

## Wonderful Bewilderment: In Praise of Knowing that One Does Not Know

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... let us be true  
To one another!

... we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.  
Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach* (1867)

Although we live in a world where professional specialization is common and supposed to be a criterion of expertise, in the normal course of work, we often find ourselves out of our depth. Experience does not come packaged as neatly as our job descriptions are written. We are tempted or called upon to address matters about which we do not know enough or barely anything at all. When we encounter our ignorance, we easily respond as though we had failed. We also might try to cover it up or take refuge in an even more intense specialization. In this paper, we shall offer a different approach. The experience of not knowing, of acknowledging one's ignorance, is valuable. It leads to further learning, learning beyond the bounds of one's expectations. It also encourages conversations. It promotes collaborations and creates affinities when people are so frequently separated by roles, status and sheer busyness.

This essay addresses two kinds of ignorance. In the first, which might be called ordinary ignorance, people encounter what they do not know and proceed smoothly and collaboratively to help each other out. The second kind of ignorance is more upsetting and profound. We call this bewilderment. People are bewildered when they realize that they don't know something very important and at the same time do not even know how to learn what they need to. Bewilderment is combination of not knowing and being helpless. This experience is unpleasant: it makes one feel disconcerted, resistant, and frightened. However, bewilderment can also open the rare opportunity to take stock of one's life and to extend and receive help from unexpected partners. This is wonderful bewilderment.

We will use our own academic work as an example. We are mentors. That is, it's a requirement of our positions as faculty at a state university offering higher education for adult students to orient, advise and tutor them, usually through individual conversations. As we normally slide back and forth among these orienting, advising and tutoring activities, even in a single conversation, "not knowing" is not unusual. It's an important part of academic and lifelong learning (Herman & Mandell 2004).

Here is an account of a single conversation with a student. We will describe and give selections from this dialogue, interspersed with commentary. (We will refer to them generically as “mentor” and “student” because we believe they are typical, even though this usage detracts from their individuality – a quality that is at the heart of their dialogue. And, when a gender reference is necessary, the mentor will be “he” and the student “she” because this reflects the demographics of our college.)

The student has just read George Ritzer’s *The McDonaldization of Society* and written a short response to it called “The McDonaldization of Yoga.” This is part of a tutorial on contemporary American society. Of course, they talked mostly about the ideas in her paper, for example, her claim that the styles of both doing and teaching yoga have so proliferated in New York City that they reproduce the hyper-rationalized standardization and specialization of global fast-food chain. She was struck by two ironically related phenomena. One was the enormous expertise that must have gone into designing a system for the mass delivery of yoga classes, one that parodies the real spiritual practice of yoga in the same way that McDonald’s parodies food. The other was that while all yoga instructors receive some kind of training and a certificate of their expertise, in fact they are required to be little more than limber, conversant in a jargon, and personable.

During this conversation, the mentor asks the student how she might more clearly present her ideas in writing and also check the general validity of her insights. So, while they discussed Ritzer’s ideas and the student’s imaginative use of them, they naturally began to talk about her overall academic skills and what she could do to strengthen them. The mentor showed some ways she could revise her paper to make it more precise. She agreed to prepare a revision for their next meeting. The work they did together on her academic skills also rejoined a conversation they’d been having about her future studies in, for example, social research methods. The student had questioned why such “technical” studies would be important for her. So the mentor had suggested that in the interval between this meeting and the next one she investigate graduate school expectations for people who intended to become social scientists or social workers – career paths which interested her. As a result of her research, she would learn something about these fields and the standards of professional practice in them. They now began to discuss her concern about this repertoire of skills at this institution: Where can she find courses on research methods? Does she want to do them online, in a classroom, or in an individual tutorial such as they are doing now?

One might be impressed or more likely rather skeptical of the professional expertise at work here. Who can claim to do all of these things responsibly? Who can know enough to practice responsibly three currently separated professions: orienting, tutoring and advising? Is this only a show of wacky diversity?

Do mentors know what they are really talking about? Are they experts in not only a particular academic subject, but also in English composition, quantitative methods, graduate school requirements, innumerable careers, as well as in all the offerings of university? Certainly not. But, the conversation between the student and mentor is propelled by straightforward questions. Those questions arise because they are dealing

honestly with the matters at hand, acknowledging what they don't know. Once this ignorance is acknowledged, it is not only benign but useful. The student and mentor help each other find out what they need to learn.

