

An epidemic of ‘epistemic closure’

By: Kevin Foley – June 6, 2013

Epistemic: Of or relating to knowledge or knowing. Life is an adventure in learning if you’re attuned to things new and different. You discover, for example, that sushi is more than bait; that Bach can transport you; that Ronald Reagan was a moderate Republican, not a far right firebrand.

With minds open, we never tire of acquiring knowledge or questioning conventional wisdom. It’s invigorating to learn; it keeps us young and vibrant.

I came across the phrase “epistemic closure” the other day. It describes the condition of shutting down one’s intellect. It sounds like a disease and, in a way, it is.

Those stricken with epistemic closure tend to gravitate only to those sources of information that affirm what they think they know. Sufferers have little interest in learning or discovery. They have no appetite for challenging their beliefs and they represent all walks of life: teachers, attorneys, housewives, doctors, clergymen, even a former president, as we will see.

Epistemic closure symptoms can present as a lack of intellectual curiosity; chronic Sean Hannity watching; becoming angry or shutting down when listening to political points of view with which you disagree; believing Sarah Palin is a colossus of conservative thought; agreeing with Glenn Beck or Wayne LaPierre.

Other than robust intellectual stimulation, there is no known cure for E.C.

Epistemic closure was popularized not by a political progressive but by Julian Sanchez of the libertarian Cato Institute.

Sanchez wrote that conservative media have “become worryingly untethered from reality as the impetus to satisfy the demand for red meat overtakes any motivation to report accurately.”

Evidence abounds: Obama wasn’t born in America. Global warming is a hoax. The president let Americans die in Benghazi. The government will take your guns. Mitt Romney wins in a romp.

None of these are remotely true, of course, but all are or were actively promoted by right wing media types and, sadly, accepted without question as fact by too many conservatives.

It is possible to cure epistemic closure. Bruce Bartlett did. A celebrated conservative economist, Bartlett was an aide to Ron Paul and Jack Kemp before writing “Reaganomics: Supply-Side Economics in Action” in 1981. Bartlett later worked at the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation, in George H.W. Bush’s Treasury Department, and he supported George W. Bush in 2000.

Bartlett was the consummate conservative insider until, disillusioned with Bush’s failing policies, he criticized the president in a 2004 New York Times article.

“(Bush) dispenses with people who confront him with inconvenient facts,” Bartlett noted in the piece.

Shortly after his remarks appeared, Bartlett attended a reception put on by a right wing organization. Curiously, none of his conservative colleagues mentioned the article to him.

“I started asking people about it,” Bartlett wrote in *The American Conservative*. “Not one person ... cared in the slightest what the New York Times had to say about anything. They all viewed it as having as much credibility as Pravda ... assuming (their) view of the Times’ philosophy was correct ... why would they not want to know what their enemy was thinking?”

Bartlett was stunned.

“This was my first exposure to what has been called ‘epistemic closure’ among conservatives — living in their own bubble where nonsensical ideas circulate with no contradiction,” concludes Bartlett. “The final line for me to cross ... was my recognition that Obama is not a leftist. In fact, he’s barely a liberal.”

Bartlett discovered that many conservatives are supremely confident in most everything they know, no matter how transparently false or easily refuted, and they have no desire to examine or rethink what they believe.

Most progressives, on the other hand, never stop questioning everything they think they know. They never stop searching for the truth.