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Kerry Gordon,
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THE IMPERMANENCE OF BEING: TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF UNCERTAINTY

KERRY GORDON received his doctoral degree in philosophy of psychology from The Union Institute. His research continues to focus on chaos, complexity, and the evolution of consciousness by bringing together existential themes with the psycho-spiritual traditions of Kabbalah, Sufism, and Vajrayana Buddhism and the new scientific paradigm of nonlinear dynamics, chaos, complexity, self-organizing systems, and quantum cosmology. He is currently executive director of the Program for New Paradigm Studies, which has drawn together some of the brightest lights in new paradigm and integral science research toward the creation of an accredited, on-line, graduate degree program. The intended focus of the program is a twofold exploration of the nature of evolving consciousness and the means of enacting this understanding in the world. In addition to maintaining a private psychotherapeutic practice in Toronto, he studies Tibetan Buddhism with Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche, and the T'Salagi medicine way with Grandmother Pu'Ris'Ha, Cherokee elder, healer, and wisdom teacher.

Summary

This article adopts Nobel Laureate Ilya Prigogine’s assertion that uncertainty is an inherent cosmic expression, deeply embedded within the core of reality. The deep psychic expression of this experience is anxiety which, following Heidegger, is conceived not as pathology but rather as an essential state of being emerging simultaneously with uncertainty. This article examines uncertainty and its child, anxiety, as a necessary consequence of a creative universe and begins to formulate a psychology in accordance with such a reality. I will show that such a psychology must inevitably be transpersonal because an unpredictable universe transcends the merely unknown and raises the issue of the unknowable. This is an inherently spiritual formulation that directly addresses the experience of mystery and the nature of faith. This article explores the
possibility for a psychology in which uncertainty is regarded not as a limit but as an expression of the boundless creativity inherent in the universe.

**Keywords:** uncertainty; unpredictability; anxiety; crisis; authenticity; chaos; new scientific paradigm

The world takes on a continually new appearance; you cannot hold it to its word. It has no density, for everything in it penetrates everything else; no duration, for it comes even when it is not summoned, and vanishes even when it is tightly held. It cannot be surveyed, and if you wish to make it capable of survey you lose it.

*Martin Buber (1958)*

If the speaker maintains that the great thing about him is that he has never been in anxiety, I will gladly provide him with my explanation: that it is because he is very spiritless.

*Soren Kirkegaard (1980)*

**UNCERTAINTY**

I have a recurring dream: I am lost at sea. Murderous waves crash down, a gale howls. Barely able to stay afloat, I thrash about, panic-stricken. Without direction, I have no idea how to get to safety. The feeling is utter chaos. Desperate, I’m bailing like a madman, trying to empty the ocean with a bucket. I am, as Alice would say, running twice as hard as I can to stay exactly where I am. Through my confusion and despair, I hear whispered words, “Lord help me for my boat is so small and your sea is so immense.” This is the point when I inevitably wake up. Naturally, I am greatly relieved that it has only been a dream, until it dawns on me that there’s not much difference between my dreaming and waking life. Making my way through the day, I am indeed overwhelmed by a sea of detail that I can’t ever seem to get a handle on—family, finances, health, job—all the variables of my life rushing toward me in flood of chaotic uncertainty. This is not my beautiful life. Where are the security and order that was promised me? All my carefully constructed truths, everything I have counted on and identified with, seems suddenly false or lost or changing. And when I pick up the morning newspaper, there’s more. Not only my life but
the whole world seems to be deconstructing. I'm back in my dream—drowning in a sea of uncertainty.

Having practiced for many years as a psychotherapist, I have good reason to believe that I am not alone in my anxiety; it is common to a great majority of those of us living in the modern industrialized world. In *Care of the Soul*, one of the most widely read books of the past decade, psychologist Thomas Moore (1992) lists emptiness, a loss of core values, and the general malaise of meaninglessness as hallmarks of our culture. It is hard to deny Moore's assertion. Only pick up a copy of *Time* magazine or turn on the TV. Everywhere we look, images of discord and dissent remind us that the political, economic, and social structures we once held as inviolable are rapidly eroding.

Our typical response to chaos is an instinctual drive to impose order and regain control. Our fear of uncertainty often impels us toward irrational and sometimes bizarre behavior. As in my dream where I am trying to empty the ocean with a bucket, such neurotic activity does little to assuage our anxiety and may even serve to increase it. And neither should we imagine that only individuals can be affected in this way. Stalinism, Nazism, McCarthyism, and fundamentalism of all stripes are examples of the kind of irrationality of which institutions and governments are capable in the name of order.

Rollo May (1977) stated that totalitarianism “may be viewed as serving a purpose on a cultural scale parallel to that in which a neurotic symptom protects an individual from a situation of unbearable anxiety” (p. 12). His further statement that “people grasp at political authoritarianism in the desperate need for relief from anxiety” (May, 1977, p. 12) suggests that perhaps, in the end, it is precisely our resistance to chaos and uncertainty and our almost pathological need to impose order where there may, in fact, be none at all, that is the cause of so much of our dis-ease. I am reminded of the words of systems theorist Kenneth Boulding, who warned that we always “run into the temptation of imposing an order on the universe which may not really be there” (Stamps, 1980, p. i).

