

Doublethink

As a warning to the world, George Orwell first defined doublethink as:

The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just as long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies — all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word doublethink it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethink one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth.

I have this vivid memory of Sarah, as a baby. She was hungry. Babies live in this eternal here and now, so from Sarah's perspective, she had been hungry for all time, and was going to be hungry forever more, and was understandably upset. She was also getting stronger and her limbs were flailing about, her arm struck her face— she stopped, shocked, and she looked at me, “Daddy, what did you do that for?”

At that time, Sarah saw her limbs as belonging to the outside world. Years later, she now has precise, intuitive control her arms, and like most of us, accepts them as part of herself. Identity appears closely coupled with our will, with immediate control. Which explains that if we have a migraine, we seem to be two people, the suffering “I” and the hostile outer world of our head.

Of course there are pains worse than migraines, when the suffering is unbearable, when the pain cuts to your very soul, you break down, shattered, your very identity is pushed out as part of the hostile outer world. This is depression, this is grief, in this place, I have found that Orwell missed an important point. Doublethink isn't only a dark art, merely a tool of oppression... Doublethink can be so much more...

Lets explore—

When wind blows across water, ripples form. Ripples move because the surface tension of the water acts like an elastic membrane, wind pushes, and the surface snaps back, because of this smaller ripples travel faster than larger ones. Waves are different, water is piled up and gravity pulls it back, so larger waves travel faster than smaller ones. Ripples and waves are both real, just incompatible... Except— if you look out when the wind begins to blow on the lake, first the water ripples, and then ripples somehow become waves, a mystery that the wind keeps to itself.

Lets dive a little deeper.

Modern physics is awesome, connecting the dots, describing an ancient, growing, interconnected web between our personal, physical form and the stars above. Einstein drafted two separate rulebooks explaining how nature works. There is general relativity, which beautifully accounts for the dynamics of everything our eyes can see. Then there is quantum mechanics, which which is extremely adept at describing how the transistors in our cell phone work, or when individual particles of light hit a solar cell.

But there is a tension between these systems too entangled for even Einstein to resolve. In quantum mechanics, time is universal and absolute; with entanglements between particles evolving in strict sequence. But in general relativity, time is relative and dynamic. Interwoven with space into a four-dimensional "space-time" fabric. This fabric warps with the weight of matter, causing gravity, and also shifting the relative passage of time. Both approaches are true, modern technology depends upon them both. But they are incompatible, differing over whether sequences of events, time itself— is absolute, or relative.

Spiritually, there is another challenge, both systems are deterministic, both imply that the unfolding of existance has been preordained since the dawn of time. No room for mystery, inspiration, or even free will. Faced with this, experimental quantum physicist Nicolas Gisin, commented: "I know that I enjoy free will much more than I know anything about physics. Hence, physics will never be able to convince me that free will is an illusion. Quite the contrary, any physical hypothesis incompatible with free will is falsified by my most profound experiences."

However in 2006, a remarkable mathematician, John Conway, proved that if one accepts both quantum physics and general relativity as true, it follows that every particle in our interconnected web of existance, contains a quantum of free will. A particle is not defined when it is created, it's identity emerges as it interacts with the universe. This leads to the expectation, that as particles combine into things like us, we have a way to mystery, consciousness, and inspiration.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do."

Many see a creator as the ultimate king: civilized, just, and pure. Witness the grandeur of creation, a trillion galaxies, each with billions of stars and by implication, countless places, every bit as complicated as here and now. Creation appears wild, creation appears capricious, arbitrary and unfair. But what if God is as uncivilized as creation? What do we do when a Wild God comes to our table? Most react to the unexpected, the unwelcome, as if it were a threat: they freeze, flee, or fight:

Fighting gets the most attention. When I look at traditional faith, I stand in awe of the strength and purity of their worship. I long for the religious inspiration of Ave Maria. Almost as much as I am dismayed at how small their visions are: so defined by what is excluded— at best by "traditional values", at worst— traditional vices.

Less newsworthy than fighting, freezing is another reaction to untamed complexity. Many who have made a serious attempt to engage with our global scale troubles, succumb to "Compassion Fatigue". Burned out and withdrawn, they limit their capacity to care to a localized realm. Such poor souls may be aware of the conflicts that roil about them, but a comfortable soul, a rational soul, may exploit a luxury of retreat.

