



# The Art of Not Knowing

CRAIG COGGLE

# What We Know.

Knowing stuff matters when your washing machine floods the kitchen. You call in the experts and they take a look and they know how to fix it. Your washing machine gets repaired and now you know a good plumber that you can recommend to your friends when their washing machine overflows.

Knowing stuff matters when someone asks you to prove what you know.

If someone asks in an interview, “What do you know?” Well, here are my qualifications, my prizes, and my awards. Here is a list of what I know, the proof if you like.

People like knowing. We all do. It’s part of the secure way that we live with each other. I know you, I know how you will behave. I know the kind of things that you like so I know that we will have a nice evening together. It comes naturally to us.

But, what happens when what I know turns out to be wrong? What happens when our evening is a disaster and what I thought I knew about you produced a completely different result?

We don’t always know, we just think we know.

# What We Don't Know.

In education the starting point is what you don't know.

Before you can begin your research or frame your experiments you'd better make sure that you are asking the right questions about what you don't know. Trying to understand the universe through science can only come from a place of not knowing.

Innovation and creativity can only exist with the wonder of not knowing. I wonder what will happen if I mix this thing here with this thing over here. I don't know, but would love to find out. Curiosity is born from not knowing.

Not knowing is a key ingredient in change and growth.

When we loosen our grip on what we expect, we are more open to the feedback we get. Once we let go of being so damn certain, we open up to new possibilities. Being open to new possibilities means that we become more adaptable, and that means that we are more likely to cope with unpredictable change and uncertainty.

In this day and age this sort of resilience is crucial to our success.

Knowing what to do matters, but more important is knowing what to do when you don't know what to do.

Can you be comfortable in that space? Because the truth is, we never know.

# When We Expect.

We set up expectations about outcomes because we think we know, and we hold onto them believing that they are the truth. Our expectations are guesswork. As we hold onto them, and deny the reality of what is happening, we stress ourselves out. We become more rigid and frustrated as we struggle to make what is happening fit with what we expect to be happening.

In our relationships with others we can find that our expectations, or what we think we know about someone, cuts off our engagement with what is happening in that interaction. We lose our presence because we are working from some pre-known assumptions. We lose the fascination of meeting someone with a presence and openness because we already “know” them in our heads.

Take a look at a common scenario, the argument. Arguments are a great breeding ground for those that know.

Imagine you are having an argument right now with your spouse or partner. Let the power of the emotions and the heat of the situation start to flush your face a little, you can probably feel the tension because you are remembering the very kind of situation that I am asking you to imagine.

Let's play out some of a typical exchange.

Is something the matter? (I know you're annoyed about something, probably something I have done.)

Well, what do you think? (I don't care what you think, I know that you couldn't care less.)

Have I done something to upset you? (It's bound to be something petty, it always is?)

How could you have said those things in front of me? (I don't care how really, I know you did it because you don't love me.)

Oh, you're not bringing that up again. (I know there is no point arguing about this because you never listen.)

Etc.

How does it make you feel?

When we argue, we defend our position with inflexibility and this creates tension and makes us feel hemmed in.

We hate to lose the argument because we hate to lose control. We raise our defences to protect ourselves and, as a result, we stop listening to the other person. We become so attached to the outcome of being right that we simply dig in and think about what we are going to say next. It's not a discussion of ideas, but a defence of a previous position.

*“When we loosen our grip on what we expect, we are more open to the feedback we get. Once we let go of being so damn certain, we open up to new possibilities.”*

We are so certain of what the other person will say (that is so typical of you!) that we form our responses as they talk. We are closed off from investigation and creativity. The outcome is stagnant because we don't allow it any room to change course.

And when things get stagnant, we get stagnant.

Our brains love new challenges and novelty. Look at children as they develop, look at how easy it is to engage them with a new toy. They are familiar with their old toys. They know them already. What excites them is the shiny new train or puzzle, what fascinates them is the unknown. It works in the same way for all of us if we let it. Our brains react to the new in a way that engages us and fulfills us. To engage with any situation in your life you have to be open to the unknown and experience events as if for the first time.

What if the truth is that we never know? How do we get comfortable with not knowing?

# Practicing The Art of Not Knowing

The way to start is to ask yourself: “What level of not knowing am I on?” It’s just one question that you can ask at any point in the day. You can ask yourself over and over, hundreds of times. What level of not knowing am I on? Give yourself a score, 1 to 10.

So when you are having a conversation with a co-worker, ask yourself and give yourself a score. When you come home to your family or when you are at an important meeting, check in with

yourself and ask what level of not knowing you are at. If you are a 4 then move yourself up to a 5 or 6. If you are a 7 push yourself up to 9.

Make yourself more open to possibility by practicing being more open to not knowing. Make yourself more comfortable with not knowing by practicing being in that state more often. As you practice you will find that you worry less about what you think will happen, instead you get excited about the possibilities of what could happen.

And let's face it, you really have no idea anyway, so you might as well be okay with having no idea.

We don't know.

You don't know.

