

Introduction to Ambiguity

am·bi·gu·i·ty (ām'bī-gyōō'ī-tē), n. pl. am·bi·gu·i·ties

1. Doubtfulness or uncertainty as regards interpretation. 2. Something of doubtful meaning.¹

The cultural tide toward simplification to relieve our power-strip lifestyles has missed its mark, and we've become stranded on the shores of oversimplification. Complex concepts are regularly reduced to sound bites. Quotations are easier to digest than essays. The candidate is either perfect or fatally flawed. Book titles have to say it all. And any big new idea needs to be completely explainable in a 12-minute Oprah segment, being sure to leave enough time for our girl to express her thoughts!

And check me out – I'm writing a *handout*.

Unfortunately, this tidal wave of simplification has left us somewhat intolerant of ambiguity, the everyday, real-life state of being unclear, open to interpretation, or lacking a right answer. As in, it doesn't exist. At all. There *is* no right answer. More and more, this is unacceptable to people, and it's taking a toll on our individual psyches.

A Sampling of the Cost of Ambiguity Intolerance

1. Decreased Psychological and Emotional Resilience. No matter how clever you are at making up stories to explain why things happen, sooner or later something will happen to you that you can't explain away. A death, a disaster, a young person's disappointing choice, a lover's sudden exit... life does baffle us. It's part of our human inheritance. Not being able to accept the unexplainable cripples our ability to heal and recover.

2. Decreased Interpersonal Tolerance. The easiest escape from ambiguity is to make someone or something wrong, and when there's a *someone* available to take the heat, he or she will usually have a different set of values than we do. That quickly boils down to someone with a different birth culture, religion, personal style, skin color, gender, sexual orientation... you know the list. Our inner prejudices (another human inheritance) come to life.

3. Increased Anxiety. For those of us who are fond of order and knowing what's right and what's wrong, ambiguous situations provoke stress. Maybe we thought the press was impartial, then learn they aren't. Maybe we thought the army had a clear mission, then learn they don't. Maybe our hero is revealed to have weaknesses. We trusted something and our trust is violated. We feel thrown off balance, out of our element, suddenly unsure of... everything. With the propensity of ambiguousness in real life, we can find ourselves living with a constant level of nail-biting, overeating, nicotine-craving anxiety.

4. Risk Aversion and Abdicated Responsibility. Avoiding situations that lack simplicity, understandability and a sure outcome means that golden opportunities in real estate or other investments are surely missed. Even more dangerous is turning one's financial responsibilities over to an "expert" to manage; it takes rigorous self-honesty to discern whether it's a genuine and affordable self-supportive action versus an irresponsible avoidance. Stewarding our own resources and choosing our own risks are privileges and part of our emotional maturing process.

¹ The American Heritage®, Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. ©2006 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

5. Decreased Creativity. A primary fuel for the creative spark is chaos – a dance of unanswered questions, unsolved mysteries, convoluted problems requiring out-of-the-box thinking, innovative approaches and fresh, unprecedented perspectives. Creativity is born of the ambiguous, and (most personally tragic of all these costs) those who can't tolerate the ambiguous lose a great deal of their creativity.

Five Keys to Making Friends with Ambiguity

1. Give Up Right & Wrong. Hamlet said it best: “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Which is a fancy way of saying we make this stuff up. Our ideas about right & wrong are just that – ideas. Ideas that spring from inside us, not out in the world. There is no monolithic yardstick in a field near Stonehenge where things can be measured objectively. The good news is that we don't need one. Whether or not something is right or wrong for the world is an irrelevant and unanswerable question (ironic, no?); whether it's right for each of us as individuals – that's relevant. And you are the authority on what is right for you. Cancel your subscription to the outer yardstick digest, and start letting others decide what's right for them.

2. Be Compassionate All Around. Ambiguity is stressful, this is a fact. How we relate to it makes the difference between tolerance and intolerance. Having compassion for ourselves is a key step. Breathe in and out, acknowledging inwardly that it's hard to just be with the uncertainty and not take a position. Pat yourself on the back when you manage to resist that urge to contract into intolerance. And when you see others losing that struggle, remember that it's not easy, that it's actually *painful* sometimes, and give them a break. Maybe they'll get it next time.

3. Practice Not Knowing. The absence of ambiguity – the clarity, absoluteness, certainty that we enjoy so often – is almost always an illusion. We don't actually know most of what we think we know, and thinking it is very limiting. It limits our creativity and our ability to see the untold possibilities of any given situation. Let go of the illusion of knowing. Spend a day coming up with as many unconsidered alternatives as possible, and make sure some of them are outlandish. Creativity is a very satisfying replacement for false knowledge, and it keeps our integrity intact.

4. Trust Yourself. When you feel the stress of ambiguity, it's often accompanied by a fear that something frightening will happen. A boogeyman will attack in the fog. Here's some news: the boogeyman is not what you're afraid of. What you are *truly* afraid of is the lashing you'll take from your inner critics for not anticipating the boogeyman. Fire them. You don't have to be prepared for every eventuality. You have resourcefulness, intelligence, creativity, courage, compassion and resilience, and they will have your back when the unanticipated appears. Trust yourself. You can handle the boogeyman.

5. Laugh. Humor is the great spell breaker, and our distress over ambiguity is a big, fat spell. With the illusion of knowing gone, with the defeat of tyrants right & wrong (hey, that rhymes), the truth is revealed. Ambiguity is our constant companion, and it's not a monster to be destroyed with sound bites. Put the torches away. Life wants to be complex sometimes, and isn't that OK? Can't we let the lawyers play too? Turn Oprah off and buy the boogeyman a coffee. In fact, *vote* for the boogeyman. Someone has to do that job, and it may as well be someone with some complexity.