

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

I heard this story a while back and it struck a chord in me:

My husband was on his way to a meeting and stopped in a diner for breakfast on the way. He sat at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee, a donut and then added a candy bar to the order for a later snack. He left the counter and went to the restroom while the server completed his order.

When he returned he was shocked to see that the woman, who was sitting on the stool next to him, was eating his candy bar. Dumbfounded that she would do such a thing, he retrieved and ate the remainder of his sweet tidbit.

He was so distracted that he decided to change his seat. Picking up his breakfast, he moved to a booth. To his surprise, the woman got up and took a big bite out of his donut. Stunned, he decided to leave before this 'nutcase' escalated the whole thing into something embarrassing. He picked up his briefcase and exited to the street.

Upon arriving at his car, the teller continues, my husband reached into his pocket for the keys only to discover the candy bar he had purchased. Beside himself with embarrassment he went back to apologize to the 'nutcase,' but found she too had left. This experience left him profoundly impacted by his own presumption.

Like the woman's husband in the story, I too have found myself so confident I have the truth that I am unable to see any other reality. Abiding in my blindness, even though the very truth is sitting right before my uncomprehending eyes, I have shared his plight of certainty.

My experience says that he and I are not alone. When we are so certain, as was our presumptuous man, we remain self-righteously fixed in our position. With no felt need to explore beyond what we think we know is right, our certainty puts us in the position of having nothing to learn. Fixed in our virtuous presumption of truth, be it profound or mundane, we are blinded to the need to examine, let alone revise, our truth. Fortunately for the man in the story, he did learn.

Carl Deutch says, "There are three classes of knowledge in the world: great truth, truths and science. Great truths are those truths the opposite of which are equally true. Truths are truths the opposite of which are patently false. And science is the art of turning a great truth into a truth." For this article I'd like to examine truths.

Truths are most frequently simple. As simple truths they often go unexamined because their common place in our lives presumes acceptance by us all. Their unexamined character gives these truths much influence over us. Because the opposite of these simple truths are obviously false, whatever we use them against doesn't stand a chance.

Simple truths like, you shouldn't eat my candy bar without asking, totally eclipse further questioning like, is this even my candy bar? Because of his rightness, the man in our story was hence certain of his neighbor's wrongness. So certain that he didn't question himself in this obviously absurd situation.

This faux pas is a doorway beyond the candy bar to important psychological and spiritual insight. We have strongly held ideas we grasp as truths. We are so certain in the truths of these ideas that they frequently become barriers to questioning the truth itself or the validity of our position. With no questions to ask about our positions we remain locked in place. From here we have nothing to learn from experience. I was pleased for the man in our story because he went back to correct his mistake.

It was not only his recognizing the mistake, but the act of revising that is important. He used his error as an invitation to explore. Instead of ashamedly writing the whole thing off as a bad dream, he stepped into the unknown path of the wronged woman whose candy bar he had self-righteously eaten. Even though she had left before his return, he was on the threshold of an important domain of learning—he was using error as an invitation to exploration and growth.

My fantasy is that he might be a seeker on the spiritual path of perennial wisdom. I can see realization dawning upon him the moment he stepped past the simple truth that many use, "Never make a mistake i.e. Always be right." Stepping past the simple truth and its patently false opposite takes us into new, unusual fields of learning.

New fields generate new questions to ask. New questions generate new insights. New insights create new occasions for amendment or revision. Instances of new fields of insight could be failure, error and anxiety as well as the standard arenas of excitement such as rewards. Expansion of our

field of learning in such atypical directions refreshes spiritual exploration and invigorates our journey of self-unfoldment.

When we venture beyond our certainty we are doing research in the broader richness of life. We discover the limits of what is conspicuous in the light as well as in what is secreted away in the darkness. We will grow to discover that strategies of both light and darkness can seclude important insight away from investigation. Living and being is then seen as an art rather than something to be endured or something by which we are helplessly confused. Insights into our purpose and meaning comes in greater abundance.

Refusal to make the necessary revisions brought about during our maturity can, however, imprison us within the ever tightening constraint of self-righteousness. Without the excitement of attraction or anxiety of discovering our error and then revising our thinking, we render life flat and find ourselves learning nothing from experience. Rather than using experience as a window to the world, we instead self-indulgently use it to confirm and massage our narrow unchallenged significance. Experience becomes a spiritless marionette with no defining value.

Experience is intended to build value with knowledge. It deepens access to a reality ever growing in complexity. When we refuse to learn we hide an expanding reality in plain sight. Secreting potential wisdom away to obscure and inaccessible corners of our mind, we loll ourselves asleep to self-unfoldment. Spiritual as well as psychological development demands we turn this ignor-ance around.

The man in our story is at least on the right track by revising his behavior. My hope is that he is at this moment challenging the absoluteness of other certainties when his theory of what is true doesn't match what he thought he had ordered.

Mindfulness¹ serves as a guide through this maze. Begin to pay attention to what you pay attention to. Things like patterns (individual, group, cultural), human relationships, power, what's right, what's wrong, yourself, others,

¹ "Insight" and "mindfulness" are systematic spiritual practices serving as instruments to get beyond such elusive barriers to learning.

color, sound, architecture, etc are some places to start attending. Examining yourself in this way through your environment lets you know what you are interested in and therefore that which you use to make up the world in which you live. This puts you in the position to resolve to revise or cherish your world; to determine if what you pay attention to leads you on the path that excites and challenges awakening.

With heightened awareness in hand in the form of insight and mindfulness, you are starting the process of making two things visible: The forces that drive your experience like food, sleep, sex, self-preservation; and the theme(s) that your experiences are oriented around, i.e. culture or ego, that determine what you pay attention to.

Ancient and modern teachers of perennial wisdom encourage us to use all of these stimulators in order to expand the way we use our mind; be it to seek new realities or to unpack and restructure old ones. In their wisdom they guide the sincere student in knowing that failure and making mistakes can serve as an enlightening challenge to the narrow absoluteness of our position. To be open to failure as an opportunity for learning, or to be open to risk-taking as an opportunity for openness to a paradigm-shift could both send us on an unforeseen and exciting quest, an exciting revision of our unexamined assumptions which would thus open the door wider still to enlightenment.

As you mature this stance of being mindful of awareness brings you in conscious contact with your experience and its source(s). Your practice of self-unfoldment is further equipped to deepen your insight into the question, “Who am I?” Mindful participation with life permits you to choicefully **attend to, revise or sustain** your truths, and the thinking, and meaning you make from them. No matter the way, your experiences will once again serve as an insightful window to the world—until they don’t. While they do, they will build knowledge instead of hiding it under the cloaks of light or darkness.