And then there is flight. Running was never about attaining enlightenment in a hurry— it is the long way around. The wind taught me that if you go far enough, all paths are both circular and spiraling. One does not Sail to go from A to B, under sail, a journey is ended only when you are not the same as you were at the beginning. Transcendence is intrinsic to revelation, a pointing beyond itself. Life is that which grows, a complete faith, a pure faith, is lifeless.

Blow and you can extinguish a fire. Blow and you can make a fire.

As we adventure into mystery in an expanding universe, our horizons appear to recede as we journey toward them. Growth in spirit isn't a linear measure of proximity to a God above, spritual growth is multi-dimensional, it's about volume—the spaciousness of our own soul.

Synchronicity, our label for happenings that meaningfully coincide, giving hearts and minds a sense that there's more... I use technology to try to capture this wonder. Mostly, I fail... but when I don't, I am embarrassed— ask any artist about their best work and there is this common theme, “it just came to me.” Inspiration is natural, we are part of the Whole of Creation. Creation didn't end, our universe is the continuity of creation— a wild, ongoing blossoming.

As our universe grows, so does God, and so must we. An authentic Unitarian Universalist spirituality, nurtures spacious and resilient souls— embracing the tensions of our world and propelling us forward in our task of loving one another. In a complex world, spiritualities of fight, flight, amputation and retreat are not sustainable, fundamentalism fails as a religious option. If humanity is to survive contradiction and complexity, we needs souls capable of loving its entirety; people capable of loving the whole, not just the chosen; not only the righteous.

Unitarian Universalism was never about “believing whatever you want”, Frankly, I don't want to believe as I do, what I want is certainty, what I want a pure faith, iwhat I want is to feel that special glow that I have seen in the eyes of the faithful. When I look out at the night sky, straining to hear that still small voice, it comes not from the stars, but from the spaces in between. Faith is not a choice, believe just comes— messy and full of doubt. Our choice, is about how authentically we seek.

We were all born in mystery, and we will all die in mystery.

But, if we are brave enough to let go of answers, brave enough to allow paradox to blossom, we can live in the mystery in between, an “open mind” is about holding dissonent and complex thoughts and trying to find some sort of perspective.

Sarah was getting ready for School the other day and she could not find her work book. Time was running short, and we are searching throughout the house and finally she spies it under a bag that had been moved earlier. In exasperation she exclaimed “Why is it always in the last place I look?”, to which I responded with a family truism “because Sweetheart, every time you find something, you stop looking.”

Humanity evolved in a harsh, wild environment; in a localized realm first impressions work: we needed speedy thinking, and the risk of premature lockdown is low when you are confronted by a bear while picking berries. First impressions are great when the cause-effect relationship is straightforward; as we prepare meals, do our dishes, as we came to church today, the majority of our micro-decisions were routine, with little reason to reflect on the limitations of our senses and intuitions.

But the whole speed-accuracy tradeoff falls apart in a world that tosses up complex problems. Our need to be certain gets in the way when we try to connect to an interconnected web of all existence. Creation is always uncertain. Complexity demands exploration, complex problems do not converge to definitive solutions. Be aware of lockdown, be aware of the first satisfying interpretation— of closing the mind to the more subtle and complicated explanations that are often better. In the realm of complexity, lockdown turns certainty into the enemy of effective decision-making. Imagine how much more smoothly our personal history would have flowed if we weren't so certain that we were right all the time.

"Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes." - Walt Whitman

A mindset of "doublethink" can help us work around premature certainty. Deferring being right, the tension of not knowing, it takes effort to resist craving for certainty, to be mindful that certainty undermines our connection with Creation. Our minds are more flexible than we think; as Sarah was learning to read and write, I became aware that English is not natural; Sarah showed me that we are not even hardwired to accept our limbs as part of ourselves. With mindfulness and practice, openness can become habitual, it takes hard work to get there, don't get discouraged, remember that by definition— everybody fails the first time.

Doublethink redefines faith — as subject to replacement, revelation and inspiration. Doublethink keeps us humble and flexible, asking if we are comfortable with our truths, our synchronicities, our paradoxes, even ourselves, and responding, "Probably not."

But first, baby steps, let's try the smallest thing that could possibly work. Doublethink is the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them... Doublethink is the first step beyond certainty, the first step towards madness, but also towards wisdom. Here is your homework assignment, Tuesday, at Nine o'clock, set aside seven minutes, breathe, explore your contradictions, embrace mystery without end, takes a step into paradox, and above all— keep looking after you found it.