

Deep down, you already know

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About asking help — and listening to ourselves

It isn't a news flash that we have access to massive amounts of information today. But the numbers about the numbers are worth reporting.

Dr. Martin Hilbert and a team of researchers at the University of Southern California calculated that the average American met with the equivalent of 40 85-page newspapers containing only information — no ads — per day in 1986. By 2007, we were exposed daily to the equivalent of 174 newspapers. Dr. Hilbert has not yet released any information past that date. I am just hoping that he and his research team aren't buried under a pile of reports, unable to get up.

At least Dr. Hilbert seems to have emerged, because he co-wrote an article published in *Science* in 2011, detailing his research up to 2007. As of seven years ago, there were approximately 295 exabytes of stored data in the world — that is, 29,500,000,000,000,000,000,000 pieces of information. This represents a 23 percent annual growth in stored information since 1986.

The increase in our output is even more prodigious than in our input. In 1986, the average American produced two and a half pages of information per day. By 2007, with the spread of email and social media, each of us produced, on average, six newspapers' worth of information, or about 510 pages. If this seems crazy to you, then you clearly are not uploading as much as some of your neighbors.

Have you glazed over from the numbers yet? That's what tends to happen with an overabundance of data. With our information glut, we simultaneously suffer a wisdom deficit. When we try to make even a simple decision, we can become overwhelmed by the plethora of choices.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz of Swarthmore coined the term "the paradox of choice" to refer to our tendency to become muddled and unhappy in the face of innumerable possibilities. Good information and a few options to choose from will empower you. Dozens or thousands — and certainly, exabytes — of data and choices can paralyze and exhaust you.

Life's most important decisions are not a matter of information anyway. Whom should I marry? Will we try to have (another) child? What is my purpose? When is it time to say goodbye to a relationship? To let go of a dream?

Benjamin Franklin famously suggested making lists of pros and cons to reach major decisions. But in the end, Franklin overrode his own lists. He assigned more weight to some considerations than others. He used his brain — but he went with his gut.

It doesn't matter how many gigabytes you have assimilated and how many you have forgotten. It doesn't even matter how much more is out there for you to learn. If you have already spent time thinking seriously about a decision, chances are that you don't need more information.

But you may need some inquiry.

Let me suggest two major sources of wisdom: 1) you and 2) the other people directly concerned.

The first and most important inquiry you need to make is of yourself. We all have to stop the onslaught of information for long enough to hear ourselves think and then admit what we know to be true.

This past August, my son, Emmett, went to a math program that was run as a family camp. My husband and I attended the parents' program, which ran simultaneously with the math classes for the kids. I learned one statistic that stuck with me, perhaps because I was also, between classes, doing a traditional pre-High Holiday self-assessment, an "accounting of the soul" for the past year.

It seems that many mathematicians and computer scientists conduct a peer review before publishing. The purpose is to poke holes in the proof or code. Trusted colleagues are invited to a presentation and then encouraged to look for errors and exceptions. The person presenting is grateful — even thrilled — when flaws are found, because corrections can be made before going public.

Here is the memorable statistic about these laboratories for offering and accepting criticism: on average, 80 percent of the errors in a review are found by the presenter. The person who lived the proof, ate and slept the code, worked on it for months

at a time, and then polished it for presentation is the very same one who discovers the vast majority of mistakes. It's amazing — and it makes perfect sense.

So often, all we need is a safe, supportive environment where we can think out loud, and where it is acceptable (even encouraged) to notice our own missteps. Under those circumstances, we know. We can name our errors, our contributions, and even our next, best steps.

Inquiry of others is also essential. After all, 20 percent of the errors in a peer review are discovered simply by asking for feedback.

Last April, Gloria Steinem published a beautiful essay in Oprah magazine. She had gone to a conference in Ghana on the subject of human trafficking, where a lot of information and plans were offered — without any results worth mentioning. Afterwards, Steinem visited friends in Zambia. She found herself sitting among a circle of women, who began talking about their lives with naked honesty. They were desperately poor. The local tourist lodges did not hire women. Elephants ate all the crops they tried to grow. They had little or no education themselves, and they were determined to find the money to pay school fees for their children. Prostitution under inhuman conditions seemed the only option.

Then Steinem asked a vital question of the people who had to know: "What would help?" The women asked for an electric fence to keep the elephants away from their crops.

She raised the money, and the fence was installed. A year later, the women had a bumper crop and their children were in school.

Writes Steinem: "Before I spoke to them, if you'd asked me how to stop sex trafficking in this village, never would I have said, 'Find a way to keep elephants out of their gardens.' I call this story the parable of the fence, and these are its lessons: Helping begins with listening. Context is everything. People who experience a problem know best how to solve it. Big problems often have small solutions."

"People who experience a problem know best how to solve it." It is a radical idea and, usually, an inspiring one — unless you happen to be the one with a problem and you are feeling overwhelmed.

If that is you, then you may need to talk things out among a trusted group of experts or in a consciousness-raising circle. There is a (slim) chance that you need more information. But most likely, you need to listen to the voice that we prayed about — and to — over the High Holidays: "the still, small voice" that calls to you amidst storms and earthquakes and all other loud and showy disasters (1 Kings 19:12).

Dr. Hilbert offers some comfort here. Remember the 295 exabytes of information that were stored around the world in 2007 — and have been added to since? It turns out that all this information is still less than 1 percent of the information that is stored in the DNA molecules of one human being.

We are more than what is thrown at us. And we can handle what is thrown at us.

Deep down, we know.

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