



THE BENEFIT OF DOUBT
To Be Uncertain is to Be Wise
H B Gelatt

Faith is fine, but it is doubt that gets you an education. Unknown

As I was writing this essay, a Pulitzer and Tony winning play called "Doubt" was on the stage in San Francisco. This play is about the elusive nature of truth. John Patrick Shanley, the playwright, says, "When I was a boy people with doubt were considered wise people, and now they are considered weak people by much of the culture. This play examines this issue. You may come out of my play uncertain. You may want to be sure. Look down on that feeling. We've got to learn to live with a full measure of uncertainty. There is no last word"

The play critic, Karen D'Souza, wrote, "Doubt probes the dark side of conviction, the point where belief hardens into blind faith. It's about the price we pay for banishing doubt in uncertain times."

Doubt and Belief

The prize-winning play is about the dogma of religion ("blind faith"). Often discussions about doubt and belief are about religion. However, I am using these words in a much broader sense in this POI essay, which is part of my Process of Illumination, creating a collective worldview that is open and inclusive.

Belief to me is something you think may be true but you are not sure. Doubt is something you think may not be true but you are not sure. Belief and doubt are similar in that they are unsure positions. I am promoting "unsureness". Not doubting, being certain, leads to conviction, to blindness toward possibilities, to closed-mindedness. Doubting leads to questions, to seeing possibilities, to open-mindedness.

My promoting doubt won't make me popular in a culture that considers doubting a weakness. People aren't natural doubters but seem to have a built-in credulity --- a combination of suggestibility in the face of whatever is clearly or strongly presented, and a willingness to believe whatever is personally or socially congenial.

The banishing of doubt in our culture would be a serious handicap to an open and inclusive worldview. To me, the banishing of doubt would be the banishing of wisdom.

Wisdom Isn't What It Used To Be.

Doubt is the beginning, not the end of wisdom. George Illies

Today it is generally agreed that wisdom cannot be viewed apart from humans and culture and it is seen as evolving, not static. Wisdom today acknowledges the inevitability of change and the interconnectedness of everything. And it is also generally recognized that knowledge is uncertain and that absolute, eternal truth may not exist. (I realize this is not the wisdom concept of everyone today but I believe it is at least an emerging, collective view.)

I believe to be unsure of our wisdom is to be wise. I believe the source of wisdom is the continuous process of illumination. How do you define wisdom? For you, what is the source of that wisdom? Do you have any doubts about your wisdom? The POI offers the following strategy for cultivating doubt.

Learned Skepticism

To the medieval mind the possibility of doubt did not exist. William Manchester

Skepticism by definition is "a doubting or questioning attitude or state of mind" A state of mind is



an inclination or habit. Learning the habit of skepticism will require practice because of our apparent natural built-in credulity. Learned skepticism, like learned optimism, is an acquired state of mind and both are important because of the behavioral consequences.

The reason to have a skeptical, questioning, doubting attitude is to be more adaptable, flexible, resilient, creative and changeable (receptive to unlearning and learning). These are personal qualities that lead to survival behaviors in today's world of constant, rapid change. Learning to be skeptical about what you believe will keep you open-minded and receptive to possibilities of new knowledge and different beliefs.

Do you have doubts about some of your beliefs? Do the doubts raise questions? Do they keep you open to new possibilities? Do they prevent you from acting?

The key is to not let your doubting paralyze you. Certainty makes it easier to make a decision and take action. For example, have you already made up your mind which party you will vote for in the upcoming presidential election? Or do you have enough doubt to keep educating yourself about the issues and candidates? Are you too certain of your position to be open to unlearning and new learning? What about the current debates between science and religion, or between evolution and intelligent design?

However, since beliefs about politics and religion are often well-established, rigid, hard to change beliefs, it might be better to practice doubting on less rigid beliefs. How about personal beliefs about your future? Consider some of your assumptions, expectations, predictions, dreams and fears about your immediate future. Can you see the benefit of questioning these beliefs and keeping them open to change?

Sometimes, doubt will be forced upon you. There will be times when you don't know the immediate future because unusual things may be happening now that make the crystal ball fuzzy. Your job is outsourced, a companion dies, a divorce happens, you are required to move to a totally new location, etc. You will obviously have to make different future plans without complete, absolute knowledge.

It is OK to not know, to have doubts, and be uncertain about the future. Try it, you might like it. Start with what is comfortable, maybe some knowledge or belief you have acquired recently. Ask yourself, "Is it possible that what I know or believe may not be true?" This may lead to other questions. Doubting leads to questions.

The point is, you don't want to let doubt prevent you from taking action or to act unwisely. Can you be comfortable practicing not knowing, or doubting what you believe? What beliefs do you have doubts about? What beliefs do you find it difficult to doubt?

I think doubting is not only wise but should become common practice. In introducing his 2007 book, [How Doctors Think](#), Jerome Groopman writes: *We see how essential it is for even the most astute doctor to doubt his thinking, to repeatedly factor into his analysis the possibility that he is wrong. We also encounter the tension between his acknowledging uncertainty and the need to take a clinical leap and act.*

Can you factor in the possibility you are wrong? I hope everyone can --- doctors, lawyers, merchants, adults, children, (well, maybe not teenagers). And then I hope you are not paralyzed by the tension between acknowledging uncertainty and the need to take "a personal leap and act." Descartes was famous for saying, "I think, therefore I am," although he never said what he was. If you will forgive me, I would like to close this newsletter by claiming, "I doubt, therefore I am wise."



Reflective Illumination

"We live in a complex world; we often don't know what's going on; and we won't be able to understand its complexity unless we spend more time not knowing." Margaret Wheatley

The Benefit of Doubt discusses the question, "Is to doubt or not to doubt a benefit?" Actually if you don't doubt, there is no question. To doubt invites questions and promotes unlearning and learning. Unlearning and learning promote wisdom.

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