

Knowing Everything and Nothing

On living in infinity and the collapse of trust that followed



43 ARCSECONDS

APR 03, 2026

When the whole family would get dragged to the shopping mall, was your dad's one-two punch Sharper Image and Brookstone? Of course it was. And you and your sibling would surreptitiously loiter near the massage chairs, as if you're actually super into the Newton's cradle for the umpteenth time, and when someone finally got up, the two of you would race to be the one to get the seat. By the display near the chairs, your dad is observing to your mom, "Look at this," as he dips a feather duster into its canister that imbues it with a static charge. "It uses ionic charge to take off the previous layer of dust and also make it ready to pick up more," he says with the extremely faint glow of being *very* into this but not wanting it to be obvious. She doesn't look impressed because feather dusters already work using static electricity.

These stores were the home of Science™ for the American middle-class suburban family. There were explanations for every little gadget in there for you to repeat later while beamingly showing it off to your visiting relatives. Was the science real? Who knows, who cares as long as the gadget did what it said it would? But really, how often was the average person asking whether the science was real at all? Why wouldn't it be?

This Substack is reader-supported. To
receive new posts and support my work,
consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

✓ **Subscribed**

Cut to: 2026. There is a subreddit called /r/ScienceBasedParenting. It was created in July 2018. It has 365k weekly visitors and 1.5k weekly contributions. The top post of all time is titled “Motion to ban ChatGPT from this sub,” followed by “Enough with the vaccine questions!” In it is a daily, hourly, *minute-ly* war to Parent Correctly.

How much smaller does harsh parenting make your offspring’s brain structure? How much arsenic is in store-bought rice? Is it okay for me to have my kids go to slumber parties, can you tell me the percentage of sexual abuse that happens at sleepovers versus anywhere else? A study showed that shorter birth intervals between siblings are associated with increased risk of divorce! THC and CBD exposure in utero had long-term effects on rodent brains and behavior! Disaster news coverage can trigger PTSD in kids! Don’t even think the word co-sleeping while you have a tab open with this subreddit: they *will* sense your thoughts and ban you.

In case you’re reading this and feel your hackles are up because you think I’m describing you and it’s gotta be bad — I probably am. I’m describing you. I’m describing my dad. I’m describing all of us. Just, in this instance, as the narrower subsegment of current parents.

For a good chunk of high school, my family didn’t eat beef, much to my resentment (and eventual anemia), because of the 2003 BSE case in Washington. Was it worth it? Only six confirmed cases in cattle and essentially none in humans because the ones that *did* appear were able to be tied back to the ‘80s-‘90s UK outbreak — when 180k cattle were confirmed infected, 750k were estimated to have entered the food chain, 4.4 million were slaughtered to contain the outbreak, and eventually, 178 people died of vCJD in the UK. Because the incubation period for prions can reach as long as *fifty* years, we’ve still seen cases trickle in since the worst of it, and they could theoretically continue to do so for another decade at least.

Now take the experience of those numbers, of reading them and feeling your brain try to model what they mean, what information is missing, how bad it was, whether my dad was right or not — and do it a thousand times a day per child.

For a lot of us Millennials, we were told we were growing up in the Information Age, and the thrill of this age is rooted in this kind of memory: when you were 18, for the first time, you could look up your childhood best friend on Facebook who had moved away in the sixth grade and send them a message that said, “omg ur here!!!” Today, nostalgic from those memories, we all suffer under the paradigm that unfolded thereafter.

The Internet was supposed to democratize information, make knowledge production and transfer faster and more efficient and farther-reaching. Instead, when I pull up a study that says, “A might be related to B,” you pull up one that says, “A and B aren’t related.”

The Internet was supposed to make it so that bonds we wouldn’t have been able to keep in the past due to distance would become just as good as the ones where we never lost physical proximity. Or even never had it to begin with. Instead, it made even the ones in close proximity start to feel dissociated and atomized.

The Internet was supposed to be the Great Uniter. Much like travel, having access to everyone everywhere was supposed to open our minds and worlds, remind us all that we’re not so different, that we all just want less struggle and more contentment, that you can love someone even if you hadn’t physically met them yet because what’s human, what links us is intangible. Instead, the absence of physicality removed consequences, removed the physiological signaling between us, reduced shame about indulging in our baser tribalistic instincts, made us easy to turn on one another. Why should I trust you, you whom I don’t truly know?

