

ALSO BY ESTELLE FRANKEL

Sacred Therapy

The Wisdom of Not Knowing

DISCOVERING A LIFE OF WONDER
BY EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY

Estelle Frankel



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Introduction

The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.

—Socrates (quoted in *The Apology* by Plato)

The further knowledge advances, the nearer we come to the unfathomable.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,

The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe

THE FAMOUS HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR Daniel Boorstin said, “The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance—it is the illusion of knowledge.”¹ All the great discoverers, according to Boorstin, were able to reveal something radically new about the world because they were willing to “not know,” to trade the certainty of the known for the unknown.

This book is an exploration of the role of the unknown in our lives and a guide to reclaiming what I call “the wisdom of not knowing,” that deeper wisdom that emerges out of the silent, white spaces between the lines of our stories. It is a meditation on how expanding our awareness of life’s great mysteries enables us to connect with unknown parts of ourselves. As a lifelong student of Jewish mysticism, a practicing psychotherapist, and a spiritual director, I have learned that being receptive to the unknown, in all its many facets, allows us to become more open, curious, flexible, and expansive in our personal and professional lives.

This openness is the key to all learning and creativity. It is the gate that unlocks our wisdom and courage.

For most of us, the unknown is both friend and foe. At times it is a source of vitality, growth, and adventure, and at times, it spells danger, fear, or paralyzing anxiety. Our psychological, emotional, and spiritual health are radically influenced by how comfortable we are at navigating the unknown and uncertain dimensions of our lives. Our friendships and intimate relationships deepen when we balance what we know with an appreciation of all that can never entirely be known about ourselves and others. Jewish mysticism and depth psychology (by which I mean those approaches to therapy that draw on psychoanalytic insights) share a common appreciation of this dialectic and offer skillful means for dealing with the tension between what is and is not known.

There is a beauty, a poetic allure, to the unknown. It is the deep, endless well, the vast blanket of space that is the source from which all mystics, artists, and poets draw their inspiration and creativity. From the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, all branches of science and the arts focus on uncovering and understanding the unknown, unseen aspects of existence. In psychoanalysis, study of the unknown dimensions of the mind, or the unconscious, provides a source of infinite fascination and possibilities for growth.

The unknown occupies an important place in all the world's religious traditions. It is the realm where faith operates. In Jewish mysticism, divinity is the ultimate *unknown and unknowable* reality that, paradoxically, we are enjoined to "know." This essential paradox lies at the heart of the spiritual quest. Psychoanalytic inquiry involves a similar paradox: the soul and psyche are infinitely deep, layered, contradictory, mysterious, and, ultimately, unknowable; yet, in order to be whole, we can and must become more fully conscious of these unknown, unrealized aspects of the self. Through the process of inquiry into what is unknown, we grow our souls. As a mystic and a healer, no matter where I turn I bump up against the power of the unknown. We humans are living mysteries of

unfathomable depths, living in an unimaginably mysterious universe. What we know of ourselves (and the cosmos) is just the tip of an infinitely vast, divine iceberg. All of our knowledge rests in a vast sea of not knowing. It is *figure*, while the unknown is our ground. Finding the balance between these energies is the key to expanding consciousness.

The unknown forms a deep current that runs throughout Jewish mystical thought and practice. Kabbalah teaches that divinity, the human soul, and the Torah are each comprised of known and unknown dimensions, the known being miniscule in relation to what is hidden and unknown. And what we *can* know of the divine realm is accessible to us only through nonconceptual modes of experience, as it says in the Zohar: "Thought cannot encompass Your divine essence" (*leit machshava tefiseh bach*)—or, in colloquial terms, you cannot wrap your mind around God.² Wisdom, for the mystic, always involves a synergy of knowing and not knowing, discovery and mystery, action and stillness, words and silence. The Kabbalah teaches that "wisdom emerges from *ayin* (divine nothingness/not knowing)" (Job 28:12). The Hebrew word *ayin* suggests negation, emptiness, and formlessness. According to the Kabbalah scholar Daniel C. Matt, it is the Jewish equivalent of what Buddhists refer to as *sunyata*, Taoists call *wu*, and Christian mystics have called either *nichts* (Meister Eckhart) or *nada* (Saint John of the Cross).³ *Ayin* is the silent, fertile void—the infinite, unknowable Source of all being, beyond all thought. The world is created anew each moment, as something out of nothing, or in Hebrew, *yesh me'ayin*. Kabbalah teaches that, at its highest level (*keter of atzilut*), the human soul is rooted in *ayin*. This point of absolute unity with the divine is referred to as "the Unknowable Head"—*reisha d'lo ityada*, in the Zohar.⁴ We touch this space in deep states of meditation—when we go beyond thoughts and thinking and sit so still that no proprioceptive signals are sent to the brain. In this place beyond thought, we drop into the experience of boundlessness, as the neurotheologist and brain researcher Andrew Newberg's studies have shown. Evidently, our brains are hardwired

