

# Certain uncertainties

Darrel Toews

## Personal uncertainties

Nineteen ninety-eight, and a diagnosis of Oculopharyngeal Muscular Dystrophy (OPMD) is confirmed.

Taken in stride, the limitations thereof could be sublimated, hidden, safely ensconced behind a niggling consciousness, delayed in their most certain appearance. After all, while in its infantile stage, OPMD operates out of sight, and mostly out of mind. Even so, circa 2010, a shot across the bow revealed a certain unwelcome pest: when a delectable delicacy would not, could not, be swallowed—there it was, a clear sign that the pharyngeal muscles were atrophying.

Given the patterns evident in my larger maternal familial system, inscribed genetic messaging begins to assert its energy upon subjects when one is nearing the age of sixty, or arriving toward that mark. Bingo!

While developmental signs of muscle dystrophy could be considered on the certainty side of the proverbial scale, an unexpected and surprising loss of voice strength during 2021 precipitated an unlooked for early departure from a lifelong pastoral ministry vocation.<sup>1</sup> What? What? What?

It turned out that the undercurrents of shifting biological tectonic plates suddenly produced a tilting personal landscape. Ergo, the day of retirement arose rather quickly. Consulting with trusted leaders and friends, I concluded that the possibilities of continued pastoral ministry would invite a necessary shift in professional identity.

Occasionally I've harbored the passing thought that an Aaron speaking for Moses could be an alternative (Exodus 4:10-17), but how well did Aaron truly know the mind and unique phraseology of Moses? More profoundly, perchance the Lord of song played a palpable trick, for the disappointing pathos of aphonia has rendered hopes of continued melody making an impossible dream.

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1 Ordained in 1982, the author served as pastor among the congregations of Gospel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg (1983-87), Tavistock Mennonite Church in Ontario (1989-2003), Breslau Mennonite Church in Ontario (2003-2014), and Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg (2014-2021).

Learning to balance certain uncertainties, I offer this sample into my personal OPMD journey while simultaneously holding an acute acknowledgement of veritable multitudes suffering much, much worse troubles and trials, tragic traumas touching the depths of human frailties, stretching the soul, sometimes eliciting wretched sensibilities of abandonment, separation, and heartbreaking loss.

### **Global uncertainties**

Widening the lens, or thinking more broadly, could it not be the case that certain degrees of uncertainty have always acted as part and parcel upon the hoped for stasis in life? Might not those elements disturbing our equilibrium, unlooked for developments challenging the ordinary, act precisely to advance the very purpose(s), meaning(s), and potential directions of the human enterprise?

Launched on Christmas Day 2021, the multi-national astoundingly complex James Webb space telescope is one hundred times more powerful than its predecessor, the 1990 vintage Hubble. With everything unfolding as per meticulous planning, Webb is offering a deep gaze into the very first galaxies forming in the early universe(s) circa 13.8 billion years ago.

Viewed from space, Earth appears as the now familiar dot of blue in the sky, one little 4.5 billion year old speck floating within the gravitational grasp of one small star within the vast swirling Milky Way galaxy. The rotating circling Earth operates with certain precision, providing the regularly expected rhythm of day and night within an annual circuit around the sun. Currently home to eight billion human inhabitants—and billions upon billions of other sentient life forms—the watery Earth provides a very certain habitation.

On the other hand, Earth itself is besotted with change. Tectonic plates shift; earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, and floods redefine the landscape. When the Laurentian ice age dominating most of the North American landscape during the Pleistocene Epoch (ending circa twelve thousand years ago) receded north, it left behind thousands of lakes, rivers, and fertile soils, reliable geographical phenomena usually forfeiting scents of uncertainty.



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And yet, the uncertainty of “natural” storms battering supposedly solid ground arise not infrequently to upset life itself. Many readers may recall the 1980 volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helens (part of the Pacific ring of fire) devastating its surroundings and killing fifty-seven people.

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The ashen skies spread all the way from Washington to the prairies.

When in 1883 Krakatoa erupted (located about midway between the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra), it not only destroyed a significant land mass; the blasts triggering subsequent tsunamis and continuing violent tremors killed more than 36,000 people and spread ash and impenetrable darkness, all of which is estimated to have lowered the entire global temperature by about .6 to 2 degrees! Volcanic aerosols blocked

sunlight, caused oceans to cool, and developed summer-time frost and lost harvests as far afield as the eastern United States.

