

Gifts of the Dark Wood
Part I: The Gift of Uncertainty
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I. Why this Series?

Our series title takes its cue from the 14th C Italian poet and moral philosopher, Dante Alighieri, who experienced a particularly dark period in his life and later wrote about it this way:

*In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in a Dark Wood
where the true way was wholly lost.*

In Dante's understanding, the Dark Wood is a place of confusion, emptiness, and stumbling that is entered because of our sin and is inhabited by strange and terrifying denizens. You don't step into the Dark Wood if you don't have to. According to Dante, it marks the entrance to the Inferno and everlasting torment.

Yet, another side of the Christian tradition, represented especially by the ancient Christian mystics, understood struggle not as punishment for sin, but as the central context in which revelation takes place. Consequently, they remembered and experienced the Dark Wood differently. While the Dark Wood was called by various names by the mystics – Saint John of the Cross called it the Dark Night of the Soul; Saint Teresa of Avila called it the Fifth Mansion; Dionysus the Areopagite called it the Cloud of Unknowing – all of them insisted that the Dark Wood is a place where one receives strange and wondrous gifts whose value vastly exceeds whatever hardships are encountered there. The Dark Wood is *where you meet God*.

The mystics taught that in the Dark Wood you discover who you are and what your life is about, flaws and all. In the Dark Wood you bring all your shortcomings with you, not in order to purge them or be judged by them, but to embrace them in such a way that your struggles contribute meaningfully to the central conversation God is inviting you to have with life.

This series will trace six unusual gifts found in the Dark Wood. These gifts have been recognized throughout the ages but have been largely lost on modern society in its fear of heading precisely into the territory we will be exploring:

- emptiness
- uncertainty
- being thunderstruck
- temptation
- disappearing
- becoming a misfit

These gifts may appear more like curses than blessings. Certainly they did to Dante. Yet before you dismiss them out of hand, ask yourself, "Do I ever experience any of these?"

Some people find themselves in the Dark Wood when they wake up one day and realize that the career that has provided a healthy paycheck for years has also been sucking the life out of them. Others find themselves there when tragedy strikes, or a marriage fails, or a serious health threat arises, shaking their confidence in God's goodness or God's very existence. Some enter the Dark Wood when their beliefs—or doubts—set them at odds with their friends or faith community. They can no longer bring themselves to pray the prayers or recite the creeds because their internal dissonance meter has gone off the charts. For these or other reasons they grow weary of juggling all the masks they wear to project a certain image to the world that has little to do with who they really are.

For still others, sheer exhaustion places them in the Dark Wood. They wake up one day facing too many commitments made to too many people, feeling trapped in a tightly woven web of obligation and guilt. If any of these experiences describe you, then if the mystics are right, you are in the best possible position to experience profound awakening and insight about who you are and what you are doing here.

You may find it strange that Dark Wood experiences could bear gifts or blessings that enable you to find your path, but it is part of life's generosity. How nice to know that you don't have to be a saint to find your place in this world! You don't even have to be "above average." All you really need to be *is struggling*.

This morning, we'll struggle specifically with the Gift of Uncertainty.

II. The Curse of Certainty

Early in my ministry in Scottsdale, Arizona, I visited an elderly couple who had once been active churchgoers but had not been seen in several months. As we sat in their living room, sipping tea, the wife shared their feelings of growing disconnection.

"It seems there's always something new at church, and it's become difficult to keep up," she explained. "So, we stepped back and now find it a bit challenging to re-engage."

Eager to help, I empathized and suggested a possible reconnection through our upcoming Bible study. "Our church calendar is definitely bustling," I acknowledged. "But Bible studies have become a cornerstone of our community. Joining one would be an excellent way to reintegrate. It's an opportunity to deepen your understanding of the Bible and build deeper connections with fellow members. I'm about to start a new series—why not join us?"

The husband's response was unexpected. "Eric," he said, firmly meeting my gaze, "I would *never* attend your Bible study."

Taken aback, but intrigued, I pressed for more.

"It would challenge my faith," he admitted.

Puzzled, I responded, "The aim of studying the Bible is to strengthen faith, to discover teachings beyond Sunday School and broaden your knowledge of God's work."

"That's precisely my issue," he retorted. "At 80, I hold certain lifelong beliefs that I've built my life upon. Your Bible study might reveal flaws in these beliefs. At my age, the thought of realizing that my life has been based on false beliefs – even if it has been – is too much for me."

Although I respected his candor, his admission left me speechless. I vaguely recall suggesting alternative ways they could stay connected. On my drive home, I reflected on the difficulty of aging with the fear of unsettling revelations.

Yet, even at the ripe old age of 33, I could relate. My time in seminary, pursuing a Master's of Divinity and a Ph.D. in Biblical studies, had challenged many of my certainties. At first, it was disconcerting, but adjusting or reevaluating beliefs in light of more convincing perspectives ultimately fortified my faith. My beliefs became more believable.

Frankly, religion does a disservice when it promises us certainty. Consider the fruits of this false promise. Have you ever noticed how the more certainty a religion claims to deliver, the more frenzied and hysterical are its adherents? The fact of the matter is that life is messy and no amount of doctrine or dogma changes this. Faith built upon certainty is a house of cards that falls apart when the "unshakable foundation" shifts ever so slightly.

Curiously, *all* of the heroes of both the Old and New Testaments had to develop a healthy relationship with Uncertainty. Take the story of Moses, for instance. Moses stood before an unconsumed, burning bush, hearing God's voice tasking him with a monumental mission. When Moses asked for God's name, so that when the people asked him what God was directing him, the reply was "Yahweh," which can mean, "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." Either way, do you think that a God who self-describes as "Yahweh" gives a hoot about offering people *certainty*?!

