

## Exploring Uncertainty and Paradox

By Marla Estes

“Only one thing is certain—that is, nothing is certain. If this statement is true, it is also false.”

– Anonymous

Some of us have come to recognize the above statement as “reality.” Most often, though, we have to go through some amount of blood, sweat, and tears to get to this point. Sometimes, life brings the disillusionment of our most cherished notions. When we discover that the things that we were most certain of—and perhaps based our lives upon—are untrue or questionable, often a dark night of the soul ensues. Jack Kornfield, the well-known Buddhist practitioner and author, says, “Disillusionment ... is one of the purest teachers of awakening, independence and letting go that we will ever encounter.”

If we build from there, we can then base our sense of reality on the ground of our subjective being—our sense of self—onto terrain that is more flexible, and has more give to it. For that reason, exploring and working with our own inner paradoxes helps to develop this stance—this kind of poise—in our world.

Those who stick to ideas of certainty often get stuck in one side of a polarity, also known as “black and white” or “either/or” thinking. We see this all around us in the macrocosm: “Us” and “Them,” for example. A strong sense of belonging to an organized belief system provides a false sense of security against the threat of uncertainty. Karen Armstrong, a scholar of religions, talks about dogma—the “dangers of certainty”—the truth of which we need only to read the daily news to see.

I have heard it said that by being our true selves we stand on the surest ground. Embracing uncertainty brings gifts of latencies, possibilities, and—paradoxically—even self-awareness. This becomes more and more possible as our solid ground comes from an abiding sense of self, rather than from attachment to external belief systems. This is necessary for change, otherwise we stay in old holding patterns out of fear, maintaining the status quo. Embracing uncertainty provides us the courage to take risks, including speaking our truth and letting go of outcome, which is necessary for living from the base of our authentic self. It also permits us to be truly creative, not holding back because of fear. Being able to live in “not knowing” allows other solutions to occur to us, and unlocks us from our preconceptions.

Uncertainty can also help shake us out of our black and white thinking, our either/or minds. It leaves room for new ways of comprehension, and the discovery of novel solutions. As our decisions, judgments, and opinions become questionable, or even impossible, room is left for new possibilities.

I read a suggestion somewhere that instead of worry, we could wonder. Our minds do not work in the same way when we worry, or even question, as when we wonder. By this

slight shift, we can operate more out of curiosity than stress or fear. This goes hand in hand with putting less emphasis on what others think and trying less to control outcome. “Experimenter” means to experience in French. How can we bring this feeling of “experimentation” into our everyday life? How can we have more of a feeling of exploration within our uncertainty?

One of the first steps is to learn to sit with the discomfort of unanswered questions, to learn to have a reverent, patient relationship with them. As Rilke wrote: “Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

The ability to transcend black and white thinking has long been held as the sign of mature psychological health. In Jungian terms, this is called holding the tension of the paradox or the opposites, knowing that something can be both bad and good, for example. It is somehow easier for the human mind and emotions to not face the nuances found in gray areas, but by polarizing our experiences, we inhibit our growth and the richness found in the full range of experiences available to us.

The ability to hold opposites is developed by doing our inner work and accepting the polarities within ourselves. It is a worthy pursuit to allow and embrace all facets of our personality—all that we deem both good and bad, positive and negative. This is what Jungians term integrating our shadow aspects: re-incorporating what is unowned, rejected, or disallowed by our conscious mind. What we don’t re-integrate into our consciousness from our shadow aspects will ultimately rise to the surface. An extreme example is the right-wing evangelist, Ted Haggert, whose shadow surfaced when he purchased meth and the services of a male prostitute.

### The Impasse

Harriet Beecher Stowe said, “When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, until it seems as though you cannot hang on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.” This description of an impasse can be taken, of course, both literally and metaphorically. This can represent paradoxes in our psyche, and the tension that they create.

Fritz Perls, the originator of Gestalt therapy, said that an impasse occurs when old psychological systems are being torn down and new structures are not yet formed. Perls says that “staying with the experience of the impasse, enduring the hell of confusion and helplessness, leads to ... growth.” Perls refers to this as “withdrawal into the fertile void.” We need to surrender but not succumb, finding the space between letting go and resignation.

These impasses are characterized by the feeling that we have gotten ourselves into an impossible predicament, a no-win situation, where there is no way out, where we suffer immensely, and where we feel like we can proceed no further. Carl Jung says that through holding the tension of this inner paradox, something new can arise. A solution can be reached which will not necessarily be just a compromise, but rather a third option, something new. He called this the “transcendent function.” Author Jan Bauer writes, “When opposites unite, something new is born,” just as a certain uniting of water and light creates a rainbow.

The Mandorla 

Jungian author Robert Johnson writes, “A mandorla is that almond-shaped segment that is made when two circles partly overlap ... This symbol signifies nothing less than the overlap of the opposites ... the mandorla instructs us how to engage in reconciliation. A prototype of conflict resolution. Take this and take that—and make a mandorla of them.”

A mandorla can show us the way out and can rescue us from the impasse. It is like a Venn diagram. For instance, one of my sets of personal polarities is Independence and Responsibility. At first, these two “circles” seemed to be mutually exclusive, therefore showing no overlap: the need to experience freedom and still be part of a family. My mandorla, in that case, was to create my own psychological space while still living with my family. I accomplished this by finding ways to have the solitude that I so needed while still taking care of my responsibilities. There is a sliver where both opposing aspects can exist simultaneously. The intersecting part is shaped like an almond, and that is the mandorla, the space where both elements are true at once.

A tiny overlap at first begins the healing of the split. The greater the overlap, the greater the healing reconciliation. It takes our consciousness to enlarge the mandorla—to experience two opposing elements as simultaneously true—and at the same time this practice expands our consciousness. By holding the tension of opposites in this way, we are not only able to find new solutions, but we also develop the capacity to stretch our consciousness. Mandorlas represent thresholds or portals to a larger (and deeper) way of life; we can move from “either/or” to “both/and.”

Sometimes a mandorla is razor-blade thin: we struggle with it, we get a glimpse of it, we blink, and then it’s gone. We blink again and we see it once more. When we understand how to see it, we can look for the mandorlas in conflicting situations as they arise. The paradoxical place represented by the mandorla is an expansive space.

Mandorlas can be a doorway to resolution, reconciliation of the poles, and a way to grow ourselves further into living the question. Some of the other polarities that I have been playing with are:

Playfulness	Purposefulness
What I want	What others want
Self-discipline	Spontaneity
Safety	Vulnerability
Humility	Pride
Effort	Surrender
Head	Heart
Sustainability	Impermanence

It is wise to hold still and find the almond-shaped mandorlas in our lives, and it is rewarding to recognize what we know to be true and yet remain flexible and receptive to being proven wrong or inaccurate. As we outgrow questions and step into new ones, we are able to integrate a new way of being.

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