During the last number of years, a certain ambiguous angst hovers around the aroused elements of climate change, social and political unrest, and the global ravages of the COVID-19 pestilence. While variants of these elements have generally accompanied the entirety of human existence, and thus could be considered to fall onto the certainty end of the scale, when these movements and illnesses impact personal lives and social enterprises, then the random absurdity thereof ends up producing a kind of existential dread.

Sometimes the outcomes of such encounters feel paralyzing. We may begin the day serenely driving along, when in a moment, an unforeseen accident changes everything. We may begin a day with a parent, spouse, or child and end the day bereft. Or in more banal circumstances, we may recall surds of uncertainty raising their dander at particular nodal points, the very real hesitancy involved in moving to a new school, church, or dance group or entering a different arena of any sort.

Written in 1859 by English novelist Charles Dickens (1812–70), the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities* suggests that Dickens’s sagacity has evidently grown current: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of

belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness.”<sup>2</sup>

This literary depiction of the urban zeitgeist serves as a bird’s eye view, a contrastive panoply placing life in broader socio-historical settings. Then as now, geography, economics, and varying political movements affect life in all its macro- and microscopic elements. Uncertainty served as a contin-

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uous staple within whatever certainties could be established, at least within the space of Dickensian times.

While we humans generally prefer to reduce the unpredictable, might we learn to trust uncertainty? American biblical scholar Peter Enns offers a stimulating image: “watching certainty slide

into uncertainty.”<sup>3</sup> It’s as if we may learn to expect changeable surprises at almost every turn.

In 1927, almost one hundred years ago, theoretical physicist Werner Karl Heisenberg (1901–76) published a paper on the uncertainty principle. In the fascinating world of quantum mechanics, precisely ascertaining both the position and speed of a particle is deemed an impossible conundrum. A devout Christian in the Lutheran tradition, Heisenberg argued that surely the Lord knows all about subatomic particles in the universe, and that quantum physics offered humanity a path toward a positive, widened worldview.

Growing up on a mixed farm in south central Manitoba, I learned that, while there was no uncertainty to the regular daily requirements of the dairy, when it came to the elements of seeding, spraying, harvesting, and storing the various crops, the lack of secure knowledge in regards to the presence of the sun or the rain or the frost or the insects or the pests or certain birds attacking both plant and beast, the entrepreneurial agricultural class is most assuredly cognizant regarding the natural expectations of uncertainty in the midst of certainty.

Not knowing what even the next moment may provide is simply part and parcel of life. I submit that such tension may even be deliciously desirable. Anticipating new friends is exciting, but then so is the loyal re-

2 Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1959), 1.

3 Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 8.

liability of lifelong companionship of dear friends. And truth be told, life without that possibility would be entirely boring, flat, uneventful.

In multiple ways, the present generations in most of the world live with less uncertainties than in earlier historical eras, so casting wistful glances back to so-called predictable social, political, or religious periods reveals a kind of rose-colored amnesia. The fact that the average age of people in the world has continually grown and now reached seventy-three testifies to a large leap in both the longevity and quality of life.

In his most recent tome, well known British-Canadian historian Gwynne Dyer notes that post-World War II, taking the whole world into account, on an annual basis, more people die in traffic accidents than in war.<sup>4</sup>

In general, the peoples of the world recognize the practice of war as a failure in the negotiation of conflict. Certainly new learning structures will

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be required to resolve the uncertainties of climate change and the natural competition for sustainable resources. Again proving that war is hell, the 2022 escalation of the dastardly Russo-Ukrainian conflict operates as no small reminder of the Holodomor, the terror of a politically induced famine that killed millions during 1932–33 in the Ukrainian Soviet

Socialist Republic. Leaders of the world's democracies struggle to work intelligently with the uncertain realities presenting themselves when confronted by unstable egotistical autocrats who flaunt international treaties.

### **Walking the path of uncertainty**

Shall we lose our way? What if overweening grief, whether personal or social, tosses assumptions into turmoil? What if we lose the will to hang on, or what if disaster imposes its stamp on life? What if the banality of evil triumphs on the larger scale, and we lose our trust in the wider collective and its leadership? What if the simple encouragement to persevere means nothing? What if cynicism becomes *de rigeur*? How shall we order our lives?