For example, the mentor asks the student to clarify what she's written because he's having trouble understanding it. He also asks about its validity because he's not sure how she's grounded the generalizations she's made. Similarly, when the mentor tries to answer the student's questions about graduate school and careers, he doesn't claim expert knowledge. Rather, he says what he thinks but urges the student to investigate further for herself. The honest questions both mentor and student ask move the conversation along. Careful attention and practical common sense are necessary, but expertise is not: that will be supplied by the further research and learning they will both do. Thus, in acknowledging their ignorance, the student and her mentor are also acknowledging their dependence on accessible information and informed people. They are comfortably embedded in connections that go way beyond themselves. Their acceptance of what they don't know accomplishes two valuable things: they understand that they depend on a society of information, and in the process the two of them become more collegial.

The student and mentor have talked about her career aspirations, the academic preparations that are likely to be useful, about how to find courses that will help, and about some points of academic composition. Something else now happens in the conversation. It now turns toward bewilderment. First the student and then the mentor will experience a deeply unsettling ignorance. They will find themselves not understanding each other and the important concerns each of them raises; and they will realize that they don't really know how to get the answers they want. The conversation now becomes bewildering. It challenges quite different beliefs each holds dear, and it appears to threaten their collegiality. But it also promises that they might achieve a more profound bond and a deeper understanding than either of them had expected.

This change begins when the mentor and student return to a discussion of Ritzer's book. As the mentor pointed out, the student can give an accurate summary of Ritzer's ideas and of the arguments he uses to support them. And, as the mentor notes, the student presents an example of her own experience as a yoga teacher, which fits those ideas. However, the mentor is concerned about two things: first, whether the student has made a good case that Ritzer's ideas are sound interpretations of the student's *particular* experience; and second, whether the student can make a rationally grounded evaluation of the *general* validity of those ideas. As we shall see, the mentor himself is ambiguous about this distinction. This confuses the student. The confusion initiates the student's bewilderment, which will eventually give rise to the same condition in the mentor. Ironically, they need one another in order to achieve a disturbing but deeper level of understanding.

Student: What do you think of my yoga teaching example?

*Mentor: I think it's really fascinating. It was terrific that you found an example from your own life that Ritzer could have used in his book. It fits his ideas perfectly. But how do you know his ideas are generally true?*

Student: I don't know what you mean. I just gave you an example and you told me it was a good one.

*Mentor: I'm not questioning your example. I'm asking you something like this: Thanks to you, Ritzer could argue that these drop-in yoga classes only give their students the spiritual and exercise equivalent of a McDonald's "value meal." What makes your interpretation or his any more valid than, I'll bet, the interpretation the students would give of their own experience. Wouldn't they say they are getting serious spiritual and physical help? What makes your judgment any better?*

The mentor is not clear about what he means by validity. Is he referring to the accuracy of the student's interpretation or to Ritzer's general truth claims on which her interpretation relies? The mentor, however, does not see this ambiguity.

Student: I guess you've lost me. I thought I found an example that exactly describes Ritzer's idea. These yoga classes are just like what he says. They're all about efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. I think he's right. So, what have I missed?

*Mentor: Imagine you're in a debate. A corporate human resources person argues that her company's lunch hour yoga class really helps the employees. They're happier and more productive and they want more. And now you have to make your point about the McDonaldization of yoga. What are you going to say to her?*

Student: But I wouldn't say anything. I wouldn't argue with her.

*Mentor: Why not? I thought you were sure that a lunch hour or drop-in yoga class is ....*

Student (interrupting): Because it wouldn't be fair. I teach yoga classes exactly like those. That's how I earn my living. I wouldn't want to criticize someone who's doing exactly what I'm doing.

*Mentor: Oh ... I think I'm beginning to understand the problem. You're talking about something really difficult: being part of, I mean, really dependent on the same classes, the same arrangements you're criticizing. Can you have it both ways?*

Student: I really believe my criticism is right. It's not only because of what Ritzer wrote; it's because I'm teaching those classes every day. But I have to.

The more classes there are or the more companies that want them, the better off I am. That's how I pay for school. I just don't know what to do about this situation. I guess I *am* trying to have it both ways.

*Mentor: I think we're talking about a larger social problem here. Every social analyst has to deal in one way or another with the problem of how to account for one's own participation in the very culture one is criticizing. This is one reason why debates about "methodology" end up being so important. There's no easy solution.*

The student doesn't understand the distinction between giving a corroborating example (however credible) and assessing its truth. But this ignorance conceals and, so to say, protects her from confronting something much deeper and more powerful. She is caught between knowing what she needs to live and knowing that her clear and well-taken criticism bites at her livelihood. Her ignorance is bewilderment. It leaves her without recourse or resource. Except one: she is asserting what to her is the most important idea in Ritzer's book, namely that individual lives are irreducibly valuable, in contrast to the mentor's interest in general claims.

