

Sermon - "The Evolution of Consciousness: Suspending Disbelief" by Cindy Cohen

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I am fascinated by how we KNOW things. Especially those unexplainable things.

So here's the disclaimer. For the next 20 minutes or so, try to suspend your disbelief. According to the dictionary, suspending disbelief means *"To temporarily allow oneself to believe something that isn't true, especially in order to enjoy a work of fiction."* So if this topic starts moving into a realm where you're uncomfortable, just ponder it as a work of fiction. But I hope some of it may resonate with you, on some level.

Have you ever just KNOWN something, but can't quantify HOW you know it?

- Like how you know you love your children? Or your partner? Or your best friend?
- Or when you're thinking of a friend and out of the blue they call.
- Or that feeling you can't explain, deep in your soul, that "inner knowing".
- Your intuition. Being psychic.

There's that word. Psychic. Conjures up the image of an old woman in a turban, sitting at a little table with a crystal ball. I called one once. I thought it would be fun to have her come to a gathering and do some readings for us. She answered the phone and instead of saying "hello", said "Janice?"

No ... ? I said, questioningly. Oh, she said, I thought you were Janice calling back. Nope, and I told her what I wanted. She said she didn't do group readings, and that was that. But in the back of my mind I thought, "How good could she be when she didn't even know who it was that was calling?"

But what about us? Do we have natural intuition? Or moments of Extra Sensory Perception -- ESP? You've heard those extreme stories - of the person who is about to board a plane and at the last minute gets an irrational feeling and decides to not get on the plane. And then something tragic happens to the flight that validates their feeling.

What IS that? What inner voice guides them to safety? Is that their conscience? God? Their spirit guides? Or are they just extraordinary people, who can hear their own “still small voice” more than the rest of us?

Gary Zukov, in his book “Seat of the Soul”, says “intuition is perception beyond the physical senses that is meant to assist you. It is that sensory system which operates without data from the five senses”, and is part of your incarnation. It is the “walkie-talkie” between your personality and your soul. And while I love his explanation of souls, I won’t go there today. That’s a topic for another sermon.

Many times children tend to have the ability to see things and people we don’t see. They may call them “imaginary friends”, but many times they’re not imaginary, they’re just not visual to us. Or after a loved one has died, there are times children still see and talk with those who have passed away. Are those feelings and visions real? Are they tuning in to a veil of energy still hanging around from their birth (or incarnation) that we adults have learned to tune out? What did we know as children that we’ve lost? And why?

In my life I find these intuitive knowings don’t only occur as extraordinary events. Sometimes they’re just part of your average, ordinary day. I’ve experienced them as long as I can remember, and the best label I could give them was “intuition”. So many times in my work life, and my personal life, I would just KNOW something, deep in my gut, and know it was right. But I couldn’t explain HOW I knew. I did know it wasn’t God, or at least my version of the fire-and-brimstone God in the sky. But what it was wasn’t clear to me. And in the everyday work world you need to be able to back up your claims with validations. I couldn’t do that.

As UUs we tend to be more science and logic based. I would espouse to be of that ilk. When there is something to be learned it’s valid only when it can be backed up with clear logic and scientific evidence. Like how we know gravity works. And our bodies. And what we know from the use of our 5 senses. What we can taste, touch see, smell and hear. But what happens when those things aren’t enough? When they don’t answer all of life’s more intriguing questions?

Background (work and Wisdom 2.0)

Until two years ago I had spent my last 15 years in the field of human-computer interaction. The field melds computer science with psychology, and I spent a lot of time watching users test our software designs to see where the sticking points were. (So if you're having trouble using some of your cell phone features, I sympathize with you, and apologize for my colleagues not doing their job well enough.) As a "soft science" field, we were always trying to validate user behavior and balancing needs and wants. But my needs and wants were beginning to shift focus. I still enjoyed the cognitive science aspect of the field, but wanted to know more about how we think. Some of you may know Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book, *Flow*, about what our brains do when we are "in the zone", fully immersed in something to the point that we forget about time and our surroundings. (Don't you just love that feeling?) That energized focus when you're fully engaged in the task at hand, and working with full consciousness. That has always resonated with me.

So I began to question consciousness, not only as it applied to us and computers, but to us as spiritual beings. About the physical vs. non-physical world. And that "transcending mystery and wonder, ... which moves us to an openness to the forces which create and uphold life." (You may recognize that as one of the sources from which we draw upon as UUs). Little niggling feelings and questions were stirring in my mind. But so was Fear. With a capital F.

