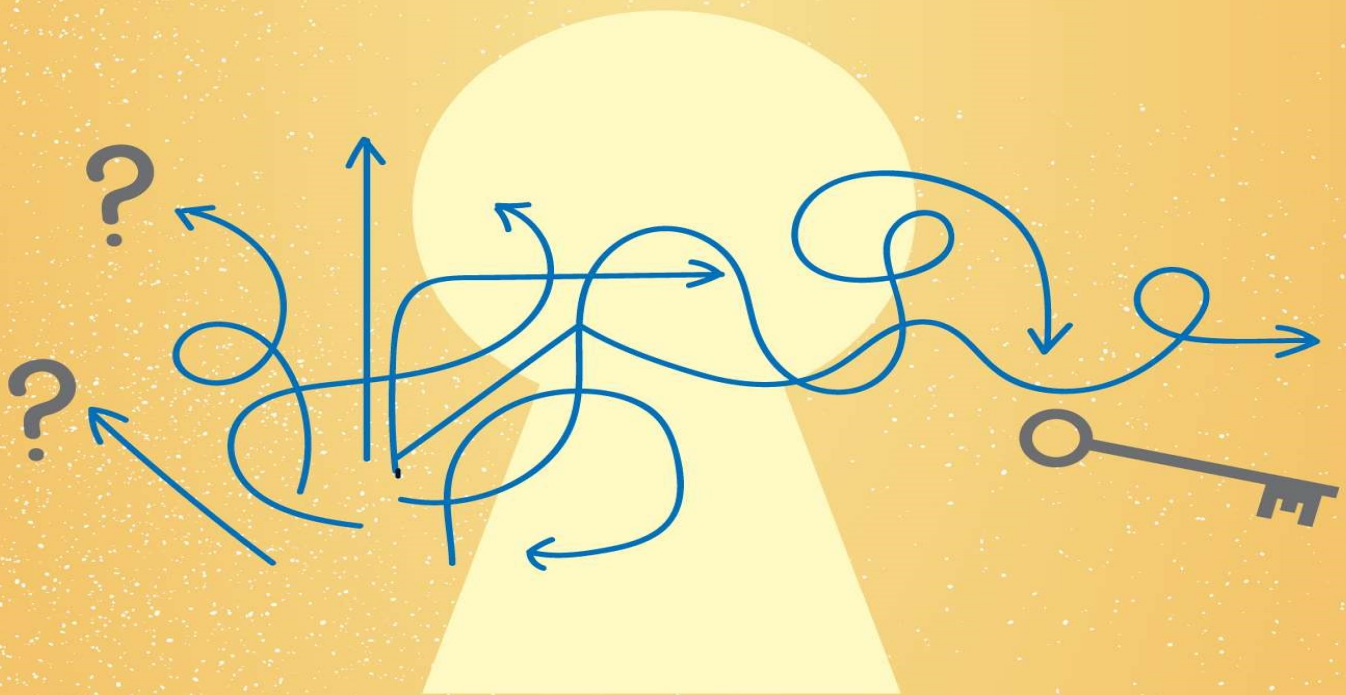


SUMMARY

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NONSENSE

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Why ambiguity is empowering.

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Introduction

Have you ever thought about ambiguity as a good thing? Probably not, right? After all, as a general rule, life is scary to us because we don't know what lies ahead. We develop anxiety and depression because we can't predict the outcome of our futures, because we're worried about what tomorrow holds, because-- in short-- we just don't know. But over the course of this summary, we'll learn why the things we don't know can add beauty and meaning to our lives.



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We Need Surprises More Than we Think we Do

Imagine a world where everything was the same. Actually, it might look a little something like the movie Groundhog Day. Every morning, you would get out of bed at the same time, hear the same story on the news, see the same view from your window, and perform all your morning tasks in the same order. In a world like this, chances are that you'd probably eat the same meals and have roughly the same conversations as well, while experiencing the same range of emotions with little to no variations. Now, I don't know about you, but as much I like order and routine, that much predictability would absolutely drive me crazy! Why? Because we need a little surprise in our lives, even if it's just in small doses! We need the pleasant surprise of saying, "I feel like going to a movie today!" instead of pursuing the same rote activities you had planned. We need the unexpected joys of running into a friend when we hadn't planned to see them or receiving an extra chicken nugget in our order because moments like these give us little bursts of pleasure in our everyday lives.

