

# SHIT YOU SHOULD KNOW

We live in an age when ignorance is praised. Ignorance and division are being manufactured on a mass scale. There is essentially an industry teaching us to doubt what we know. Many corporate, military, financial, industrial food, prison, extraction, retail, public relations and media conglomerates are essentially gaslighting us, sowing division, distraction and ignorance.

Too often new knowledge is used against us, kept from us or gathered at our expense. Learning how to share experiences as part of understanding the bigger picture empowers us as individuals, as communities, as poor and working-class peoples. How do we learn to learn with and from each other, gathering information that enables us to build knowledge for our collective liberation?

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## Tell the truth

Emily Christensen

I asked my Grandfather for his most important piece of knowledge, and "tell the truth" was his response. Actually, he said 'Don't be a liar. I hate liars. That's why I hate Jay Inslee. Now another thing about Whoopi Goldberg...'

Grampa is a stout, red-faced, balding Italian man in his mid-70s. He has elevated the bearing of weird and apparently arbitrary grudges to an art form. He can't leave the house without an oxygen tube and he can get you the best deal on anything you need to buy.

My Grandfather is a Bully. As long as I've been alive he walks all over my Uncle Marty, my grandmother, and anyone else in his way. Marty has a deeply nostalgic personality, with a love of old jazz records, movies and TV shows on VHS tapes, and paperback mystery novels. He loves to write.

He is Gay, and worse, has never made any effort to hide it, or to mute anything about himself for anyone's comfort. He has Cerebral Palsy and has been intellectually and physically disabled since birth. My grandparents are deeply involved in his life and have a great deal of control over him.

My grandfather exerts tyrannical domination over every aspect of Marty's life-- his finances, who he can or cannot communicate with, his diet, everything.

Grandpa doesn't tell the truth so much as he experiences sudden outbursts of violent frustration, emotional dysregulation disguised as honesty. Furthermore, my grandfather has zero tolerance to any 'truth' being told to him. He prefers those around him to accept his tirades passively and silently.

He is by no means unique in this. There are myriad men, women, and institutions in our society who function by this same logic. Rather than addressing my Grandfather's misbehavior, my family takes the easier route of trying to put an end to the trouble by silencing my grandfather's detractors.

As far back as I am aware of, the women in my family have a habit of affiancing themselves to angry, dominating, volatile, and emotionally unavailable men. I took this arrangement for granted in my Grandmother and Grandfather's relationship. But with my own parent's marriage breaking up long before I was sentient enough to remember the dynamics of their married life, I assumed the strong single mother who raised me was inoculated by her divorce to this family curse.

When my mom took up with the man who is now her husband, a man who gives my grandfather a run for his money in terms of volatility, bigotry, and despotism, I was perplexed. My mother, who remains one of my grandfather's more vocal critics, was allowing the same dynamic which had stolen my Grandmother's happiness to steal hers. If my mother, an educated, independent, strong and willful woman, could succumb to the curse, was I destined to do the same?

My mother and grandmother both see themselves as disempowered victims of Love. They feel that their choices in spouses were not so much choices as whims of the heart which they were without agency over, rather than a subconscious recreation of the patriarchal abuse they were surrounded by. There is a pervasive myth that Love is an emotion we are helplessly at the mercy of.

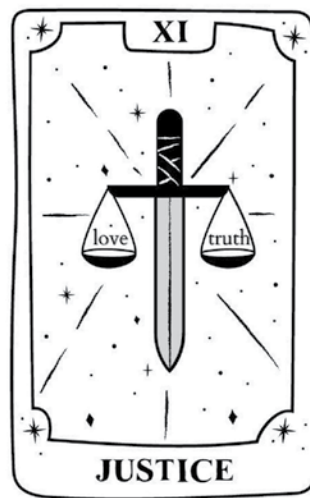
bell hooks taught me that Love and abuse cannot coexist, and that Love is a decision to respect, nurture, and trust another person (or even yourself). I have not only the ability but the responsibility of addressing and improving my own patterns. I have the responsibility of telling the truth.