The human need for order, given the apparent unpredictability of the natural world, is probably as old as history. This explains why universal laws have been the holy grail sought by science. The evolution of the classical scientific paradigm, beginning with New-
ton, reflects a 350-year progression toward this goal. Establishing the existence of universal laws has allowed us to encounter the world with enormous confidence and creativity. And although there is no doubt that this is one of the great accomplishments of Western culture, something has gone terribly awry. When we fail to distinguish between discovering order in nature and imposing order on nature, we have lost relationship with the very thing we yearn to know. Whereas once we were students of nature, looking to her for meaning, we now denigrate her in the belief that it is our inalienable right to have dominion.

There can be little doubt that the classical scientific paradigm has provided “the means for systematically acting on the world, for predicting and modifying the course of natural processes, for conceiving devices that can harness and exploit the forces and material resources of nature” (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984, p. 37). That being the case, it would be naïve to suggest that science has been a purely empirical endeavor devoted solely to the pursuit of knowledge. The human power drive, to have dominion over the natural world, is also at play here.

Thomas Kuhn (1996, p. 42) pointed out that scientific paradigms imply a specific set of rules or assumptions to which the paradigm is committed and must appropriately respond. In this respect, the classical scientific paradigm both supports and is a natural outgrowth of its cultural context, one that assumes that order must be inherent to the natural world because only through order can humankind fulfill its manifest destiny, which, following Genesis I, 28, is to “subdue...and have dominion over...the earth.” Indeed, biblical scholar Lyman Abbott commented that

the secret of all modern science is in the first chapter of Genesis. Belief in the dominion of spirit over matter, of mind over nature, of man over the physical and the animal creation, was essential to the possession of that dominion. (as cited in Hertz, 1961, p. 5)

Given this basic cultural assumption, it follows that “to bend phenomena to human needs, natural processes must be reduced in complexity and simplified into predictable, lawlike behavior” (Kellert, 1993, p. 154). And, indeed, the classical model has been enormously successful in this respect to the extent that we have become dangerously inflated in the pride of our own accomplishment. Not only have we come to accept that we can dominate and
bend the natural world to our will but also that it is our responsibility to do so.

I am not presuming to suggest that all scientists since Newton have engaged their art with malicious intent. It would be absurd to even imagine such a thing. But the mechanistic, linear approach that has pervaded the course of science over the past 350 years has led to the glorification of order and the subsequent objectification of reality. At the same time, the idea of mystery—a sense of the unknowable—has typically been dismissed by science as mere metaphysics or, worse, superstitious ignorance—the last refuge of a primitive mind.

Because mystery is by definition unknowable, its nature is also unpredictable and therefore beyond the aegis of technology’s control. Because its understanding serves no practical purpose in the context of the classical paradigm, there would appear to be no reason to give it attention. This at least partly explains the rift between science and spirit. Be that as it may, in the final analysis, the classical scientific paradigm, in rejecting uncertainty as an essential aspect of reality, has been the unwitting agent of great injury both to our planet and our psyche. I believe that this situation is in urgent need of redress and necessarily involves “revisioning” both our scientific and psychological relationship to uncertainty.

Considering the extent to which our culture has been influenced by the scientism of the past 350 years, it should come as no surprise that the way we perceive reality and the way we do science are inextricably intertwined. Western culture has evolved its collective self-image based on a particular scientific paradigm and has come to depend on it for a stable sense of identity. Even those wary of this scientific model must concede that it has had, and continues to have, a dramatic impact on our way of thinking about the universe and our place in it.

Despite its limitations, the classical paradigm has been maintained because it supports a view of the world and ourselves in which, over time, we have become highly invested. Therefore, even though it has become increasingly cumbersome and unresponsive, our culture has been extremely reluctant to give it up. It is a familiar model. For the most part, it works, at least to the extent that it explains the world in a predictable, orderly fashion. It is also, in its basis in determinism, an essentially idealistic model that assumes
that if we keep to the scientific project—ask the right questions, gather enough information, solve the problems—then finally we will run out of problems to solve. We will have arrived at the source and theory of everything. We will at long last “know the mind of God” (Hawking, 1988, p. 175) and be at one with creation. As one of the 19th century’s most influential scientists, Pierre Simon Laplace, affirmed, “nothing would be uncertain. Both future and past would be present before us” (as cited in Peterson, 1993, p. 229).