It's not just Moses who had to develop a healthy relationship with Uncertainty. So did Abraham and Sarah, King David, his wives, and all of the prophets. In the New Testament, Peter, Paul, and even Jesus contended with uncertainty. Really, the only people who consider certainty to be a high value in the Bible are the *villains*. From the serpent in the garden of Eden enticing the original couple with the absolute knowledge of good and evil, to Pontius Pilate who crucified Jesus in order to be assured he would remain in power, our scriptures continually portray certainty as highly overrated. Even dangerous.

The apostle Paul chides the need for certainty as childish, suggesting that maturity in faith involves outgrowing this need. He writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:11-12)

The word translated as "dimly" in Paul's statement comes from the Greek word *anigmati* – the root of the English word *enigma*. Enigma signifies a mystery or puzzle. What Paul is saying is that a mature faith is one that embraces life as a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved—that accepts Uncertainty as a gift, not a curse.

Imagine watching a movie that's totally predictable. When is the last time you have enjoyed such a film since childhood? Movies where characters are certain of their futures, face no real challenges, and always succeed are lucky to score 20 out of 100 in the Rotten Tomato ratings.

We are drawn to stories filled with uncertainty, in which characters face difficult choices without a clear path forward and no one can predict the outcome.

Yet I must confess that if I were given the opportunity to write the script of my own life, my first inclination would be to fill it with highly predictable outcomes, constant success, and no significant challenges. Every book I set about writing would become a *New York Times* best seller, every sermon would move my congregation to tears, my wife, Melanie, would laugh at all my jokes, and our daughters would think I'm the coolest dad who ever walked the earth. Yet I would never pay a dime to watch such a film, not even of my own life. So, if I wouldn't pay to watch this film, why would I want to live this life?

Before continuing further, I invite you to take a few moments to imagine that some Hollywood film director has approached you to create a feature-length film of your life. What parts would audiences find most engaging? What parts do *you* find most engaging? And what role did Uncertainty play in making these parts so rich?

III. The Gift of Uncertainty

Here is why we should welcome Uncertainty:

We all replay narratives in our minds about our past, present, and future. These narratives shape our sense of self, and our place in the world – and of others, and their place in the world. Repeated often enough, these stories become certainties. We believe them as if they are God's Own Truth.

Inevitably, however, something unanticipated happens that upends these narratives and challenges our view of Reality. We realize that since X, Y, and Z happened, then our stories about A, B, and C couldn't be true. Think, for instance, of how our national stories changed after 9/11. Stories we used to tell ourselves about our country's invulnerability and our status as a Superpower; stories about how safe it is to fly; and so on. The new narrative could not be contained by the old stories, so the stories changed.

Events that upend our certainties act like a grain of sand inside an oyster. The sand keeps poking and grinding away until eventually we replace the discredited narrative with a more credible one.

When Uncertainty arises in an atmosphere of fear, we often tend to replace our old stories with new ones that are more flawed and further constrict our view of the world. Think, for instance, of how many people's views of Muslims changed after 9/11. Suddenly, the new narrative for many was that "all Muslims are terrorists." Hardly a story most Muslims could live inside! Or our nation.

Yet, when Uncertainty arises in an atmosphere of love, it often produces a more expansive narrative that more accurately reflects Reality. Consider the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska, for instance, where a synagogue, a mosque, and a church all moved to a 38-acre Commons to move beyond interfaith dialog into interfaith community. The Tri-Faith Initiative was born on 9/11 when a rabbi named Aryeh Azriel realized that the Muslims of Omaha could use some support. So, he and other members of his synagogue went to a nearby mosque to stand outside and protect it. Rather than seeing all Muslims as terrorists, Rabbi Azriel saw all

Muslims as humans, and vulnerable to attack by those who had no idea that the Qur'an specifically forbids killing innocent people, and insists that killing one innocent person is like killing all of humanity in God's eyes.

Here's the math of Uncertainty:

"Uncertainty + Fear" results in a more constrictive story that is often further removed from Reality than the one it replaced.

"Uncertainty + Love" results in a larger, more expansive story that more accurately reflects Reality. It creates a story large enough for us to live inside of with freedom and ease.

If you want to know where God is inviting you to live more freely and expansively in the world, just consider the stories you habitually tell yourself about your life, your family, your community (including your faith community), your nation, and God's world. Then identify those places where your inner-oyster is feeling the nagging irritant of Uncertainty. These are the very places where the stories you tell yourself have become too constraining to live within.

That oyster-irritant of Uncertainty is inviting you to change the narrative. If you will approach these irritants not with fear, but with love, you are well on your way to experiencing more breathing room in your life.

Remember that couple I referred to at the beginning of this sermon? They did, in fact, make it back to my church eventually. They made it back the day we voted to formally become identified as a congregation that welcomes LGBTQ persons. This couple cast the only two "No" votes that day. On their way out of church, the husband turned to me and said, "You're an ass." I never saw either of them again.

Their story took an ironic twist, however. They left my church and became members of a UCC church a few miles down the road. A few years after they joined, the church called their first-ever openly gay Associate Minister and voted to become an Open and Affirming (ONA) congregation!

Here's the beautiful irony: A few years later, I heard how both the husband and wife had come to love this new Associate Minister dearly. They came strong supporters of his ministry, embracing the fact that they'd been wrong all their lives about gays and lesbians and became advocates for LGBTQ equality! If memory serves me, I believe this gay minister eventually preached at the man's funeral.

It's amazing how our stories expand when we add a dose of love to Uncertainty. It expands not only our stories, but our world.

Where might you add a dose of love to your Uncertainties, turning that oyster-irritant into a pearl of wisdom?