

On the aesthetic appeal of powerful ideas



Author and journalist Robert Wright on the dialogue between writing and research, why self-doubt is necessary, how meditation can alter history, and his theory of a more reflective kind of resistance.

August 7, 2019 -

As told to Mark Sussman, 2307 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Culture](#), [Journalism](#), [Politics](#), [Anxiety](#), [Identity](#).

Your books are, generally speaking, very research intensive, and they often involve immersing yourself in a wide range of literature from the sciences and social sciences. How do you move from doing all of this research to carving out an actual book with an arc and an argument?

First, I'll say there are people who have two phases, research and writing. [John McPhee](#), who I took a course from in college, is like that. He does research and research and research. Then that phase ends, and he's got all the notes he's gonna use, and he starts writing. With me, there's much more of a dialectic between research and writing. I'll do research, I'll kind of think I understand things or understand what I want to write, so I'll start writing, and then I'll realize I don't [understand], I have to do more research, start writing again, have to do more research, and so on. So for me there's definitely an ongoing dialectic between research and writing that does not seem optimally efficient. But I haven't figured out an alternative, and I think that's one reason that, for the most part, my book proposals have never born much of a resemblance to the book. You know, you have to write a book proposal to get a contract to write them. But there's typically very little correspondence between my proposals and the books, because the proposal is just kind of a bluff.

I'm a very slow reader and an inattentive reader and an easily distracted reader. So to the extent that I'm depending on written material, I'm in for a long haul, usually. My favorite form of gathering information is interrogation. Just ask questions and you basically get them to do research for you.

Do you find the research-writing dialectic gratifying? Often it's a lot of just sitting alone in a room or a library.

I'm fine with that part. I'm not a super-gregarious or extroverted person. As I said, I'm not usually a very efficient reader. On the other hand, when you want to make an argument, once you know what argument you want to make, and your reading is really motivated by that, I find it a lot easier to pay attention, because I'm gratified by the things that support my argument.

It feels good to finally identify the thing you're really writing about in the midst of all that research. It all clicks into place.

Yeah, very much. I mean, in a way it's like using your cognitive biases as motivation, right? You want your argument to be right, and that is motivating. So it actually literally feels good to find information that supports your argument. There's two questions you just alluded to, one of which is the gratification of having

what feels like a unifying insight. That is, I would say, more of an aesthetic experience, because the economy of explanation is beautiful, and if multiple seemingly diverse facts are accounted for by a single theory or a single idea, that feels like a beautiful thing. And if it's an idea you thought up, it is both beautiful and egotistically gratifying, because you thought it up. So that's all great, that's one phase. And then after that, you're trying to make the argument on behalf of the ideas. Then a second kind of gratification comes in. It's gratifying to find things that corroborate the idea, and the challenge is not to let that gratification blind you to the shortcomings of the argument.

This dialectic is really important. To, on the one hand, be able to go big and develop some large-scale idea or theory. Then, on the other hand, to have enough self-doubt. There are two ways to do the doubt thing. You can keep showing it to people who doubt it and have them find the flaws. Or you can be full of self-doubt, or at least have phases of self-doubt. One of those two things has to happen.

There's a pretty clear intellectual trajectory stretching from your first book, *Three Scientists and Their Gods*, to your most recent, *Why Buddhism Is True*. What do you think accounts for this sustained interest in the relationship between science and questions of belief?

I'm obviously drawn to big ideas with potentially big consequences. I don't know why that is. I was brought up religious and with questions of the fate of humankind and so on. Like when I was nine years old, my favorite book in the Bible was "Revelations." There was a big emphasis, implicitly, on human nature, because there was the idea that we're all sinners and require salvation. So I guess a certain kind of religious upbringing orients you toward big ideas. I don't know if that's the reason that I was drawn to them.

I do have an appreciation of this kind of intellectual beauty we talked about, the aesthetic appeal of powerful ideas. When I encountered the theory of natural selection as a sophomore in high school, I was a convert. It was just so powerful and explained so much. As I got drawn into that worldview, I kind of applied it, I guess you can say, to some of these questions I first encountered in religion. Human nature, human destiny, and so on. And that's what I've done, actually. Apply science and social science to questions of human nature and human destiny.

One of the central claims of *Why Buddhism Is True* is that Buddhist meditative practice can counteract cognitive tendencies that evolution has instilled in us—tendencies that may have once been useful but have become maladaptive. So, do you think that meditation has the potential to change the course of human evolution?

The things that make us susceptible to our cognitive biases, and also enable us to combat [those biases], were both produced by [evolution], unless you have some other metaphysical explanation. I don't see [meditation] as altering the course of biological evolution for the most part. I mean, biological evolution has happened. We are stuck. For better or worse, we have inherited its legacy in the form of human nature. I think meditation can help us transcend some of the more unfortunate parts of that legacy and in the process can alter cultural evolution.

There are two kinds of evolution that have shaped human history: biological evolution and then the kind of cultural evolution that only a pretty intelligent species can launch, and which in our case has become the formative process. [Cultural evolution is] now the thing that changes the nature of our being, because it includes technological evolution, the evolution of ideas, and so on.

Meditation is so personal, [but] it's a product of cultural evolution that can now change cultural evolution, that can change the course of cultural evolution in human history.