Paradigms are meaningful precisely because they are conservative. This is reflected in the fact that scientists, doing what Kuhn refers to as “normal science,” assume that they already know what the world is like (Kuhn, 1996, p. 5). The point of scientific research has never been about the search for novelty but is rather concerned with the further substantiation and verification of the existing paradigm. “Normal science . . . often suppresses fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 5). Innovation is, therefore, not in the nature of paradigms themselves but is rather the result of the accumulation of anomalies discovered in the course of standard research with respect to the paradigm. If sufficient anomalies continue to appear over time, then the paradigm may be driven into a state of crisis. This brings the existing paradigm into question and affords the possibility for the evolutionary emergence of a new one.

Clearly, paradigm shifts do not come about easily. Nor should they. Indeed, there must be a proven and compelling reason, an absolutely unavoidable necessity for a shift. We cannot capriciously flit from paradigm to paradigm like a honeybee in search of nectar. Were we to do so, no stable conceptual ground would ever develop on which science (or culture) could build and evolve.

My point is only that phenomena relating to unpredictability and uncertainty have not been ignored over the past 350 years simply because scientists are narrow-minded or lack the intellectual capacity to perceive of their existence, but because uncertainty is an anomaly inherently beyond the scope and interest of the prevailing paradigm. Furthermore, to consider uncertainty as an actual systemic state opens a Pandora’s box that seriously calls into question a model of reality that has taken hundreds of years to establish. Scientists, like manufacturers, are not eager to retool the plant just when it is starting to turn a profit. Not, that is, unless
they want to generate a level of crisis and anxiety that may well threaten the entire system on which their enterprise is based.

Real transformative change is simultaneous with crisis (Krippner, 1994). Most practicing psychotherapists already know this because inevitably it is crisis that brings clients into therapy in the first place. When Kuhn (1996) stated that “crises are a necessary precondition for the emergence of novelty” (p. 77), he made a similar point—that shifts in paradigms are not gradual but are always precipitated by extreme chaotic turbulence. Despite the apparent human psychological need to dampen crisis and avoid the ensuing anxiety, from the perspective of evolving systems (including paradigms), it is a necessary phenomenon consistent with quantum shifts in knowledge and experience. According to dynamical systems theorists, crisis, whether at the molecular or cultural level, is typically the harbinger of radical systemic transformation (Abraham, 1994; Krippner, 1994; Prigogine, 1997). That being said, the emergence of the new scientific paradigm signifies a cultural crisis of the first order that cannot help but generate profound anxiety because, by definition, it threatens “the basic assumptions which have been identified with the existence of the culture, and which the individual, as a participant in the culture, has identified with his own existence” (May, 1977, p. 239).

As the conceptual foundation on which the industrialized world is built, science both generates and dramatically epitomizes the crisis in which we find ourselves. Any significant shift in the way we encounter the world—whether cultural, ecological, socioeconomic, or spiritual—will necessarily be concurrent with a shift in the way we do science. Because where so recently science had been able to comfort and assure us that the universe was a model of constancy and deterministic order, it now speaks of uncertainty and unpredictability. Where so recently we looked out on a stable and knowable universe, now we are drawn to the encounter on the narrow ridge between chaos and order. We are at a crossroads, a bifurcation point where we must decide whether to cling to a rigid 19th-century model of deterministic certainty, or risk a radically different view of the cosmos, one that accepts the unknowable (as opposed to the merely unknown) as a necessary consequence of existence (Michael, 2000). In the wake of a radical re-visioning in 20th-century scientific and mathematical thought, we enter the new millennium on the tide of a shifting paradigm.
THE QUESTION OF DETERMINISM

In the newly emerging scientific paradigm, the issues of determinism and uncertainty are considered in a radically new light. Although separated by 300 years, the theories of both Newton and Einstein are models of scientific determinism, a view of the universe that holds that “the structure of the world is such that any event can be rationally predicted... if we are given a sufficiently precise description of past events, together with all the laws of nature” (Popper, 1982, p. 2). For Einstein in particular, any theory to be admissible had to be deterministic, transcending the vagaries of human existence and satisfying what he considered to be the essential, ordered nature of reality. Einstein’s well-known assertion that “time is an illusion” clearly reflects his belief in a deterministic, predictably ordered universe in which spontaneity, novelty, change, and ultimately time itself are nothing more than human illusion born of ignorance (i.e., incomplete information). In this, Einstein is guilty of adopting a point of view, widely held by many great thinkers from Kant and Laplace on, which assumes that because a deterministic theory is successful in describing the world, the world it purports to describe must itself be inherently deterministic (Popper, 1982, pp. 36, 49).

However, the new scientific paradigm, in embracing nonlinearity and indeterminism, takes a radically different view, assuming unpredictability to be an inherent cosmic expression deeply embedded within the core of reality. As Nobel Laureate Ilya Prigogine (1997) so succinctly put it, “Chance, or probability, is no longer a convenient way of accepting ignorance but rather part of a new, extended rationality” (p. 55). According to this view, the universe is an emergent, self-organizing system of exquisite complexity, continuously evolving within an interpenetrating web of cocreative relationships (Goerner, 1999; Laszlo, 1995). As such, we can no longer think of the universe as a closed system—a static, eternal creation—but rather as an emergent phenomenon, spontaneously arising in every moment of its existence. This is an unpredictable model of the universe in which the arrow of time points in one direction and “the future [is] in no sense contained in the past” (Popper, 1982, p. 3). It is a model that regards uncertainty as real, an authentic expression of the world as it actually exists, further articulating the evolutionary tendency toward creative emer-
gence, unpredictability, and spontaneous change (Laszlo, 1995; Prigogine, 1997).

