

Are Groups Smarter Than Individuals?

The Reverend Roger Fritts
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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
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Individualism is an important value to Unitarian Universalists. We come out of the British cultural tradition that places a high value on the individual, something we share with other denominations that come out of the British culture such as the Congregationalists, the Episcopalians, and the Methodists. In this church our heroes are people like Henry David Thoreau who suggested that “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.” Thoreau lived the life of splendid individualism in a cabin near Walden Pond, except on those days when he walked to Emerson’s house to eat a good meal.

This morning, however, I want to suggest that we can over do this celebration of an individuality. Sometimes groups are smarter than individuals.

- As an experiment a sociologist asked the students in a classroom to estimate the room’s temperature and write down their estimate without talking to anyone else in the class. The average of the group guess was 72.4 degrees. The actual temperature was 72 degrees.
- Another sociologist asked two hundred students to rank a collection of items by weight. The group’s answer was 94 percent accurate, which was better than all but five of the individual guesses.
- In still another experiment a professor asked students to rank ten piles of buckshot by size. The group’s guess was 94.5 percent accurate.
- The Internet search engine, Google, decides which web pages to display by counting each link to a web page as a vote. Google assesses a page’s importance by the votes it receives. So when I type a word into Google, it decides in less than a second, of the three billion web pages, which page with the word I am searching for, has received the most votes. That page goes first on the list. Using this method Google has become the most popular Internet search engine.

These examples come from a book called *The Wisdom of Crowds*. The author is the financial writer for *The New Yorker* magazine. He argues that under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and the group as a whole is often smarter than the smartest individuals in the group.

For example, he describes the search for the submarine *Scorpion*. In 1968, in a terrible tragedy, the American submarine *Scorpion* disappeared on its way back to Newport News, Virginia. Although the Navy knew the sub’s last reported location, it had no idea what had happened to it. The area where the Navy began searching was a circle twenty miles wide and many thousands of feet deep.

To better focus the search, a Naval officer assembled a team including mathematicians, submarine specialists and salvage experts. The officer asked each person to independently give their best guess about the location of the *Scorpion*. The naval officer took all the guesses, put them on a map and looked at where they intersected, thus creating the group’s collective estimate of the location of the submarine. It was not a spot that any individual member of the group had picked. Nevertheless, the sub was found 220 yards from where the group said it would be.

This kind of evidence suggests that diverse and independent groups are intelligent. The key words here are *diverse* and *independent*. Diverse means a wise group is made up of people with different backgrounds, different

specialities. Independent means that the members of the group are thinking for themselves, they are trusting their own ideas and experiences.

Most of us are not looking for submarines, but in my imagination I started applying this to common problems. For example, because I was officiating at a wedding yesterday, I thought about the process of courtship. Parents, grandparents and siblings struggle with whether we should offer advice to young men and young women who are dating. Our model of romantic love says that what is most important is how each individual feels about the other person. If we feel an irresistible attraction to a man or a woman, and they feel the same, then we are encouraged to mate for life. As movies and television portray this model of courtship, the decision is private, made by two individuals who seldom consult anyone else.

But consider: the person we select as a life partner is one of the most crucial decisions we make. Given how important it is, perhaps we should take advantage of the wisdom of crowds. The evidence suggests that when it comes to picking a mate we should consult as many friends and relatives as possible. If a clear majority has doubts about the relationship, perhaps we should trust the wisdom of the group. On the other hand, if the majority says we would be crazy not to get married, we should trust the group's wisdom.

In the same way, I wonder if the wisdom of groups might also be used to help decide our careers. Most of us decide careers based partly on our interests and partly on who will give us a job. Perhaps we should encourage our children and grandchildren to seek out a diversity of independent decisions as they decide how they wish to choose a career. Perhaps instead of seeing the choice of a career as a private decision, our children and our grandchildren should work harder to consult as many friends and relatives as possible.

On the other hand, in some areas I have my doubts about the wisdom of the crowd. For example, in study after study ninety-five percent of adult Americans say that they believe in God.

I am comfortable with using the word God to refer to the purpose and unity that connects all the universe together. However I do not believe that the existence of God can be decided by the view of the majority. Crowds are only wise when they are both independent and diverse. When it comes to God the pressure to conform is so strong that I question whether most adults in America can think freely.

Unitarian Universalists are blessed by the fact that we are some of the most independent people on earth. We think for ourselves. We stand on our own two feet. We evaluate every claim using our own experience and reason.

We can have a discussion on any topic. I enjoy this about this church. Of course, we are not perfect. If a debate goes on too long most people will eventually lose interest and just go along with the more vocal and persistent speakers. If a debate goes on too long both independence and diversity are lost. I am almost always grateful to leaders who put a time limit on discussions.

Still, our democracy shows our trust in the potential wisdom of the group. When it comes to running the church, we often try to make decisions using the wisdom of the members of Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church. At the same time, in matters of religious belief we support individual independent thinking. We do not vote on whether God exists.

I believe that many of the important decisions we make about our lives, decisions about whom we marry, decisions about our careers, can benefit from our searching out the opinions of independent, diverse people. I believe that the management of institutions, including business, government, educational and religious institutions benefit from collective wisdom. Ninety percent of the time, we can get good advice from a group of independent people.

However, in trying to decide about religious beliefs, I trust my own judgment. Sometimes it is best that each of us march to the beat of our own drummer.