



CULTIVATING UNCERTAINTY IN A COMPLEX WORLD

BY MARGARET WHEATLEY

Like most of you, I was raised in the traditions of Western schooling. Knowing the right answer was always rewarded. Intelligence was equated with how well I did on tests, and most tests were about knowing the right answer. Later, as a leader, I was promoted for my certainty—I had the vision, I knew how to get there, and people would follow me based on how well I radiated that certainty, how well I disguised my fears.

But everything has changed since those sweet, slow days when the world seemed knowable and predictable. The growing complexity of our times makes certainty about any move or any position more precarious. And in this networked world where information moves at the speed of light and “truth” mutates before our eyes, certainty changes and speeds off at equivalent velocity.

Surrendering Certainty

But despite these realities, it is very difficult to surrender certainty—our positions, our beliefs, our explanations. These things lie at the core of our identity—they define us. Yet I believe we can only succeed in understanding and influencing this strange new world if we are able to think and work together in new ways. Our most cherished beliefs, our greatest clarity must be offered up. We won't necessarily have to let go of them all, but we do have to be willing to let some of our certainties go.

We live in a dense and tangled global system in which everyone has a different vantage point. No one person can explain what is going on to everyone else, or assume that his or her point of view is the right one. We can look at that fact in a negative way, as a description of a new Tower of Babel, where

we can't hear each other because of so much diversity. Or we can look at it as an invitation to come together and truly listen to one another—listen with the expectation that we will hear something new and different, that we will hear what we need to hear from others in order to grow and survive.

The need to relinquish our certainty lies at the heart of both modern science and ancient spirituality. From complexity science, Ilya Prigogine tells us that “The future is uncertain . . . but such uncertainty lies at the very heart of human creativity.” It is uncertainty that creates the space for invention. We must let go, clear the space, and leap into the void of not-knowing, if we want to discover anything new.

In Tibetan Buddhism, “the root of happiness” lies in the acceptance that life is uncertain. If we expect life to change, we don't hold on too long to what has worked in the past, we resist grasping painfully for temporary securities. Only in our relationship with uncertainty are we able to flow gracefully with life's inevitable cycles and experience true happiness.

Seeking Ideas That Disturb

Now, why am I telling you all this? Because I believe our own need for certainty is destructive to human relationships. And because I believe so much more is possible if you welcome those ideas that disturb you. Instead of looking for confirmation, imagine what could be possible if you looked for disturbance. Instead of looking for safety in numbers and noting those who feel like allies or fellow travelers, what might you create if you looked to discover insights that are the most different from yours?

In graduate school, I had a professor who encouraged us to notice what

surprised or disturbed us. If a statement surprised us, it indicated we were assuming that something else was true. If a comment disturbed us, it indicated we held a contrary belief. Noticing what disturbs me has been an incredibly useful lens into my deeply held beliefs. When I'm shocked at another person's position, I have the opportunity to see my own position in greater clarity. When I hear myself saying, “How could anyone believe something like that?” a doorway has opened for me to see what I believe. These moments of true disturbance are great gifts. In making my beliefs visible, they allow me to consciously choose them again or change them.

What if we were to listen to each other's comments with a willingness to expose rather than to confirm our own beliefs and opinions? What if we were to willingly listen to one another with the awareness that we each see the world in unique ways? And with the expectation that I would learn something new if I listen for the differences rather than the similarities?

What might you see, what might you learn, what might we create together, if we become the kind of people who enjoy differences and welcome disturbance? I know we would each become wiser, and we would enjoy one another more. We don't have to agree with each other, we just have to explore together. There is no need to be joined together at the head, as long as we are joined together at the heart. ■

Margaret Wheatley is president of the Berkana Institute. She is the author of *Leadership and the New Science* (revised version, Berrett-Koehler, 1999) and co-author of *A Simpler Way* (Berrett-Koehler, 1996). A longer version of this article originally appeared in *The Works* under the title “Disturb Me, Please!” The complete article can also be found at www.berkana.org/media.html. Reprinted by permission of the author.