Many of us have heard the supposed complaint of the frustrated member of a large organization: “I must be a mushroom. They just keep me in the dark and feed me bullshit.”

Actually there may be some truth to that, but we are even more like mushrooms than that quip suggests.

Our human brains are fantastic. In them we grow astronomical numbers of ideas during our lives, from the most mundane, like “What’s my favourite food?” to the most profound, like “What is the meaning of life?” and everything in between, like “What is First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto?”

The ideas grow as intricate networks of neurons in our brains. I read recently an estimate that each of our billions of neurons connects with, on average, 7000 other neurons, making for trillions of interconnections!

And, like the underground mycelium of a mushroom colony, most of our ideas remain out of sight, hidden inside our skulls.

Like the fruiting bodies of mushrooms, small glimpses of our ideas surface in our behavior, including our speech and writing, and often in surprising ways.

Our external appearance -- how we dress, decorate our bodies, and style our hair -- is an expression of some of the ideas in our brains. But many more of our ideas remain hidden unless we choose to communicate them through language or art.

And it turns out that, just like mushrooms, while many of us can offer tasty, nourishing ideas, others present poisonous ones.

I am both repelled by, and fascinated by, the poisonous ideas of other people, as I am uplifted by the beautiful ones, as you probably are, too.
Continuing with the mushroom metaphor, our experiences are the “soil” in which the nerve networks of our brains live and grow. Our familiar experiences ground us, and new experiences are what make our brains grow. They provide the “mental nutrients” that, along with our chemical nutrients from food, permit new neuron network connections to form in our brains.

Without new experiences our mental growth stagnates or even declines. But for our brains to grow well, we must have new experiences at an appropriate rate — not so fast as to be overwhelming, but not so slowly as to be under-stimulating.

Sometimes in our lives we mushrooms become “uprooted”, when we have to -- or choose to -- change to a new location or a new situation or relationship. That can be temporarily overwhelming, but it can ultimately provide new “soil” for our brain development.

The important thing for our mental health is that most of our new experiences throughout life be ones of positive challenge rather than fear-inducing stress. To help that happen, we can all try to provide healthy soil for each other’s minds to grow in.

Furthermore, we humans are not only like mushrooms, we are also like neurons. The similarity is really more than metaphorical. Just as the individual neurons in our brains make decisions about how to act, based on the inputs they receive from our senses and from other neurons, we individual people make decisions about how to act based on the inputs that we receive, through our perceptions, from other people and from our environments.

The most important inputs we receive from other people come through language. Language is what made us “human”. It is both our strength and our curse. Language requires us to express our thoughts in discrete, nameable categories, like man and woman or Russia and Ukraine or God and Human.

Those discrete categories make for efficient communication but they also give rise to conflicts – even violent ones -- over interpretation and application of those categories.
In the present era, as nodes of the internet, we individual humans can be connected reciprocally to thousand of other people. (Remember the 7000 other neurons that each of our own neurons is connected to, on average?)

And the billions of people on our planet are now connected in intricate communication networks that coordinate our activities as social animals and our interactions with other animals, plants, and inanimate objects on the planet.

Those connections make networks of people -- like the networks of neurons in our brains -- becoming structures which, when active, constitute our global thoughts as a species. And those collective thoughts cause us to act in decentralized, but coordinated, ways as groups -- as human supra-organisms -- to accomplish supra-individual actions large and small, like building great cities and space telescopes, or conducting wars or even just creating a new home for our Congregation.

Think about it: Trillions of nerve networks in our individual brains communicating with each other through social groups of many sizes, from families and local groups performing shared creative or destructive actions every day to millions of social networks on the planet resulting in actions of planetary scale.

It’s almost literally mind-blowing.

The results of our collective human behavior are truly awesome, but unpredictable, and beyond our individual abilities to control.

As individuals, we can only try to send mostly positive, encouraging signals to people and other beings that we are connected with, when their actions seem beneficial to themselves, to others, and to the planet as a whole, and we can try to send gentle but firm inhibitory signals to people and other beings that we think are doing harm, but without behaving violently ourselves.

We can all try to be careful in our use of language and be good “neurons” in our social networks, for the sake of our local and global sanity.

Returning to the mushroom metaphor, our collective creations, large and small, resulting from the communication networks of us human social animals -- creations ranging from the pyramids of Egypt to the medieval cathedrals of Europe to modern
particle accelerators and space telescopes to (on the poisonous side) the mushroom clouds of nuclear explosions, and even (on the nourishing side) to our own growing new home at 473 Oakwood Avenue -- are fruits of the local and global social mycelium of our human species.

For me, much of the beauty of life is the opportunity to explore the ideas of other people and enjoy the nourishing ones. That's why the people I know are so precious. Who knows what interesting and beautiful ideas may still remain to be revealed by them? And how much I would miss them if they were gone!

Thank you for letting me offer these few mushrooms from my mind to yours. I hope you find them tasty and nourishing.