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Sure *enough*

How doubt can lead to greater intimacy, enhanced self-confidence and a deeper sense of spirituality.

BY DIANA RICO

“**MUSLIMS OUT OF AUSTRA**lia!” was the subject line on the email in my inbox. “IMMIGRANTS, NOT AUSTRALIANS, MUST ADAPT. Take It Or Leave It,” the text shouted, in a speech attributed to Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. “Christian men and women, on Christian principles, founded this nation, and this is clearly documented. It is certainly appropriate to display it on the walls of our schools. If God offends you, then I suggest you consider another part of the world as your new home, because God is part of our culture.” The diatribe went on and on, finally ending with the invitation to “SEND IT ON” if I agreed. Someone in the long email chain had appended the remark: “This woman should be made Queen!”

My first impulse was to shoot back a withering point-by-point slapdown. But because this appalling email had come from someone I love—a relative who had married into our family when I was a little girl, who had patiently put up with my petulant-child hostility until he’d won me over with his unwavering acceptance of me—I knew I needed a cooling-off period before I could write a reasoned response.

Still, the text was there in my computer. I felt morbidly drawn to reread it, the way one feels compelled to pick at a scab. And as I did, something unexpected happened.

A little bit of doubt started to creep in.

Not doubt about my opposition to these views. The email was clearly bigoted hate mail. But a tiny crack opened up in my armor. And the more I read beneath the words, the more I could sense that the whole thing was an outpouring of fear: fear of terrorists, fear of economic meltdown and fear of a world out of control. All those fears were focused on one religious group, very unfairly. But as I sensed the underlying feeling, compassion began to well up in me.

We are all afraid, I thought. It just gets channeled into different behaviors. But maybe, underneath all the polarized yelling, healthy doubt can give us a little foothold as we begin to stumble toward common ground. We're used to thinking of doubt as something to be banished. But, it turns out, doubt has some important upsides. Healthy doubt can aid conflict resolution, create a fairer justice system, deepen intimacy in personal relationships, boost self-confidence and increase our tolerance of differing views. Some spiritual traditions even consider doubt a prerequisite for spiritual enlightenment. Maybe we need to start thinking of doubt in a new way: as a potentially useful tool.

"There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in," sang Leonard Cohen in "Anthem." But living in the crack is not something we industrialized Westerners seek out. Doubt makes us supremely uncomfortable. "Problem is, living in the question kills most people," says Jonathan Fields, author of *The Uncertainty Book: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance*. "We are wired to experience action in the face of uncertainty as fear and anxiety. Our brains' fear centers, the amygdalae, light up and make us want to run for the hills."

PHOTOGRAPH: KARLOWAC/DREAMSTIME.COM

"Our most primitive brain mechanism of the fight/flight response is obviously there to inform us about and protect us from harm," agrees Diane Renz, a Denver-based psychotherapist whose private practice focuses on anxiety as a gateway to healing. "However, if we stay only at this primitive level, we limit our focus and continually hone the contracted state and narrow perspective that keeps us separate, alert and ready to attack or flee."

I recall, as a painfully shy child, being allowed to drop out of piano classes every time a recital was coming up. While my mother's decision to allow this was likely motivated by compassion, I carried, well into adulthood, a terror of public performance. In this case, my unhealthy self-doubt held me prisoner of the flight response; it took me years to learn strategies for facing and moving past anxiety.

It doesn't help that in our culture, certainty is valued and doubt is regarded as the bailiwick of sissies. Look at the unwavering conviction with which President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair led their respective nations into war in Iraq, claiming the existence of weapons of mass destruction that never materialized. Look at how convinced investment bankers and homeowners were that stocks and housing prices could go in only one direction: up. What lives and economies might have been saved if some modicum of healthy doubt had been brought into those decision-making processes?

The truth is, uncertainty hasn't always had a bad rap. "Modest doubt is call'd the beacon of the wise," wrote William Shakespeare. Victor Hugo viewed doubt as "the instrument which forges the human spirit." In 1951, in his book *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, Alan Watts pointed out that "there is a contradiction in wanting to be perfectly secure in a universe whose very nature is momentariness and fluidity." Watts was steeped in Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism, Eastern spiritual traditions that teach us to embrace the unknowable nature of existence. These days, when global instability is at an all-time high, it behooves us to try to understand and welcome doubt instead of pretending it doesn't exist, perhaps even to cultivate it as a useful state of mind.

Researchers in the social sciences are giving us fresh ways to look at doubt. In a study published in *Psychological Science* in 2009, a team led by Dutch psychologist Jos J.S. van Berkum of Amsterdam's Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics found that the brain reacts within a mere quarter of a second to statements that contradict our ethical beliefs—which means that we almost instantly stop listening and start arguing, either mentally or verbally.

