More or Less True
Why Extreme and Rigid Thinking Makes Us Weak
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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Most of us here understand there's little if anything that we can know with absolute certainty and it is, therefore, important to keep an open mind. It's important because such understanding makes us critical of all thinking, including our own, and more tolerant of those with different views than us. Unfortunately, there are many in the world so certain of their own beliefs that they are threatened by and despise those who think differently. This is so even though the notion that all people should be free to express themselves, including those we disagree with, is a basic tenant of the Enlightenment principles our society and our liberal religion are founded upon.

Yet I've noticed in ordinary discourse that most of us, even the most liberal of us, tend to use idioms suggesting we can be certain of what we are saying or agreeing with: Absolutely, definitely, totally, exactly, precisely, I completely agree, for sure, surely, sure thing, you bet, of course, without a doubt, no question. We also use a few common idioms suggesting our absolute disagreement with contrary ideas: certainly not, surely not, of course not, absolutely not, I totally disagree, I completely disagree, no way, that's insane, that's crazy, that's nuts.

Even now I was about to begin my very next sentence with the phrase, "Of course." "Of course, we tend to use absolutisms casually," rather than simply saying, "We tend to use absolutisms in casually," or, "It seems to me, we tend to use absolutisms casually." But when I begin a sentence with, "Of course," as I often do, it's not because I'm absolutely certain of whatever I'm about to say, but because it has become an ordinary and habitual way of writing and speaking for me, just as it has for many of us. I use the term lazily, not literally.

But to be reasonably confident the idioms I've just listed are seldom meant to be taken literally by most people, I'd have to study a few linguists on the matter, consider the value of their research and reasoning, then present you with some of their data to prove my point. Even then, there is likely to be some disagreement among linguists on the subject. Based upon such research, rather than beginning my sentence with, "Of course," I'd have to say, "*Some* linguists say we tend to use absolutisms casually." But what is not to be missed here is that even though a sentence based on solid research is stronger than one that isn't, the statement that begins with "Some," rather than "Of course," sounds weaker to us. So, during normal discourse, we tend toward absolutisms because we feel that the surer we sound the stronger our point—Absolutely, definitely, totally, exactly, precisely, I completely agree, for sure, surely, sure thing, you bet, of course, without a doubt, no question, indubitably my dear Watson.

Reinforcing our arguments by merely pointing out that "some" people agree with us doesn't sound as convincing as suggesting anyone in their right mind must agree with us, "of

course." The term, "some," furthermore, is too vague to be meaningful if it isn't quantified. "Some" can refer to most or to only a few. Saying, "Most linguists agree that we tend to use absolutisms casually," sounds more convincing to us than saying, "A few linguists agree that we tend to use absolutisms casually."

Hence, the problem with saying "some" is that we must quantify what we mean by it, which cannot be done as readily as simply saying "of course," or some of the other absolutisms I've mentioned. Saying "some" requires research, which requires time and effort, and, even then, we still end up with an evidence-based statement that sounds less impressive than one that simply begins with, "Of course." If, for example, I say, "Fifty-three percent of linguists agree that we tend to use absolutisms casually," there's a good chance they are wrong. Or if I say, "A peer reviewed study among linguists finds that ninety-five percent of us tend to use absolutisms casually," there are still some who don't. And this less-than-five percent chance is enough to make the statement sound weaker than simply saying, "Of course, we tend to use absolutisms casually."

If all of this has become a little too abstract and hard to follow, please work to stay with me because I consider this topic fundamental to being a sound thinker. It may help for me to repeat the variations on the sentence I've presented so far.

- We tend to use absolutisms casually.
- It seems to me we tend to use absolutisms casually.
- Some linguists say we tend to use absolutisms casually.
- Most linguists agree that we tend to use absolutisms casually.
- A few linguists agree that we tend to use absolutisms casually.
- Fifty-three percent of linguists say we tend to use absolutisms casually.
- Ninety-five percent of linguists say we tend to use absolutisms casually.
- Of course, we tend to use absolutisms casually.

This last version of the sentence, which is the one I had intended to begin with, still seems the most potent of them all, even though it is the least substantiated among them. Yet another problem with quantifying our arguments, as we have seen here, is that it takes way too much time. It is difficult to imagine researching the truth value of every statement we make and still having the time to actually say something. Case in point: the sentence I've now been talking about for quite some time was meant to be the sixth sentence in this discourse. Since then, I've uttered 34 compound sentences to explain why I didn't use it. Who has that kind of time when trying to communicate effectively and efficiently with others?