In religion, the term "liminal" represents a time when we are on the threshold between two states. Between life and death. Between the ordinary and the sacred. Many times they are associated with death, illness and disaster, but not always. What about what we experience during meditation? That sacred "otherness"? Where you leave your individual self and engage with a universal connectedness you can't explain? Or the euphoria some runners are said to feel when they are "in the zone"? Those liminal places tend to be where the mystery happens. And I find those spaces fascinating. But how does a UU go delving safely into an area of mystery like consciousness?

My answer came in 2013, when I attended a conference that asked the question: How can we use technology to be more mindful in the world? It was a "light bulb" moment for me. There I was in San Francisco, sitting with over 2,000 individuals from around the

world -- but mostly Silicon Valley techies and those in the Mindfulness community, pondering how we can live more consciously in the digital age. The Sacred and the Ordinary together on one stage.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield and Roshi Joan Halifax talking with leaders from the technology community (folks like Jeff Bezos from Amazon, Jeff Weiner from LinkedIn, and Meng Tan, Google's Jolly Good Fellow), and from the corporate world (Bill Ford from the Ford Motor Company and Mark Bertolini, the head of Aetna). All talking about consciousness. On so many practical levels. My mind was blown.

That really jump-started my introduction to new ways of thinking about consciousness. I was ready to tackle my Fear of the unknown. To go from my left brain, analytical thinking, and delve into the world of right brain thinking, the world of the creative and sometimes unexplainable. The unknown. You know, the "woo woo" side.

What I found was a new field that has emerged - called the "Noetic Sciences" It is the intersection where science and consciousness meet. I had found my world.

Noetic Sciences

Noetic - is derived from the Greek noesis / noetikos, meaning inner wisdom, direct knowing, or subjective understanding.

And of course Science - are systems of acquiring knowledge that use observation, experimentation, and replication to describe natural phenomena.

So the Noetic Sciences - then is *a multidisciplinary field that brings objective scientific tools and techniques together with inner knowing to study the full range of human experiences.*

Extraordinary Knowing

One of the best examples I found early on for this bringing together science and inner knowing was the book "Extraordinary Knowing, by Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer. Back in the 1990's she was just your ordinary psychologist, doing research at Berkeley, when her

daughter's rare, hand-carved harp was stolen in California. The police couldn't turn up any leads on the theft, and a friend suggested she call an intuitive in Arkansas. Despite her scientific background and skepticism she did, and within two days, without leaving his house in Arkansas, he was able to identify the exact California street coordinates where the harp was found. Weird, right?

She was then driven to understand what had happened, and spent 14 years researching the field of knowing and other "inexplicable" phenomena. She found Sigmund Freud's writings on telepathy, CIA experiments on remote viewing, and studies within the fields of neuroscience and quantum physics. Most of which was validated, but "swept under the rug". Fear. Oh the levels we will go to to not be "outed." To not be thought "beyond the fringe." Even when validated science is staring you in the face.

In her book she doesn't ask us to believe. Instead she merely lays out information for us to ponder, not just for scientific inquiry but for the way we go about "seeing" in this world.

Fear

So let's talk about Fear. I think we all know it's a great motivator. It can move mountains. But it can also block intuition.

When it comes to seeking the Truth (with a capital "T"), Gary Zukav says "Truth is that which does not contaminate you, but empowers you. There are degrees of truth, but generically, truth is that which can do no harm. It cannot harm. ... And the truth that comes through intuitive processes or intuitive channels can be contaminated with your own fear."

And the answers you receive through your intuitive channels may not be the ones you want to hear. They may challenge what you would PREFER to do rather than what is your actual Truth.

Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer talked a great deal about Fear in her book. When she began publishing papers on exploring mind-matter anomalies an odd thing started happening.

People would start coming up to her and sharing their stories. Usually prefaced with the statement “I’ve never told anyone this, but ...”

It started with a physician she barely knew who came up to her at a professional meeting to talk about how he was diagnosed with a fatal bone cancer 20 years ago. As a marathon runner he was deeply depressed and found relief only when running. One morning, two hours into his run, he was overcome by what he described as a “sensation of light. Clear soft light, as though light was filling my bones, as though light and air were infusing each bone. I saw it - light penetrating those bones, right through to the marrow.” The next week his x-rays were clean. “The light crowded out the cancer cells. I don’t know how, but I know it did.”

