

OPEN-MINDEDNESS

The following is a transcription of: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=T69TOuqaqXI

It seems to be an extremely common experience amongst people who don't believe in certain non-scientific concepts to be told by others who do, to be more open-minded. This advice is typically based on highly flawed thinking including an inaccurate understanding as to what open-mindedness is. In fact being open-minded simply means being willing to consider new ideas.

Science promotes and thrives on open-mindedness because the advancements of our understanding about the reality in which we exist depends upon our willingness to consider new ideas. Indeed scientific discovery often requires entirely new ways of thinking. However, not only does believing in certain non-scientific concepts not automatically make you open-minded, it can often lead you to be the complete opposite.

A neighbor of mine once noticed a moving lampshade in my front room and said it was a ghost. When I told him it wasn't he said, "You've got the evidence in front of you." And said I was stubbornly close-minded and had no curiosity. When he finished his little outburst I reached down and switched off the small fan underneath the lamp to stop its currents of warm air from moving the shade. It was actually my neighbor who had no curiosity in this situation. He leapt to an immediate conclusion and dismissed all alternatives. When you label an event supernatural just because it has no explanation that's obvious to you, you'll inevitably misinterpret evidence and make invalid causal connections. You'll eliminate whole realms of alternative explanations before its even clear which explanations might be appropriate. And that's the very definition of close-mindedness.

People who tell others to be more open-minded about so called supernatural concepts often accompany this advice with one or more personal anecdotes they claim can't be explained. This is another flawed approach. Even if your experience can't be explained, that in no way strengthens the case for any supernatural concept. All it shows is that your experience can't be explained. Trying to suggest that a lack of explanation is evidence that supernatural powers are at work is actually a contradiction. In effect what it's saying is "I can't explain something therefore I can explain it".

The unexplained is just that, unexplainable. Furthermore, although it's quite reasonable to describe an experience and say you can't explain it, telling your audience that they can't explain it is senseless. Because your audience has no independent access to the event's you described. Nor any way of investigating which detail's you may have missed or edited out. If my neighbor had told other people they had to accept his ghost story because they couldn't explain the moving lampshade, how would anyone be able to agree or disagree without knowing anything about the fan heater. Expecting others just to take your word that you had a brush with the supernatural is simply unrealistic. Even if I saw someone disappear right in front of me, I'd recognize how unreasonable it would be to expect a complete stranger just to believe me without corroborating evidence, however personally frustrating that may feel.

Someone once tried to suggest to me that scientists who ask for evidence before accepting claims are about as close-minded as witch doctors. The idea that requiring evidence makes you close-minded is a fallacy. A willingness to consider new ideas doesn't commit you to accepting them unconditionally.

If someone you love was lying injured and unconscious, and a complete stranger told you she had some

magic powder that would cause instant healing if poured into the wounds, would you just accept this stranger's claim? Would it be close-minded not to let her pour a substance that you know nothing about into the open wounds of someone you love?

We're all skeptical about some things. If Alfie isn't skeptical about the existence of ghosts but Beth is, it may be that Beth's experience of other people's flawed evidence and logic has given her strong reasons to be skeptical. Now if Alfie develops a valid operational definition for what ghosts are supposed to be and produces valid evidence, Beth might one day re-evaluate and accept their existence. But it's important to remember that unless Beth says something like "ghosts do not exist" she's made no factual claim regarding justification or indicating a closed mind.

I've watched a number of people work themselves up into a froth about me having a closed mind on some paranormal issue only to realize when they start listening carefully that I don't actually hold the views they've rationally attributed to me. For example, when I say I don't believe in something, I've not said that it can't be true, all I have said is that I've not been presented with persuasive evidence for it. Now someone describes an entity to me that's logically impossible, then in those specific cases I might well say that X cannot be true, and I'll back up my statement.

But it's a classic debating technique to exaggerate and therefore misrepresent a person's position. And when you treat someone's statement of non-belief as an assertion that something cannot be true, this is exactly what you are doing. If you have difficulty accepting that other people don't share your beliefs, then that's unfortunate for you, because there's a lot of difference out there. But if knowing that someone's belief differs from yours causes you to lose a sense of perspective when talking to them, so that as soon as you hear certain trigger words you start grafting inaccurately assumed attitudes onto them, you're no longer communicating, you're merely rehearsing your own prejudices, and that's truly close-minded.

In the course of my life, I've been told to be more open-minded by people who believe in a god but not reincarnation, and people who believe in reincarnation but not gods. Both groups seem quite happy for others to express skepticism when they do, but not when they don't. To these people, open-mindedness seems to mean agreeing with me.

Then there are others, whose idea of open-mindedness is accepting the unreliable testimony of any random person with a spooky story. These people are often also fiercely skeptical of science. Certain comments can quickly reveal their poor understanding of what it is, and this results in two supreme ironies. One is that they are guilty of exactly the same skeptical attitude they criticize in other people, the other is that what they are reserving their skepticism for is a domain that emphasizes skepticism. In other words they are skeptical of skepticism.

Again, open-mindedness isn't about believing things. So believing about more paranormal things than the next person doesn't make you more open-minded, though it can be a sign that you are more gullible. And despite what some people might have us believe, it's not a virtue to be easily persuaded by people. Those who say that it is and that requiring evidence is close-minded clearly wouldn't survive one day in a court of law. After all what does the person with that attitude do in any situation where there is more than one version of events, and is it close-minded to require evidence of someone's guilt before locking them up? These attitudes don't stand up for a moment in the real world.

It would be absurd to suggest that we need evidence for everything we are told. When a friend tells us about their day at work, we don't ask them to back up what they say, and we don't stop enjoying films

and stories just because they contain incredible events. But when someone is trying to persuade us to accept something as fact or take some sort of risk, demanding valid evidence helps us distinguish true claims from false ones, and that's an invaluable ability in a world where believing false claims can seriously damage your wealth and your health.

Critical thinking is not incompatible with open-mindedness. On the contrary it empowers an open mind. Even though demanding evidence may lead you to occasionally reject ideas that are poorly supported but nonetheless valid, if and when evidence accumulates for those ideas, an open mind will allow you to reconsider them and possibly dislodge false ideas that you previously accepted as true.

This approach is promoted by science. By contrast, when you have an open mind but demand little or no evidence before accepting things, you leave your understanding of reality much more up to chance. Even worse, if you have accepted false ideas uncritically, and close your mind to anything that contradicts them, you won't recognize true ideas, even when the evidence is overwhelming, and you'll sabotage your own capacity for learning.

If you believe in pseudo-scientific and supernatural concepts, that's your privilege. If you want to put forward your personal reasons for believing in them, understanding that whoever is listening may have questions or find flaws in your arguments, that's fine. But if you are in the habit of targeting individuals you've never met and suggesting they're in some way deficient just because they don't believe in these concepts. If you reject conflicting evidence and counter-arguments without consideration but demand that others accept your arguments and what you regard as evidence uncritically, not only is that close-minded, it's controlling, arrogant and presumptuous in the extreme.

More importantly, when your trying to make it seem unreasonable for someone to want evidence before changing a significant attitude or take a significant risk. The mere fact that your claim requires the suspension of critical thinking should indicate it's not the other person that needs to demand less evidence but you that needs to demand more.

Before presuming to advice others to be open-minded, think about some of the widely accepted ideas that you dismiss without consideration. You might need the advice your dispensing far more than other people.

Remember too, that an open mind that demands little or no evidence before accepting them, will let in an awful lot of rubbish.