

## On being wrong

Most of us will do anything to avoid being wrong. But what if we're wrong about that? "Wrongologist" Kathryn Schulz (staff writer for the New Yorker) makes a compelling case for not just admitting but embracing our fallibility.

Accent: The speaker is American (from Ohio)

00:11 So it's 1995, I'm in college, and a friend and I go on a road trip from Providence, Rhode Island to Portland, Oregon. And you know, we're young and unemployed, so we do the whole thing on back roads through state parks and national forests -- basically the longest route we can possibly take. And somewhere in the middle of South Dakota, I turn to my friend and I ask her a question that's been bothering me for 2,000 miles. "What's up with the Chinese character I keep seeing by the side of the road?" My friend looks at me totally blankly. There's actually a gentleman in the front row who's doing a perfect imitation of her look. (Laughter) And I'm like, "You know, all the signs we keep seeing with the Chinese character on them." She just stares at me for a few moments, and then she cracks up, because she figures out what I'm talking about. And what I'm talking about is this. (Laughter) Right, the famous Chinese character for picnic area.

01:41 I've spent the last five years of my life thinking about situations exactly like this -- why we sometimes misunderstand the signs around us, and how we behave when that happens, and what all of this can tell us about human nature. In other words, as you heard Chris say, I've spent the last five years thinking about being wrong. This might strike you as a strange career move, but it actually has one great advantage: no job competition. (Laughter) In fact, most of us do everything we can to avoid thinking about being wrong, or at least to avoid thinking about the possibility that we ourselves are wrong. We get it in the abstract. We all know everybody in this room makes mistakes. The human species, in general, is fallible -- okay fine.

02:37 But when it comes down to me, right now, to all the beliefs I hold, here in the present tense, suddenly all of this abstract appreciation of fallibility goes out the window -- and I can't actually think of anything I'm wrong about. And the thing is, the present tense is where we live. We go to meetings in the present tense; we go on family vacations in the present tense; we go to the polls and vote in the present tense. So effectively, we all kind of wind up traveling through life, trapped in this little bubble of feeling very right about everything.

03:17 I think this is a problem. I think it's a problem for each of us as individuals, in our personal and professional lives, and I think it's a problem for all of us collectively as a culture. So what I want to do today is, first of all, talk about why we get stuck inside this feeling of being right. And second, why it's such a problem. And finally, I want to convince you that it is possible to step outside of that feeling and that if you can do so, it is the single greatest moral, intellectual and creative leap you can make.

03:53 So why do we get stuck in this feeling of being right? One reason, actually, has to do with a feeling of being wrong. So let me ask you guys something -- or actually, let me ask you guys something, because you're right here: How does it feel -- emotionally -- how does it feel to be wrong? Dreadful. Thumbs down. Embarrassing. Okay, wonderful, great. Dreadful, thumbs down, embarrassing -- thank you, these are great answers, but they're answers to a different question. You guys are answering the question: How does it feel to realize you're wrong? (Laughter) Realizing you're wrong can feel like all of that and a lot of other things, right? I mean it can be devastating, it can be revelatory, it can actually be quite funny, like my stupid Chinese character mistake. But just being wrong doesn't feel like anything.

04:50 I'll give you an analogy. Do you remember that Loony Tunes cartoon where there's this pathetic coyote who's always chasing and never catching a roadrunner? In pretty much every episode of this cartoon, there's a moment where the coyote is chasing the roadrunner and the roadrunner runs off a cliff, which is fine -- he's a bird, he can fly. But the thing is, the coyote runs off the cliff right after him. And what's funny -- at least if you're six years old -- is that

the coyote's totally fine too. He just keeps running -- right up until the moment that he looks down and realizes that he's in mid-air. That's when he falls. When we're wrong about something -- not when we realize it, but before that -- we're like that coyote after he's gone off the cliff and before he looks down. You know, we're already wrong, we're already in trouble, but we feel like we're on solid ground. So I should actually correct something I said a moment ago. It does feel like something to be wrong; it feels like being right.

06:03 So this is one reason, a structural reason, why we get stuck inside this feeling of rightness. I call this error blindness. Most of the time, we don't have any kind of internal cue to let us know that we're wrong about something, until it's too late. But there's a second reason that we get stuck inside this feeling as well -- and this one is cultural. Think back for a moment to elementary school. You're sitting there in class, and your teacher is handing back quiz papers, and one of them looks like this. This is not mine, by the way. (Laughter) So there you are in grade school, and you know exactly what to think about the kid who got this paper. It's the dumb kid, the troublemaker, the one who never does his homework. So by the time you are nine years old, you've already learned, first of all, that people who get stuff wrong are lazy, irresponsible dimwits -- and second of all, that the way to succeed in life is to never make any mistakes.

07:12 We learn these really bad lessons really well. And a lot of us -- and I suspect, especially a lot of us in this room -- deal with them by just becoming perfect little A students, perfectionists, over-achievers. Right, Mr. CFO, astrophysicist, ultra-marathoner? (Laughter) You're all CFO, astrophysicists, ultra-marathoners, it turns out. Okay, so fine. Except that then we freak out at the possibility that we've gotten something wrong. Because according to this, getting something wrong means there's something wrong with us. So we just insist that we're right, because it makes us feel smart and responsible and virtuous and safe.

