

I Could Be Wrong



by Allan Barger, As heard on The Bob Edwards Show 9/30/11

<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/17183/>

I believe in uncertainty. I believe that the four words “I could be wrong” should be etched above every schoolroom, house of worship, political assembly hall, and scientific laboratory. Uncertainty is an odd creed, but I find it deeply spiritual, combining humility and a deep respect for the mysteries of God and life. It’s not an easy creed.

My conversion to uncertainty came from my life. As an evangelical Christian and a pastor, I spent years trying to reconcile my religious certainties with the certain fact that I was gay. I tried being not gay for almost twenty-five years only to find I had simply been wrong. It didn’t help, and it didn’t stop. In the process I hurt myself, and worse, I hurt others. Sometimes, no matter how certain I am, life and God hand me a different message. This was my hardest lesson in uncertainty. I didn’t lose faith in God, but I certainly lost faith in certainty.

My commitment to uncertainty grows today because I see an appalling excess of certainty around me. It seems to me that certainty visits a great many evils upon the world. I see religions lose their humanity because they are certain they know divinity. Some commit acts of terror and others acts of political intolerance all in the name of God. I watch political certainties create inflexibility in the face of changing information and situations. I see scientific researchers sidelined by other scientists when their theories challenge the scientific orthodoxy—sidelined not because they lack sound evidence but because accepting their evidence means rethinking cherished certainties. It’s human to resist uncertainty. I resist it myself. But when my certainties are in overdrive, I act as if the truth will die if I can’t make you see it and then I can do terrible things. I need uncertainty to keep me humble.

Some ask me if it’s crippling to always question myself. I find it uncomfortable, but not crippling. I act with more confidence if I know in my heart that I’m willing to abandon my certainties if the facts, or the outcomes, turn out wrong. Today, as a teacher and a research analyst, I have certain knowledge. I’m also pretty certain what I want for my children and grandchildren. I’m politically active because I hold certainties about human equality, democracy, and spirituality. I’m certain of a great many things, but I embrace uncertainty because it makes me a better person. I do make mistakes; it’s part of being human. The real error is to be too certain to see my mistakes. Certainty becomes a prison for my mind. Humble uncertainty lets the truth emerge. That’s why I believe in uncertainty—but I could be wrong.

Allan Barger has worked as a research analyst with a non-profit organization for nearly twenty years to reduce alcohol and drug problems in our society. He is also a parent of four amazing daughters and a grandparent of five extraordinary kids. Other than this, he is a fairly normal and relatively boring guy.