The researchers monitored the brain functions of two groups of men—21 members of "a relatively strict Christian party" and 22 self-described nonreligious voters—when presented with 158 statements on such hot-button issues as homosexuality, women's liberation and euthanasia. Two types of brain waves showed amplified activity when the subjects read statements conflicting with their moral values: the LPP, or late positive potential, which is affected by stimuli with emotional content, and the N400, which reflects neural processes that relate a word's meaning to its context. Among other things, the results may help explain some of the polarization we see in much of the current political discourse, like the endless arguments about global warming, the legislative deadlocks over the economies in Europe and the United States and the anti-immigrant intolerance in many countries throughout the world.

MY OWN FIRST REACTION TO the anti-Muslim email (which, thankfully, turned out to be an Internet hoax) followed exactly this pattern. It was only because I slowed myself down, motivated by my relationship with the person who'd sent it, that I was able to reread it and understand something deeper. Armed with the knowledge that an opponent's ability to listen shuts down as soon as her values are challenged, activists, politicians and others involved in public dialogue might consider restructuring their arguments in a way that maximizes their chances to be heard. Someone promoting women's reproductive rights, for example, might lead his argument with a statement about how sad and problematic it is to bring more unwanted children into the world. A gay-marriage activist might begin by discussing what positive family values mean to her.

Another recent study shows us a new way to interpret those who shout their views the loudest. Northwestern University's David Gal and Derek Rucker, in a paper published in 2010 in *Psychological Science*, presented a series of experiments with 345 subjects who were asked to advocate for issues they had strong opinions on: animal testing, dietary preferences, loyalty toward Macs versus PCs. Then doubt was introduced in various ways—for example, by asking some of the subjects to relate memories about which they were uncertain.

PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/ALEAIMAGE

Afterward, Gal and Rucker found, the subjects who'd been injected with doubt became stronger advocates for their beliefs, as if they now had to try to convince themselves as well as others. "Although it is natural to assume that a persistent and enthusiastic advocate of a belief is brimming with confidence," wrote Gal and Rucker, "the advocacy might in fact signal that the individual is boiling over with doubt."

This is useful information on two fronts. If, when someone's in our face with his opposing opinions, we remind ourselves that he might be swimming in doubt, our stance toward him might soften. And if, when we ourselves react in a knee-jerk way, we step back and do a little self-examination, we might uncover some doubts behind our own views. Recognizing that we are all human and vulnerable, we might then begin to explore a more honest exchange of ideas and feelings.

This sort of softening is precisely what's promoted by Jon Rudy, a peace-building global consultant who has designed and mentored conflict-transformation programs throughout Central and Southeast Asia and Africa. "A lot of conflict is about entrenching in positions," Rudy says. "The task of peace building is to get in the middle there and create space for conversation, for stepping out of these intractable positions." Doubt, when openly acknowledged rather than fearfully hidden, can be a powerful tool to move people into fruitful conversation.

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Rudy himself has had to embrace doubt—and has found astonishing payoffs. As a facilitator at the Mindanao Peace Building Institute in the Philippines, he and his colleagues were approached by a two-star general who wanted training. The institute members were filled with doubt; Rudy, who comes from the pacifist Mennonite religion, specifically had to confront his own resistance to engaging with the military.

But the general took courses on peace building and interfaith relations and then instituted a whole raft of changes whereby the military is recognizing that its core competency of combat is inadequate to do the job of nation building. Since then, more military officers have had the training. "Because we were willing to work through this level of doubt, we've become part of a larger structural change to what is undergirding much of the conflict in the Philippines," says Rudy, adding that he's now

PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/MALERAPASO

become “very eager to engage the military in conversation.”

What might happen if, for example, this kind of healthy doubt were introduced into discussions between Palestinians and Israelis or between North and South Korea? The late historian Howard Zinn believed that great social changes have been brought about by citizens who have productively doubted. In his classic essay “The Optimism of Uncertainty,” published in *The Nation* in 2004, Zinn advised us to question the perceived infallibility of our institutions. “There is a tendency to think that what we see in the present moment will continue,” he wrote. “We forget how often we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by extraordinary changes in people’s thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible.”

At the beginning of 2011, the web magazine *Edge* invited leading scientists and philosophers to answer the question “What scientific concept would improve everybody’s cognitive toolkit?” A surprising number of respondents cited the value of uncertainty. Carlo Rovelli, a physicist at the University of Aix-Marseille, wrote, “The very foundation of science is to keep the door open to doubt. Precisely because we keep questioning everything, especially our own premises, we are always ready to improve our knowledge.”

