

## Knowing the wisdom of doubt in the search for spiritual knowledge



CHRIS HIGHLAND  
HIGHLAND VIEWS

A friend of mine is the poet Jim Gronvold. After years as a non-profit leader, he is now retired and has time to write. His latest collection of poetry ("Star Thistle") includes this little gem I read to a class recently:

"Knowing the need, to understand, what it all is all about,  
I also know the freedom of not needing to figure it out,

"of feeling enough uncertainty to value the wisdom of doubt."

The truth of this verse sticks and pricks like a thistle. The "need to understand" has a strong pull. Our curiosity and wonder push us to want to know more.

Yet as the poet reminds us, there is freedom in "not needing to figure it out," a freedom in uncertainty that brings us "to value the wisdom of doubt." An important lesson.

I was taught as a youngster not to doubt. Asking polite questions was fine, but you should never, ever doubt God, the Bible, the teachings of the church or the pastor. I learned that I should never doubt, "for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea," because a doubter is "double-minded and unstable" and shouldn't expect to receive anything from the Lord (James 1: 5-8).

As I studied this more deeply I discovered there are two kinds of wisdom: from "above" (dropping down from the divine) and "earthly" (from below; devilish). I learned that God is the only one to give wisdom, so just have faith and never doubt.

This was affirmed by Jesus who told his disciples to "have faith and do not doubt" because "whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive" (Matthew 21: 21-22).

Even as a child I think I secretly doubted that. I mean, "whatever I ask" I will get? Friends and family got sick, had accidents or died. My prayers weren't answered then. I guess I just didn't have enough faith.

I suppose believers have come to this conclusion for many centuries. Who has "enough faith" anyway? You don't see many people throwing mountains into the sea.

In my eye-opening college years when I began to emerge from believing in one god, one faith, one church to a wider view of the world, I was doubting heavily. At that time I wasn't doubting that there was a God, but questioning if the God I was taught was the "real" or only God.

As a philosophy major with a minor in religion, studying at an evangelical college, I discovered there were many understandings of God and faith. I found there were many good people who doubted too, and it didn't make them bad people.

I also saw there were millions of people doing good things in the name of



CHRIS HIGHLAND  
A new green trail at Craggy Gardens, photographed by Chris Highland.

different Gods, or in the name of God, and the world was a better place for all of us. Though some warned me I shouldn't study philosophy because I would be led into doubt, I came to value the philosophical path, practicing the love of wisdom as a way to creatively question without fear. I'm grateful for my professors who were people of fearless faith.

Maybe we've been misled a little. Maybe a lot. Sometimes, with the best of intentions, teachers and preachers have told us there is a wisdom only available from one faith, one book. These specially chosen, exceptionally wise teachers might even tell us not to doubt their exceptional wisdom.

Using verses from James and Jesus, they also claim Paul was right when he warned believers: "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise." Then comes the zinger: "For the wisdom of this world [a secular, non-biblical worldview] is foolishness with God" (First Corinthians 3: 18-19). Makes us wonder, Who's being fooled?

"Esoteric" means specialized knowledge only understood by a few. That isn't bad or dangerous in itself, but we can see how easy it would be to manipulate the message — and, in the wrong hands, control people too. The ironic twist is that it takes some wisdom to see that.

Perhaps, next to philosophers and scientists, the poets are the best ones to help us in our search for knowledge and wisdom. At least they seem to understand that words are slippery and misunderstanding leads to misuse of words. In other words, words are important and powerful, and need to be examined for truth and wisdom.

With faith or without faith, we can feel free to fearlessly examine.

Is it such a bad thing to toss around thoughts, ideas and beliefs like waves or wind? Should we ever hesitate to wisely wonder and ask the hard questions?

I doubt it.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com).

6/10/17

Clipped By:



chris\_highland  
Thu, Aug 24, 2017