

Preparation for G319 — Unlearning

Read the passage below by Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Dr. Gordon B. McKeeman, from his book *Out of the Ordinary: Meditations* (Skinner Press, 1999, page 28). Then consider the questions on the following page.

An ancient Zen story tells of the master who poured tea into the student's cup long after it was already filled, to underline an important understanding that learning requires some emptiness. Unless there is an emptiness (sometimes called *yearning*), no learning is likely to occur. This suggests that, particularly among the learned, some unlearning is important.

It's hard to know how to encourage unlearning. There are probably many things that I now know aren't true, even though I believed at one time they were true. The ongoing quest for knowledge, when successful, makes the partial truths of the past less true, possibly even false. "New occasions teach new duties. . . ." Doctors now can do things once thought impossible. Engineers can, as well. People can expand their horizons beyond "my kind, my color, my language, my customs, my notions, my sexuality." The king in *The King and I* laments, "I wish I could be certain of the things of which I'm absolutely sure." The unchanging—the immutable—seems far more elusive than it once did.

In the last analysis, it is not knowledge for which we yearn, but wisdom. Surely knowledge and wisdom are kin, but in some significant way they are different. Put another way, knowledge offers us the key to 'how to.' Knowledge has opened doors to possibilities undreamed of in earlier times. The marvels of modern science and its twin, technology, are impressive, often even astonishing. The pace at which new knowledge is discovered seems to accelerate daily. Some even wonder if we ordinary folks are not suffering from the impact of "information overload"—knowing too much all at once.

It is more likely that the growth of knowledge, which we assumed would simplify decision-making, appears to be making decisions more difficult. Expanded knowledge increases our options and widens our horizons. In such a situation, wisdom plays an important role in our lives. Our dilemmas are not so much "how to"; they are "whether to." Even ordinary events present a bewildering array of choices: what to have for dinner, what toothpaste to use, what to wear . . . Knowing the choices helps, but little. Wisdom, fundamentally, is knowing who you are, where you are, and what you're trying to do or be. These are not matters of knowledge. They are matters of faith.

Choices in all matters, whether trivial or life-and-death, do not yield to knowledge. They require wisdom. The psalmist said, so many years ago when knowledge was very limited, "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." This petition becomes increasingly urgent as floods of knowledge threaten utter confusion. Even when it's only an ordinary day.

Questions for G319 — Unlearning

Please read the passage on the reverse of this page before considering these questions.

1. What do you need to unlearn?
2. What are some of the ways you can encourage unlearning in yourself.
3. What are some of the things that you now know aren't true, even though you believed at one time they were true?
4. Talk about times in your own life when the difference between knowledge and wisdom became apparent to you.
5. Give an example of your own suffering from "information overload."
6. Talk about some of the choices that have been made more difficult for you because of "a bewildering array of choices."