to experience the mystical state of oneness we call "God" and kabbalists refer to as *ayin* or *Ein Sof* (literally, "Without End"). Ein Sof is the boundless and transcendent aspect of divinity that is beyond all form. When we allow our individual space-time identities to dissolve into the underlying unity of all being, we can experience the truth of God's oneness from a place beyond thought. When we emerge from such states of grace, our inner being opens more fully and new layers of soul are revealed to us.

Despite the potential richness that contact with the unknown provides, most of us fear and resist it. In fact, we are programmed as part of our survival instinct to avoid it as much as possible. We see this instinctual fear in infants exhibiting "stranger anxiety," the developmental stage that many infants and toddlers go through between the ages of eight months and eighteen months, characterized by extreme upset on encountering unfamiliar faces. Infants instinctually prefer their primary caregiver's face, for it reassures them that they are safe. An unfamiliar face seems to pose a threat. But it's not just infants that fear the unknown and unfamiliar. As adults many of us prefer to stick with familiar ideas, patterns, relationships, and circumstances, rather than venture out of our comfort zones, even when we are extremely uncomfortable where we are. As one of my psychotherapy clients said when I asked him why he stays in a job that makes him miserable, "I prefer the familiar snake inside my tent to the one outside it." Without what I call "the wisdom of not knowing," it is difficult to leave the safe harbor of the known for the vast, unpredictable sea of growth and change. Certainty may calm our anxious spirits, but it closes the door on possibility. Moreover, when the known overshadows the unknown, we forsake our infinite life for a counterfeit, finite existence.

This book challenges us to widen our arc of possibilities by increasing our tolerance for the unknown and uncertain. Drawing on insights from Kabbalah, depth psychology, Zen Buddhism, and ancient myth, it explores how we can grow our souls by tapping into the wisdom of

not knowing. These insights are illustrated by stories of individuals who have grappled with their fears of the unknown (myself included) and, as a result, have come out wiser, stronger, and more resilient. Into these narratives, I have woven a collection of poems about the unknown that have become my daily prayers. Each chapter includes experiential exercises and/or meditations for befriending the unknown. These exercises help convey how we must be willing to not know in order to gain knowledge and be able to bear uncertainty in order to grow and be free.

For the past decade, the wisdom of not knowing has been my personal spiritual curriculum. Although it may seem contradictory, I am passionately curious to know and learn everything I can about not knowing. This quest has, in part, been prompted by an awareness of my own and my clients' difficulties with not knowing. My search prompted me to take a deeper look at Jewish and other spiritual teachings on the unknown. Although I have been a student and teacher of Jewish mysticism for over thirty-five years, I never fully appreciated how ubiquitous this theme is in Jewish thought until I began searching for it. Now a subtle figure-ground shift has occurred: Instead of focusing on the vast stores of knowledge and wisdom in Jewish sources, I pay more attention to the emptiness from which all this knowledge emerges. To use a metaphor from Jewish folklore, instead of concentrating on the words and letters of Torah, I now focus on the silent, white spaces between and surrounding them. This shift has had a profound effect on my consciousness, redirecting my contemplative life from what is known to what is always unknown, the questions rather than the answers.

In my work as a healer, a similar shift has occurred. Inspired by psychoanalytic thinkers like Wilfred Bion, Michael Eigen, and Roy Schafer, I have developed a greater appreciation of the role not knowing plays in my clinical work. One of the great challenges that every skilled psychotherapist faces is tolerating moments of doubt and uncertainty, when one simply does not know what is going on in treatment. The analytic attitude requires what the poet John Keats referred

to as “negative capability”: “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”⁵ Unless the therapist is comfortable with not knowing, he or she cannot help others reach into their own, as yet, unknown selves and grow. I realize that when I am impatient to know and understand things both in my personal life and my work, I often draw premature conclusions. By nature I am intuitive and my mind draws rapid conclusions based on minimal bits of evidence. Although my quick assessments are occasionally correct, I have learned that it is better to be patient and allow what is being revealed to make itself fully known. And even after something is revealed, I know that it is always provisional and that things can change on a dime. Truth is most often a moment-by-moment revelation, not something that can be permanently fixed with certainty. This notion lies at the heart of the Jewish understanding of divinity as an unfolding process, a verb rather than a noun.