You've done a lot of thinking and writing about "tribalism" as a particular kind of cognitive bias that has shaped cultural evolution in general, and our current political moment in particular. Could you talk a bit more about that idea?

[The term "tribalism"] is in some ways misleading, and also some people find it offensive, so it's suboptimal on a couple of grounds. But what it refers to that's real is that human beings were engineered by natural selection to identify with groups, and sometimes in opposition to other groups, and that engineering involves some cognitive biases that distort their view of the world. And that's what I think of as the psychology of tribalism.

Your most recent project, the Mindful Resistance Newsletter, is related to the psychology of tribalism. Can you tell me a little bit about the origin of the idea?

The origin of the phrase "the Mindful Resistance" came in 2017. I was at a meditation retreat, and I was thinking about mindfulness. But at some point, the phrase "mindful resistance" popped into my head. And there's a thing about retreats where they can be ratifying experiences. You can have ideas on meditation retreats that you become convinced are important or good, somewhat the way it could happen with drugs. Things seem maybe more important to you than they might have if they occurred to you in a moment of sobriety, or when you weren't on a retreat. But for whatever reason, that seemed like an epiphany: the phrase "mindful resistance" [laughs].

As for the idea associated with it, I was already by now frustrated with the nature of the regular "Resistance," which to my mind is overly reactive, often plays into Trump's hands by responding not-very-cerebrally to his provocations, and doing exactly what he actually wants, which is to start screaming about a particular thing that allows him to point at you as examples of these evil coastal elites who hold [his supporters] in contempt.

So I thought we needed a more reflective version of the Resistance. And it isn't just that mindfulness meditation can put you in a more equanimous frame of mind and a less reactive frame of mind. There are also specific Buddhist ideas that I think can be well-applied to the current moment. For example, Buddhism is very against essentializing things. So, if you are thinking Trump supporters are just a bunch of racists, that's a form of essentializing that I think is, first of all, wrong and, secondly, counterproductively wrong. Because it leads you to not ask yourself, well, what conditions might we change that would reduce support for Trump?

I mean, if they're all just racists, there's maybe not much you can do. Whereas, if in fact they have diverse motivations, and even the ones who might be racist are more that way because of economic conditions they've encountered or things they've seen on TV or whatever, in that event, maybe there are things you can do to change things. So, it just seemed to me we needed an alternative to the regular Resistance, which is so driven by the dynamics of tribalism and tribal psychology, to its own detriment, I think. Buddhist meditation, in obvious ways, could equip you for a more reflective and productive approach to opposing Trump and Trumpism. And also Buddhist philosophy, in deeper ways, is well-suited to the task of approaching the problem.

A lot of people think we're at a crisis point as a species, and you agree. But most people who think that would probably point to catastrophic climate change as the thing that threatens to wipe us out. Your understanding of the crisis is different.

I think there's a failure to appreciate that technological evolution is bringing extinction-level threats that no one is thinking about. You hear almost nothing about biological weapons or the fact that a terrorist group could unleash them in a way that led to a contagion that killed hundreds of millions of people. You're just not hearing about that. You're not hearing much about how war in outer space could blind countries by destroying a bunch of satellites and thus get nuclear powers to freak out in a way that led to nuclear armageddon. And yet those threats are getting realer and realer.

So I worry about two things. I worry, one, about tribalism in the context of terrorism of non-state actors actually itself leading to a deployment of weapons, such as biological weapons, that's devastating. And then I also worry about threats involving nation-states. Tribalism is a problem for two different reasons in both cases. One is it's leading us to not think about these things, because we're all obsessed with this Donald Trump problem. And we don't have time to think about all of this other stuff.

And then the other way tribalism is a threat is, as it proceeds unconstrained, it increases the dangers of these things actually happening. You get these positive feedback systems. We've already seen the New Zealand mosque shooter say, "I hope I will provoke other attacks." The Islamic State says [after the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka], accurately or not, we're doing this in retaliation for the New Zealand thing. These kinds of positive feedback dynamics threaten to just make things worse and worse and worse.

My point is just that the cognitive biases that are making the world worse are so powerful that I'm not sure that op-eds alone are gonna get the job done. You could just write op-eds saying, "this is what we need to do," and try to appeal to people's reason, but it seems to me that having a frame of mind conducive to reason is not as common as we would like. And so maybe you need something that's separately addressing that problem.

And mindfulness meditation is not the only thing that can do that. In fact, there are other spiritual techniques, and then there are non-spiritual techniques. But I do think, at a minimum, the average human being needs to get better at just seeing the world from the perspective of other human beings, including rivals and enemies.

Robert Wright recommends some documentaries:

Wild Wild Country is cautionary tale for anyone who wants to be a spiritual leader. Or buy a lot of land in the Pacific Northwest. Both of those seem to be fraught with peril, and if you put them together, you're in particular trouble.

Searching for Sugar Man is both a reminder of how different the world was only 40 or 50 years ago in terms of how separate people in different nations were. And how little communication there was among them. And also just an amazing story about a musician, and if I say more I'll ruin it.

The lesser known Errol Morris is worth checking out, like Gates of Heaven and Vernon, Florida.

Name

Robert Wright

Vocation

Author, Journalist

□