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We'll All Be Better Off If We Ask Better Questions in 2017

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We'll All Be Better Off If We Ask Better Questions in 2017

By Bruce Janz

UCF Forum columnist

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I find myself at the end of 2016 thinking about how differently we all make sense out of our shared experiences this year. “Common wisdom” seems to have it that 2016 was generally worse than other years – some of our favorite people died and the wheels fell off of whatever we thought they were on.

Of course, “common wisdom” undoubtedly is tied to whomever the wisdom is common to. Read a different website or curate a different set of friends on Facebook and you will get a different picture.

Making sense of our ways of making sense is what I’m most interested in. I teach philosophy and humanities. The humanities side of my job focuses on the ways that cultures make sense of themselves to themselves and to others. I’m interested in the ideas and beliefs we hold, but also the ways that we have of representing them in the media and elsewhere in culture, in the things we own and the things we make.

The philosophy side focuses on concepts of all sorts, especially those related to knowledge, reality, values and the ways we use reason. Other disciplines, of course, also have an interest in these areas, but come at them using their own tools and histories.

We all struggle to make sense out of a world that seems to change faster all the time. The walls between those of different opinions and worldviews seem higher than ever. Everyone lays claim to reason for themselves and assumes a lack of reason for those who disagree.

My job, either in a column or in a classroom, is never to tell anyone what to think or which opinion is correct. I like to think that my main job is to help people ask better questions.

So, to that end, I have some suggestions that might help us think through the turbulent world that faces all of us.

1. Learn about some of the basic logical fallacies that are easy to commit. These include ad hominem (attacks on people who hold a view, rather than the view itself),

begging the question (assuming a conclusion is true while arguing for it), straw man arguments (responding to the weakest form of someone else's position), and others.

2. Learn about cognitive biases we are all prone to commit. These range from confirmation bias (looking only for things that agree with a position we already hold), to outcome bias (judging a decision based on the outcome rather than the way it was arrived at), to stereotyping (generalizing characteristics about a group), to many others.
3. Beyond looking for bad reasoning, it's also worth thinking about what good reasoning looks like. Reasoning isn't good just because you agree with it, or comes from someone you admire, or uses words or examples that are familiar to you. The best reasoning gives us a new way of thinking about the world. It gives us new concepts and new tools. The best reasoners create something new, even if they are thinking about something old. We often find this in the best science – a new concept gives us a new way of understanding the cosmos, or the genome, or consciousness itself.
4. Look for those who can help you be a better thinker. You might find them among the best thinkers in the “opposition.” You don't have to agree with someone to respect them and to learn from them. They might be asking a good question, even if you don't like their answer.
5. Don't go straight to meta for others – but do go there for yourself. We think about what someone thinks, and also how and why they think what they think, that is, what motivates them. That's what I mean by “meta” – it's metathinking, or thinking about the causes and reasons for someone's thinking. It's very common to think that we arrived at our own ideas through careful thought, but that other people are just affected by the group they are part of, or their psychology, background or self-interest. In other words, it's very easy to go meta on someone else, but very hard to do that for ourselves. So, try reversing that, at least sometimes. What are the forces that affect your own reasoning? And, what does it look like to respect someone else and take their thinking at face value?
6. It is very common to personalize people we agree with, but generalize people we don't agree with. We give personal stories to people in our camp, but see opponents as being examples of overall characteristics, especially negative ones. Our friends

have personalities while our enemies have labels. This happens in war all the time – the enemy is stereotyped, in order to be easier to fight against. War, though, is not reason, but the failure of reason. Try personalizing the other side.

7. The more strongly you feel about something, the more you need checks and balances in your own thinking. Feeling strongly about something isn't a bad thing, but the more we want something to be true, the more likely we are to take shortcuts.

Hopefully this gives an idea of how to think clearly and ask better questions. It's a confusing world out there, but no matter what your position or beliefs about things might be, we're all better off when we ask better questions.

Here's to our new year, one in which we follow the better angels of our nature.

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