Student: You say, "There's no easy solution." But that's too easy for you to say.

*Mentor (after some silence): I think maybe you're probably right. If what you're trying to say is....*

Student: I am saying that a teacher at a university, like you, isn't so different from me. This whole course was about criticizing social institutions – even yoga classes like mine. But, you work in one too.

*Mentor: I do. You're right. The things we both depend on certainly are open to a lot of criticism. You have some experience of a yoga class that you know is different from the mass-produced version. And actually, I have a similar experience. I know that some work that goes on in the university is also mass-produced. I bet Ritzer would have a field-day with us too.*

Student: In the last two terms I was enrolled, I had at least one class each time, a required class, where the content was cookie-cutter and the teacher was just going through the motions. Sure seemed McDonaldized to me.

*Mentor: Were all of your classes like that? And how about the discussion we're having right now? Do you think this is cookie-cutter learning? How would you evaluate what we're doing?*

How could the student possibly respond authentically? Can the mentor really expect her to seriously criticize his work to his face? And, even if she actually admires his work, how can she expect him to believe – in fact, how can she herself trust – that her own response is authentic? The mentor has neglected the distinction between conflict of

interest and disinterested practice. Defending his own work, he has put his student in an awful position. Indeed, we can see in his final question, "how would you evaluate what we're doing?", he has covered his own self-interest and his own ambiguity with his professional authority.

Student: I'm even more lost now than I was. I don't know what you're looking for. You want me to rewrite my paper and you've told me I have a good idea. But I don't understand what more you want.

*Mentor: It's not what I want that matters. We need to be talking about what will help you learn.*

The content of the mentor's response is, of course, right. The student does need to learn to do intellectual evaluation. Nonetheless, the mentor's response to her is also wrong, because he has so compromised his own integrity in this interchange. That is to say, he has demonstrated in his own behavior how an honorable calling, whether yoga or higher education, can lose its soul for authority and profit.

Student (upset): Do you really think I don't want to learn this, whatever "this" is? I still don't understand what you're telling me I need, or how to do what you're telling me to do.

Even though the mentor actually hasn't told the student to do anything, she accurately senses that she's being pushed around. How can she make it through this conversation? How can she pass the test, whatever it is?

*Mentor: I'm really sorry. This conversation hasn't gone the way it should have and that's my fault. I do think you wrote a very insightful paper about Ritzer's book. And I just wanted to work with you on taking another step: learning something more about taking a step back.*

Student: What do you mean?

*Mentor: When you have a great insight, or when you think someone else does, like Ritzer, it's hard to separate your enthusiasm from believing for certain that your idea is absolutely true. So what I was hoping we could work on was presenting arguments, giving reasons for, and even asking tough questions about the general validity of your own ideas. Every academic has to do this.*

Student: I don't want to be one. But I am a yoga teacher. My paper was about my life.

*Mentor: That's one of the strengths of your paper. You're connecting something you know and care about with something you're studying. But an academic paper has to do something more. It has to look at an issue from all sides; that's what it*

*means to examine arguments and reasons. That's also what I meant by taking a step back.*

Student: Isn't my paper an example of exactly what you're talking about? In order to write that paper I had not only to take ideas of Ritzer and find examples illustrating them. I also really had to take a step back: I used his critical analysis of society to examine a part of it that's really important and uncomfortable for me. I'm a yoga teacher who needs to work in the very sort of thing Ritzer's criticizing. In order for me to do the yoga I respect, I have to make my living teaching yoga in a way I can't respect.

*Mentor: I do understand that you see that you're involved in what Ritzer criticizes. And now I can also understand why it wasn't easy for you to reach that point. But I'm still asking you to consider how generally true Ritzer's and your insights are of the contemporary world as whole. How do you know that he is right about a range of experiences that go well beyond your own?*

Student: I'm getting a clearer idea of what your question means. My experience is only one example. Ritzer has lots more, but you're asking whether, even with all those examples, someone would be convinced that his is an accurate description of the whole world, like his title suggests, it's about the McDonalization of all of society.

*Mentor: That's exactly right.*

Student: I can see how useful it would be for me to this – to figure how to test whether very broad judgments about society are really true. That would help me in the work I want to do even if I don't want to become a professor.

Both student and mentor have come a long way. The student, without surrendering the importance of her insight, now understands that it's crucial to be cautious about generalizing and that when generalizations are made, they must be investigated by means that go beyond accumulating examples. The mentor, without giving up his criticism, has learned how hard it was for her to do the analysis she'd done, because she is more intellectually sophisticated than he'd supposed. She had to take a thoughtful critical perspective on her own life in order to write the paper she did. Until the mentor got that point, the student remained bewildered by what he was asking of her. But does he yet understand everything he needs to learn? Their conversation continues.

