

Reading

Excerpt from *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron

"We think that if we just meditated enough or jogged enough or ate perfect food, everything would be perfect. But from the point of view of someone who is awake, that's death. Seeking security or perfection, rejoicing in feeling confirmed and whole, self-contained and comfortable, is some kind of death. It doesn't have any fresh air. There's no room for something to come in and interrupt all that. We are killing the moment by controlling our experience. Doing this is setting ourselves up for failure, because sooner or later, we're going to have an experience we can't control: our house is going to burn down, someone we love is going to die, we're going to find out we have cancer, a brick is going to fall out of the sky and hit us on the head, somebody's going to spill tomato juice all over our white suit, or we're going to arrive at our favorite restaurant and discover that no one ordered produce and seven hundred people are coming for lunch.

"The essence of life is that it's challenging. Sometimes it is sweet, and sometimes it is bitter. Sometimes your body tenses, and sometimes it relaxes or opens. Sometimes you have a headache, and sometimes you feel 100 percent healthy. From an awakened perspective, trying to tie up all the loose ends and finally get it together is death, because it involves rejecting a lot of your basic experience. There is something aggressive about that approach to life, trying to flatten out all the rough spots and imperfections into a nice smooth ride.

"To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man's-land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. . . .

"The way to dissolve our resistance to life is to meet it face to face. When we feel resentment because the room is too hot, we could meet the heat and feel its fieriness and its heaviness. When we feel resentment because the room is too cold, we could meet the cold and feel its iciness and its bite. When we want to complain about the rain, we could feel its wetness instead. When we worry because the wind is shaking our windows, we could meet the wind and hear its sound. Cutting our expectations for a cure is a gift we can give ourselves. There is no cure for hot and cold. They will go on forever. After we have died, the ebb and flow will still continue. Like the tides of the sea, like day and night — this is the nature of things."

<https://thewisdomdaily.com/how-to-embrace-living-in-the-unknown/>

Sermon

I am not much of a game player but I've been a fairly dedicated player of the game Wordle since it was first released. First released in 2021 Wordle is a game you can play on your phone or computer. Every day a new game is published and you have six tries to identify that day's 5 letter word. After every guess, each letter is marked as either green, yellow or gray: green indicates that letter is correct and in the correct position, yellow means it is in the answer but not in the right position, while gray indicates it is not in the answer at all. The goal is to try and identify the word in as few guesses as possible. One of the things I really like about it is that I isn't a test of expertise in that way that a crossword puzzle – I think only once or twice has the answer been a word I didn't know. Rather, it is sheer grappling with the alphabet and its near infinite combinations.

Important life lessons:

- What appears to be skill is often luck

Those few times I get the word on the third or even the second try. Oh, the self-congratulation that follows!

- Strategy can only get you so far

My brother and brother-in-law are big proponents of their system. Evaluating letter frequencies in the English language. Strategizing the best starting words. But there are times I know 3 or even 4 letters and that last letter eludes me

- A really clever solution may still not be the right one

How many times I have spent 10 minutes before the AHA only to discover that the word still wasn't the right one

- Sometimes you have to retreat to move forward

Sometimes I use a letter that I know is wrong because that is the only way to find other letters that are right

- English gets more privilege than it deserves

How many times have I identified a French or German word that meets the criteria

- Preconceptions blind me to finding the truth

I always forget to remember double letters like in "igloo" and "utter". Or forget alternate pronunciations like the soft "g" in agile

- There is so much reward in the journey and so much potential for wonder in the world

Acrid and aspic, scarf and slack.. who knew these word pairs shared three letters?

For the record, I am not someone who embraces a state of unknowing. My general philosophy or burden depending on the day is that “I am responsible” and “be prepared”. My default to accomplishing this is to avoid uncertainty. Stay out of the gray area of unknowing. But that isn’t the person I strive to be. And one thing I’ve come to realize is that above all, I spend a lot more time intensively grappling with unknowing when I play Wordle than in other parts of my life.

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat writes: “When I accept that I can’t wholly know what my future will hold, I open myself to possibility. There are things I hope will happen. There are things I hope won’t happen. But I affirm that I don’t actually know what will be, and that there is a gift for me in the not-knowing. Because I don’t know, I can hold my imagined futures lightly. I can cultivate openness to learning from whatever unfolds. I can cultivate the bravery I need to keep moving forward, even when I don’t always know for certain where I am headed or how I will get there.”

There are some people who seem to more naturally thrive in the space of unknowing. My brother is one. But I think it isn’t a comfortable space for many of us and to doing so takes practice. Like working out stiff muscles that get stronger and more flexible with repeated exercise.