I'm guessing, few of us do. But I would also suggest, because of our commitment to our liberal values and to fashioning a liberal society in which freedom, reason, and tolerance are the values inherent in all we do, that it is important for us to wean ourselves off using

absolutisms in our ordinary speech because doing so lends itself well to the extremist thinking and intolerant behavior that has become rampant in our society. Thinking about how we say things helps us become aware of bad linguistic habits and to work on replacing them with better alternatives. This year I've resolved to lessen my use of absolutisms in my writing and speech in order to promote a world that is more honest, less extreme, and better adept at coping with life's ambiguities and uncertainties. For example, rather than saying, "Of course," it's just as easy to say something, like, "I'm guessing," or "My guess is," or, "I presume," or, "Perhaps."

So, now that we have settled the matter of how I should begin my sixth sentence of today's message, let the sermon continue: *I'm guessing that we tend to use absolutism casually.* As noted, using such idioms in common speech, even if we don't mean to sound so certain of ourselves, reinforces absolutist thinking, which fosters dogmatism, intolerance, and extremism. Such rigidity is delusional because it refuses to recognize and cope with the uncertainty of life. As social psychologist Erich Fromm once said, "life is never certain, never predictable, never controllable; in order to make life controllable it must be transformed into death."[1] Just as the body becomes rigid upon death, rigid thinking expresses dead ideas, ideas that cannot grow, or adapt, or breathe, or create, or imagine because they are out of harmony with the uncertain ambiguous nature of life.

The certainty with which we often express ourselves, even if only by thoughtless habit, may be symptomatic of both our society's need for coherence among its populous, in order to foster cooperation and compliance, and our own biological instinct toward repetition. The more an organism repeats the behaviors that don't get it killed, the more habitual they become, to the point of behaviorally defining a species as they get genetically passed on. As a thinking species, evolution has given us a psyche driven to repeat the ideas that haven't gotten us killed so far. This ideological repetition, rooted in our fear of the unknown, leads to rigid societies and rigid thinking that are intolerant of new ideas and of those with other ideas. No wonder we have evolved to use absolutisms as a part of our ordinary speech. Doing so is part of our inborn survival instinct.

The feeling of certainty is a kind of matrix we've set up for ourselves, or that has been set up for us by previous generations attempting to erect systems guaranteeing we will always stick with the tried and true, even if the tried and true has become too rigid to help us cope with the changes around us. Some rigid ideas eventually lead to our detriment and destruction, like clinging to nationalism in an age of globalism, or embracing the continued use of fossil fuels in the face of Global Warming, or clinging to gun rights in an era of assault rifles and mass shootings. So, I consider it important for us to start using language in a way that reflects the dynamic, evolving, flexible, and uncertain nature of life and its ambiguous realities, rather than using language to unthinkingly prop up dead, inflexible, rigid ideas that mislead us into thinking we are in control and that we can be confident of what comes next.

Toward this end, let us return to the very old thinking of Aristotle, who developed his system of logic 2,400 years ago. Logic may be old, but it is not dead, although, sadly, it has never become our main way of thinking. Aristotle discovered that there are only four categories our assertions of truth fall into: all, none, some, or some not. If we say something is true about politicians, for example, we are either referring to all politicians, to no politicians, to some politicians, or to some politicians who are not included in our assertion: All politicians are corrupt. No politicians are corrupt. Some politicians are corrupt. Some politicians are not corrupt.

When speaking of "all" or "none," we are speaking universally, because we leave no room for a single exception. When speaking of "some who are" or "some who are not," we are speaking only of particular instances, which may have a few or many exceptions. That's about as simple as I can put it, so please work to stay with me, even if it's a little hard, because this is important information. Thinking well takes effort. It doesn't come naturally; yet being thoughtful is important work.

The point I want to make, and that I want you to hear, is that when we speak in universal terms, like claiming All politicians are corrupt, or No politicians are corrupt, we think we have the stronger argument because we aren't allowing for a single exception. We *sound* certain. But, in reality, our argument is extremely weak. It is so unyielding and rigid that it can be shattered with the slightest thump. To disprove such an assertion all one needs is to find a single instance in which it is false, then the entire statement becomes untrue; one exception proves that not all politicians are corrupt. The statements, *All politicians are corrupt* and *Some politicians are not corrupt* cannot both be true. If one is true, the other must be false.

If, on the other hand, we speak in particulars by claiming only that some politicians are corrupt or some politicians are not corrupt, we make what on the surface seems a weaker claim but is in reality almost incontrovertible. By saying "some" or "some not," all we need to do is find one example in which a politician has been corrupt or proven to be incorrupt, and we have proven our point. Such arguments, as I have said, are even better when there is data backing them up, so we have an idea of what percentage are or are not corrupt, per our example. But the main point here is that what we intuitively feel is the weaker position is actually the stronger position. Avoiding absolutisms doesn't diminish our thinking but strengthens it.