From the perspective of the new scientific paradigm, even if there were a super intelligence capable of determining the complete set of initial conditions of the universe at any instant in time, it would still be incapable of predicting future events with any degree of certainty (Krippner, 1994; Laszlo, 1995; Prigogine, 1997). The notion of inherent unpredictability challenges the very foundation of classical science, the linear, cause-and-effect approach to the world that most of us learned in high school. For, indeed, how can a science which asserts that “the future can be rationally deduced (based on) scientific procedures of prediction” (Popper, 1982), be rationalized with a model of the universe in which uncertainty and unpredictability are regarded not as troublesome anomalies but as the essential nature of reality?

Prigogine (1997) stated that “the universe itself is highly heterogeneous and far from equilibrium. This prevents systems from reaching a state of equilibrium” (p. 158). This means that the universe is a web of interdependency—all systems interacting continuously in relationship with the myriad systems around them, such that the dissipative waste of one system is the self-organizing food for another. Furthermore, Prigogine suggested that as systems tend to move further from equilibrium, so they tend toward greater degrees of freedom, thus “distance from equilibrium becomes an essential parameter in describing nature” (Prigogine, 1996, p. 68).

From this point of view, all systems are conceived as dissipative structures and the greater their degree of uncertainty, the greater their creative potential. If this is the case, then any concept of closed systems is purely illusory, because nothing can be conceived as independent of its relationships. We begin to see that unpredictability and uncertainty do indeed follow universal laws once we accept that probability is not an expression of ignorance but rather accurately reflects the weblike patterns of interconnection that we see all around us in the natural world. For uncertainty to make sense, we must relinquish the simplistic—a predictable, closed-systems view of the universe—and take up the complex—a world comprised of interdependent, interpenetrating networks of relationship. This is the very essence of new paradigm thinking.
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF UNCERTAINTY

Once entertained, the concept of scientific indeterminism leads down a slippery slope away from the known and knowable toward the psychological depths of mystery. Here, at the edge of chaos, the linear map ends and we enter on a new paradigm, one that embraces uncertainty, unpredictability, and the unknowable. I should point out that despite its rather poetical lilt, “the edge of chaos” is actually a technical term coined by systems theorist Christopher Langton, who says that

right in between the two extremes (of order and chaos), at a kind of abstract phase transition called “the edge of chaos,” you find complexity; a class of behaviors in which the components of the system never quite lock into place yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either. (as cited in Waldrop, 1992, p. 293)

In this realm of infinite potential, nothing can be grasped or quantified once and for all. The self-assured “I” on which we stake our life is shaken as the fixed and solid forms in which we are so thoroughly invested dissolve into probability and potential. Whether despite our science or because of it, we face this “awe-full” place in trembling and anxiety, for it is one thing to conceptualize an indeterministic world but quite another to actually live in it. But if, as the great rabbi Abraham Heschel (1955/1976) taught, “any genuine encounter with reality is an encounter with the unknowable” (p. 115), then how are we to meaningfully embody the anxiety that emerges in its wake?

Although it has become clichéd to equate anxiety with the failure of modern culture, it is, like most clichés, based in an essential truth (May, 1977). However, the emergence of the postmodern requires that we re-vision anxiety, not as a symptom but as the necessary expression of evolving culture and consciousness.

Quoting the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), Bruce Perry (1998) stated that “anxiety, an emotion, is the subjective sensation that accompanies the body’s response to real or perceived threat.” He further added that with anxiety, “the apprehensive anticipation of future danger or misfortune is accompanied by a feeling of dysphoria or somatic symptoms
of tension.” The underlying point is that for Western medicine, itself an outgrowth of the classical scientific paradigm, anxiety is regarded primarily in the context of psychopathology, a symptom or disease to be cured.

Heidegger (1962), however, refuted the notion that anxiety is a pathology or even, for that matter, an emotion but rather considers it as an irreducible, existential state of being. For Heidegger, anxiety is not in response to something, such as an external threat, but exists for its own sake. It arises from the self-reflexive awareness of our own “potentiality-for-Being.” Speaking from a more strictly psychological perspective, May (1977) made much the same point in saying, “Whenever possibility is visualized by an individual, anxiety is potentially present in the same experience” (p. 38).

