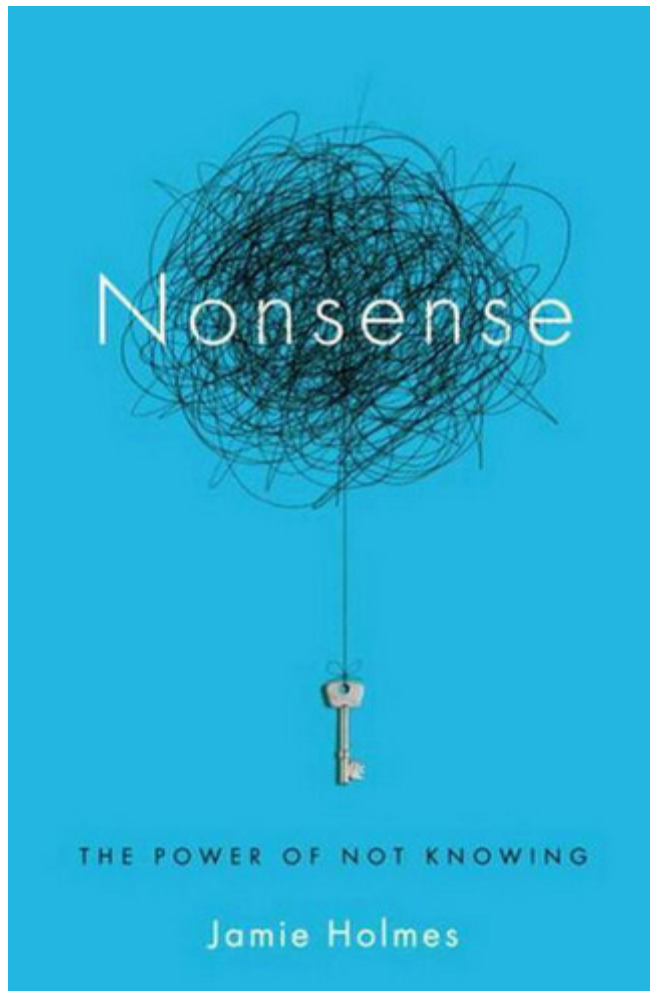


‘Nonsense’ can be captivating

Posted: Sunday, December 27, 2015

“Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing,” by Jamie Holmes. New York: Crown Publishers (Penguin Random House), 2015, 336 pages, \$27.



“The mind state caused by ambiguity is called uncertainty, and it’s an emotional amplifier,” Jamie Holmes explains near the beginning of *“Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing,”* his recently released book on the value of opacity. “It makes anxiety more agonizing, and pleasure more enjoyable. The delight of crossword puzzles, for example, comes from pondering and resolving ambiguous clues. Detective stories, among the most successful literary genres of all time, concoct their suspense by sustaining uncertainty about hints and culprits. Goethe once said that ‘what we agree with leaves us inactive, but contradiction makes us productive.’ So it is with ambiguity.”

As a lifelong educator, much of my career has been spent in a never-ending attempt to eradicate ignorance wherever it lurks. But what if all that could be known was known? Don’t get me wrong; I fully understand and appreciate the fact we are not in any imminent danger of unraveling the world’s infinite mysteries. At the same time, it is an interesting proposition – and one at the heart of the present offering. Having a problem constitutes a powerful and potent motivational force, and one that seems to be unique to human beings.

Indeed, a desire to make the unknown known has been the driving force behind virtually everything we have learned and accomplished since we first gazed heavenward and pondered the meaning of our existence. It has also contributed more than most of us realize to our continued survival and ultimate dominance as a species.

“Our propensity for avoiding or shutting down what could otherwise be a process of endless deliberation was probably a product of natural selection,” Holmes writes in *“The Resolving Mind: How Making Sense Works,”* the inaugural chapter. “It’s what allows us to stop thinking and move on with our daily lives. There comes a point when we just have to decide. Our need to simplify means that we will all have an innate ability to form impressions based on limited information. We must have the ability to see people in stereotypes and envision objects and ideas prototypically. Our urge for resolution is vital both for managing complexity and, as Piaget understood, for learning. Clarifying ambiguity helps us to act and to build knowledge. Our appetite for consistency is a means to an end.”

Holmes is a former research coordinator in the Department of Economics at Harvard University. He is currently a Future Tense Fellow at New America, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C. He earned a Master of International Affairs degree from Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. His articles have been featured in The New York Times, The New Yorker, Slate, Politico, The Christian Science Monitor, The New Republic, The Atlantic, Foreign Policy and The Daily Beast. "Nonsense" is his first book.

The author explained his initial motivation for writing the book at the companion website: "I was exploring psychologist Roy Baumeister's research on willpower, which is focused on how mental conflicts affect people. And I grew interested, more broadly, in what psychological science tells us about how the mind deals with unclear experiences, with moments that challenge our expectations. I've always been fascinated by the ambiguities embedded in odd or foreign experiences, maybe because I lived abroad when I was a child. So I was excited to discover the burgeoning research on how we deal with ambiguity."

One of the most intriguing arguments Holmes articulates in "Nonsense" revolves around the notion that how much we know about the circumstances germane to any given situation is often the determining factor in how comfortable we are dealing with it. This realization has obvious implications for our personal relationships as well as how successful we are at negotiating the complex interactions most of us encounter every day in our work environments.

"In 2010, Marieke de Vries, Winkielman, and other researchers ran a study that confirmed a similar phenomenon in adults," Holmes explains in "Building a Better Ducati: The Uses of Uncertainty," the seventh chapter and one of my personal favorites. "When people were in a bad mood, they found comfort in the familiar. Happy adults, on the other hand, lost their taste for the recognizable as the warm glow of familiarity deteriorated into a yawn. Novelty was threatening only when the adults were in a defensive state of mind. An upbeat mood can apparently turn a confusing idea into an interesting one. By rebranding failure and confusion as not merely normal but also indispensable, teachers can go a long way toward changing students' emotional attitude toward uncertainty."

"Nonsense" is extensively researched, with 76 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the prologue, nine chapters arranged in three major sections and epilogue that constitute the main text. "Making Sense," the first part of the book, is made up of two chapters; "Handling Ambiguity," the second part, consists of four chapters; and "Embracing Uncertainty," the third part, is comprised of three chapters. Despite the heavy emphasis on empirical research that tends to permeate the narrative (hardly a paragraph passes without some reference to a published study, either relatively current or from the past), I was astounded by the clarity and eloquence Holmes employs as he breaks the subject matter down for a general audience. Those with a background in psychology or a related field will no doubt be able to reflect on the concepts and applications presented in this insightful volume at a deeper level, although anyone with a passing interest in the primary thesis should also find it fascinating.

In many respects, Holmes' effort reminds me of "Not Exactly: In Praise of Vagueness," by Kees Van Deemter, which I reviewed for the Daily News in August 2010. Both books extol the virtues of having an incomplete understanding of how things operate and how this deficit inevitably precipitates progress. I think a lot of readers would find "Nonsense" captivating; I recommend it highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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