A wonderful example of doubt leading to improved knowledge can be found in the justice arena, where wrongful convictions are being overturned as a result of the relatively new technology of DNA testing. (With the DNA from a single hair root, an individual can be differentiated from everyone else who’s ever lived.)

The most infamous instance is probably the 1989 Central Park jogger case, in which five Harlem teens were convicted of raping and leaving a woman for dead in New York City’s Central Park; in 2002, DNA testing showed they were innocent and rightly placed the blame on a convicted murderer and serial rapist, who then confessed. This mode of positive doubt provides a much-needed balance in the justice system; in the United States, 70 percent of DNA exonerees are minorities, and one-third were under 22 when they were arrested.

The New York–based Innocence Project, founded in 1992 by attorneys Peter Neufeld and Barry Scheck, has gotten courts to overturn more than 250 wrongful convictions on the basis of DNA testing, a figure Neufeld says “is unquestionably just the tip of the iceberg.” But even in a profession where lives are at stake, people are resistant to entertaining doubt. “About half the time police and prosecutors bury their heads in the sand and insist they were right no matter what the evidence says,” Neufeld told Kathryn Schultz, author of the book *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, for her Slate.com blog, The Wrong Stuff. “With the passage of time, your story becomes your reality. You get wedded to your own version.”

Studies suggest we would be wise to question the stories we’ve grown attached to—because they can be inaccurate, no matter how certain we *feel* that we are right. In a 2002 study at the University of Portsmouth in the United Kingdom, people were asked about their memories of Princess Diana’s death, including whether they’d seen footage of the fatal crash. Almost half said they had seen the footage—even though none exists. Researchers at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand asked twins about memories of their shared childhoods and found that most pairs have at least one disputed memory, of an event that both twins are convinced happened only to them.

What if you were to apply a little useful doubt to that story you tell yourself about the thing your partner/parent/child did “to hurt you” and with which you keep re-engaging in your pain-inducing thoughts? What new information might such a crack of light illuminate? Doubt is hard to entertain because it makes us feel vulnerable. But it is precisely when we let our defenses down that breakthroughs can be made.

Self-help guru Byron Katie, the bestselling author of *Loving What Is* and many other books, has practically bottled this process. In a method she calls The Work, Katie applies a series of deceptively simple questions to chip away at the certainty with which we invest our thoughts: Is that thought true? Can I absolutely know that it’s true? How do I react when I believe this thought? Who would I be without this thought?

As I watch a series of videos of Katie leading individuals through The Work, I can see them dropping their rage, shame, stress, disappointment—all the suffering their thoughts create. To a man who’s angry with his sister because she still hasn’t gotten over the death of her young daughter after eight years, Katie applies the drill:

“So she won’t let go of her daughter’s death. Can you absolutely know that it’s true?”

He thinks for a moment and admits he can’t.

“What happens when you believe this thought: ‘She won’t let go of her daughter’s death?’”

“I feel angry and sad. I’m feeling almost the pressure I’ve put on her, my sister,” he responds.

“So, sweetheart, who would you be without the thought ‘She won’t let go of her daughter’s death’?”

He closes eyes and breathes deeply. “Lighter. I feel lighter and free, open.”

Then she takes him through what she calls The Turnaround: He has to come up with a thought that is as true as or truer than the original thought. Often this turns out to be just the opposite of the original thought.

“So ‘My sister won’t get over her daughter’s death.’ Turn it around.”

He closes his eyes again, gets teary, and begins to nod and nod, as if he’s just realized the truth. It is clear what he’s thinking: He hasn’t gotten over his niece’s death.

“Yeah,” she says gently to his unspoken epiphany. “Yeah. You never get over love.”

The Toltec shaman and author of the bestseller *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, Don Miguel Ruiz, takes this idea of self-inquiry even further. “With the power of doubt, you challenge every message you deliver and receive. You challenge every belief that rules your life,” he advised in the article “The Power of Doubt,” which he co-wrote with his son, Don José Ruiz, for *O: The Oprah Magazine* in 2010. “Then you challenge all the beliefs that rule society, until you break the spell of all the lies and superstitions that control your world.”

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I’M STANDING IN TADASANA, THE Mountain Pose, in my yoga class, in month three of recovery from a serious injury to my long-arthritic hip. I’ve been working closely with my Ashtanga yoga teacher, Jennifer Ammann, who has gradually reintroduced different poses to my practice. She scrutinizes my body, then announces, “I think you’re ready to add in Vrksasana,” Tree Pose.

I flinch. All I can think of is the pain I’m certain it will trigger. “I’m scared to do that pose,” I say honestly.

“I’ll bet,” she answers evenly. And in that moment, because she has patiently worked through other physical issues with me and helped me to heal so much, I start to doubt my own fear. If Jennifer thinks I’m ready, then at least I’m willing to try.