Existence, which Heidegger calls “Being-in-the-world,” is conceived as a dynamic ground of emergence constantly creating itself through the multiplicity of its relationships. Existence is therefore conceived as an expression of infinite complexity whose nature is always in question. This is a cocreative perspective in which, similar to Prigogine’s dissipative structures, that which is giving birth is simultaneously being born. To the extent that subject and object arise interdependently, existence is a far-from-equilibrium system manifesting the flux and flow of continual emergence. This profound level of creative uncertainty is recognized in Heidegger’s (1962) statement: “That which anxiety is anxious about is Being-in-the-world itself” (p. 187). Human beings, aware of the inherent uncertainty of existence, embody that awareness in anxiety. Uncertainty is therefore that inherent state of the world that is simultaneous with anxiety, whereas anxiety is that inherent state of being human that is simultaneous with uncertainty.

When May (1977) stated that “the possibility of freedom always arouses anxiety” (p. 391), he affirmed Heidegger’s (1962) notion that anxiety is coincident with freedom, the freedom that comes with the infinite potential innate in any moment of existence. Heidegger proposed that the authentic self is that which is aware of the ambiguity and uncertainty of its existence (i.e., asks the question as to its own being) and, through intention, chooses to stand in that place. In an uncertain world of boundless, creative potential, choice is always happening. Choice is the continuous process of bifurcation that inevitably arises from the ground of uncertainty. Far from being fixed and knowable in some factual way, existence is nothing but potentiality-for-Being, a bifurcating
cascade of endless choice. Whether or not we embody this awareness in action is always an open question. That is why in choice there is anxiety; it is inherent to an authentic, or creative, mode of existence.

Creativity, authenticity, uncertainty, anxiety—these cannot be separated. To live a creative existence means to live with uncertainty. To live an authentic existence means to live with anxiety. But Heidegger (1962) also said that when we turn away from our authentic self and, grasping for safety and certainty, abdicate our choices to the ubiquitous “they” (Das Man), it is anxiety that draws us back from our absorption in the world (p. 189). Anxiety is the deepest sense of despair that comes on us when, becoming enmeshed in the world, we are lost to ourselves. When, in despair and hopelessness, we forget and deny our uniqueness in the world, it is anxiety that draws us back to remember our purpose and calls on us to assume responsibility for our life.

It is therefore that the uncertainty inherent in being a unique individual is a source of primal anxiety. The Hasidic rabbis, knowing this, remind us that

> every man shall know and consider that in his qualities he is unique in the world and that none like him ever lived, for had there ever before been someone like him, then he would not have needed to exist. (Buber, 1988, p. 103)

In this regard, we cannot hide faceless in the crowd but must stand exposed in the responsibility of our uniqueness and special purpose for being.

Whether we are “right” or “ready” is not an issue for Being-in-the-world; it is constantly arising in any case. Without sentimentality, anxiety thus responds, relentlessly bringing each individual before his or her creative potential, “for anxiety individualizes. This individualization brings (the human being) back from its falling, and makes manifest to it that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 191).

Anxiety is not, in this sense, a manifestation of chaos but is the edge of chaos, that state of in-between, in which, at any moment, the distinction between self-discovery and self-annihilation is ambiguously obscured. Anxiety is the existential tension inherent in every moment of choice and is therefore the experiential ground for all meaningful experience. Thus, in anxiety, an individual becomes aware that being human is not a once-and-for-all proposi-
tion but is rather a continuous process of creative choice in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. Only in “being-anxious” is the possibility for transformative change brought into awareness. Anxiety is the embodied expression of creative uncertainty, and it is precisely for this reason that we come to the understanding that it is not anxiety itself but our resistance to it that pathologizes (May, 1977).

PENETRATING THE ILLUSION OF CERTAINTY

In arguing for an irreducible relationship between uncertainty, creativity, authenticity, and anxiety, we find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma. From the perspective of the new scientific paradigm, the world is conceived as being in a state of nonequilibrium or uncertainty. As systems move farther from equilibrium, increasing their level of uncertainty, they attain greater degrees of freedom. From the existential point of view, the very fact of being in an uncertain world is anxiety inducing. Furthermore, as we move toward greater degrees of freedom and more potential for creative choice, our anxiety necessarily increases. Authenticity and anxiety, anxiety and creativity, creativity and uncertainty—it is the complexity of these cocreative relationships that provides the ground of tension from which existence continuously emerges.

And there’s the rub because if we concede that, as human beings, we aspire to a creative life, then we are left with the issue of anxiety as inherent to the life we wish to lead. In this, we are faced with a most perplexing problem because that which is the object of our yearning, creativity, is also, in anxiety, the source of our fear and loathing. All too often, in my psychotherapeutic practice, I see my patients suffer the terrible anguish of this dilemma. I have come to the belief that the most tragic state that can befall a human being is the deadness that arises when the primordial creative urge is sublimated in an effort to dispel anxiety. May (1977) acknowledged the same concern when he stated that “by accepting impoverishment of personality, one can buy temporary freedom from anxiety, to be sure. But the price for this ‘bargain’ is the loss of those unique and most precious characteristics of the human self” (p. 384).

