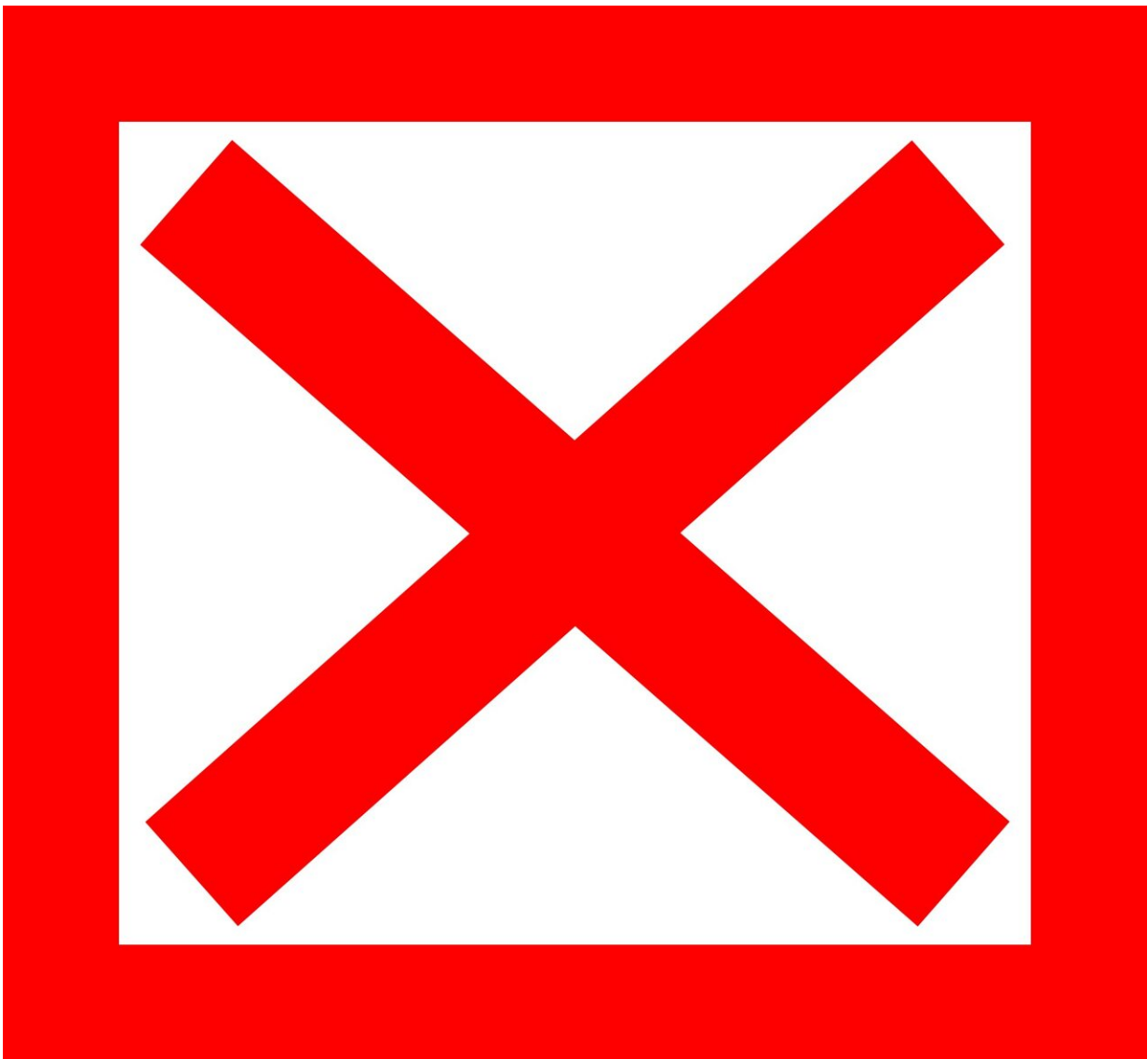


# **The curious joy of being wrong—intellectual humility means being open to new information and willing to change your mind**

December 30 2023, by Daryl Van Tongeren

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Mark Twain apocryphally said, "I'm in favor of progress; it's change I don't like." This quote pithily underscores the human tendency to desire growth while also harboring strong resistance to the hard work that comes with it. I can certainly resonate with this sentiment.

I was raised in a conservative evangelical home. Like many who grew up in a similar environment, I learned a set of religious beliefs that framed how I understood myself and the world around me. I was taught that God is loving and powerful, and God's faithful followers are protected. I was taught that the world is fair and that God is good. The world seemed simple and predictable—and most of all, safe.

These beliefs were shattered when my brother unexpectedly passed away when I was 27 years old. His death at 34 with three young children shocked our family and community. In addition to reeling with grief, some of my deepest assumptions were challenged. Was God not good or not powerful? Why didn't God save my brother, who was a kind and loving father and husband? And how unfair, uncaring and random is the universe?

This deep loss started a period where I questioned all of my beliefs in light of the evidence of my own experiences. Over a considerable amount of time, and thanks to an exemplary therapist, I was able to revise my worldview in a way that felt authentic. I changed my mind, about a lot things. The process sure wasn't pleasant. It took more [sleepless nights](#) than I care to recall, but I was able to revise some of my core beliefs.