08:10 So let me tell you a story. A couple of years ago, a woman comes into Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center for a surgery. Beth Israel's in Boston. It's the teaching hospital for Harvard -- one of the best hospitals in the country. So this woman comes in

and she's taken into the operating room. She's anesthetized, the surgeon does his thing -- stitches her back up, sends her out to the recovery room. Everything seems to have gone fine. And she wakes up, and she looks down at herself, and she says, "Why is the wrong side of my body in bandages?" Well the wrong side of her body is in bandages because the surgeon has performed a major operation on her left leg instead of her right one. When the vice president for health care quality at Beth Israel spoke about this incident, he said something very interesting. He said, "For whatever reason, the surgeon simply felt that he was on the correct side of the patient." (Laughter) The point of this story is that trusting too much in the feeling of being on the correct side of anything can be very dangerous.

09:22 This internal sense of rightness that we all experience so often is not a reliable guide to what is actually going on in the external world. And when we act like it is, and we stop entertaining the possibility that we could be wrong, well that's when we end up doing things like dumping 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, or torpedoing the global economy. So this is a huge practical problem. But it's also a huge social problem.

09:54 Think for a moment about what it means to feel right. It means that you think that your beliefs just perfectly reflect reality. And when you feel that way, you've got a problem to solve, which is, how are you going to explain all of those people who disagree with you? It turns out, most of us explain those people the same way, by resorting to a series of unfortunate assumptions. **The first thing we usually do when someone disagrees with us is we just assume they're ignorant.** They don't have access to the same information that we do, and when we generously share that information with them, they're going to see the light and come on over to our team. When that doesn't work, when it turns out those people have all the same facts that we do and they still disagree with us, then we move on to **a second assumption, which is that they're idiots.** (Laughter) They have all the right pieces of the puzzle, and they are too moronic to put them together correctly. And when that doesn't work, when it turns out that people who disagree with us have all the same facts we do and are actually pretty smart, then we move on to **a third assumption: they know the truth, and they are**

deliberately distorting it for their own malevolent purposes. So this is a catastrophe.

11:15 This attachment to our own rightness keeps us from preventing mistakes when we absolutely need to and causes us to treat each other terribly. But to me, what's most baffling and most tragic about this is that it misses the whole point of being human. It's like we want to imagine that our minds are just these perfectly translucent windows and we just gaze out of them and describe the world as it unfolds. And we want everybody else to gaze out of the same window and see the exact same thing. That is not true, and if it were, life would be incredibly boring. The miracle of your mind isn't that you can see the world as it is. It's that you can see the world as it isn't. We can remember the past, and we can think about the future, and we can imagine what it's like to be some other person in some other place. And we all do this a little differently, which is why we can all look up at the same night sky and see this and also this and also this. And yeah, it is also why we get things wrong.

12:30 1,200 years before Descartes said his famous thing about "I think therefore I am," this guy, St. Augustine, sat down and wrote "Fallor ergo sum" -- "I err therefore I am." Augustine understood that our capacity to screw up, it's not some kind of embarrassing defect in the human system, something we can eradicate or overcome. It's totally fundamental to who we are. Because, unlike God, we don't really know what's going on out there. And unlike all of the other animals, we are obsessed with trying to figure it out. To me, this obsession is the source and root of all of our productivity and creativity.

13:16 Last year, for various reasons, I found myself listening to a lot of episodes of the Public Radio show This American Life. And so I'm listening and I'm listening, and at some point, I start feeling like all the stories are about being wrong. And my first thought was, "I've lost it. I've become the crazy wrongness lady. I just imagined it everywhere," which has happened. But a couple of months later, I actually had a chance to interview Ira Glass, who's the host of the show. And I mentioned this to him, and he was like, "No actually, that's true. In fact," he says, "as a staff, we joke that every single episode of our show has the same crypto-theme. And the crypto-

theme is: 'I thought this one thing was going to happen and something else happened instead.' And the thing is," says Ira Glass, "we need this. **We need these moments of surprise and reversal and wrongness to make these stories work.**" And for the rest of us, audience members, as listeners, as readers, we eat this stuff up. We love things like plot twists and red herrings and surprise endings. When it comes to our stories, we love being wrong.

14:37 But, you know, our stories are like this because our lives are like this. We think this one thing is going to happen and something else happens instead. George Bush thought he was going to invade Iraq, find a bunch of weapons of mass destruction, liberate the people and bring democracy to the Middle East. And something else happened instead. And Hosni Mubarak thought he was going to be the dictator of Egypt for the rest of his life, until he got too old or too sick and could pass the reigns of power onto his son. And something else happened instead. And maybe you thought you were going to grow up and marry your high school sweetheart and move back to your hometown and raise a bunch of kids together. And something else happened instead. And I have to tell you that I thought I was writing an incredibly nerdy book about a subject everybody hates for an audience that would never materialize. And something else happened instead.

15:36 I mean, this is life. For good and for ill, **we generate these incredible stories about the world around us, and then the world turns around and astonishes us.** No offense, but this entire conference is an unbelievable monument to our capacity to get stuff wrong. We just spent an entire week talking about innovations and advancements and improvements, but you know why we need all of those innovations and advancements and improvements? Because half the stuff that's the most mind-boggling and world-altering -- TED 1998 -- eh. (Laughter) Didn't really work out that way, did it? (Laughter) Where's my jet pack, Chris?

16:38 So here we are again. And that's how it goes. We come up with another idea. We tell another story. We hold another conference. The theme of this one, as you guys have now heard seven million times, is the rediscovery of wonder. And to me, **if you really want to rediscover wonder, you need to step outside of that**

tiny, terrified space of rightness and look around at each other and look out at the vastness and complexity and mystery of the universe and be able to say, "Wow, I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong."

17:31 Thank you. Thank you guys.