If anxiety is necessary to a creative life, then from a psychological point of view, our concern should not be for its elimination but rather for a way to re-vision it so that it may be experienced as a
positive life force. But how do we make this experiential shift when anxiety, by virtue of its indeterminance, seems to pose such a threat to our being? In every instance in which we are aware of it, anxiety fills us with a sense of dread that, like some primordial rising tide, threatens to overwhelm and consume us.

Our instinctive response, to eliminate or contain anxiety, is as defensive as it is neurotic. What are we protecting and why are we so persistent in our efforts? One would think, in light of the failure of our ceaseless striving, that we would at last concede that containing anxiety is about as likely as emptying the ocean with a bucket. Our problem with anxiety is identical to our problem with uncertainty and stems from an unwavering desire to put clear, definitive boundaries on that which is, in essence, boundless.

This is consistent with what Buddhists consider to be the primary cause of human suffering, which is the persistent belief in permanence—that our self-concept and our relationships with the world are, or ought to be, objective, unchanging, and predictably ordered. Psychologically, we cling to this irrational belief in permanence, even despite the demonstrated truth that all things are subject to decay and death. Still, according to Buddhist philosophy, it is precisely this tightly held illusion that generates the samsaric world of endless suffering, pain, and frustration. Yet, no matter how insistently we grasp at the illusion of fixity, the universe refuses to conform, constantly challenging our desire and need for certainty.

From the Buddhist perspective, it is understood that the root cause of our illusory relationship to the world is a “fundamental ignorance in the minds of all beings” (Kalu, 1986, p. 15). This is not ignorance in the intellectual sense but refers to a profound level of unawareness such that the mind continually projects a “fantasized, impossible manner” of being onto the world and believes that this projection is, without a doubt, true (Dalai Lama & Berzin, 1997, p. 92).

The unaware mind is like an infant who imagines that all the existent things in the world are nothing more than objects for its gratification. It is an omnipotent point of view in which every entity, including itself, is perceived as having a discrete, inherent nature independent of the complex, interpenetrating relationships that truly constitute the world. It is in this sense that the unaware mind narcissistically imagines itself as a kind of homunculus, a little being that “lives” in our head, controlling, assimilating, and
evaluating all the information that comes in through our senses. The self-object thus reified achieves the status of a solid, independent entity, which we imagine to be the real “me.”

The characteristic feature of this coarse, undisciplined level of mind is its intention toward objectifying the nature of existence the better to grasp its meaning once and for all. Thus, Buddhism confirms the notion that it is precisely the mind’s striving for discrete order—where there may, in fact, be none at all—that is the root cause of human suffering. Mind, at this level, attempts to grasp existence in the dualistic manner of distinct subject/object and omnipotently projects on it all those qualities that result in negative feelings and emotions. Like a child, the unaware, twofold mind takes no responsibility for its experiences because they are said to emanate from the side of objects rather than from mind itself. The unaware mind, thus disempowered, continuously perpetuates a victimized state of frustration and suffering.

Buddhism considers mind to be a dynamical process of emergence. Mind is not a thing that can be quantified, measured, or known with certainty but rather exists in a state of continuous transformative change. New and always new again, it is in this sense that mind is called the “mind stream” or “mental continuum” (Dalai, 1997, p. 65), suggesting a continuity of experience consistent with potentiality-for-Being. As an expression of the fluid, creative potential of uncertainty, mind can be fairly characterized as the complex, interpenetrating flow of relationship that is identical with existence itself.

As the nature of mind is uncertainty, any attempt to take hold of it, to grasp it conceptually, can only lead to confusion and frustration. As Buber (1958) noted, “It cannot be surveyed, and if you wish to make it capable of survey, you lose it” (p. 32). Still, it is hard to resist the urge to impose order, to know the unknowable. But the faculty of thought has limits, and, in mind’s uncertainty, it has reached the end of the line. How can we hope to arrive at a conceptual understanding of that which is, in essence, nonconceptual? Because in Buddhism “mind always refers to experience” (Dalai, 1997, p. 61), it would be reasonable to conclude that an authentic understanding of mind can only be reached through experience. Thus, although Buddhism is justly renowned for its philosophy and scholarship, its core beliefs are derived through the development and practice of those techniques that experientially reveal the nature of mind. It is precisely because of mind’s nonconceptual
nature that the technology of meditation and yoga has been so highly developed and is so essential to Buddhist practice. That being said, it is still possible to draw some conclusions in regards to mind that can direct us to a deeper understanding of uncertainty and its embodied expression in anxiety.

It is reasonable to assume, for example, that mind has the capacity to apprehend its own nature. And being that its own nature is without solid, concrete definition, mind must be able to recognize uncertainty as an essential experience for itself. It is in this sense that Buddhists speak of mind as emptiness. This does not mean that mind is nothing or that nothing is real for it but only that it is empty of any content that can be objectified. Buddhists believe that the deepest nature of mind has the capacity to apprehend its own emptiness. Enlightenment is therefore the experiential realization that, in its basis in mind, existence has no inherent content independent of the infinite set of relationships that exist for it in space and time.