She also had patients present interesting anomalies. Like the neurosurgeon who came to her for a psychological consultation after he started having debilitating headaches that medical testing couldn’t find a cause for. He was a successful surgeon, but had stopped teaching, which he loved to do, because he didn’t think he could teach what he was really doing to be so successful. As soon as he learned a patient needed surgery he went to the patient’s bedside, sat at their head, and waited for a distinctive white light to appear around their head. Once it appeared he knew it was safe to operate. “How can I teach that?” he asked. “What would the residents think? They’d think I was crazy.” When she asked when the headaches had started, he had a light bulb moment. “That’s interesting” he said. “The headaches started two years ago. And I remember when I noticed the first one. It was the day I resigned from teaching, right after I told the Dean ...”

Mayer asks us, “What happens when you have an anomalous experience, but you’re afraid to acknowledge it? If you admit to the experience, you run the risk of being disbelieved or thought crazy. It’s a profoundly destructive conflict, one that stops us as a society from looking for ways to discover and develop new knowledge. And one that stops us as individuals from embracing our reality. We pay a price for denying our personal experiences of what’s real.”

What is the nature of that discomfort and the conflicts that underlie it? How do our collective and individual fears of the unknown cost us?

Consciousness and Knowing

But there are people who have stepped out of the darkness to share their stories publicly. Who have moved beyond their individual Fear. People who were firmly grounded in science who have had their inner knowing transformed in radical ways. Two of the more famous ones you may know are Jill Bolte Taylor and Dr. Eben Alexander.

Jill Bolte Taylor is the Harvard-trained neuroscientist who had a massive stroke in the left side of her brain when she was in her mid-30's. In her book "My Stroke of Insight", she shares her experience, how in the first four hours of the stroke she was able to observe her mind alternating between the euphoria of the intuitive and kinesthetic right brain, in which she felt a sense of complete well-being and peace, and the logical, sequential left brain, which recognized she was having a stroke and enabled her to seek help. It took her 8 years to recover, and from it learned that inner peace is accessible to anyone, by "stepping to the right" of our left brains, to uncover feelings of well-being that are often sidelined by our "brain chatter."

Dr. Eben Alexander, had a different consciousness-raising Near Death Experience. As a neurosurgeon, with a degree from University of Virginia, and teaching stints at Harvard, UMass, and Duke University medical schools, he was also well steeped in how the brain, mind and consciousness worked. After experiencing a meningitis-induced coma in 2008, he came out of it to assert that his experience taught him that consciousness is independent of the brain. (And by the way, I just saw that he's coming to Wilmington in October to do a workshop, through the Center for Integrative Learning. If you're interested don't miss him!)

Both Eben Alexander and Jill Bolte Taylor's Near Death Experiences provide us with direct first-hand experiences of the mind while unconscious, and shed light on where knowing may, or may not, come from. From individuals who are steeped in science, logic and reason.

Conclusion

Perhaps the best justification for MY exploration of inner knowing, and those liminal states we experience, comes from Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who in 1971 became the sixth man to walk on the moon. His trip back home to earth was what he recalled most, during which he said he felt a “profound sense of universal connectedness”. He said:

“The presence of divinity became almost palpable, and I knew that life in the universe was not just an accident based on random processes. . . .The knowledge came to me directly.”

It led him to conclude that reality is more complex, subtle, and mysterious than conventional science had led him to believe. Perhaps a deeper understanding of consciousness could lead to a new and expanded understanding of reality in which objective and subjective, outer and inner, are understood as co-equal aspects of the miracle of being. It was this intersection of knowledge systems that led Dr. Mitchell to launch the interdisciplinary field of noetic sciences in 1973.

The Institute of Noetic Sciences (abbreviated as IONS), describes consciousness this way.

Personal consciousness is awareness—how an individual perceives and interprets his or her environment, including beliefs, intentions, attitudes, emotions, and all aspects of his or her subjective experience.

Collective consciousness is how a group (an institution, a society, a species) perceives and translates the world around them.

Our worldview is the beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and assumptions through which we filter our understanding of the world and our place in it.

There are several ways we can know the world around us. Science focuses on external observation and is grounded in objective evaluation, measurement, and experimentation. This is useful in increasing objectivity and reducing bias and inaccuracy as we interpret what we observe. But another way of knowing is subjective or internal, including gut feelings, intuition, and hunches—the way you know you love

your children, for example, or experiences you have that cannot be explained or proven “rationally” but feel absolutely real. This way of knowing is what we call noetic.

So what do you know that you can't explain away rationally? That feels absolutely real to you? That you KNOW deep in your gut? And where does that knowing come from, in your mind?

I'll leave you with this question from Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer.

Could extraordinary knowing not be so extraordinary after all? But part of ordinary knowing that we simply haven't known how to account for? If that's true, I encourage us to share our stories, so we might start inhabiting our world with a different, radically more hopeful outlook for our future.

Or as Hamlet tells his friend Horatio, “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy”.