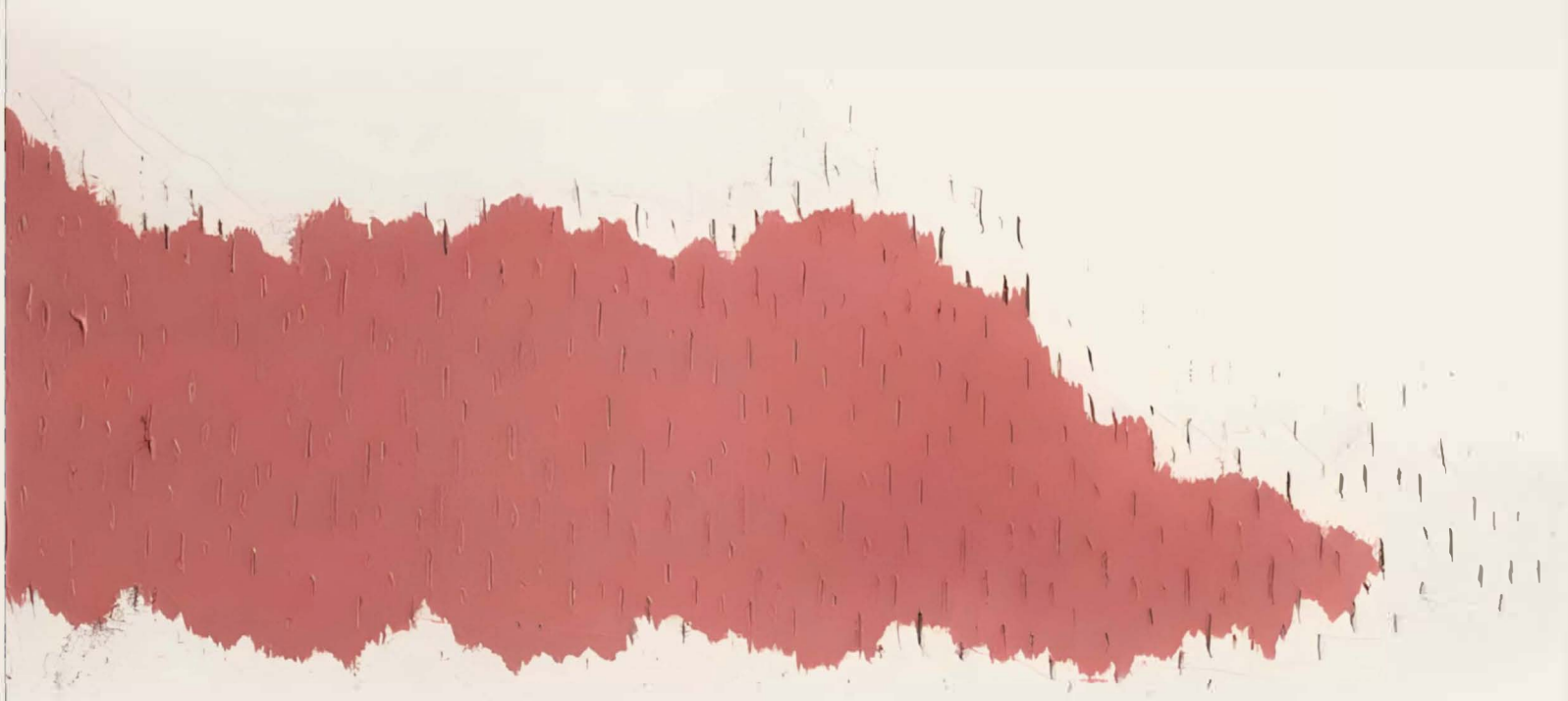


# BEING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Exploring Perspectives, Embracing Change

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# CARLO ROVELLI: WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT CERTAINTY

