

FOREWORD

A two-year-old and her teacher, Nick, lie on their bellies eye to eye with a worm. The toddler, Paige, tries to fit the worm into an organizational system—male or female, boy or girl. She asks, “Does the worm have a penis?”

Her question hangs in the air while Nick gulps and collects his thoughts, aware that this question could carry them into intimate considerations. “How much should I say? How little?” he wonders. And he finds his answer in “one of my highest values, which is to honor children’s thinking by ... responding honestly. I decided to stick with Paige and her curiosity, her desire to understand, rather than let my anxieties stifle the conversation.”

And so Nick opens a can of worms. Consideration of the worm’s anatomy leads to questions about gender and identity—not only for worms but for Paige herself. Those questions stir Nick to examine the ways he talks with children about what makes someone a girl or a boy. Unsettled and unsatisfied by the

outdated language he's been using, Nick recognizes that he needs to "dismantle my habit of talking with children about gender identity in fixed and traditional ways ... and do better."

Nick's story turns the idea of a "can of worms" inside-out. We usually think this expression points to a problem that's better left untouched, because it will lead to a whole litany of other considerations that are complex, daunting, possibly unsolvable. Best to leave the can closed, the idiom suggests. Nick's story suggests just the opposite: only by opening the can of worms can we encounter the complexities at the heart of human identity—the complexities that animate our understandings of ourselves and each other, and, so, carry us into deeper, richer relationship.

When Nick opens the can of worms, allowing the complexities to spill out, he finds himself confronted by his uncertainties. Committed to his continual evolution as an educator, Nick recognizes that what he once thought of as settled and certain no longer offers firm footing. And rather than scrambling to get things back into some sort of steady state, Nick commits to staying in uncertainty—a commitment he makes for his own growth, and for the children's flourishing. "I want to support children to be comfortable with complexity and uncertainty, with not-knowing, with asking questions that don't have immediate or straightforward answers," Nick writes. "And to do that for children, I need to strengthen those capacities in myself."

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön would smile, reading Nick's reflections. She's written a lot about uncertainty.

“The truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty,” she reminds us in her book, *Comfortable with Uncertainty*¹. “This not-knowing is part of the adventure.” She describes what’s at stake in our decision to linger with uncertainty: “As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, but we also feel that we deserve resolution. However, not only do we not deserve resolution, we suffer from resolution. We deserve something better than that. We deserve our birthright, which is the middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity.”²

The toddlers in Nick’s stories illuminate this “open state of mind.” They consider whether a boy can be a “sister Batman” and whether a girl can be a “boy Batman.” They ponder why a person with brown skin is called Black. They notice the many ways in which they share qualities of being human and the many ways in which they diverge from each other—while still being human, together. Nick writes that toddlers “have this ability to sit with the complexity of life and seldom let it consume them with worry or anxiety ... or the need for an immediate answer. My job is to honor this capacity, preserve it, and strengthen it.”

This book enters the world of readers during the first year of the global coronavirus pandemic and as the Black Lives Matter movement for restorative racial justice in the United States is moving into a new phase of action and truth-telling, disruption and reparation. The necessary capacity to be comfortable with uncertainty has become more evident with each day’s unfolding events. The children in Nick’s stories can instruct us

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about staying present to the complexities of human identities and shared human life.

During the pandemic, the human family has lived a shared story: the story of viral illness and shelter-in-place orders and economic collapse; the story of grief and loss and uncertainty; the story of generosity and kindness and service. Within the shared story of pandemic and quarantine, we also have unique stories shaped by our contexts and our diverse identities. Some of the stories that have our attention include:

- Stories about the disproportionate rates of COVID-19 illness and death in Black and brown communities;
- Stories about an eerie downtick in calls to domestic violence hotlines, which advocates suggest is a worrying indication of greater danger at home;
- Stories of hunger and long lines at food banks;
- Stories of business owners struggling to stay afloat, and of people remaking their businesses to survive these times;
- Stories of medical workers rising to the challenge—and struggling with endless exhaustion and signs of PTSD.

Perhaps we've been better able to take in these stories, with less buffer or barrier, because of our overarching shared story of vulnerability and uncertainty. Perhaps because we share the story of unsettled and disrupted lives, we can

empathize with each other's unique stories more fully than we once could: we recognize our shared humanness and that helps us see and affirm each person's distinct human life and rights.

Empathy: the capacity to set aside one's personal perspective to consider truths and realities unlike one's own. When we open our hearts in empathy and encounter other truths, other realities, we can be rocked by disequilibrium and uncertainty as we are unmoored from the comfort of the familiar and habitual.

Consider this letter by Sean Carter³, a potent invitation to white people to use the shared human story of the pandemic as an opportunity to see the reality of life for Black people in America:

Dear White America,

That sense of fear and dread you now feel whenever you leave your home—that feeling that one false move or letting your guard down for even one moment could result in your death—THAT is what it is like to be black in America ... EVERY day and ALL day.

So, when this pandemic is over for you, remember that black folks will continue living under quarantine until we find a cure for our 400-year affliction of racism.

When we listen with empathy to a story different from our own, we let it change us. That's what Sean Carter is asking white folks to do: to see the world through the lived experience of Black folks—and so, to see Black people more fully. To let the story of our shared human lives carry us to a recognition of the differing realities in the lives of Black and white Americans. To be moved into action by this story of generations of fear, violence, and inequity, joining the movement for restorative justice to address the “400-year affliction of racism.”

Can we open ourselves to the unknown? Can we sit in uncertainty? Can we become more courageous in our action? These are the questions of our times. They are the questions that spill out when we open *A Can of Worms*—questions that are formidable, yes, but which must be engaged. Can we be present to each other, with all the awareness that we can muster? Can we call forward the humility that recognizes multiple realities? Can we mobilize our empathy and stay curious about other people's truths? Can we contribute to repair and healing?

Nick declares, “Two key skills for participants in a democracy are the capacity to hold complexity and to understand multiple truths and perspectives.” Opening *A Can of Worms* is an opportunity to further develop those necessary skills as we linger with the questions in Nick's story, and take them as our own.

—Ann Pelo and Margie Carter

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REFERENCES

- 1) Pema Chödrön. *Comfortable with Uncertainty*. Boston: Shambala, 2002.
- 2) Pema Chödrön. *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Boston: Shambala, 1997.
- 3) Sean Carter, Facebook post. Used with permission.