



“Night Shadows” by Edward Hopper

To Be Confused IV: Facts and Feelings

Confusion is its own kind of order; accept it and understand it.

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, 2022. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
www.mindstrengthbalance.com



“It may sound trite to say that confusion is the most confusing syndrome in medicine, but it is. A confused person behaves in a way so foreign to common experience that it can be unnerving, even for professionals. It is an alternate state of being. Portrayals of confusion in popular culture—the town drunk, for example—may look funny, but in the case of a truly confused person, the sight of someone who can’t find his own mind can be overwhelming.”

— **Allan Ropper** (2014), neurologist

Our goal here is to be less confused. In order to get there, we want to know what confusion is. While confusion is a confusing syndrome, the experience is clear even as its roots are obscure.

Confusion can be:

1. Too many plausible choices, or no plausible choices.
2. Emotional or intellectual uncertainty.
3. Neurological: the inability to find or make sense.

Clarity Comes with Obscurity

In physics, a greater understanding of chaos came when people stopped trying to find order in chaos, and started looking to find the order of chaos: chaos as a thing in itself. It's profitable to do the same with personal chaos.

Intellectual chaos generates confusion, and when narrowness and certainty are wanted, confusion is not helpful. But are narrowness and certainty always appropriate? In situations where change is needed, and where that change is significant or broad, narrowness and certainty will not get you there. To embrace significant change means moving away from what's narrow and certain.

Change leads toward confusion from the old vantage point. What seems like confusion from the old vantage point could offer clarity from a new vantage point. Do we need to know what we're aiming toward before we start to change?

We resist moving into confusion because it seems there are more wrong ways than right ways. If there's some reason to change, some pain or push that's motivating us, we want clarity before we invest. We want something delivered, usually comfort or security, and confusion is neither comfortable nor secure.

In the leading quote, Allan Ropper was thinking about confusion as a neurologist. This is the 3rd point on my list of sources of confusion. He was talking about diagnostic confusion, which is structural rather than situational. One is diagnostically confused when the situation is within the range of normal, but our ability to navigate what's normal is disabled.

I'm focusing on points 1 and 2 on my list, having more to do with knowing facts and feeling centered, and having less to do with neurological ability.

We think facts are intellectual and feeling centered is emotional. This is part of the problem: facts are often relative and not absolute. We tend to believe facts that support what we feel rather than accept what might be facts that cause us confusion. We have a hand in recognizing confusion and, paradoxically, what appears as confusion can more reflect the error in our thinking and not uncertainties in the situation.

I think this characterizes our most common confusions: they are conflicts in our preconception and not a lack or excess of choices. That is to say, as long as we are not neurologically impaired, our confusion is mostly of type 2: emotional or intellectual. Our situation is signaling us to think differently, and our

confusion reflects our resistance to doing so. The ideas we are attached to are causing conflict and confusion.



The Action Bias

We are biologically inclined to act on issues; we're all subject to this. Generally, this works to our advantage, especially in emergencies where time is critical and doing nothing is not an option. The action bias is our tendency to see things as urgent. The result is rarely the best, but often better than nothing.

From an urgency mindset, confusion is an obstacle. We'd like to act and, for that, we want to know. But consider this from another point of view. Most cases are not emergencies; careful thinking that incorporates more information generates better outcomes.

If you want to know what to do, do you need to know more facts or more feelings? How might confusion help you in these situations? Confusion is the feeling that there is more to know. If you can become comfortable with that feeling, then you'll be more open to learning and change.

I suggest that confusion can be seen as informative in both of these respects. Finding information is an outward looking search for connection, while getting more in touch with your feelings is an inward search. You will feel confused if you cannot resolve your facts and feelings, but you'll be closer to the truth when you accept this is the truth: you cannot understand all that you see or feel. Appreciating that is a good thing.

In the formal, mathematical sense, information is what cannot be condensed. The more succinctly and definitively something can be stated, the less information it contains. From that point of view, your aversion to confusion is an aversion to learning more. This comes from your compulsion to act.

If you can reconceive of taking no action as an act, then you're more likely to see confusion as a source of direction to take the action of not acting. This will feel counterproductive if you feel pressed to ACT NOW, but then, that is an underlying bias.



"Visions of Quixote" by Octavio Ocampo

The New Paradigm

When you're pressed to grow, or after you have experienced growth, you are moving into new territory. Expect things to make less sense when seen from the old paradigm. You'll have to find the new sense present in the new paradigm. The problem with the action bias is not the desire to act, but the urge to act now.

In some cases where everything works normally, new information fits in the old paradigm. When this happens we have little trouble waiting to act. We can see the path, we know what's adequate, and we're comfortable with the result. We accept the facts.

But when the facts lead us along a path that ends in dissatisfaction, then we can either resign ourselves to the inevitable, or embrace confusion in a search for change. Most people who are troubled with their confusion have taken the second approach.

One of the most fertile goals in counseling or coaching is to relax into what appears to be confusing. If I can find calm in not knowing, and become sensitive to what previously did not make sense, then I can begin to appreciate what I see on its own terms.

To reach this point, a person must get beyond expectation. Cognitively, this means accepting contradiction. Emotionally, it means releasing need. Spiritually, it means accepting a deeper sense of meaning. The source of confusion is the differences in these three directions. You must sort through facts, feelings, and needs in a new way in order to realign them. The picture that results may be incomplete but it will be more spiritually valuable.



“Obscurity” by Krisztina Horvath

Confusion

“An understanding of confusion has yet to be operationalized in the way that stroke or neuropathy or Parkinson’s disease have been. It is not, technically, a disease, but a syndrome, a collection of problems. Clinically, confusion is defined as a loss of the usual clarity, coherence, and speed of thinking, but this description, while accurate as far as it goes, captures only a snapshot of confused behavior.”

— **Allan Ropper**

Confusion is often a good thing, it’s a sign of fecundity. It’s one of the two things that stand just outside any structure, the other being the sterility of absence. Too often we are more comfortable with what’s sterile than what’s fertile. We learn to be fearful and this becomes a bias. As a result, we’re more comfortable with what’s static than with what’s dynamic, being more attracted to what’s certain.

Think about this from a learning point of view: you will not learn with certainty. Certainty will not lead you to change and growth. Perhaps you are at a point in your life where you want certainty, but will that benefit you in the long run?

This confusion between stasis and change is fundamental. As long as there is life there is change, and with change comes confusion. It's natural. The question is, how do you approach it? If the origin of your uncertainty is organic, which is to say is a natural outgrowth of the situation, then the more you resist the confusion and the more you hold to the old paradigm, the further you'll be from understanding.

This, I feel, is the essence of counseling and coaching. It's actually the essence of learning and change. To be a good scientist you must welcome confusion. To be a grounded person, you must welcome confusion too.

References

Allan H. Ropper & Brian D. Burrell (2014). *Reaching down the rabbit hole, A renowned neurologist explains the mystery and drama of brain disease*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

To subscribe to this newsletter, click on [Newsletter-Subscribe](#).