My grandfather taught me a wide selection of racist epithets so etymologically and chronologically varied in their origins that one could describe his racism as a talent, albeit an execrable one. He also taught me that not lying means more than saying nothing--it means saying the truth--even when no one, least of all him, wants to hear it.

We don't have infinite time with the people we love. We have no control over how or when we will lose them or ourselves. All we can control is the truth we speak to each other in the present. The late bell hooks said in All about Love, "There can be no Love without Justice. And the heart of Justice is truth-telling."

Students began by inventorying their own stores of different kinds of knowledge, including self-knowledge and self-love; incorporating experiential and contextual knowledge; and finding their creative knowledge. Over the course of the semester, people from outside the class shared knowledge they had gleaned from their own lives and experiences. The students combined ideas from those presentations with selections from their "knowledge inventory" to produce essays reflecting the kind of knowledge that could be called "people's knowledge," or "shit you should know."

The essays appear in a series of books assembled by Anthony Zaragoza, who originated the class. Anthony also provided the words in this introduction, that give a taste of the richness of the program. The full introduction and more of the essays are available on line at [shityoushouldknow.com](http://shityoushouldknow.com).



This Christmas I went home for the first time in years, and there were moments where it was miserable. I hid in the basement and cried for nearly an hour when my mother said nothing after her husband cussed me out over a snowball fight.

I had the same small and helpless feeling when my grandfather, red-faced and out of breath, started cursing me on Christmas day for sticking up for my uncle. In years past, all the headache wouldn't have been worth it. But on Christmas day, after my grandfather calmed down from his tirade, my uncle came to me and said, in front of the whole family, "You are brave. You are Brave."

*This is excerpted from Emily Christensen's presentation as a student in the Peoples' Epistemology program.*

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## I am a treasure

Adriane Johnson

Being myself and understanding who that person is or wants to become has been an uproaring, enlightening, and amazing journey. Sometimes I feel out of place because I am myself. Myself is a diverse complex of emotions and growth.

From a very young age I wanted to be around a lot of people because I was uncomfortable within myself. I used others to build up my self-esteem and confidence. After finding out that I didn't know who this little girl was, I saw that people just wanted to use me because I was so nice and a people pleaser.

I cannot help that I have a big heart to understand, agree, be honest, debate, laugh, and disagree. All these things are a part of who I am and I thank God for making me. I have learned through my years of being in recovery that I used to hide, bury, forget, and or ignore events in my life where it caused me serious pain and trauma. Being myself has shown great results in my time spent with others in the solidarity of life. Being myself deserves acknowledgement of the fact of loving myself to the fullest. I am fearfully and wonderfully made by my creator and there is no one like me in the world.

As I was growing up my childhood was taken from me and I could not explore the inner voice of myself. There were things that kept me from showing people the real person I am. Being in an abusive relationship with someone who told me what he did to me was my fault... Letting people tell me that I was nothing, an addict that didn't care about anything but drugs--that I was not going to be anything in life. I know now that God made me perfect the way I am in all my weirdness so I have realized that I don't have to change myself for anyone or anything.

I know that I am a treasure and that God sees me as the apple of his eye.

*This is excerpted from Adriane Johnson's work as a student in the Peoples' Epistemology program.*



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## Learning from huckleberries and onions

Melissa Bennett

Cat-See-I-el, I come from two worlds. I am an Indigenous person who was adopted by a white family at nine days old. I come from people Native to the Columbia River and the Great Lakes. And I come from generations of Willamette Valley farmers. My family of origin are Huckleberry Women, and the family I was raised in are onion growers. So here's everything I know, that I have learned from onions and huckleberries.

### One. The best things begin underground

Have you witnessed a seed sprout? Watched it drop a taproot into the earth before it does anything else? All growth begins underground. In the quiet. In the dark. In a moment of rest. Before everything else begins. Before any transformation becomes visible. Incubates.Two.

