

## Assuming Value Everywhere by Viral Mehta

They call it a "kindness internship." My 14-yr-old cousin and his best friend have decided, of their own accord, to spend much of their summer creating spontaneous and mostly anonymous opportunities to grow in kindness. So at summer camp, he was on the lookout. He's a popular kid, and being kind is not always "cool," so that made his reflection afterward all the more poignant:

"I noticed that there was one kid who no one was really talking to. He had a serious kind of disability, and some of the kids were kinda scared to approach him. So I went up and introduced myself. And you know what? He taught me some amazing dance moves!"

Sharing his presence was a wonderful thing to do, in and of itself, but his perspective was even more remarkable. Someone asked him, "What if he wasn't able to teach you anything? Would you still have done it?"

"Well, everyone is good at something. You just have to listen long enough."

It's a profound lesson coming from an early teen: Assume value everywhere. In orienting myself in this way, I take responsibility for tuning in to what others offer, and open myself to other perspectives. How I see the world is a product of my experiences, so there is undeniable worth in my own accumulation of perspectives. But I restrict myself when I become so attached to my one way of seeing things. The fact is that I benefit from a more balanced view -- in order to appreciate other viewpoints, I need to become aware of the inherent limitations of my own.

My friend Rachel learned this in an unforgettable way. Years ago, she was making a phone call at a payphone in Berkeley, and she felt something hit her foot. Figuring that someone had mistakenly brushed her while walking by, she didn't even bother turning around from her conversation. But seconds later it happened again, and then a third time. Fully annoyed by now, she turned around, ready to give it to the person bothering her. That's when she saw that it was a blind man, trying to find his way with a walking stick.

Experiences like that humble us into holding our assumptions more lightly. In a quite literal, biological way, we all actually have blind spots. Author Michael Talbot explains: "In the middle of the retina, where the optic nerve connects to the eye, we have a blind spot where there are no photoreceptors. When we look at the world around us we are totally unaware that there are gaping holes in our vision." So what we perceive to be the whole picture is actually an extrapolation, a projection that fills in the unknown based on the known.

As intelligent human beings, we've rightfully evolved a set of mental shortcuts that give us a jumpstart in understanding whatever is in front of us. But left unchecked, instead of serving us, these projections become rigid. So on the one hand, we risk our unconscious habits of interpretation quickly stagnating into a rigid closed-mindedness, and we block ourselves from learning. On the other hand, in the name of open-mindedness, if we are unable to develop conscious convictions based on our experience, then we can't build on our learning. Like many things, it comes down to balance: developing clarity and understanding, while remaining aware of how much we don't know.

When we think we know, we look in the direction of the supposed answer. By knowing

that we don't know it all, we create enough space to be able to withhold conclusion, becoming open to all directions. From an interpersonal standpoint, this kind of humility opens us up to the potential of synergy, and to the benefit afforded by taking in other views. By deepening my ability to listen in this way, I can examine things from multiple viewpoints, and in areas where I need to change my understanding, or even unlearn a contradictory perspective, I give myself that option. But at its core, the real value goes beyond that. 2500 years ago, the Indian sage Mahavira defined the core tenets of the Jain religion, with a key principle being that of Anekantavada, or "many-sidedness." It is an encouragement to be aware of a multiplicity of viewpoints, with a recognition that any single point of view is partial. As the meditation teacher S.N. Goenka says, "One sees things from only one angle, a partial view, which is bound to be distorted; and yet one accepts this view as the full truth."

The power of listening to multiple views comes from the flexibility of mind it affords. It frees me from the unconscious hold of unexamined views -- and much of my sense of self is derived from an amalgamation of such views. My 14-year-old cousin was onto something profound: Whether it's listening to a person or otherwise, if I listen long enough it creates an opening. In every such opening, I can choose to accept or put aside whatever I do discover. In the process, though, if I can embrace the unknown -- while being firmly rooted in developing wisdom through my own experience -- I am freeing myself from the prison of a limited identity.