



## THE CERTAINTY OF UNCERTAINTY

Beware of Your Dogma  
H B Gelatt

*The truth is that we cannot avoid uncertainty. This not-knowing is part of the adventure.  
It is also what makes us afraid.* Pema Chodron

Niels Bohr, one of the founding fathers of quantum physics, tells a story about a young student attending three lectures by a very famous rabbi. The student said the first lecture was very good -- he understood everything. The second lecture was much better --- the student didn't understand it but the rabbi understood everything. The third lecture was the best of all --- it was so good that even the rabbi didn't understand it. Bohr tells this story because he says he never understood quantum physics, even though he helped create it.

I think this story illustrates that what we are learning about the world nowadays is "so good" that nobody really understands it all. This is the certainty of uncertainty. In fact here is the opinion of the "new sciences:" *Reality may not be structured in any way the human mind objectively discern.*

This article is part of my Process of Illumination, creating a collective worldview that is open and inclusive. The basic premise is that uncertainty is certain and the illumination strategy is: Beware of your dogma. I probably should say that I don't really understand everything I am writing about in this article. But I will say that I am certainly uncertain.

### **Say Hello and Goodbye to Your Dogma**

Absolute certainty is dogma. I believe dogma is a major deterrent to growth, development and learning ... and to a collective worldview that is open and inclusive. However, as Swami Beyondananda puts it: *Dogma is truly man's best friend.* This is because certainty feels so good ... yet you can't grow clinging to the status quo.

However, there seems to be an emerging collective worldview that acknowledges the uncertainty of our reality and the reality of uncertainty. This comes from Niels Bohr's and Werner Heisenberg's quantum physics, and from the cybernetics, and constructionist work of Gregory Bateson and Heinz von Foerster, among others. And from some of the "old" eastern philosophies. Yet some of us, at times, still reject the possibility of uncertainty.

If you are certain about the security of your current job or certain that your country will always protect your freedom, it might be dangerous because you may not pay attention to signs that your job is becoming obsolete or that your personal freedom is being restricted. Are there some areas of your personal life where you are so comfortable with knowing for sure that you might be unable to "see" beyond your sureness? The answer is probably yes. Recognizing it and its dangers is the beginning of illumination.

Years ago Emile Chartier warned us, *Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it is the only one you have.* Today I would say that nothing is more dangerous than a dogmatic belief, no matter how many you have. Get acquainted with your dogma and then say goodbye. Mark Twain points out a problem with such sureness. *It ain't what you don't know that gets you in trouble; it's what you know for sure that ain't so.* How do you live without certainty? Here are two suggested illumination methods.

### **Be Positive About Uncertainty**

Returning to Mark Twain again: *There are only two things you need to be successful in life, ignorance and confidence.* Mark Twain could have been promoting "Positive Uncertainty," my philosophy of creative decision making. Seeing yourself as ignorant sounds a little like being uncertain and feeling confident sounds a little like being positive. I have been promoting positive



uncertainty as a philosophy for making creative decisions since 1989. ([Creative Decision Making Using Positive Uncertainty](#), Crisp Learning, 2003).

Why should you be positive about uncertainty? The future is uncertain; it doesn't exist, it is yet to happen. Its uncertainty means it is not predetermined or predictable but it is persuadable. If the future is certain then all you can do is predict it and try to prepare for what you predicted. When the future is uncertain, then there are many possibilities and you can imagine your desirable future and try to create what you imagined. Therefore be positive about the uncertainty.

A major feature of positive uncertainty is that it promotes open-mindedness. Uncertainty is the *prerequisite* and the *product* of an open mind. Can you think of times in the past when you were uncertain and discovered new possibilities? Can you think of times in the future when uncertainty might be a good strategy?

We don't seem to be natural doubters, but born with a willingness to believe readily, a built-in credulity --- a combination of suggestibility in face of whatever is clearly or strongly presented, and a willingness to believe whatever is personally or socially congenial. We need to learn to be doubters, to be comfortable with uncertainty, to see uncertainty as "part of the adventure." The key is to accept uncertainty but not be paralyzed by it.

Being certain is having answers. What's wrong with answers? Your answers will always be answers only to the questions you ask. By seeing the value of asking different questions to get different answers is how to be positive about uncertainty.

For example in the current religious vs. scientific beliefs about evolution and creationism, questions are asked about being irrational and improbable while I believe we should ask questions about being dogmatic. Instead of asking if what you believe is true, ask if what you believe is open to change.

Perhaps the good news about the popularity of open discussions about science vs. religion today is that more people are asking questions, even different questions. What would happen if more people would muzzle their dogma and unleash their open-mindedness. Dogma is not just narrow-minded but also closed-minded, totally unreceptive to new ideas. This leads to a second illumination method.

### **See Life as a Mystery**

*Life is not a puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be lived.* Thomas Merton

I propose that you use the metaphor, "Life is a mystery" as an illumination method to help overcome the problem of dogmatic believing and closed-mindedness, and to become comfortable with uncertainty. Mystery is defined as "something not fully understood." To accept life as something not fully understood does not mean to stop trying to understand, but to stop pretending that you do.

To see life as a mystery is to have the mind of a detective, an investigating mind, a Sherlock Holmes way of seeing. The eye of a good detective sees with an open, searching, seeking mind. Holmes was apparently a very good detective, with the ability to observe a scene without prejudice, bias, or certitude.

We seem to love to read about mysteries. Why not love living mystery? For example, ask some questions about what you know and don't know about the mystery of global warming, about the mystery of children with low test scores; the war in Iraq. Or about the current presidential candidates, about your unfriendly neighbor, about your job now and career twelve months from now. Is your current job a puzzle already solved or a mystery to be lived? Here are some



possible questions:

- What assumptions prevent me from seeing the “whole scene”?
- What don't I know because I don't want to know? Or because I can't know?
- What do I know that may not be true?

These kinds of questions tell you two things. 1) You don't and can't know everything. 2) You have to make life decisions not knowing everything. For example if you realize you don't and can't know everything about the war in Iraq , you might then ask different questions; you might decide to be more open in your assessment and reaction.

Or what about this? What would happen if the current science vs. religion debaters all thought of evolution and creationism as a mystery to be lived rather than a puzzle already solved? Would they be asking different questions? Would they be asking questions they couldn't answer? When you only ask questions you know the answer to, you can't learn very much. When you are filled with certainty and dogma, there aren't many questions you don't have the answer to.

### **Reflective Illumination**

**The Certainty of Uncertainty** encourages you be open-minded, be positive about uncertainty and to say goodbye to dogma. How would your life be different if it were not a puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be lived?

*Keeping the mind open in the face of uncertainty is the single most powerful secret of unleashing your creative potential. Michael Gelb.*

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