The untamed or unenlightened mind is unable to penetrate the illusion of an objective, dualistic reality. This is reflected in our typical twofold attitude toward the world, our investment in the contents of experience over experience itself.

This is evident in our relationship to anxiety. We first recognize anxiety as an energetic welling-up, a sensation of uncontrollable arising that makes us feel as though we will be overwhelmed. Immediately we begin to project on it all sorts of contents (e.g., symptoms, phobias) to explain our discomfort. In an instant, anxiety has become a thing external to our being that threatens us. Anxiety is not fear in this sense; fear is, rather, our “armor against anxiety” (May, 1977, p. 225)—our attempt to choke it off and put it in its place.

In resisting the flow of anxiety’s arising, we deny its true nature, thereby entering into a pathological relationship with it. Pathology is in resistance, choking off the energetic flow of creative uncertainty, which, from the very first, was the source of anxiety’s arising. As May (1977) pointed out, “This defense is an emotional withdrawal in which people who can do nothing else dull their sensitivities, cut off their awareness of threat. The shrinking of consciousness seems to work temporarily in the warding off of anxiety” (p. 11). But, ultimately, it is a strategy doomed to fail. Left feeling depressed and depleted, we have, in effect, deadened ourselves to the innate creative energy that naturally courses through us.
What is required is that we allow ourselves to experience anxiety devoid of the content that we project on it and begin to visualize it as a cosmic expression of a creative, uncertain universe. The difference between the agony of being overwhelmed and the ecstasy of over-flowing is the difference between a pathological relationship with anxiety and an authentic one.

AWE

But how do we establish this new relationship with anxiety? Anxiety is shrouded in the illusion of our own projections. And because the illusion is complete, we cannot imagine other than its being a threat to us. Anxiety thus brings us face-to-face with the limits of our existence and the proximity of death. Ultimately, death is the object of anxiety (Becker, 1973; May, 1977; Kierkegaard, 1980). Our dread of it constricts us with tension, for though we know that death is inevitable, we never know how or when it will come. But even were we immortal, still we would not be free of death. For death is not once and for all, the mere shuffling off of this mortal coil, but is continuous, with every creative moment of existence. In every instance that the “I” we unequivocally declare to be ourselves is questioned, in every instance that this concrete, certain self on which we stake our life is challenged, we face death. Anxiety is therefore always toward death—the death of certainty. It is with regard to this paradox—that every possibility for life is simultaneous with the threat of death—that Kierkegaard stated, “Freedom’s possibility announces itself in anxiety” (1980, p. 74).

Ultimately, it is death that we project on anxiety and assume to be its contents. How then are we to come before anxiety except in fear? What can possibly motivate us to step into the abyss of the unknowable and risk the complete dissolution of self? Abraham Heschel tells us that there is no other way to encounter the depths of unknowable mystery except in awe. For Heschel (1955/1976), “awe is the antithesis of fear” (p. 77), for in awe we are drawn toward the object of anxiety, whereas in fear we shrink away. In fear, we abandon ourselves. In awe, we transcend ourselves. In the openness and boundless generosity of ecstatic surrender, fear cannot touch us. In awe, we put aside our willful need for certainty and allow ourselves to be humbled in the face of mystery. In this place, where knowledge is sacrificed for the sake of wisdom, we engage
the unknowable and take our stand. Vulnerable in the hell fires of uncertain existence, our pride burned away, we gaze in amazement and are astonished. This is the way of it, “the beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe” (Heschel, 1955/1976, p. 74). Awe opens us to the power and potential of uncertainty. And though it is not faith itself, awe is that state of being that renders faith possible. “Awe is the sense of wonder and humility . . . felt in the presence of mystery” (Heschel, 1955/1976, p. 77).

Being in awe is not only meaningful for the individual in society but for society as a whole. As a culture, we have adopted an arrogant relationship to the world, assuming that what is beyond our dominion is of little consequence and that what cannot be known with certainty is not worth knowing. We have placed our faith in the classical scientific model and counted on it to resolve the uncertainty of our existence. But the attitude of certainty assumed by normal science, the attitude in which our culture has been so thoroughly schooled, is by no means the be-all and end-all of science. It is indeed paradoxical that the scientists of greatest genius, the Newtons and Einsteins who championed the deterministic model, were those who approached science from a position of awe. It was this reverential attitude that motivated their research. Einstein (1954/1997) himself wrote that

> it is the most important function of art and science to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it . . . I maintain that the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research. (p. 14)

This, however, is not the typical attitude of normal science, which, as an institution, has rejected the unknowable as irrelevant to its projects and has applied itself instead to gaining dominion over the natural world. In an effort to grasp the universal laws and know them once and for all, science has denied a level of complexity that is beyond our capacity to measure or quantify. In advocating this position, science has taught, or at least encouraged, our culture to resist the anxiety of uncertainty. In denigrating all that cannot be explained in objective, “scientific” terms, we have lost reverence, not only for our planet, but for the complex, interpenetrating web of relationships that comprise the world. By thus demeaning nature, we demean ourselves. We have paid dearly for our single-minded absorption in our own accomplishments. Through science we have acquired far more knowledge than wis-
dom. For, although knowledge is gained through curiosity, wisdom, according to Heschel (1955/1976), can only be gained through awe: “The loss of awe is the great block to insight. A return to reverence is the first prerequisite for a revival of wisdom” (p. 78).

