



## Learning to Not Know

### Engaging Ambiguity

We spend a lot of time in life trying to figure things out. We need to know how things work, to approach our world with curiosity and to seek answers so that we can make sense of our lives and how we fit into the world around us. We like to think we know. We *really* like to think we know.

Yet, there is so much we simply cannot predict or understand. As a result, we're forced to constantly balance these two states - seeing where there are opportunities to find out the answers, while simultaneously recognizing the very deep wisdom that comes when we accept uncertainty. And, of course, few places is this more true than in our globally mobile lives. We show up again and again in a state of not knowing.

Finding the right balance in this paradox and accessing both the challenges and gifts it offers comes from learning to fully engage ambiguity. In other words, we must learn the skills necessary to examine and build a relationship with not knowing. This is not simply shrugging and throwing



all caution to the wind, it is more about accepting the possibility that the wind may, or may not, represent a pending storm.

When we Engage Ambiguity we're actively deciding to turn towards the places in our life where we're uncertain. We give ourselves permission to mindfully tune in to our emotions and our physical sensations and to acknowledge the assumptions and judgments we may be making about a give situation. Instead of pushing away the things we don't know (Ignorance is bliss!) or scrambling to consider every possible outcome (Let me Google that!), we ask - What do I **not know** here? Then, we move deeper by asking - What more *can* I not know? What can I choose, in this moment, to accept as simply a part of the great unknown? How can I learn here, in this in-between space?

Additionally, Engaging Ambiguity is about learning to be present in the in-between spaces. We spend a lot of our lives trapped by the realities of our past or pushing ourselves into the next-best-thing of the future. When we Engage Ambiguity, we offer ourselves the opportunity to see what exists in the spaces where we're waiting. This quote from author Sue Monk Kidd, sums up this concept nicely

*We think that the 'real thing' is concentrated in the next moment, the next month, the next year. We can go on and on, waiting for the next 'happening' in life, hurrying towards it, trying to make it happen. We live from peak event to peak event, from brightness to brightness, resisting the flat terrain of ordinary time - the in-between time.*

*Waiting is the in-between time. It calls us to be in this moment, this season, without leaning so far into the future that we tear our roots from the present. When we learn to wait, we experience where we are as what is truly substantial and precious in life. We discover, as T.S. Eliot wrote, "a lifetime burning in every moment."*



## Practice

This exercise is designed to help you cultivate deeper ease with the state of not knowing. You'll be practicing turning towards all of the things that come up for you in a moment of ignorance or confusion.

During the next 5-10 days, choose to actively Engage Ambiguity.

Every day you'll encounter moments of not knowing. This can be something as simple as forgetting the name of an actor in a movie to being unable to read the tone in an email from a colleague. It will sometimes be momentary ambiguity - wondering why your spouse is late getting home. At other times it will be the greater sense of the larger liminal space of life - perhaps the uncertainty of whether or not your children will grow up to be healthy and happy adults.

As you raise your awareness of these moments, you'll likely start to see them everywhere. You'll begin to notice your natural inclinations for how to respond and your discomfort when you don't know. Record these moments in your journal. You can choose as many or as few as you like, but aim to do this at least once each day.

In real time, first notice that you're facing a moment of not knowing. In your head, simply bring your awareness to the fact that this is a moment of ambiguity. Then, choose to actively Engage Ambiguity. Notice the thoughts, judgments and assumptions that are running through your mind. What emotions does not knowing bring up for you? What physical sensations do you notice? What insights do you gain from mindfully observing yourself in a state of not knowing? Later, record the incident (remember it can be a super small thing or something more significant) in your journal along with your observations. The self-coaching questions on the following pages can help you reflect more deeply at this exercise.



## Self-Coaching Questions

These questions are designed to give you the opportunity to reflect on what you've learned in the above exercise. In a traditional coaching or training session, these would be questions a coach or trainer might ask. The key to getting the most out of these self-coaching questions is to set aside time to really consider your responses here. You can answer the questions in a journal or notebook, in any order and at any time. As always, be kind to yourself.

- What are my overall impressions of what it means to Engage Ambiguity?
- What did I most value about the practice of Engaging Ambiguity in the past 5-10 days?
- What did I find to be the most challenging part of the practice?
- What surprised me as I practiced Engaging Ambiguity?
- Prior to learning about the practice of Engaging Ambiguity, how would I have rated my comfort with uncertainty? After having practiced Engaging Ambiguity, how would I rate my comfort level now?
- In what areas of my life do I find it relatively easy to Engage Ambiguity?
- In what areas of my life do I find it to be the most difficult?
- As I practiced Engaging Ambiguity, what emotions and physical sensations did I most frequently encounter?



- One of the greatest gifts of Engaging Ambiguity is that it can actually offer us incredible insights that we would have missed if we simply settled on an answer, assumption or response. As I Engaged Ambiguity this week, what insights did I have?
- Compared to other mindfulness practices, Engaging Ambiguity is more complex in that it's not necessarily practiced on its own. It requires us to tune in to our emotions, physical sensations and judgments. That is, in fact, the "engage" part. With that in mind, ask yourself - In what ways do I imagine using Engaging Ambiguity as a mindfulness practice in my daily life? What benefits do I anticipate might be available when I practice? What challenges do I anticipate I'll encounter?
- What goals would I like to set for myself with regard to Engaging Ambiguity?
- How will I keep myself accountable to those goals?