Jennifer has me stand against the wall so my body is supported upright. I gingerly bend my right knee and bring my foot to rest against my shin. “Move your femur bone back towards the wall,” she instructs. “Drop your sit bones. That’s it!”

My initial doubt gives way to the most delicious feeling of spaciousness in my hip—something I haven’t felt in years. The breakthrough is deep: I have challenged my fixed idea of my physical limitations and discovered it to be bogus. I’m also enjoying a sensual pleasure I did not know I was capable of.

A study led by psychologist Aaron L. Wichman of Western Kentucky University and published in the March 2010 *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* suggests that doubting one’s own doubt can actually increase self-confidence—exactly what I experienced in my yoga-class breakthrough. Wichman’s team measured the uncertainty of 37 participants by testing their agreement with statements like “When bad things happen I do not know why.” The subjects read imaginary scenarios, such as an employee getting a raise, and rated their confidence in the different possible causes. They also had to complete a sentence-unscrambling task, but half of the subjects were given words relating to doubt causes. This task led the habitually uncertain participants to be far more confident in their judgments, as if they were

PHOTOGRAPH: LUNAMARINA/DREAMSTIME.COM

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doubting their own doubts.

A second study by the same team showed that one doubt-inducing task followed by another led to more behavior that looked more confident. The implications are wide. “One might speculate that the difference between being certain of one’s agonizing insecurity and lack of worth and being uncertain of it may mean the difference between suicide and scheduling an appointment for psychological therapy,” the researchers wrote.

“When you accept and acknowledge that you don’t know what’s happening, then you’re freeing your mind of any decision of what reality is,” my yoga teacher tells me. “When you realize you don’t know, you open your mind to any possibility, and reality will reveal itself to you. That’s the state you want to be in. And eventually, it becomes so pleasurable to be in that place of not knowing, it eliminates fear.”

World religion professor Mirabai Starr, author of the new book *God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, has made a study of perhaps the deepest state of doubt—the doubt that arises when one is in spiritual crisis, such as when faith bottoms out or a loved one dies. Starr has also authored critically acclaimed translations of the Spanish Christian mystics St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, both of whom suffered through what St. John called “the Dark Night of the Soul.” “Contrary to popular use of the term, the Dark Night of the Soul has very little to do with depression,” explains Starr. “It’s more about being spiritually stripped so that we are plunged into a state of not knowing anything. That radical unknowingness is an absolutely necessary step on the spiritual journey.”

The value of “radical unknowingness” is not limited to Christianity. “The Great Doubt is a central feature in Zen, where it’s said one needs equal amounts of faith, doubt and determination in order to ‘succeed’ in the practice,” says meditation teacher and longtime Zen practitioner Sean Murphy, the author of *One Bird, One Stone: 108 American Zen Stories* and other books. “The Great Doubt is when you don’t know what you’re here for, what anybody’s here for, and you’re just thrown into this radical uncertainty that makes you dive into the very depths of your heart and mind to try to find an answer from the inside.”

Zen’s Great Doubt and St. John the Divine’s Dark Night of the Soul are, paradoxically, both terrifyingly annihilating and intensely productive. “Radical doubt often precedes a great awakening,” says Murphy, “because the psyche has come to the end of being able to understand. It can’t understand in terms of the ego, the personality structure, and so now we can crack through to something deeper, to this sense that we are living something so much larger than ourselves.” Radical doubt, in other words, might well be a necessary predecessor to spiritual enlightenment.

Later I’m reading Starr’s blog, This Beautiful Wound, where she’s posted a commencement address she gave to a high school graduating class in spring 2011. “Today I invite you not to know,” she told her young audience. “I invite you to wonder. In fact, I urge you to unlearn everything you thought you knew. Do it quickly! There is no time to lose. The world is burning, and only those who drop all preconceptions will have their hearts free to douse the flames and soothe the wounds.”

I think back to the fear-filled email I’d received from my beloved relative. The world is indeed burning, and there are flames to be doused. I have to drop what I think I know and open my heart to what really is in front of me, over and over again, being uncertain each time whether this will throw me into despair or elation—or both, and something more. ■

DIANA RICO, *who wrote about giving in the December 2011 issue, is considering trying out some other yoga poses she’s been dead set against. Maybe.*

Ode now

Harnessing Uncertainty as Fuel for Brilliance
with Jonathan Fields

In this interactive program, Jonathan Fields, serial wellness-industry entrepreneur and author of *Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt Into Fuel for Brilliance*, shares a set of simple shifts in workflow and daily mindset practices that unlock higher levels of creativity. They inspire action, even in the face of uncertainty and disruption.

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