But of course, this list only touches on life's pleasant surprises and not the moments where we find out something painful that we never expected to hear or when something ends with painful results. And because surprises like these are all too real and all too common, it's no surprise that many of us are afflicted with anxiety. Worrying about our relationships, our grades, our futures, and the nation's political climate can often keep us up at night and leave us desperately grasping for the reassuring consistency of things we can control.

But this creates something of a weird catch-22 as we confusedly cycle between feeling bored because we're concentrating on predictable things and being scared about the things we can't control. It's therefore unsurprising that this leads to a feeling of overall dissatisfaction and restlessness, leaving many of us unhappy with our lives. So, what can we learn from this? Well, for starters, we can conclude that we need a mixture of both surprise and stability in our lives all the time in order to maintain a healthy balance. And

furthermore, we can see that we should be intentional in our cultivation of this balance so that we can manage our anxiety.



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Why Didn't We See That Coming?

In the previous chapter, we considered some of the benefits of surprise. But now it's time to take a look at the slightly darker side of surprise: that upsetting moment when something bad happens and we ask, "Why didn't I see that coming?" This is a natural human reaction because, when confronted with a tragic event in our personal lives-- a natural disaster, or any other freak occurrence-- we often want to know why we didn't anticipate and therefore avoid it. This is a prime example of our tenuous relationship with ambiguity: when we're hit with something we didn't know about, we get upset. We want to believe that if we'd had the information in the first place, we would have made different choices and received a happier outcome. But the author posits that that might not always be the case. And, when you really think about it, knowing the future actually sounds like the kind of superpower that nobody wants. Knowing what happens in the future doesn't give us the freedom to go back and alter what's already happened or what will happen, so what's the point? This might be an especially gloomy superpower to have if your future holds a lot of trouble. If you only have depressing things to look forward to, would you want to spend the rest of your life knowing that, or would you want to move forward, cherishing a little bit of hope?

When you think about it that way, you might not want to know the future after all. But the upside to existing in a sense of ambiguity is that you don't have to know the future to make a positive difference for your future. In fact, every single human being on the planet has the power to alter the outcome of the future by making smart choices in the present. For example, we might not be able to prevent a natural disaster or a global pandemic that has already occurred, but we can use our knowledge to avoid or be prepared for disasters that might happen in the future. For example, if you were a medieval king whose unprotected city had been ravaged, this tragic loss could inform your future decisions, motivating you to fortify your city with strong walls, a tower, a mote, and multiple new defense systems. And in this respect, a little ambiguity can be good because it enables us to learn from our mistakes and prepare for our futures.

Similarly, even things that are seemingly up to chance-- like winning the lottery-- can be altered by our choices. That's because the numbers people choose when playing the lottery aren't as random as they seem. Instead of picking numbers out of thin air-- which would be wisest-- people almost always pick numbers that have some sort of personal significance to them, like their birthday, their anniversary, their cat's birthday, or the numbers from LOST. Is it likely that that specific combination of numbers will be the winning lottery ticket? Probably not. In fact, when you choose numbers that are personally significant to you, you're actually decreasing the likelihood that you'll select the winning numbers! So, if you think about it that way, you can draw a few reasonable conclusions, such as:

- Many people will choose their birthdays or anniversaries
- Many people have the same birthdays and anniversaries
- It is highly likely that many people will choose the same lottery numbers

This means that if you do decide to play the lottery, your best bet is to choose less common numbers that other people are unlikely to think of. You might not know exactly what the winning numbers are, but in this respect, a little ambiguity can create a sense of mystery and excitement! You can also counteract that ambiguity by using your new knowledge of probability and statistics. Once you know the most common guesses that people choose-- and why those common guesses are ineffective-- you can use ambiguity in your favor and pick numbers out of thin air that don't follow a pattern. In doing so, you'll increase your chances of winning the lottery!

But these are only a few examples of the positive nature of ambiguity. Most jokes are also predicated on the principle that you don't know the outcome or that you're initially confused. For example, just think about the "dad jokes" you might have grown up with! If you walked up to your dad and said, "Dad, I'm hungry!" and he replied, "Hey, Hungry, I'm Dad!" you probably laughed and rolled your eyes. Why? The joke is funny because your dad's

reply put a confusing spin on your statement. You were simply telling him that you wanted to eat, but because he responded as though as you were introducing yourself-- therefore implying that “hungry” could be a name as well as an adjective. You weren’t expecting that reply because that’s a normal thing for someone to say. In short, it was funny because you didn’t know it was going to happen! Likewise, if you’ve ever laughed at a joke or situation that was absurdly nonsensical, you’ve found humor in ambiguity.

