

Quest

Jesus was renowned for his teaching, drawing hundreds and even thousands to hear his perspective on life and faith. Though deeply informed by the Jewish tradition, he created quite a stir as he challenged long-held interpretations of scripture. Further, his life, informed by his faith, was marked by many examples of breaking with tradition when it came to grace, justice, and inclusion. Indeed, he was so well known for such things that it drove the Jewish leaders to conspire with Roman officials to end his life. Sometimes Jesus' teaching was straightforward. At other times, he used parables to cause people to think in new ways. The fact that he offered new ways to think inherently means that there were older ways that needed to be released. He described this reality with his parable of wine skins – you cannot put new wine into old wineskins because the new wine will burst the old skin. New wine requires new skins. Similarly, new ideas require new frameworks.

As we continue *The Quest for Thin Places*, informed Dana Hicks' book of the same name, it may behoove us to give some thought to our thinkers. Our brains. How could we live without it? Yet a helpful question on our journey would also be, how does our brain keep us from living more fully? Psychologist, author, and teacher Tara Brach offers this insightful story to consider:

*Mohini was a regal white tiger who lived for many years at the Washington D.C. National Zoo. For most of those years her home was in the old lion house—a typical twelve-by-twelve-foot cage with iron bars and a cement floor. Mohini spent her days pacing restlessly back and forth in her cramped quarters. Eventually, biologists and staff worked together to create a natural habitat for her. Covering several acres, it had hills, trees, a pond and a variety of vegetation. With excitement and anticipation they released Mohini into her new and expansive environment. But it was too late. The tiger immediately sought refuge in a corner of the compound, where she lived for the remainder of her life. Mohini paced and paced in that corner until an area twelve by twelve feet was worn bare of grass. – Tara Brach, *Accepting Absolutely Everything**

Dana Hicks notes that psychiatrist and author Dr. M. Scott Peck observed that most times that religious people came to him for therapy, their pain would lead them to more questions and doubts and usually to agnosticism or atheism. (We might label this as “deconstructing.”) Whereas when atheists or agnostics would come to him for therapy, their pain would typically lead them to become either profoundly religious or deeply spiritual... People who are not hampered by preconceived ideas of divine control seem open to the thin places that pain brings. As a result, atheists and agnostics in pain seem inevitably to stumble upon *The Divine (Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, New York: Touchstone, 1993, p 22).

Questions: What are the ideas about God, pain, and suffering that have informed you? Which do you believe? What ideas are you struggling with most?

Physicist Albert Einstein once quipped, “Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods.” Similarly, American Theoretical Physicist Richard P. Feynman advised, “The first principle is that you must not fool yourself and you are the easiest person to fool.” Psychologist and author Robert Wright notes:

*The human brain is, in large part, a machine for winning arguments, a machine for convincing others that its owner is in the right—and thus a machine for convincing its owner of the same thing. The brain is like a good lawyer: given any set of interests to defend, it sets about convincing the world of their moral and logical worth, regardless of whether they in fact have any of either. Like a lawyer, the human brain wants victory, not truth; and, like a lawyer, it is sometimes more admirable for skill than for virtue (*The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p 280).*

Social psychologist Lee Ross calls these phenomena naïve realism—the human mind's tendency to assume our perceptions and beliefs are accurate and unbiased. We think that other reasonable people perceive things the way we do, and when they don't, they are “unreasonable” (Joyce Ehrlinger, Thomas Gilovich, and Less Ross, “Peering into the Bias Blind Spot: People's Assessments of Bias in Themselves and Others,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31:2005: 680–692). Have any of us witnessed this behavior in our culture? Sociologist Murray Davis argued that when ideas survive, it is not because they are true; it is because they are interesting. What makes an idea interesting is that it challenges our weakly held opinions. We get a dopamine rush when we discover or learn new things – but only when those new ideas do not threaten our core beliefs (“That's Interesting!: Toward a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology,” *Philosophy of Social Science*, no. 1: 1971: 309—344).

Questions: *What new ideas about God feel exciting to you?*

What new ideas about God seem threatening?

The Dunning-Kruger Effect references the human tendency to be initially overconfident in one's knowledge, only to discover they don't know as much as they thought. Over time and with experience, people's confidence grows along with wisdom. The pinnacle of false confidence is sarcastically referred to as the Peak of Mount Stupid, above the Valley of Despair we may find ourselves in when we discover we don't know so much. "The problem with [The Dunning-Kruger Effect] is we see it in other people, and we don't see it in ourselves. The first rule of the Dunning-Kruger club is you don't know you're a member of the Dunning-Kruger club" (Brian Resnick, "Intellectual Humility: The Importance of Knowing You Might Be Wrong." Vox. January 4, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/1/4/17989224/intellectual-humility-explained-psychology-replication>, Accessed December 14, 2023). Walt Whitman encouraged his audience to be curious, not judgmental.

Questions: *When in your life have you ascended Mt. Stupid?*

If you could go back in time, what would you tell yourself to avoid such over-confidence? How can you avoid the same climb now?

Indian Jesuit Priest and Psychotherapist Anthony de Mello wrote, "Most people end up being conformists; they adapt to prison life. A few become reformers; they fight for better lighting, better ventilation. Hardly anyone becomes a rebel, a revolutionary who breaks down the prison walls. You can only be a revolutionary when you see the prison walls in the first place." Dr. Donald Hoffman in his work on his Interface Theory of Perception proposed that "if we take evolution and natural selection seriously, we could ask, 'Would evolution by natural selection shape sensory systems to tell truths about the physical world around us?' Through theorems and computer simulations, the results seem to point in one direction: the probability that our senses have shaped us to see the truth about the world around us is zero. Our senses have shaped us to guide adaptive behavior so that we can live long enough to make babies. In other words, natural selection didn't shape us to see the truth, but it shaped us with sensory systems that are like a user interface to the truth." He continues:

"Suppose you are writing an email, and the icon for its file is blue, rectangular, and in the center of your desktop. Does this mean that the file itself is blue, rectangular, and in the center of your computer? Of course not. The color of the icon is not the color of the file. Files have no color. The shape and position of the icon are not the true shape and position of the file... The purpose of a desktop interface is not to show you the "truth" of the computer—where "truth," in this metaphor refers to circuits, voltages, and layers of software. Rather, the purpose of an interface is to hide the "truth" and to show simple graphics that help you perform useful tasks such as crafting emails and editing photos" (The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes, New York: Penguin Books, 2019).

It appears that we have a tension to manage. Our eyes help us see the world, yet our eyes don't see everything. Our physical eyes have three photoreceptors that allow us to see only what those receptors are capable of seeing. In contrast, the Mantis Shrimp has 16 photoreceptors, giving it the capacity to see much more than humans. Let that sink in. As wonderful as our eyes are, we must limit our beliefs that are only based on what we see, because we don't see much. May we remain humble as we sometimes blindly stumble along our dimly-lit paths in life!

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from Dana Hicks' book, The Quest for Thin Places: How to Find Spirituality after Deconstruction, Kindle Edition.