The unknown is a concept of crippling anxiety for many. There is fear in the unfamiliar, the possibility of failure, of danger, of embarrassment. In a contrasting way, author Anne Morrow Lindbergh describes the “disappointments and surprises” of the unfamiliar, the failures and the unexpected moments that are the most fulfilling. In this sense, she is absolutely correct. The exploration of the unknown has led to unprecedented scientific development, cultural development, and personal development alike.

The principles of science are synonymous with exploration of the unknown. President John F. Kennedy is famously quoted as saying that the US would land on the moon “not because it is easy, but because it is hard.” In the face of public uncertainty, Kennedy set out to explore one of the biggest unknowns of modern humanity: outer space. Obviously, the moon landing was successful, and the subsequent technological development benefitted all aspects of society. Billions were allocated in research funding, and as a result, humanity expanded its sphere of knowledge greatly. Yet, this is not a recent phenomenon. One of the most famous scientists in history, Galileo Galilei chose to explore and challenge commonly held truth. He was ridiculed for claiming that the Earth revolved around the Sun, yet it was his desire to enter into the unfamiliar that led to the scientific advances by the US under Kennedy so many centuries later. Scientists throughout history—Kepler, Brahe, Boyle, Tyson, --
Hawking, Charles, Gauss, and more — made their names by engaging with the unknown, and humanity will forever be indebted to them for their tenacity.

Yet, this trend is not limited to the realm of science. Theorists of music know of the many “eras” of music, from medieval to classical to romantic. The most notable example of an exploration into the unknown is found in the baroque period, under the compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach is one of the few composers who can claim to have created his own era of music, and he did this by exploring the possibilities of a chamber orchestra. He, by exploring new territory in music, changed the face of string and orchestral music, employing elements of fugue and countermelody that can be found frequently in subsequent eras and even in the pop music of today. Like scientists, musicians are known for being barrier-breakers. Listening to a performance of Dmitri Shostakovich’s 12th String Quartet (written in the 20th century, which is considered “modern” by musicians) will demonstrate how musicians are continuing to explore the limitless possibilities of sound. By breaking the constraints of cultural norms and exploring the unknown, composers have brought lasting cultural development to fruition.

Finally, an exploration of the unfamiliar is a powerful tool of personal development in addition to the scientific and cultural benefits. This is best demonstrated by the
Life and legacy of Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau famously spent a period of his life living in seclusion on the banks of Walden Pond in the northern United States. Like Bach and Shostakovich, Thoreau helped to establish a new genre in his craft. Thoreau, along with others like Ralph Waldo Emerson, created the transcendentalist movement, now studied by millions of scholars and students across the world.

While his exploration of new ideas in literature is certainly notable, it is the content of his writing that is most important in the context of the theme of the unknown. Thoreau wrote Walden to summarize his thoughts and experiences throughout the time he spent on the pond of the same name. Reading Walden gives a clear impression of Thoreau as a dynamic character, one who develops and alters himself thanks to the knowledge he obtains. It is clear, therefore, that after his experience on the pond, Thoreau has changed for the better: he is more introspective, he has come to realizations about the world. Thus, Thoreau's decision to leave society and live in the unfamiliar wilderness led to his own personal improvement in a big way.

When Lindbergh writes of the unknown being "enriching," she severely understates the true benefits of exploration. The Unknown is more than "enriching." It is a demonstration of true humanity, a reflection of a true desire to understand
the world, and a crucial point of living in a changing world. The unknown has allowed the human race to develop, improve, and augment itself scientifically, culturally, and personally, and for these causes, it is clearly incredibly valuable.