In the wake of infinite information transfer, unimaginable information abundance, lives the reality we occupy today: trust collapse. If we have perfect information, if we can construct the perfect foundation of data, then we can live optimized lives, we can cure all our ails, we can make sure our children never suffer, and they can be happier than we are now. We just need to know what's true, and to know what's true, we just need to know who to trust — and we trust no one.

On one dimension, this looks like people racing back toward authority figures, trying to believe that you just have to find the Right One who'll fix it or whom you can at least believe will try to do the right thing. On another, it looks like scientism, a reduction of the premise of empiricism down to having faith in a process while not fully engaging with that process oneself, forgetting that "it can always change as we learn more." On yet another, it's just utter resignation from any of it being legible or meaningful or solvable: just get me out of here, life is hard enough.

I should make clear that I'm not making any sort of argument for moral relativism or the idea that there is nothing that's true at all. I don't know what's true, but I still want to find what's true. I just also have to be okay with the possibility of that journey doubling back on its way to never ending. I'm saying that if we do want to get out of here, we need to rebuild the connective tissue that let our species survive and advance for as long as it has. Truth and trust are binary stars. We are in a state of truthlessness, where, because we can know everything, we effectively know nothing, and with it comes trustlessness, not knowing whether you or me or anyone else is someone you can believe has their wits about them.

Here's a very famous KJV rendition of a Bible verse: "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." This was more concisely repeated to me by my dad for most of my childhood and teen years: "Knowledge is power, but ignorance is bliss."

Robert Alter, a Jewish professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, wrote a 3000-page translation of the Hebrew Bible, written and commentated on with the intention of lifting out of the text its literary spirit and heritage. Here is his translation of the final verses of Chapter 1 of Qohelet (Christians will know this as Ecclesiastes) from which the above verse is pulled:

¹⁴ I have seen all the deeds that are done under the sun, and, look, all is mere breath, and herding the wind. ¹⁵ The crooked cannot turn straight nor can the lack be made good. ¹⁶ I spoke to my heart, saying: As for me, look, I increased and added wisdom beyond all who were before me over Jerusalem, and my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge. ¹⁷ And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know revelry and folly, for this, too, is herding the wind. ¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much worry, and he who adds wisdom adds pain.

Alter has this to say about his translation “herding the wind,” which Christians have variably translated as everything from “vexation of spirit” to “striving/chasing after the wind”:

The verbal root of the first Hebrew word here generally means to tend a flock (and in the Song of Songs, to graze), so the common modern translation, “pursuit of the wind,” is an interpretive liberty. Herding the wind, which of course cannot be herded (it goes round and round), is an effective enough image of futile activity, coordinated with “mere breath.”

It’s one thing to frame the pursuit of wisdom or revelry, every edge of the experience of living as chasing a thing that can’t be caught; it somewhat implies dynamism and directionality, even if pointless. Herding, on the other hand, is an effort toward containment and control, and the wind is infinite and shapeless and unpredictable — just like information, knowledge, wisdom. In the end, in your effort to herd the wind, isn’t it just herding you?

It would be silly to distill what it is we're looking for into one thing, but I don't think it's a stretch to say that a good deal of any pursuit of certainty is pursuit of control, a pursuit toward reassurance that everything is going to be okay. Of wanting to know that even if there are ten million variables, you have both enough information and the *right* information to withstand all ten million as best as you can, and you can live at peace with how you will fare in the future — how your kids will fare in the future.

But the more I tried to navigate it all, the more it made me cling to these things that turned out not to be truths so much as photographs. High fidelity, true to life, but two-dimensional until I could collect enough of them to try to form a sculpture. And there's never enough. So instead, I've been trying to learn how to feel the wind from moment to moment while not resenting it for shifting, not needing it to stay where I want it. Will that posture change anyone else's mind? Will it solidify the ground beneath you? Maybe not. But maybe it could:

Intellectual humility and trust -Tenelle Porter, Shauna Bowes, Jonah Koetke, Michal Lehmann

The problem of mistrust cannot be solved by increasing trust indiscriminately; rather, we need tools that help people trust more in what is credible and doubt what is not. In this review we argue that intellectual humility, a willingness to acknowledge the limitations of one's knowledge and beliefs, has much to offer in this regard. We review evidence suggesting that intellectual humility (1) helps people discern what is trustworthy, (2) helps credible sources be perceived as more trustworthy, and (3) helps facilitate trusting relationships across deep socio-political divides. Implications are discussed. Cultivating intellectual humility offers a promising means of fostering a more discerning, informed, and connected public.

Thanks for being here.

✓ Subscribed