The new paradigm perspective of interdependence and indeterminism is therefore a significant development in evolving consciousness toward a cocreative relationship with reality that accepts and embraces uncertainty and the mystery of the unknowable. It is not merely a way of knowing but also a mode of being that penetrates the illusion of fixity and separateness and invites us to participate directly in a complex, uncertain world of interpenetrating relationships.

The new paradigm addresses a fundamentally new way of perceiving reality that includes not only a reinterpretation of human nature but also a reinterpretation of the complex, interdependent relationships that characterize the natural world. Here, I am speaking of the existential tendency of life to self-organize in a way that establishes identity and fosters the evolution of consciousness. It is in this existential sense that life is understood to be synonymous with embodiment, a continuous systemic process of formation and transformation. Embodiment is therefore a dynamic phenomenon, the conjoining of transcendent spirit and immanent matter in a dialectic process of continuous emergence. What is emerging is consciousness itself.

Although such a perspective has traditionally been the domain of metaphysics, it would seem that the new scientific paradigm is sufficiently complex as to allow these issues to be further addressed and extended through a model of scientific empiricism. The new scientific paradigm calls us, therefore, to further explore the inherent relationship between a spiritual and a scientific interpretation of evolution, a relationship that evokes the mystery in uncertainty, spontaneity, and transformative change.

In the face of the unknowable, we discover the awe-full truth of our own limitations. For, indeed, there is nothing left to us but awe. Little wonder we feel a sense of loss. Western culture in the 21st century finds itself in the throes of a shifting paradigm brought on by a crisis of uncertainty as it struggles to come to grips with the irresolvable nature of existence. It is for this reason that the emergence of the new scientific paradigm transcends the boundaries of science per se and becomes a vital concern to all who wish to directly participate in the evolution of consciousness. It is in this
sense that the line that separates the concerns of science and spirit
becomes ambiguous, hearkening back to the rational mysticism of
the Sufi and Kabbalist sages of the 12th and 13th centuries.

Heschel (1955/1976) asked us to consider three attitudes toward
the mystery: the fatalist, the positivist, and the person of faith.

For the fatalist, mystery is the supreme power, an overwhelming
irrational force controlling all reality. From this perspective,
human intention and action are meaningless because life is a pre-
determined cycle of birth and death wholly beyond human influ-
ence. Because for the fatalist the issue of existential responsibility
is not even a consideration, the concept of meaningful scientific
questioning is essentially irrelevant.

For the positivist, there is only denial. Feeling his own insignifi-
cance and insecurity in the face of the ineffable, he inflates himself
and, in supreme arrogance, denies the very existence of mystery. In
the name of linear rationality, which is now reified as the supreme
arbiter of reality, he states with the voice of authority and utmost
certainty that mystery is nothing but a superstitious fiction, the
last refuge of a primitive intellect. To the positivist, all meaningful
questions are, in principle, answerable.

The person of faith approaches mystery from a position of awe.
From this perspective, mystery is engaged as a cocreative dialogue
in which human participation is regarded as a necessary and,
indeed, sacred act. Here, existence is viewed as an emergent phe-
nomenon requiring that all sentient beings assume responsibility
by actively seeking out the encounter with the unknowable. This is
a very nonlinear perspective that recognizes that the evolutionary
nature of reality continuously emerges from a cocreative ground of
interdependent relationships. In awe, resolution is eschewed and
uncertainty embraced, not as a limit but as an expression of the
boundless generosity and creativity inherent in the universe.

Thus, the newly emerging scientific paradigm assumes an atti-
dude of faith, for it draws us to the abyss of uncertainty and, in the
words of Eliot (1943/1971), bids us enter “through the unknown
remembered gate” into the realm of mystery. Here, we are revealed,
exposed in our insecurity. As a mode of perception, the new para-
digm is therefore unrelenting because it refuses to indulge our
instinctual desire for certainty—a place to stand once and for all.
What, after all, can be said about the impermanence of being that
does not diminish its awe-full truth? The uncertainty that lies at
the core of reality can never be resolved but only, in awe and won-
der, be experienced as a state of perpetual creative emergence. Between the known and the unknown, order and uncertainty, lies the edge of chaos, “a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.” As a way of seeing the world, the new scientific paradigm draws us to the place of awe, providing an elegant new model of culture and consciousness that weds heart and mind, soul and spirit, science and religion within a new paradigm of evolutionary spirituality.

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Reprint requests: Kerry Gordon, Program for New Paradigm Studies, 10 Cloverlawn Ave., Toronto, ON M6E 1H3; e-mail: kigordon@acncanada.net.