

Embracing the Unknown



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This week I've been reading a wonderful book titled [*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*](#), by Karen Armstrong. I ordered a copy for purely personal reasons, but found inside this inspiring new book several wonderful connections to sound risk management practice.

In Chapter 7, titled "How Little We Know," Armstrong reminds her readers about the unrealistic but altogether human craving for certainty. She explains that over time we humans become oddly possessive about certain beliefs and opinions that germinate from a narrow world view and limited set of experiences. Within our narrow frame, these beliefs and opinions become our personal version of the "truth." Yet most of us fail to see that the "truth" as we know it is often based on a handful of facts too few in number to qualify as "knowledge." If you believe you are exempt from shallow thinking about big issues, think back to the last heated argument you had on any political topic!

In our multi-tasking, SMS world we routinely make so many snap judgments that it becomes hard, if not impossible to appreciate the extraordinary, wider world we ignore in the process. And the more firmly we hold fast to our "view" of the world, the less room we allow for contrary views. Armstrong writes, "Western society is highly opinionated. Our airwaves are clogged with talk shows, phone-ins, and debates in which people are encouraged to express their view on a wide range of subjects. This freedom of speech is precious, of course, but do we always know what we are talking about?"

While reading this fascinating book I recalled a recent workshop where an attendee in the front row asked me to provide a definitive answer to his hypothetical question about a legal challenge facing a nonprofit. He insisted that I tell him "exactly how the court would rule" in the "case" he described. Even before I uttered the words, I knew he would be dissatisfied with the only possible answer, "It depends."

We crave certainty. We are drawn, often foolishly, to individuals and organizations that promise a certain outcome. We want a precise calculation of our risks, an unconditional promise of ongoing financial support, and only on-time flight departures and arrivals. Yet our ever-changing and complex world and the always-changing, complex organizations we lead defy certainty at every turn.

Karen Armstrong argues that becoming comfortable with "how little we know" is essential to becoming a more compassionate member of society. I think the same advice holds true for nonprofit leaders seeking to deepen their understanding of risk and upgrade their corresponding risk management strategies. In the "how to"

section of Chapter 7 Armstrong outlines a series of smaller, personal steps. These include: (1) learning to appreciate the “unknown” and “unknowable,” and (2) becoming sensitive to the “overconfident assertions of certainty in ourselves and other people.” Armstrong recommends countering false confidence that we or others are “all knowing,” by reflecting on “the fact that the more we know about a special field or area of interest, the more acutely we become aware of all we have to learn!”

This is, in my humble opinion (!), insightful and timely advice for nonprofit leaders. Approach your mission to unearth, understand and reflect on the risks your nonprofit faces as an informative and ongoing journey, and not as a short trip that will enable you to create a definitive picture of risk in your organization.

With the mission of so many nonprofits focused on improving our world by providing a better quality of life for our fellow human beings, I have a hunch that many of the readers of this [eNews](#) will find the analysis and insights in [Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life](#) helpful on many levels.

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