In my work life I’ve been very fortunate to have mentors who encouraged me to embrace the unfamiliar. When I returned to Cornell in 2001 I was offered a research position in a newly emerging area of science. I said to my boss, “But I don’t have any expertise in this area” to which he responded, “Oh, that’s alright - none of the rest of us do either!”

Three years ago I was offered an administrative position at Cornell to which I responded, “And what qualifies me for that?” The person whose job I was taking said in effect that he thought my personality and attitude were a good match for the needs of the role. I wasn’t looking to take on something that unfamiliar, but I can feel how that stretch into the unknown and the need to adopt a beginner’s mind at my somewhat advanced age has been really beneficial.

But flexing that mental muscle is not just about stepping outside the circle of one’s comfort zone and knowledge.

As I think of the time and attention I bring to Wordle, I wonder - what would it mean to invest that energy on understanding the experiences and perspectives of the people around me? What would it mean for me to approach others with the goal of seeing and knowing them

better. I look out on all of you. If you were each a Wordle puzzle I might know a letter or two for each of you. Maybe three. But for many, none at all.

I was thinking of this in connection with the recent memorial service for Hans Fleischman, an older man who had attended this church in recent years. I did not attend his memorial service, but my husband Keith did, and he returned with stories of things we hadn't known about Hans. His childhood in 1930s Germany. His work as a physicist whose research areas overlapped with my Dad's. Hans's service was also a reminder of the people here who really did take the time to get to know him.

I've also been reflecting about the benefits of engaging with unfamiliar ideas which can be a little harder. I may really struggle to solve a Wordle problem with all the energy and frustration that involves, but I'm not anxious that the answer is going to challenge my worldview. Maybe I forget that a letter can be pronounced many different ways but that isn't really a world view.

In recent years I get most of my news via podcasts or online media. I'm not the first to observe this, but like many others tend to gravitate toward topics ideas that are generally aligned with my pre-existing world view. While every day Wordle is a blank state to be engaged with anew, I'll often a pre-judge the topic of a news article or podcast without engaging at any depth.

Last week I was looking at the brief promo for a podcast I subscribe to. The topic concerned the author Elizabeth Gilbert and her recent decision to halt publication of a book she had written because of Ukrainian objections to its Russian theme. Well, reading that brief promo I had A LOT of thoughts and opinions. This kind of censorship is ridiculous. She caved. What is their problem. Are we going to ban all Russian books... and so on.

I came very close to skipping that podcast in a state of indignation. But I went ahead and listened to it anyway. And while I still have concerns about censorship, the commentary about the history of Russian fiction and its connections to Russian imperialism was a real revelation. A depth of background for which I had NO idea but had been ready to dismiss without significant consideration. What else have I been missing?

So, I'm choosing to use Wordle as inspiration to be present and to engage more thoughtfully with the people and world views. Where that will lead, I don't know... But I also remind myself one of the most important lessons that Wordle can offer and that is to pace oneself. Probably the most important design features of the game is that it only changes once a day. One word a day. I'm guessing that if you could play infinite rounds in a day, many people would have long since stopped play. There is so much room for attention and wonder in the world. Try to engage more deeply even just one time each day.

Closing Words

The author Margaret Heffernan writes:

Promises of certainty underestimate the pervasive contingencies that define human lives.

As physicist Carlo Rovelli argues, scientists are driven by doubt, more inspired by questions than answers. While citing “the science” sounds like the hallmark of confidence, scientists know that science is only the best we know... so far. “Between full ignorance and total certainty,” Rovelli says, “is a vast intermediate space where we conduct our lives.”

That “vast intermediate space” of ambiguity and uncertainty is also the territory occupied by artists... How to work, what to work on, assessing what’s been made. These are the questions that suffuse every artist’s career. They start with nothing, mostly without being asked, and sail into the unknown with a passion to make something. Even the bleakest among them share a fundamental optimism in the value of making. Every word, every note, every colour is a decision which is also a hypothesis: I think this is what will mean that. They turn away from the predictable, eschewing certainty and reach out to what Toni Morrison calls their “co-conspirators”: the minds of others in whom, as connection is made, the work of art springs to life.

We need to sit with uncertainty, not run from it. Acknowledging with confidence and courage that lack of knowledge is what drives our curiosity, uncovering new understanding.



WORDLE



S	N	O	R	T
A	D	I	E	U
T	A	N	G	S

Q	W	E	R	T	Y	U	I	O	P
A	S	D	F	G	H	J	K	L	
ENTER	Z	X	C	V	B	N	M	⌫	