### Two. Difference is our strength

There are approximately 920 species of onions, and 12 varieties of huckleberries. Although my great grandmother Esther Motanic Lewis, who was a traditional Umatilla Huckleberry woman, said that she could identify almost 30 varieties of huckleberry in the Cascade Mountains. She knew which ones made the best pies, which to use in jams and jellies, which for use in making medicine and which made the sweetest pancakes. Diversity offers us more flavor, more pleasure, more delight, greater wisdom and more opportunities for learning and emerging.

### Three. Our survival depends upon water

Water, uúšche, is our first medicine. Without it, we cannot grow, survive or thrive. Water connects us, it is the lifeblood of this planet. Without it, there are no huckleberries, there are no onions. If we do not protect our water, we lose everything.

Drink water and make drinking water a ceremony. Wake up, hold the glass of water in your hand. Thank it for giving you life. Drink it. Cultivate a relationship with water.

### Four. We must be flexible

We don't always know when the plants will be ready, or what weather or bugs will do to them. One year, worms may eat up the roots before the onions have a chance to grow and you may have to replant half of your field. One year, there may be a harsh winter and it's too cold for the huckleberries to flower and grow fruit and you may have to rely on what you canned the year before. One year, the onions may be pulled and drying happily in the sun, when a rainstorm turns them into mush and all you can do is feed them to the sheep.

Be flexible. This world is unpredictable and our ability to lean in and roll with what comes demonstrates our character.

### Five. Preparation is key

There is a joke about Black, Indigenous and People of Color and our relationship to time. About how we're always late. My auntie said this got turned upside down, what Indian time really means is being prepared. We show up before the berries are ready. We prepare ourselves with ceremony. We show the huckleberries we are ready to receive their gifts. We keep an eye on our fields. We spend the growing season tending the plants, weeding the onions, giving them water. We do the work of preparing for a good harvest.

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## To be with each other in an unhurried way

Savvina Chowdury

For lessons from my life journey, I'm drawing on the program I teach at Evergreen called "Narrative Psychology and Storytelling. We've been looking at the way dominant narratives have legitimized the exploitation of poor people, colonized people and slaved peoples, women and queer peoples. Narratives erased our histories, our cultures, our knowledge, our ways of knowing and being and our way of thinking about the world; our relationship to the world and to each other.

How did people fight back? What can we learn about them from what they did to survive, persist and persevere in the face of colonial onslaught? How do people preserve stories and world views, cultures and food ways, their visions of a future?

What prototypes of alternative ways of being in the world did they try to preserve? What were their collective forms of being and resisting? What strategies did they embody, through their communities, just through surviving.

I'm drawing on these histories as I think about my own history. I'm from Bangladesh, but I grew up in the Middle East. I came to the US when I was 19. When I think about the way my whole family has been dispersed and dislocated, I think about the way colonialism--and now new forms of structuring the society through the economic system we call capitalism--has done a number on my family.

It has dispersed us, dislocated us, uprooted us from our place of origin. We are now spread across the world so we can no longer be together the way we used to be. I think about my grandmother Shaheeda, who had a larger than life presence, and a way of holding our entire family together. She was born during British colonial times and lived through many many challenges.

She lived through World War II and through a famine that happened in my part of the world in 1947. About 3 million people died; now history is showing us how much that had to do with British colonial policies). She lived through partition of the Indian subcontinent that split her family between East and West Bengal. She lived through 1971, another war, where we became independent from Pakistan.

I think about this woman who through all of this also lost her husband at an early age. I think about this woman who somehow found inner strength to persevere and raise her four children by herself; to hold her family together and preserve our culture, customs and traditions. So even though I grew up abroad, I had a sense of what my culture was about.

### Six. Singing helps

The work--from planting, to harvest--is hard. It is physical, emotional. It takes time. It can wear us out, and make our bones ache. The work is hard, but we sing. Sing the songs of your ancestors, your family, your culture, your church. Sing your favorite song that's on the radio. Sing alone, or in the company of others. Sing with your voice, or with your hands, or with your body. Sing. Life responds to song, and it makes the work easier.

