

## **Embracing Uncertainty: Exploring the Power of Agnosticism**

By Theresa Willingham

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Back in May, a great piece ran on National Public Radio called, "The Liberating Embrace of Uncertainty", and although I didn't appreciate at the time the journey this train of thought would take me on, it struck me then as a wonderful, celebratory ode to not knowing.

*"We feel it with each breath," wrote NPR blogger Adam Frank, author of "About Time: Cosmology and Culture at the Twilight of the Big Bang." From birth to the unknown moment of our passing, we ride a river of change. And yet, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, we exhaust ourselves in an endless search for solidity. We hunger for something that lasts, some idea or principle that rises above time and change. We hunger for certainty. That is a big problem. It might even be THE problem."*

It's certainly not a new problem. Human beings have hungered for certainty since we became self-aware. And almost as soon as both the scientifically minded and the theologically minded started angling for some universal truths, "skeptics" appeared who proposed that no such thing existed. Sometime around 365 BC, Pyrrho of Elis founded the "Skeptical School" in ancient Greece, based on the premise that the real truth can never be known with certainty, a philosophy further developed over time by the likes of David Hume and Immanuel Kant, and others.

Agnosticism is a relatively young outgrowth of that school of thought, one of those peanut butter cup mash-up words that comes from the Greek, a-, meaning "without", and γνῶσις (gnōsis), meaning "knowledge" - conjoined to mean "without knowledge." It was first uttered as a description for religious (or non-religious) identity by Thomas Henry Huxley, whose Victorian careers spanned physiology, anatomy, zoology, paleontology and anthropology and who was best known as "Darwin's Bull Dog". If you're not a student of the Victorian Enlightenment but the name seems vaguely familiar, he was also the grandfather of Aldous Huxley – of Brave New World fame .

Thomas Huxley coined the term at an early meeting of the Metaphysical Society in 1869, a sort of free-wheeling think tank for what founder R. H. Hutton described as " full discussion of the largest range of topics from all points of view... ." At one of the first meetings, each member was asked to identify his religious or political position as Anglican, Roman Catholic, Positivist, and whatever else was popular in the day.

The Huxley Files, a comprehensive online collection of all things Thomas Huxley, archived at Clarke University, described the moment thusly, *"Having no label, and feeling like the fabled*

*fox without a tail, Huxley coined a word for his position: "agnostic." Although this word is sometimes defined (as in the Oxford English Dictionary ) as relating to the Unknowable, Huxley denied having that as source of the word. Having referred to the Unknowable earlier, he subsequently apologized for having wasted a capital U. "Agnostic" was coined in 1869 as an antithesis to "gnostic," one who knows the meaning of mysteries such as God. It seems to have first appeared in print in a May 29, 1869 Spectator note ("The Theological Statute at Oxford").*

In Huxley's reflections on using the word, *Agnostic*, he wrote,

*"When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain "gnosis" – had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble...*

*"This was my situation when I had the good fortune to find a place among the members of that remarkable confraternity of antagonists, long since deceased, but of green and pious memory, the Metaphysical Society. Every variety of philosophical and theological opinion was represented there, and expressed itself with entire openness; most of my colleagues were –ists of one sort or another... So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of "agnostic." It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the "gnostic" of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society... To my great satisfaction, the term took... This is the history of the origin of the terms "agnostic" and "agnosticism"."*

When I said I didn't know where the NPR train was taking me at first, that's because my initial reflections on the story were more science oriented, and completely (or so I thought at the time) unrelated to agnosticism. I wrote a piece for my author's blog based on the NPR story, called *Delicious Ambiguity*, from which I also draw some of the material I'm using here (I don't want to be accused of quoting myself without disclosure, like poor old Jonah Lehrer was recently – although he commandeered Bob Dylan, too, which was probably the more egregious error!)