Ordained Presbyterian minister and Yale Divinity professor Thomas H. Troeger (1945–2022) caught certainties amid uncertainty so very

4 Gwynne Dyer, *The Shortest History of War* (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2022), 1.

well in his poetic renditions. In the song “How Many Times We Start Again” from the *Voices Together* hymnal, he describes the journey of faith as starting again and again, taking us on a path from the familiar to the perilous, even as we trust that it is always in God that “we live and move and dwell.”<sup>5</sup>

Let me propose the sedulous path as one way to encounter the ever present certainty of insecurity. Illustrative of dedication and diligence, we may catch the wave of resilience and adaptive sensibilities. When the path ahead is dim and murky, we are exhorted to keep eyes open for insightful surprises! Pursuing deepening experiences of grace and exploring ever changing realities impacting life’s experiences may vitalize one’s “normal” socio-religious trajectories.

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Observing Webb’s spectacular images beamed back to earth, spectral starry scenes engender imaginative flights to early beginnings while simultaneously approximating a wholly uncertain future propelling us beyond the wildest eschatological possibilities operating at the heart of all realities. Uncertainty reigns, and yet poetic visions seek to gain a glimpse of a deeper (or higher), more meaningful ethos.

“Further on up the road where the way is dark and night is cold, one sunny morning we’ll rise, I know, and I’ll meet you further on up the road.” The Bruce Springsteen song “Further On (Up the Road),” sung live in Dublin, Ireland, captures a sense of working through the challenges of life vitalized by the metaphor of a lifelong search for meaning and purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Adopting a major motif in the tension of uncertain certainties, we may see light in the cloudiness and set the mindset toward a joyous life-enhancing gratitude. Without negating the realities of darkening clouds, the “cloud of unknowing” may be precisely the path forward and through whatever darkness presents itself, whatever testing ground, whatever mystery operates at the core.

Imagining life with companionable travelers among a cloud of witnesses, we shall not quail in the face of what sort of people we may be

5 “How Many Times We Start Again,” lyrics by Thomas H. Troeger; music by Bradley Kauffman, *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: Menno Media, 2020), #553.

6 “Further On (Up the Road),” track 5 on Bruce Springsteen with the Sessions Band, *Live in Dublin*, Columbia Records, 2007.

within the context of certain uncertainties. Perhaps the key is learning to trust the mysteries of God's hiddenness.

Tossed into the uncertainty of seeking the actual identity of common humanity, the poetry of German American Pulitzer Prize winner Theodore Roethke (1908–63) comes to mind: "I learn by going where I have to go."<sup>7</sup>

Ergo, nothing is ever finished. We enter a stream at a certain historical point and hope that the river of grace will keep on flowing, continuously blessing our collective splendiferous travels favoring those elements freeing a full humanization within an evolutionary context.

Here's hoping a poetical artistic bio-historical incarnational communal presence will continue to inspire a mutually enriching humanity in our deepest and highest possibilities, thereby revealing God's realm in the world. Emerging as we have within a long evolutionary process, assuming a curious open stance may act as our saving grace.

The reverence bestowed upon and honoring daily life may well open up daily transcendent epiphanies. And irony of ironies, as promised by an

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old time prophet, peace is freely given (John 14:27), confirming Isaiah's much earlier declaration of trust (Isa. 26:3).

Surely donning a colorful enlightened serviceable spirituality may aid and abet our walk in challenging times, as they have ever been. Surely the certain presence and process of God's unfettered Spirit weaving together a multitude of uncertain communities may offer a kind of humble luminosity to the

world. Surely unveiling the possibilities of human equality to and within the entire world offers a chance for the peace branch to blossom. After all, building up our social contracts requires an ongoing constructive project.

These spaces of expansive wisdom provide room for wondrous incursions of mystery. Sedulously seeking ever broadening ruminations, we may handle uncertainties with aplomb; unknown vistas and creative forces inspire our better angels.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Roethke, "The Waking," in *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Gary Geddes (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 178–79.

In the end, I find myself resonating with Ray Dirks, founder, curator, and former director of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery, who was recently quoted as saying this: “Where I find comfort is in mystery, not in certainty.”<sup>8</sup>

### **About the author**

Darrel Toews is recently retired from his position as lead minister at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Married to Lucille Harms Toews, Darrel also enjoys sharing the journey with three adult children and as Opa to four young grandsons.

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Brenda Suderman, “Drawing on Relationships,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 26, 2022, section F1.