*New York Times 2021*

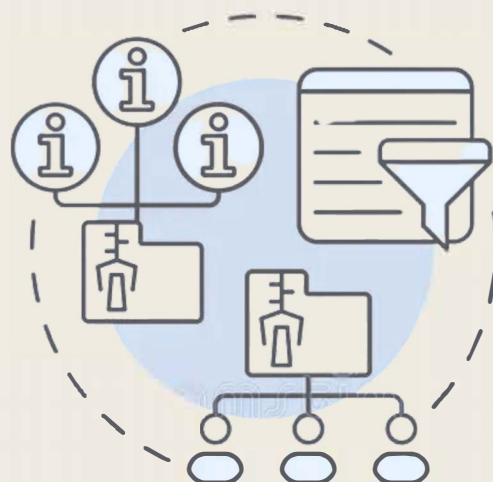
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/special-series/carlo-rovelli-what-we-believe-about-certainty.html>

Albert Einstein questioned Newtonian science, and quantum theory questions the picture of the world of classical mechanics. There was a time when we thought that reality was simple: particles in space, moving in time. Now space bends and weaves, and time depends on where we are and how we move. Quantum physics subverted most of what we used to believe about matter.

This doesn't mean, however, that we are in the dark, or that we should feel paralyzed by a lack of perfect knowledge. If I ask for street directions — from a person or from my smartphone — there's no guarantee that the answer will be correct. The person might have misinterpreted my question, or I may have misspelled the address I entered into my smartphone. But that won't stop me from deciding on a direction and walking.

Our forefathers believed that only white, property-owning men could be trusted to vote; that Black people were better off enslaved; and that witches floated when tossed into a pond. Thank heavens some people in the past had the strength to challenge the standards of their time. If they hadn't, we'd still be stoning women in the streets.

Such drifts in what we believe do not make our convictions any less valuable, either. No person, book or institution holds definitive truth. Openness to change means that our beliefs are strong, and that we can make them stronger. It means that we, the finite critters who inhabit this planet, are capable of doing better.



# SELF-AWARE DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS: WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TO UNCERTAINTY?

What does uncertainty feel like to you?

What are the advantages of requiring certainty in life? How has needing certainty in life been helpful to you?

What are the disadvantages of requiring certainty in life? How has needing certainty in life been unhelpful to you or detrimental to your life?

Do you tend to predict that something bad will happen, just because you are uncertain? Is this a reasonable thing to do? Could something good or neutral be just as likely to happen?

What is the likelihood that the things you predict will actually happen? If the likelihood tends to be low, could you live with this small chance?

Are there some uncertainties in your life that you can live with? How do you do this? Can you do the same thing in situations where you have difficulty tolerating uncertainty?

Talk to the people you know. Ask how they cope with the uncertainty and unpredictability of life? Could you do the same thing they do in situations where you have difficulty tolerating uncertainty?

**Intolerance** for ambiguity is characterized by



Need for categorization



Need for certainty



Inability to allow good and bad traits to exist simultaneously



Acceptance of attitudes representing black-and-white life views



A preference for familiar over unfamiliar



Rejection of the unusual or different



Early selection and maintenance of one solution



Premature closure

**Tolerance** for ambiguity is characterized by



No need for categorization



Need for curiosity



Encouragement of good and bad traits to exist simultaneously



Rejection of attitudes representing black-and-white life views



A preference for unfamiliar over familiar



Celebration of the unusual or different



Generation and exploration of many ideas



Patience

**Endure ambiguity**

**Engage ambiguity**

**Embrace ambiguity**

How would you describe your ability to act in your metaphor?

Ambiguity happens to me.

I can choose to take part in ambiguity.

Ambiguity is a tool and a resource.

What does your metaphor say about your openness and adaptability?

I need to get to certainty and find the "right" outcome.

I accept that there are many possible outcomes.

The more possible outcomes, the better.

Does your metaphor include any of these elements?