But essentially, my first thoughts on the subject took me to the moment in college when I, literally and figuratively, cast off the heavy cross of my Methodist upbringing after some very thought provoking lectures in a World Religions and Politics class. Initially, I felt a twinge of

uncertainty. No more absolutes now, no guarantees, no salvation – I was on my own with all the questions that entails and no more book of answers.

But almost immediately afterwards I felt completely free, totally unburdened. Doubt had become freedom. If, as the evidence of many paths suggested, there was no one true way, the playing field was leveled and any possible answers I came up with were as good as anyone else's, and at the very least, acceptably valid for me. I was no longer at the mercy of a myth I'd often found conflicting at best. Now I could honestly deal with the facts of the realities of my life.

*“What took a little longer, “ I wrote at the time, “was the understanding that I won't always find an answer or a solution. We have a very human tendency to seek patterns and lend them a narrative, from which we then try to draw conclusions. But sometimes – often – the patterns we see and the narratives we derive from them are just our own imperfect efforts to create order out of the natural chaos of life and living. Most of the time, our narratives are workable, creating a functional linearity along which we can move forward in our lives. Sometimes our narratives paint us into a corner, or lead us down blind alleys. Sometimes, there simply aren't any answers to the problems we encounter. Sometimes, especially if we're honest with ourselves, our narrative boils down to an essential and enduring unknown.”*

What took longer than that, was the realization that in referencing the “essential and enduring unknown,” I was talking about agnosticism. My spiritual narrative, even as I wrote this a couple of months ago, was based on a vision of myself, in the intervening decades since my conversion to free-thought, as an atheist. I had long come to the conclusion that there is no god, no man in the sky, no divine hand guiding our destinies.

But it also made perfect sense to me, as I quoted Marcelo Gleiser that it *“is pompous is to think that we can know all the answers. Or that it's the job of science to find them.”* *When science as an idea is used to push away the tremulous reality of our lived existential uncertainty then it, too, is degraded. It becomes just another imaginary fixed point in a life without fixed points.”*

This is the challenge of science, said the NPR writers, accepting not only that we may not know an answer right now, but that we may never know it.

*“For science, embracing uncertainty means more than claiming “we don't know now but we will know in the future””, they said. “It means embracing the fuzzy boundaries of the very process of asking questions. It means embracing the frontiers of what explanations, for all their power, can do. It means understanding that a life of deepest inquiry requires all kinds of vehicles: from poetry to particle accelerators; from quiet reveries to abstract analysis.”*

“Embracing the fuzzy boundaries of the very process of asking questions,” is also a profoundly healthy and instructive way to live, I wrote. *“In my adopted Unitarian Universalist faith, which has no creed and no doctrine, and pretends to no final answers beyond love, we have a hymn which contains the line, “Sometimes even to question, is an answer.”*

That’s where I initially planned to head with this sermon – embracing the fuzzy boundaries of asking questions, and being okay with not always having the answers. And that’s where I’m still going – but I took a side trip to get here, because as I was doing a little more research – gaining a little more knowledge – to turn an article into a sermon, it suddenly occurred to me that I can’t, in good faith and with any real certainty, declare myself an atheist because I can’t prove a negative – I have no more evidence that god doesn’t exist than that god does exist.

And then I suddenly *GOT* agnosticism!

*“Although Thomas Henry Huxley coined the term agnosticism, it did not spring fully-formed from his mind.”* writes Austin Cline, former Regional Director for the Council for Secular Humanism and a previous Publicity Coordinator for the Campus Freethought Alliance. *“On the contrary, Huxley was relying upon a long philosophic tradition of religious and epistemological skepticism when he argued that we should approach the question of the existence of God in the “agnostic” fashion he described.*

*“No one before Huxley would have described themselves as agnostics, but we can identify philosophers and scholars who insisted that either they didn’t have knowledge of Ultimate Reality and gods, or that it wasn’t possible for anyone to have such knowledge — both positions associated with agnosticism. Perhaps the simplest and earliest statement of a basic agnostic position was made by Protagoras, who according to Diogenes Laertius (back around 200 AD or so) said:*

*“As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or do not exist. For many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life.”*

That’s worth repeating: **Many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life.**

*“Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method,”* wrote Huxley, in an article on the topic 1889, for The Popular Science Monthly. A method *“ the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle...**Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.**”*

Before understanding agnosticism as a structured means of understanding the world, I tended to see the philosophy as something more akin to Studs Terkel's description of an agnostic (which he considered himself) as "a cowardly atheist," or Stephen Colbert's more contemporaneously humorous jab, "just an atheist without balls."