### Seven. Everything is better in community

The more help you have, the more effortless the work. The gathering of berries, the harvesting of onions, is smoother and goes faster with many hands. Find the ones who will gather with you.

### Eight. We create our own best tools

My Grampa, Bud, always wore his hat barely sitting on the top of his head. He crafted his own weeding sticks and attached burlap bags to belts to hold the weeds so they wouldn't reseed in the field. He had the cleanest crops. My grandmothers and aunts, they wove their own huckleberry baskets. Those baskets held the tiniest and largest berries and they never dropped any. When we intimately know our work, we will know what tools serve us best. Craft your own tools, no one is stopping you.

### Nine. Rest is everything

There are years when the huckleberries don't grow and are very difficult to find. Then they come back in abundance a year or two later. In winter, the fields are barren allowing the earth to rest, in order to replenish its own nutrients for the upcoming spring. Rest. Please, please rest. This is not optional, it is essential.

### And finally, 10. If you want something to prosper, throw shit on it first

My great grandfather Robert Boyce raised chickens for many years. When he died and my parents bought the property, the area deepest in chicken shit grew the best onions.

They were larger, taller, and tastier than those from the rest of the field. Suffering is not your enemy, it is your teacher. Do not roll over and let it drown you. Learn from it. Strengthen your commitment to life, and let it inform how you move forward. Flourish.

*Melissa Bennet (Umatilla/Nimipuu/Sac & Fox/Anishinaabe) has been engaged in spiritual care work since 2008, serving people of all and no faith traditions, primarily in higher education, mental health, and Indigenous settings. She participated as a presenter on an SYSK panel.*

I grew up going to schools that taught me how to read and write in English and yet I know how to read my language. I know how to read Bengali, and I think. "how did I learn all of this?" It had to do with the strength of my grandmother's spirit--how she held this family together, taught us our culture and customs.

One thing my grandmother loved to do was to have people over. My grandmother comes from an extended family that's really huge, and she would invite people over and make lots and lots of food. The whole day was spent cooking and preparing things, things today you would consider time-consuming to make, everything from scratch, and then everyone would sit and eat together.

Sometimes in batches, because there were so many people. You have to feed one batch of people, and then you feed the second batch, and people would take turns serving so you know the batch that just got done eating, then serve everyone else, and the whole time there are stories being shared. This was a way of being in the world that took the time to be with each other at a slower pace.

Here's another lesson from all of this. We don't take enough time to be with each other in that slow, unhurried way. That was something important to our way of being in the world that I see being squeezed out, because of the way we live our lives today. We're always hurried, always rushing and there's never enough time.

Not just that we're rushing throughout the day because of work, but even when we are with each other; we often tell our friends "like, I have this much time, only, to be with you." And that was so not the way our life used to be. We would spend sometimes days together, and it was just about being with each other, spending time together.

I've been talking about where do we draw our strength from, how do we preserve our culture, our traditions, the things that sustain us? This is a vision of a prototype of a society, of a way of life that used to be, and it's a vision of a society that still animates me.

This is the kind of society I want to be in, this way of living in the world. I want to hold on to this vision that animates me. This way of being in the world sustained my family and my community, and I worry that it is being lost.

This way of being in the world taught the younger generations just by being with each other, the values of the previous generations. It was also a way of being in the world that focused on people-making work. This kind of relationship-building work is people-making work. It nourishes people's minds, people's relationships, people's psyches. It nourished our mind bodies.

As I look back, I think about how to preserve some of the life lessons that I learned when I was a child. I want to carry these traditions onwards, and pass them on, and teach my nephew, who I see is hungry for these old ways of being and thinking and preserving.

*Savvina Chowdury teaches feminist political economy at The Evergreen State College in Olympia (among many other activities). She presented her lessons as part of a panel for the SYSK class.*