Feeling lost or disoriented, like seeking the exit of a maze

Choosing or creating your own path, like swimming in the ocean

Working to find something of great value, like making a scientific discovery

Overcoming a fear or challenge, like climbing to the top of a mountain

Taking the plunge, like paragliding

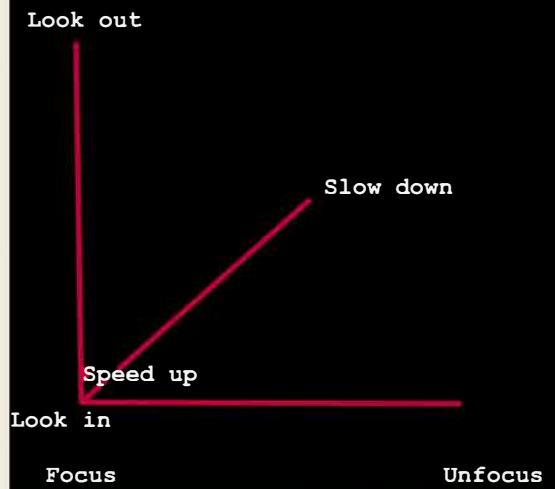
Actively making something better with time, like painting a blank canvas

Wrestling with the "right" choice, like standing at a crossroads

Sensing danger and excitement simultaneously, like watching a summer storm

Choosing to turn challenges into opportunities (like having too many zucchinis)

# Navigating Uncertainty



## LOOK IN

**Notice the signs in yourself:** what happens in your body when you experience the unknown?

[ex: dreams, racing heart, night sweats, angst, ennui, nail biting, withdrawal]

**Connect to your purpose:** what is your mission? Dig deep, and ask “why?” What is your goal, and why do you want to achieve it? Ask yourself why a few times, what feels true to you?

## LOOK OUT

**Check in with others and empathize:** Navigating uncertainty is a team sport. Leadership in unknown times involves building trust through inviting and empathizing with different viewpoints

**Cultivate curiosity outside work:** develop habits of watching and noticing [ex. Journaling, going somewhere new, sketching, writing prose and poetry, nature walks]



## FOCUS

**Allocate time:** Focus can keep you steady. Protect your immediate goals with time limits and allocated space, for example, a time window for clearing more trivial tasks beforehand. Or setting up a “parking lot” for ideas, distractions, questions. Don’t squelch them, stash them to revisit soon.

**Break it down:** Make mini-decisions and complete step-by-step tasks. When things feel uncertain and amorphous, they get sticky and distorted. Get unstuck and build momentum with a small step.

## UNFOCUS

**Get mindless, daydream:** Engage your DMN, the default mode network, in the brain. This brain network gets activated during daydreaming, mind-wandering, resting, zoning out. Neuroscientists have proven that this helps us to boost creativity, activate memories, connect past, present and future, and integrate ideas.

**Take body breaks:** Don’t forget your brain lives within a body, and your body within a social world. Take breaks to stretch, breathe fully, shift your gaze.

## SPEED UP

**Start before you're ready:** Uncertainty can breed deep inertia. Get started anyway, before the elusive readiness feeling finds you. Pick up a pen and begin notes, just get the process going, it's always open to revision once you've started. This might take an attitude of acceptance; getting started means doing away with tendencies to judge your own output too much.

**List your priorities:** We can all get lost in the ever-growing to do lists. Be realistic with yourself, and beware procrastination. Ordering your tasks will help you feel things are feasible and give you a sense of some control.

## SLOW DOWN

**Pause into percolation mode:** When fear or anxiety kick in, we tend to pick up pace. We're built for this, to swim faster, run or kick harder as a reaction, but these might be precisely the times when we need to slow down. Slowness is fertile ground for creativity and deliberation, for critical thinking and the generation of fresh perspectives.

**Get out of your head and into your breath:** Look to your body to find slowness. Whether it's through mindwandering exercises, a rest or some breathing exercises, stretching time between thoughts and action gets your heart rate down, conserves oxygen and builds up the conditions and resources for clarity and imagination.

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## The human brain is built to adjust to a changing world: *be malleable, tentacular and open like the brain*