But despite not knowing, you throw yourself into your life, you absolutely do your best. You give it your all, even though you don't know if you will fail or succeed, whether you will be praised or ignored. Because you are engaged and enthusiastic about the process you have no need to be anxious of the result. Keep asking yourself: "What level of not knowing am I on?"

When you get comfortable with not knowing, once you practice it, that's when the fun starts, when the joy becomes palpable. It's the same exhilaration you get when you are at the top



of a roller coaster. The exciting buzz of fear and apprehension mixed with breathless glee. Horror films play on this effect; the tantalizing unknown, the excitement of possibilities. But it doesn't have to be terrifying. It can be exhilarating.

When you convince yourself that you know exactly how the future is going to go, you close down the potential opportunities in front of you. You shut yourself down to possibility.

*“ Make yourself more open to possibility by practicing being more open to not knowing.”*

In a way, we often see in our reality exactly what we expect to see. This is why eyewitness accounts of the same road accident or crime can be completely different from one person to the next. When you are expecting a baby you see pregnant women everywhere. Your mind has been opened up to that possibility and then develops a limited awareness that can be very specific.

So, in the same way, when you limit what you potentially expect from a situation you close yourself off to the awareness of that moment and that situation. You lose your presence and

operate from a point of predictability and automatic, or stimulus response, rather than engaged creation.

Creativity is something that we can generate when we manage to establish the right environment for it to develop. Creativity is part of an infinite potential, bigger than us and flowing through us when we allow it to. We have no way of knowing when this will happen so we practice our not knowing and become open to the potential. What level of not knowing are you on?

Practicing your not knowing mind is the same process that the Zen masters called practicing your beginner's mind. You practice letting go of certainty in situations and look for everything that is new. Remember the brain loves newness and novelty.

Focus on the things that you don't know. When you are in the middle of your commute to work and you are moaning about how things are so terrible and slow and crowded, stop yourself and focus on the new and the not known. You might be about to have a life changing experience; you could meet someone that turns your world around.

When you are arguing with your spouse, stop your expectations of what will happen and listen for the unknown. Listen and engage with that. You will surprise yourself.

All you can do is listen, be engaged, and be open to knowing.

This is important because we have been conditioned to think that knowing is both attainable and aspirational. Not knowing is seen to be inferior or a sign of weakness.

Take a look at how politicians make their careers from claiming to be certain about future events that they really have no control over. They attempt to provide confidence and trust in their policies by maintaining an illusion of certainty; they have to be seen to be on top of things, to know all of the answers.

How can they be expected to stand up and respond to questions by saying that they don't know? Yet that is the reality—they don't know anything. You may have felt this yourself when you have been in a meeting and responded to a question by fudging some sort of fake certainty or knowing, when what is closer to the truth is to say: "I don't know, but I have some ideas and I'm excited to find out if they'll work."

All of this matters because we are taught to feel good when we think that we know something. We're rewarded at all stages of life for it. Not knowing feels uncomfortable, not knowing is feared, not knowing is, literally, unknown.

# The Art of Not Knowing

The Art of Not Knowing is about changing this pattern. If you can supplement your knowledge with the skills of not knowing, then you double your assets.

Having the strength of not knowing will:

- Give you more of an imaginative solution to problems and to new and challenging situations.
- Trigger new insights and be a catalyst for new ideas to emerge.
- Be a problem solver by being comfortable with all possibilities.
- Find new solutions by letting go and embracing the unknown.

When we come to a place of not knowing, there is one more important effect that takes place. Maybe for some of you this could be the most important aspect of the whole manifesto.

Practicing the Art of Not Knowing also means become familiar with being prepared. As we open ourselves up to possibility, so that we truly don't know what the outcomes will be, then we find that we take measures to be prepared for all potential results. We prepare fully because we trust that any outcome is possible.

The great paradox is that as we expect less and less, we prepare more and more. As we improve our preparations we can trust ourselves to be able to handle difficult situations—regardless of the changes that will occur or the outcomes that we might get.

This trust gives us more freedom in our lives.

*“When you get comfortable with not knowing, once you practice it, that’s when the fun starts, when the joy becomes palpable.”*

Trusting yourself means that you can focus more in the moment and be less anxious about how you are doing or what might happen next. As we practice not knowing, and become more prepared, we experience more freedom as a result.

**With this freedom comes more likelihood of engagement and presence in our life and business, and from this truly great things will grow. 🌱**

# Info

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Craig Coggle is a musician, meditator, educator, and writer.

He has been using music and improvisation as a transformational tool in schools, hospices, colleges, and businesses and has worked with thousands of people of all ages and backgrounds.

His current focus is on how to use meditation and awareness to live more skillfully, in both business and personal worlds. You can find him online at [craiggoggle.com](http://craiggoggle.com).

→ **SEND THIS** | [Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

→ **SUBSCRIBE** | [Sign up for e-news](#) to learn when our latest manifestos are available.

This document was created on August 8, 2012 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [Veer](#). You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.

# About ChangeThis

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

## *800ceoread*

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).



Explore your knowledge further with [KnowledgeBlocks](#), a new project from 800-CEO-READ that lets you turn what you know into knowledge you can use.