So, as you can see from these examples, ambiguity can fulfill many roles in our lives. Although we often think that it’s scarier to not know something, the author observes that sometimes certainty is worse. This means that ambiguity can sometimes protect us from a painful reality. Likewise, ambiguity can also be helpful because it can enable us to make guesses or hedge our bets. And lastly, ambiguity can make us laugh. But now that we’ve considered some of the positive and negative roles uncertainty can play in our lives, it’s time to take a closer look at the impact of uncertainty on our morality and development.



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Our Fear of Ambiguity Can Breed Dangerous Conspiracy Theories

When something unexpected happens, what do you do? Your instinct is probably to try and find an explanation for the event. The event in question doesn't have to be a big deal or even something traumatic in nature. In fact, it can be something as simple as your wife sounding hoarse when she tells you, "Good morning." Because your wife's voice isn't always hoarse, you've noticed that something is different, so your first instinct is to ask her about it. You might say something like, "Are you okay? Do you have a sore throat?" to find out what's going on. Similarly, if you run into a friend during a time when they're normally at work, you would notice that this is unusual for them. As a result, you might ask if their work schedule has changed or if they're on a break.

These are innocent examples of seeking explanations; they happen all the time and they don't hurt anyone. In fact, they're usually welcome indications that you care about people enough to notice when things seem out of the ordinary. But these examples are only innocent because they're free of bias. When you ask these questions, you're probably not expecting the worst possible outcome as an answer; you're simply seeking information. And that's the key difference that separates these questions from conspiracy theories. Although both cases have a common denominator-- seeking information about an unexpected event-- as we mentioned in the first chapter, fear is the core characteristic of conspiracy theories. And when we brainstorm wild theories to explain bizarre circumstances, it's usually because we're upset or seeking an answer as wacky as the question.

For example, let's take the case of the missing Malaysian Airlines Flight 370. We all know that planes don't just disappear. They can experience catastrophic crashes, of course, but in those cases, we have tangible evidence that explains what happened where and why. But planes carrying 239 passengers don't just disappear into thin air. So, when something so astounding happens, it's natural for us to try and come up with explanations

that help us make sense of the tragedy. But it enters dangerous conspiracy theory territory when we begin to invent explanations that are as bizarre as the events themselves. For example, when it comes to Flight 370, we don't know what happened. There's a strong possibility that we never will. And unfortunately, we don't really have the option of blaming it on something simple like a faulty piece of equipment or a pilot's error. But that doesn't mean that the answer is automatically something preposterous like aliens!

However, as shocking as it seems, more than 10% of Americans genuinely believe that aliens are responsible for the mysterious disappearance of Flight 370 and its passengers. And those who believe such theories stick to them with dogmatic confidence! It might sound crazy-- and maybe believing in aliens is a little kooky-- but the logic behind it is pretty understandable. People are understandably confused by such a baffling disappearance and when conventional explanations don't help them, they turn to something else. They continue to cling to these theories for the same reasons that many of us hold to our political or religious beliefs: they're ours and they comfort us. That's because conspiracy theories aren't inherently crazy at all. Instead, they're a natural psychological process that we engage in when we need to make sense of the inexplicable. But that doesn't mean they're always harmless or innocent. It's okay to brainstorm theories or try to imagine how something happened, but we have to be careful about the power we give these theories. Because it's also human nature to cling to our beliefs and refuse to change our minds. And if we get too caught up in believing something wrong, our fears and prejudices can prove harmful for ourselves and others.



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Final Summary

Ambiguity is a natural part of the human experience. Although we like to make plans for the future, no one knows the future with any real certainty. We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or next year and sometimes that uncertainty can be scary. But the author observes that ambiguity can also be funny and positive. Because we don't know the future, we can appreciate the unexpected punch line of a joke or be delighted by a surprise. Learning to balance our relationship with ambiguity is an important facet of the human experience.

It's especially important because sometimes our fear of ambiguity can lead our minds in dangerous directions. If we allow ourselves to be too obsessed with understanding the unknown, we can easily fall prey to conspiracy theories that distort our thinking. That's why it's important to keep ambiguity in perspective and learn to balance our anxiety. A little uncertainty is necessary to make life interesting and keep our minds sharp. Although that may sometimes make us anxious, we have to learn to balance the bad with the good and cultivate a healthy relationship with uncertainty.



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