That could well be the case. But I'm finding that far from seeming a cowardly or unprincipled stand, agnosticism provides a solid, reliable means of negotiating a tangled jungle of ideologies.

*"In the popular sense, an agnostic is someone who neither believes nor disbelieves in the existence of a deity or deities, whereas an atheist and a theist disbelieve and believe, respectively,"* writes William Rowe in the 1998 book, "Agnosticism". *"In the strict sense, however, **agnosticism is the view that human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that deities do or do not exist. In so far as one holds that our beliefs are rational only if they are sufficiently supported by human reason, the person who accepts the philosophical position of agnosticism will hold that neither the belief that God exists nor the belief that God does not exist is rational.**"*

And - *voila!* **A world of possibilities reveals itself, a true path to tolerance and understanding because the very nature of relying on reason and rational experience to steer my course through life means, to me, that I have to keep an open mind with regard to what others express or experience as right and true and meaningful in their own lives.** I cannot say with certainty what is true for someone else, how the world reveals itself to them, that a belief in a deity is categorically wrong, or how someone else is experiencing "deity" in the first place.

And that, to me, is the essence of the examined life: The Open Mind. Where atheism is about a determined disavowal of something - believing no evidence is all the evidence needed - agnosticism by its very nature is about the never-ending pursuit of knowledge and the commensurate ever-changing possibilities and ways of being that accompany it.

*"I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure,"* said Clarence Darrow. *"that is all that agnosticism means."*

Physicist Richard Feynman said, *"I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing. I think it is much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers that might be wrong. If we will only allow that, as we progress, we remain unsure, we will leave opportunities for alternatives. We will not become enthusiastic for the fact, the knowledge, the absolute truth of the day, but remain always uncertain ... In order to make progress, one must leave the door to the unknown ajar."*

Actress Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer at the age of 42, put things in a more personal context.

*“I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. **Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.**”*

That's not to say that debate and discourse in exploring possible answers aren't important, or to negate the value and importance of that one reasonable answer that may rise above other possibilities in the process of asking questions. But sometimes, we just don't know, and sometimes, we may never know, and that's the power of agnosticism. We don't *HAVE* to know; we don't have to have all the answers, or believe in all the same answers, in order to live well and with meaning in the world.

*“These lives we live,”* wrote Adam Frank, for NPR, *“surrounded by beauty and horror, profound knowledge and pitiful ignorance, are a mystery to us all. To push that truth away with false certainty, falsely derived from either religion or reason, is to miss our most perfect truth.”*

Embracing the uncertainty of life –heading into that delicious ambiguity with abiding curiosity, an open mind and a willing heart – makes life exciting and worthwhile and beautiful.

Is there anything we can be certain of? Not collectively, probably, beyond basic scientific facts (and even sometimes those are rendered doubtful) or sometimes beyond our small shared communities. Individually, though, if we can be honest with ourselves we can probably be sure of a few things. Speaking for myself, I am certain of the power of love to heal and overcome differences, even if I don't always have that power, and even if it doesn't always work; it works often enough. I am certain of the value of knowledge, and of the importance of trying to understand one another, and identify that common ground where we can love and learn and be together.

Beyond that, though, I'm okay not having all the answers.

*“Live in the question,”* said Rainer Maria Rilke in Letters to a Young Poet.

I can't think of a more exciting or promising place to be!

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