This is important to grasp, not only for the sake of cutting our politicians a little slack, but because extremist thinking also leads to other kinds of unsound and unwarranted prejudices. We might get an idea in our heads about Trump voters and then presume it must apply to all or, at least, to most of them. But we may not have met or spoken with many Trump voters, using our limited interactions with only a few to make universal

assumptions about all of them, which can easily be shattered by finding only one exception to our prejudice. Similarly, when Trump once implied that all or most of the Mexicans illegally crossing the border are rapists, criminals, or drug dealers, he made a prejudicial statement that was easy to disprove, because there are many examples of Mexican immigrants who are not fiendish criminals. Today the Woke Left, and woke authors like Robin DiAngelo, are making lots of claims about white people, especially white straight males, that they consider to be universally true, true that is, about *all* white people. In their extremism, they feel certain they must be right, but their claims are extremely weak because it is simple to find examples contrary to their assertions. It is a simple matter, that is, to find white people, including white straight males, who are not racist or don't suffer from, so-called, *white fragility*, and many whites whose so-called "privilege" has earned them a cardboard sign on a cold street corner.

Many of our unsound prejudices in the past, present, and future, were, are, and shall be based on such extremist thinking. The old belief that people with dark skin were inferior to others, or that males are smarter than females, or that homeless people are mentally ill or substance abusers, or that billionaires are greedy and selfish, or that politicians are corrupt, for that matter, are among the many prejudices encouraged by our ordinary overuse and casual misuse of absolutisms—absolutely, definitely, totally, exactly, precisely, I completely agree, for sure, surely, sure thing, you bet, of course, without a doubt, no question, or, certainly not, surely not, of course not, absolutely not, I totally disagree, I completely disagree, no way, that's insane, that's crazy, that's nuts. But when we start thinking in terms of *som*e—that only some people may fit our stereotypes and that, without extensive research, we have no way to quantify how typical they might be—then perhaps we'll realize the futility of speaking in prejudicial stereotypes and be a little humbler about our assertions to begin with.

Absolutism also leads us to inflate "some" into "all." We may find ourselves traveling in Seattle, for example, and get cut off in traffic or have someone blow past us in the fast lane and think, "Man, these Seattle drivers are crazy!" We blow the experience out of proportion when, in reality, most the Seattle drivers we've encountered have driven courteously and by the rules of the road. I often hear individuals try to prove something they claim is always true by giving a single anecdotal experience of their own, as if it is reasonable to draw general conclusions about the whole world based upon our own limited experiences. *I suspect* this is fairly common.

In recent years there have been a lot of universal conclusions about police officers and policing based upon the horrific officer-involved killings of individuals like George Floyd. Some believe these killings implicate all police officers. Others claim they are only the result of a few bad apples. Seeing these terrible scenes in the news is enough for any of us to reasonably conclude that some police offers, at the very least, are either racist or hold unconscious prejudices. Yet it is also reasonable to conclude some officers can be found

who are not racist and hold no such biases. To understand just how widespread this problem truly is, we need to look at reliable research in order to come up with substantiated data to help us determine if by "some" we're talking about a few, many, or most police officers. But this takes effort. It's a lot easier to look at the horrific images we've seen on the news and immediately draw emotionally driven and broad conclusions about racist policing, or, on the other hand, to consider some of the kindhearted and professional police officers we have encountered and conclude it's just a few bad apples: "Move along folks. There's nothing systemic to see here." Whatever the reality, we can be almost sure that the truth is ambiguous not absolute, as it is with life in general, because "life is never certain, never predictable."

I'll be keeping all this in mind during the year ahead as I write my sermons, which will be easier for me to monitor than my everyday speech. I often find myself saying things like, "absolutely," "I totally agree," "for sure," when engaging in informal friendly conversation. I'm going to work on substituting these absolutisms with phrases like, "that seems reasonable to me," or, "based on what little I know, I would agree," or, simply, "I agree." And, instead of referring to the ideas I disagree with as "insane" or "nuts," or saying, "I completely disagree," or, "no way," I'm going to work on just saying, "That doesn't seem right to me," "I don't get it," or, simply, "I disagree."

This prospect is as exciting for me as it is daunting because it's both an area of growth as well as a serious challenge to catch myself engaging in habitual speech patterns during heated debate. But I am resolved to do my best and feel confident I will have some but not absolute success. And this, ultimately, is what the effort is about, not merely modeling a less rigid form of speech and thought but learning to better speak and think in ways that are evolving, adapting, breathing, forgiving, uncertain, and, thus, alive.

[1] Fromm, Erich, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1964, p. 42.