The philosopher Martin Buber writes, “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.”⁶ The biblical narrative is replete with archetypal tales of journeys into the unknown. Part One of this book, “Journeys into the Unknown,” chronicles several of these classic stories, beginning in chapter 1, “Entering the Unknown: Embarking on the Journey,” with Abraham and Sarah’s voyage to an unknown land. In this archetypal tale of the first wandering Jews, the journey itself becomes the destination; the unknown land, a metaphor for all that is beyond human comprehension. Like Abraham and Sarah, when we leave the known for the unknown, we open ourselves up to growth and transformation.

Judaism and Jewish culture have always emphasized the importance of asking questions. Our questions help us befriend the unknown and make new learning possible. Historically, Jewish questioning of the status quo spawned revolutionary ideas and social change movements. Yet, nowadays, in many Jewish educational settings, the focus is too often on

the answers rather than the questions. And, often, these answers are predetermined and pat. True curiosity requires space to consider what is *not* known. If we already know the answer, then our question is not really a question. And when we think we already know something, our curiosity inevitably diminishes. What we *know* can also limit our imagination if it is not countered with an equally powerful *don't know*. In matters of faith, in particular, too much certainty can shut down the process of spiritual inquiry. Clergy and religious educators who have all the answers to their congregants’ questions run the risk of being smug and are less likely to listen carefully to the questions being asked or the questions behind the question. Chapter 2, “Curiosity and Open-Mindedness: The Pathway to Growth and Freedom,” explores how curiosity and skillful questioning enable us to acquire the wisdom of not knowing. Using the biblical myth of the Exodus and the journey through the wilderness as allegories, this chapter explores curiosity as a pathway to inner freedom—how we must be willing to not know in order to be free.

Chapter 3, “Darkness: Encounters with the Divine,” explores darkness as a metaphor for the unknown. The chapter follows the biblical stories surrounding Jacob’s three nocturnal encounters with the divine. Each time Jacob closes a chapter of his life and is on the road between his old and new life, he is helped along by numinous figures that show him unknown parts of himself. Jacob’s spiritual development provides a paradigm for how we evolve and expand our identities by opening ourselves to the unknown.

Part Two, “Befriending the Unknown,” focuses on tools for engaging the wisdom of not knowing in our personal, interpersonal, and spiritual lives. Chapter 4, “Embracing Uncertainty: How Divine ‘Becoming’ Illuminates Our Unfolding,” explores the interface between psychology and theology, showing how our understanding of the divine affects and is affected by our own psychology. Throughout our lives, we inevitably go through alternating cycles of knowing and not knowing, certainty and doubt, as our faith and beliefs undergo revision. The God we once

believed in may no longer make sense to us as we mature and evolve. Being willing to face uncertainty and doubt, to not know, makes space for this evolution to take place. Similarly, when we are not overly certain about who *we* are, we leave room for our own growth and evolution. Seeing the divine as an unfolding process, a verb rather than a noun, we are more likely to experience ourselves and reality as a whole as mutable, changeable, and continually unfolding. This basic principle of process theology shifts the focus from divine perfection to divine becoming, modeling a pathway for our own ongoing evolution.

Chapter 5, "Silence: The Role of White Space in Our Lives," explores the importance of maintaining a healthy measure of white space in our lives. We do this by balancing words with silence, activity with stillness, knowing with not knowing, and by not overscheduling ourselves. This chapter also explores Jewish mystical legends about the "white fire" of Torah—the silent, primordial source of wisdom from which the written Torah of words and letters emerges. The white fire is seen as an allegory for the higher realms of consciousness that can only be accessed in silence.

Chapter 6, "Creativity and Spiritual Inquiry: Opening the Gates of Insight and Innovation," explores the role of the unknown in the creative process and shows how we can enhance our creative capacities by consciously entering the space of unknowing, or *ayin*. In addition to the arts and sciences, creativity plays an important role in spiritual inquiry. The cosmic tree of life in Kabbalah contains a paradigm for enhancing creativity using the power of paradox or dialectical thought. We evolve spiritually by meditating upon increasingly complex questions that present initially as paradoxes. Through the process of synthesizing opposites, we tap into our creative potential.

