

How Can We Know When Knowing is Really Knowing?

“Knowing” is acquired in different ways. Some knowledge is from personal experience. I know not to spit into the wind, for example.

What about the, “Uh-oh, I’ve got a feeling I’m in the wrong place at the wrong time,” kind of knowing? This is felt in the body as well as understood by the brain. Is that instinct or intuition? Does it come from somewhere beyond collective experience? Can it accumulate over time and manifest in our genetic code? The present-day effects of genocide and slavery suggest yes.

What about the knowing that stems from a deep sense that we are connected with “all that is”, which some experience as “I’ve gotten a message from God”? Does it matter that scientists have measured states of consciousness – from comatose to ecstatic – and still cannot tell us where the seat of consciousness lies, nor if all consciousness is knowing?

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a tool for me to build confidence in what I know and what I don’t. If I can avoid going automatically into story and evaluation, there’s a better chance that I am still “present”, thus, avoiding assumptions and projections for my evidence. Focusing on what happened and observing how the event has affected me gets me closer to accurately naming a need having been met or not met.

Being present in the present can be hard for those with active lives and active minds. The past and the future continue to color our present experience, and what we think we know. Nevertheless, the past, even trauma, can be unraveled with tender, long-term applications of NVC techniques, especially empathy. By peeling apart what happened from judgment, then sitting with the pain or loss in present time, we can slowly diminish the impact and attachment to past events. Doing so, we can meet needs for relief, ease and health, for example. Experiencing the feelings arising from those needs being met in present time amounts to “knowing” in my opinion. The results from that kind of emotional lift can be measured.

But how can NVC help with the future? Say, for example, that my intention is to engage with Proud Boys members at the next Black Lives Matter rally. My intention is not to educate them, but, rather, to listen to their story with empathy. Certainly, I’d like him or her to also find the bandwidth to listen to me, but I can meet that need elsewhere, too.

My experience in these situations tells me that I can’t know the outcome. However, when I think of how my needs for understanding and connection were met the last time, I had a similar conversation, I feel confident in my skills. That confidence amounts to a kind of knowing, a felt sense that I trust my senses to tell me whether the climate is safe or dangerous in that moment, when I will then act accordingly.

I have a dear friend whom I used to call “the professor” because of his habit of stating opinions as if they were fact. With effort, he now fills his conversations with the caveat, “while I believe this to be true, I’m not certain.” I told him his change in language (and awareness) has created more ease for me, and other needs: generosity, space, inclusion and perhaps contribution are also being met.

There is a set of scales that I employ in my consciousness. On one scale is the weighty evidence of my knowing; on the other is the weight of my not having a clue. When balanced through the practice of NVC, the arrow occasionally comes to rest on honesty. When it fluctuates wildly from side to side, I feel hopeful that my need for finding some comfort in a field of “not knowing” may soon be met.

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