I didn't realize it then, but this experience falls under what social science

researchers call [intellectual humility](#). And honestly, it is probably a large part of why, as a [psychology professor](#), I am so interested in studying it. Intellectual humility has been gaining more attention, and it seems critically important for our cultural moment, when it's more common to defend your position than change your mind.

## **What it means to be intellectually humble**

Intellectual humility is a particular kind of humility that has to do with beliefs, ideas or worldviews. This is not only about religious beliefs; it can show up in [political views](#), various social attitudes, areas of knowledge or expertise or any other strong convictions. It has both internal- and external-facing dimensions.

Within yourself, [intellectual humility](#) involves awareness and ownership of the [limitations and biases](#) in what you know and how you know it. It requires a willingness to [revise your views](#) in light of strong evidence.

Interpersonally, it means [keeping your ego in check](#) so you can present your ideas in a modest and respectful manner. It calls for presenting your beliefs in ways that are not defensive and admitting when you're wrong. It involves showing that you care more about learning and preserving relationships than about being "right" or demonstrating intellectual superiority.

Another way of thinking about humility, intellectual or otherwise, is being the right size in any given situation: not too big (which is arrogance), but also not too small (which is self-deprecation).

I know a fair amount about psychology, but not much about opera. When I'm in professional settings, I can embrace the expertise that I've earned over the years. But when visiting the opera house with more cultured friends, I should listen and ask more questions, rather than confidently

assert my highly uninformed opinion.

Four main aspects of intellectual humility include being:

- Open-minded, avoiding dogmatism and being willing to revise your beliefs.
- Curious, seeking new ideas, ways to expand and grow, and changing your mind to align with strong evidence.
- Realistic, owning and admitting your flaws and limitations, seeing the world as it is rather than as you wish it to be.
- Teachable, responding nondefensively and changing your behavior to align with new knowledge.

Intellectual humility is often hard work, especially when the stakes are high.

Starting with the admission that you, like everyone else, have [cognitive biases](#) and flaws that limit how much you know, intellectual humility might look like taking genuine interest in learning about your relative's beliefs during a conversation at a family get-together, rather than waiting for them to finish so you can prove them wrong by sharing your—superior—opinion.

It could look like considering the merits of an alternative viewpoint on a hot-button political issue and why respectable, [intelligent people](#) might disagree with you. When you approach these challenging discussions with curiosity and humility, they become opportunities to learn and grow.

## **Why intellectual humility is an asset**

Though I've been [studying humility](#) for years, I've not yet mastered it personally. It's hard to swim against cultural norms that [reward being](#)

[right and punish mistakes](#). It takes constant work to develop, but psychological science has documented numerous benefits.

First, there are social, cultural and technological advances to consider. Any significant breakthrough in medicine, technology or culture has come from someone admitting they didn't know something—and then passionately pursuing knowledge with curiosity and humility. Progress requires [admitting what you don't know](#) and seeking to learn something new.

Relationships improve when people are intellectually humble. Research has found that intellectual humility is associated with [greater tolerance toward people with whom you disagree](#).

For example, intellectually humble people are more accepting of people who hold differing [religious](#) and [political](#) views. A central part of it is an [openness to new ideas](#), so folks are less defensive to potentially challenging perspectives. They're [more likely to forgive](#), which can help repair and maintain relationships.

Finally, humility helps facilitate personal growth. Being intellectually humble allows you to have a more accurate view of yourself.

When you [can admit and take ownership of your limitations](#), you can seek help in areas where you have room to grow, and you're more responsive to information. When you limit yourself to only doing things the way you've always done them, you miss out on countless opportunities for growth, expansion and novelty—things that strike you with awe, fill you with wonder and make life worth living.

[Humility can unlock authenticity](#) and personal development.

## **Humility doesn't mean being a pushover**

Despite these benefits, sometimes humility gets a bad rap. People can have misconceptions about intellectual humility, so it's important to dispel some myths.

Intellectual humility isn't lacking conviction; you can believe something strongly until your mind is changed and you believe something else. It also isn't being wishy-washy. You should have a high bar for what evidence you require to change your mind. It also doesn't mean being self-deprecating or always agreeing with others. Remember, it's being the right size, not too small.

[Researchers are working hard](#) to validate reliable ways to cultivate intellectual humility. I'm [part of a team](#) that is overseeing a set of projects designed to test different interventions to develop intellectual humility.

Some scholars are examining different ways to engage in discussions, and some are exploring the role of enhancing listening. Others are testing educational programs, and still others are looking at whether different kinds of feedback and exposure to diverse social networks might boost intellectual humility.

Prior work in this area suggests that [humility can be cultivated](#), so we're excited to see what emerges as the most promising avenues from this new endeavor.

There was one other thing that religion taught me that was slightly askew. I was told that too much learning could be ruinous; after all, you wouldn't want to learn so much that you might lose your faith.

But in my experience, what I learned through loss may have salvaged a version of my faith that I can genuinely endorse and feels authentic to my experiences. The sooner we can open our minds and stop resisting

change, the sooner we'll find the freedom offered by [humility](#).

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