Student (after a pause): I know there are big ideas in Ritzer's book, but, I liked it because it's about the importance of individual lives, not generalizations. His criticism is that McDonalization is making everything the same. That's why I thought it was so important to write about my own experience.

*Mentor: Of course it's about the importance of the individual and the particular. Ritzer is clearly worried that we're losing ourselves, that we're all compromised.*

Student: So, when you read it, didn't think about your own life and work? Weren't you troubled too?

*Mentor: I'm sure I was. I think his ideas are very relevant.*

Student: Weren't there times when you thought he was writing about the work that goes on in schools and colleges?

*Mentor: What do you mean?*

Student: While I was writing my paper, even though I just wrote about yoga, I thought of a lot of other examples. I thought about some of the requirements I have to fulfill at this college. I even thought about some of the classes I've already taken. They were pretty McDonaldized.

*Mentor: Every college has requirements at least some students don't like. That's inevitable. But I don't think that's what you mean. Tell me more about what you think a McDonaldized course is.*

Student: I mean a course where everything is planned in advance – all the readings and assignments. Where the numbers of students in any section of the course are way too high for the teacher to pay attention to any one of them individually, even if they wanted to. I mean courses where the teachers seem to have taught the same thing over and over again so many times, that they barely know the students are there and don't even seem to be paying attention to what they, the teachers I mean, are saying. Where, especially in those required courses, which you all say are so important for us, they seem designed so that the teachers don't have to care whether the individual students are actually learning anything or not.

*Mentor: You've really thought about this, haven't you?*

Student: I thought about it before I read Ritzer. But he gave me a way to think about it more clearly and he gave lots of examples about things I'd never noticed before. That's what led me to think about what I do.

The topic is no longer the McDonaldization of yoga or the general validity of Ritzer's claims. Although the mentor still holds on to his abstract point of view, the student has engaged him in *her* topic, which is that the rationalization of everything really strikes close to home. He hasn't yet fully considered his own experience with her critical analysis of the academy. But the invitation is there.

*Mentor: Sometimes I've had to teach the same course, year and after year. To be honest, it's not that much more fun for me than for you. I accept that this is part of the work of being a college professor today. It's not clear to me that it's the*



*best use of my time. It's not what I was trained to do. But I think of it as part of the game.*

Student: I know what you mean. We all have to do things we don't like. But when I teach those yoga classes, those routine ones during someone else's lunch break, the work feels trivial and I feel bad about that. It's not fun; it doesn't feel like a game at all.

*Mentor: I guess it feels more like a game to me because I don't have to pay as much attention to things I don't especially like about my job. But we both do what we have to do.*

Student: But why do we have to do it? Ritzer gives some examples and suggestions about how to get out of the McDonaldization trap.

*Mentor: I think his examples are rare and his suggestions are naïve. After all, if lots and lots of people started shopping at organic food co-ops, I'm sure those stores would start standardizing their products and doing what all businesses do to achieve economies of scale and productivity. It would be just like how a college or university rationalizes what it does as soon as it starts to reach a certain size.*

Student: So are you saying that we're all just stuck? That once these trends get going, we're all just helpless and should give up? Maybe that's why you don't mind playing the game. You don't think there's anything else we can do.

The mentor doesn't want to be as personally confessional as the student is. But once he starts using her own, analysis for himself, he's pulled toward a more personally reverberating and discomfiting analysis of his own situation. The student is taking more authority, and the mentor is following her lead here. A conversation between equals about their inequality will soon emerge.

*Mentor: I'm not sure about that. (Then after a pause) But even after you've paid your dues by teaching the regular survey courses, professors still have to serve on time-consuming and not very helpful committees and also we still have to teach whatever the department decides are core courses. I've always loved teaching and the kinds of conversations we're having right now. But every academic term, I have to work with 75 to 100 students, and I'm lucky if I get to know just a handful. It's probably not too far away from what Ritzer is talking about. He would probably tell me that I'm working in an academic factory and you're being processed through one. And I'd largely agree.*

Student: So our predicaments aren't so different.

*Mentor: You're right, but (pause). There's an important difference and it has to do with something else you've been reading about, differences between your status or class and mine.*

Student: I think I know what you mean.