Part Three, "Becoming Intimate with the Unknown," explores three important areas where we can practice the wisdom of not knowing: in our friendships and intimate relationships, in healing, and in situations requiring courage. Chapter 7, "Love: The Unknown in Friendship and Intimate Relationships," explores the evolving face of the unknown in

long-term relationships. Blending psychoanalytic and Jewish mystical insights on love, this chapter explores the dialectic and balance of knowledge and mystery in love. It also illuminates the stages of romantic love and offers tools for preserving eros in long-term relationships by holding on to the mystery of the other. Ultimately, no matter how well we think we know the people we are closest to, at our core each of us is an unfathomable mystery, unpredictable and ever changing.

The unknown lies at the heart of all psychotherapeutic healing. In order to understand their clients, therapists must make use not only of their cognitive faculties but also their intuition. Intuition is the therapist's most important tool for gaining insight into the unknown. Chapter 8, "Intuition and Illumination: The Unknown in Therapy and Spiritual Inquiry," explores the role of intuition in psychotherapy and in our lives. Intuition is defined here as a nonconceptual and nonlinear means of insight through which we can gain direct access to holistic knowledge. Using insights from Wilfred Bion and other psychoanalytic thinkers, this chapter focuses on intuition as a navigational tool for accessing the unconscious. For therapy to be effective, therapists must learn to relax with the unknown and uncertain. The therapist's willingness to not know makes room for the client to reach deeply into his or her own previously unknown self. While Bion wrote primarily for therapists, his insights are applicable to all of our lives. In fact, his approach shares a good deal in common with the Zen practice of beginner's mind—the pure state of awareness, beyond conceptual thought, where one experiences the present moment with intimacy and immediacy. For therapists this means putting aside all preconceived ideas or theories about their clients based on past interactions and, instead, remaining open to what actually transpires in the present-moment encounter. The practice of beginner's mind is something that we can all strive to incorporate in our lives.

Fear of the unknown and unfamiliar is rooted in our uniquely human awareness of mortality. We are, as far as scientists know, the only species that lives with this conscious awareness. And although we know for

certain that we will die, we do not know how or when—hence, fear of the unknown is part of our human instinct for survival. Knowing what is lurking around the corner, so to speak, ensures our existence, while not knowing can feel like a mortal threat, even when it is not. Natural selection rewarded those who could anticipate unknown threats; hence, our brains are wired to recognize patterns and distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar ones. Our ability to remember and learn from the past is useful in many situations, but it can also be problematic, especially when fears rooted in the past prevent us from seeing clearly in the present moment. Our very human tendency is to foreclose on the present moment by coloring it with fearful overlays from the past. It seems that the anxious mind would rather imagine the worst than wait and be surprised by what life actually presents. Chapter 9, “Courage in Face of the Unknown,” examines these dynamics and explores ways we can overcome our fear of the unknown by developing greater courage. With courage we can face our radical vulnerability and the unpredictable nature of life with greater equanimity.

When my own spiritual life becomes stale and I want to shake things up, I often turn to poetry. Poetry emerges from an unknown, unseen source, offering depth and luster to ordinary things. The poet Rilke writes about his life as a spiral journey spent circling this mysterious source, which he equates with God:

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I’ve been circling for thousands of years

and I still don’t know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?*

Rilke’s tower, a metaphor for the divine, represents an essence so vast and mysterious that one can never fully know it, only encompass it. Living his life in relation to this mystery, Rilke recognizes how his own identity is also vast, fluid, and ever changing. When the poet asks himself who he is—“am I a falcon, a storm, or a great song?”—he realizes that he really does not know. This not knowing is a reflection of the great mystery he has spent his life circling. Just as Rilke’s God is infinite and unknowable, every part of creation—the poet included—reflects this inscrutable mystery. Giving up his certainty about the defined boundaries of his own Self, Rilke awakens to an expanded identity with all creation.

The chapters in this book are my attempt to circle the mystery of all that is unknown. As you journey through its pages, you will discover many different dimensions of the unknown. My personal blessing and wish for you, the reader, is that the unknown will become your muse as it has for me, opening up unexpected pathways for your life to unfold.