

Don't Be So Sure

by Margaret Wheatley

Most people I meet want to develop more harmonious and satisfying relationships. But we may not realize that this can only be achieved by partnering with two new and strange allies: uncertainty and confusion.

Most of us weren't trained to like confusion or to admit when we feel hesitant and uncertain. In our schools and organizations, we place value on sounding assured and confident. People are rewarded for stating opinions as if they're facts. Quick answers abound; pensive questions have disappeared. Confusion has yet to emerge as a higher order value or behavior that organizations eagerly reward.

As life continues to speed up (adding to our confusion), we don't have time to be uncertain. We don't have time to listen to anyone who expresses a new or different position. In meetings and in the media, often we listen to others just long enough to determine whether we agree with them. We rush from opinion to opinion, listening for those tidbits and sound bites that confirm our position. Gradually, we have become more certain but less informed, and far less thoughtful.

We can't continue on this path if we want to act more intelligently, if we want to find approaches and solutions to the problems that plague us. We no longer live in those sweet, slow days when life felt predictable, when we actually knew what to do next. In this increasingly complex world, it's impossible to see for ourselves most of what's going on. The only way to see more of the complexity is to ask many others for their perspectives and experiences. Yet if we open ourselves to their differing perceptions, we find ourselves inhabiting the uncomfortable space of not knowing.

It is very difficult to give up certainty: these positions, beliefs and explanations define us and lie at the core of our personal identity. Certainty is our lens to interpret what's going on, and, as long as our explanations work, we feel a sense of stability and security. But in a changing world, certainty doesn't give us stability; it actually creates more chaos. As we stay locked in our position and refuse to adapt, the things we'd hoped would stay together fall apart. It's a traditional paradox expressed in many spiritual traditions: by holding on, we destroy what we hope to preserve; by letting go, we feel secure in accepting what is.

I believe this changing world requires less certainty and far more curiosity. I'm not suggesting we let go of our beliefs altogether, only that we become curious about what someone else believes. As we open to the disturbing differences, sometimes we discover that another's way of interpreting the world actually is essential to our survival.

For me, the first step to becoming curious is to admit that I'm not succeeding in figuring things out by myself. If my solutions don't work as well as I'd like, if my explanations for what's happening feel insufficient, I take these as signs that it's time to begin asking others what they think. I try to move past the superficial conversations in which I pretend to agree with someone else, rather than inquiring seriously into their perspective. I try to become a conscious listener, actively listening for differences.

There are many ways to sit and listen for the differences. Lately, I've been listening for what surprises me. What did I just hear that startled me? This isn't easy—I'm accustomed to sitting there nodding my head as someone voices opinions I agree with. But when I notice what surprises me, I'm able to see my own views more clearly, including my assumptions.

Noticing what surprises and disturbs me has been a useful way to see invisible beliefs. If what you say surprises me, I must have been assuming something else was true. If what you say disturbs me, I must believe something to the contrary. My shock at your position exposes my own position. When I hear myself saying, "How could anyone believe something like that?" a light comes on for me to examine my own beliefs. These moments are great gifts. If I can see my beliefs and assumptions, I can decide whether I still value them.

If you're willing to be disturbed and confused, I recommend you begin a conversation with someone who thinks differently from you. Listen for what's different, for what surprises you. Try to stop the voice of judgment or opinion and just listen. At the end, notice whether you learned anything new. Notice whether you developed a better relationship with the person you talked with. If you try this with several people, you might find yourself delighted to realize how many unique ways there are to be human.

We have the opportunity many times a day to be the one who listens to others, the one who is curious rather than certain. The greatest benefit that comes to those who listen is that we develop closer relationships with those we thought we couldn't understand. When we listen with less judgment, we always develop better relationships with each other. It's not differences that divide us; it's our judgments that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together.

We can't be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change always starts with confusion; cherished interpretations must dissolve to make way for the new. Of course, it's scary to give up what we know, but the abyss is where newness lives. If we move through the fear and enter the abyss, we rediscover we're creative.

As the world becomes more perplexing and difficult, I don't believe most of us want to keep struggling through it alone. I can't know what to do from my own narrow perspective. I know I need a better understanding of what's going on. I want to sit down with you and talk about all the frightening and hopeful things I observe, and listen to what frightens you and gives you hope. I need new ideas and solutions for the problems I care about, and I know I need to talk to you to discover them. I need to learn to value your perspective, and I want you to value mine. I expect to be disturbed, even jarred, by what I hear from you. I expect to feel confused and displaced—my world won't feel as stable or familiar to me once we talk.

As I explore partnering with confusion and uncertainty, I'm learning that we don't have to agree with each other in order to think well together. There is no need for us to be joined at the head. We are already joined by our human hearts.