*Mentor: I get paid better, I have more job security, and I'm established in a profession that carries some prestige and power. These privileges buffer me. I don't have to spend all that much time seeing the faces of uninterested students whose names I can't remember. I don't have to participate too often in meetings where people don't really speak up except to make a good impression. And I don't have to put much of my time into research and writing about safe or fashionable topics. For the most part, I can learn and say what I really believe is true and important.*

Student: Because you have more job security and because you are saying you know what is true and important, shouldn't you be more able to do something about it than I can?

*Mentor: Even though I do have more freedom than you do, and even though I have read and thought a great deal about this topic – you know, Ritzer is part of a very long tradition – I don't know what to do about it. I worry about this all the time and I just don't know what to do.*

The mentor is now bewildered. He isn't merely acknowledging ignorance; he is disturbed that he does not know how to solve a problem that is fundamentally important to him, not just intellectually but also to how he lives his life. They are both affected and troubled by the same problem: their livelihoods are dependent on compromising what they both care most about. And neither of them knows how to escape from that trap because it is set by large and powerful social systems and trends.

They reach their bewilderment in different ways. The student came upon it through her inability to readily understand the mentor's expectations; she could not understand them because they distracted her from what she knew to be ultimately important about Ritzer's critique, namely the threat to the irreducible value of the individual and the particular. The mentor, on the other hand, became bewildered through his inability to respond readily to the student's insistence on exactly his point. Attached as he was to important abstract ideas and generalizations (which indeed he accurately thought the student was missing), the mentor was "buffered" from feeling Ritzer's analysis strike home to his own experience. Now that he has admitted the power of the student's insight, the two of them are in the same place. They know both their ignorance and their helplessness.

Student: You know, I've sometimes wanted to just quit teaching those mediocre yoga classes. I'd find something to do, be a waitress or something. But why would waiting tables be any better? Barbara Ehrenreich's book, which we read for this study, *Nickel and Dimed*, helped me realize better what I already knew: there's no safety living on the margins. So I've stayed in my job and I've stayed in college. But, if people like you, who know so much and have more power, if you give up, then think about the consequences for people like me, your students.

It means that school is just helping us give in to the way things are and to continue them as they are. I'd thought that getting a college education would get me out of this rut.

*Mentor: Don't quit. My work is about trying to understand this society and helping my students do the same. If I didn't believe change is possible .... It would be hard to accept that the most scholarship and teaching can do is to help people understand that they can't change very much about their lives. I don't just want to teach people to be tough and ruthless.*

Student: But then, what do you think we should do?

*Mentor: We both the same things to figure out. Maybe we can work on this together. We don't want to retreat from the world, and it wouldn't work anyhow. But we can't change the whole world. We can't just dismantle what Weber called 'the iron cage' of rationalization that Ritzer refers to so much. But maybe we can make life a little more humane, starting right here in the university, even right here and now in how we do this course together.*

Student: I'm not exactly sure what you mean; it's pretty general and abstract. But why not? I'll try. So where do we start?

*Mentor: I'm not sure about that either. I wonder if we have to get back to appreciating the individual and the particular.*

Student: That's exactly why I decided to write about my yoga class.

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The mentor and student are lucky in each other: the student, that the mentor is not so proud; and the mentor, that the student is not so humble. They are both lucky that they are in an environment not so constricted and specialized that these exploratory, groping conversations can occur. The benefit coming from these good fortunes is that their encounters with ignorance and bewilderment are benign and fruitful. The moves both the student and mentor make into acknowledging ordinary ignorance and their fall into bewilderment shake their hold on cherished beliefs. And from these experiences, they make something new together. They begin to make a bond in dialogue. This dialogical relationship is fair and collaborative. The mentor and student consider one another's ideas and questions with equal respect and seriousness. They are both eager to move ahead and begin to look for what neither of them knows but both understand is important to learn.

We shouldn't sentimentalize or romanticize what's happened. On a different day, perhaps at a different institution, or with different people, the results might have been otherwise. A mentor might have just sent a student off to a writing skills center or to a career counselor. Or, he might have given her a mediocre grade on her paper rather than

asking to discuss it in greater depth. A student might have just been glumly obedient to whatever she was told to do. But this student really does want to understand what is being asked of her. And, by the same token, she persists, over time and through her uncertainty, in asking questions that will give the idea she has had about the absolute value of individuals and their particular experiences a thorough exploration.

The two people who have created this dialogue make a haven with their difficulties rather a refuge than from them. Sharing their bewilderment, they can trust that they will help one another make their way in unknown territory.

We ourselves are not extricated from the world that we've written. Our challenge to ourselves, which we pose as well to our readers, is how we all can become careful to take stock of our institutional environments and our routinized beliefs and actions. We should do this so that we can encounter bewilderment and the pride of not knowing.

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