

CURIOUS?

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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In my sermon last Sunday, I spoke about our ethical basis for deciding what to do and how to live. How do we determine what we ought to do?

I described three possible answers. One is that we ought to do what God tells us to do—an answer that makes little sense once we realize that divine commands are actually human ideas cloaked in divine garb. Some commandments are good to follow, of course, but others aren't. For a reliable source of ethical guidance, we need to look elsewhere.

A second option is to look out into the realm of human experience rather than up into the heavens. This approach asks about outcome. What would happen if everyone did whatever you propose to do? What would yield the greatest good for the greatest number of people? We find pitfalls here as well. Sometimes the needs of the few must take precedence over the good of the many. Some actions are right even if they can't be universally practiced.

The third option looks inward for ethical guidance. The ethical thing to do is what an ethical person would do—someone who has fulfilled his or her distinctive potential as a human being. If this happens, we will achieve the state of being Aristotle calls happiness.

The key to happiness, Aristotle insists, is virtue. Virtue is a state of character in which we fulfill our potential by living as human beings ought to live. Unitarian Universalists have often been described as believing in salvation not by grace or by faith, but salvation by character. We believe in virtue—the personal spiritual discipline of becoming the kind of individuals we ought to become, in order to live as human beings ought to live.

In my own catalog of virtues assembled from various sources, there are seven necessary virtues: wisdom, courage, compassion, justice, temperance, transcendence, and hope. Each virtue, in turn, is made possible by two or more character strengths that support it. The virtue of wisdom, for example, is a combination of curiosity (the acquisition of knowledge in the service of the good life) and discernment (the use of knowledge to make decisions about the good life). Today, we look at curiosity—what it is and why it's important.

Many of us first learned about the promise and peril of curiosity from a monkey named Curious George. The various books about this naïve and trouble-prone creature have sold more than 30 million copies since the first volume appeared in 1941. Like many children's books, this tale is more caution than celebration.

The first book in the series, titled simply *Curious George*, tells the basic story. The Man in the Yellow Hat, a gun-toting poacher tramping through the African jungle, spies George in a tree. "What a nice little monkey," he thinks. "I would like to take him home with me." The man puts his hat on the ground, and George, curious, comes down from the tree to look more closely. When George places the hat on his own head, the hat

is so big that it covers him completely. It's a trap. In a flash, the man picks George up and pops him into a bag.

The remainder of the book tells how Curious George survives a series of spectacular misadventures—at sea (his curiosity about whether he could fly like a seagull lands him overboard), on land (his curiosity about the telephone leads him accidentally to dial the fire station and lands him in prison), and in the air (his curiosity about a big red balloon ensnares him in a bunch of balloons and whisks him high into the air). Eventually, Curious George is rescued by The Man in the Yellow Hat, who takes him to the zoo. It is, the book reports, “a nice place for George to live.”

Presumably, the zoo is a nice place because there are fewer opportunities for George's curiosity to land him in trouble. Though he comes perilously close, his curiosity at least does not kill him, as it did the cat—the other thing most of us learned about curiosity as children. Curiosity killed the cat. Given the obvious danger, if you are going to insist on being curious, it is useful to have nine lives.

In his two-volume treatise on psychology published in 1890, William James makes note of this double-edged characteristic of curiosity. Using the evolutionary framework provided by Darwin, James points out that the excitement of being attracted to new sensations and novel experiences is adaptive, because it increases knowledge. On the other hand, the anxiety provoked by fear of novelty is also adaptive, because the new experience might be dangerous. The rustling in the reeds at the water's edge could be your dinner—or you could be its dinner.

In other words, curiosity can lead to danger or to opportunity. The story of Curious George emphasizes the danger. Today, I wish to highlight the opportunity. Either way, curiosity will change your life. In the end, the change will almost always be for the better. If the rustling in the reeds is indeed an alligator, you are better off knowing of its presence than continuing to live in ignorance. If your spouse is annoyed by something you've done or a colleague is irritated by something you haven't done, you are better off learning why and making amends, rather than allowing their feelings to fester. Curiosity is the antidote to ignorance, wherein lies the real danger. Curiosity motivates us to investigate the uncertain and explore the unknown.

In his useful new book titled *Curious?*, from which I took my sermon title, Todd Kashdan observes that curiosity is the engine of possibility and growth. “By being curious, we explore. By exploring, we discover. When this is satisfying, we are more likely to repeat it. By repeating it, we develop competence and mastery. By developing competence and mastery, our knowledge and skills grow. As our knowledge and skills grow, we stretch and expand who we are and what our life is about.”

Curiosity expands the domain of our lives—the range of our knowledge and the depth of our experience. The more we know about our lives and the more we understand about our world, the better our decisions will be about how to live. Curiosity is a personal spiritual discipline that leads, eventually, to wisdom.

The dictionary defines curiosity as “the desire or inclination to know or learn about anything... a feeling of interest leading one to inquire about anything.” Where does this desire to know or feeling of interest come from? Do some people have it and others not? Did George climb down from the tree because he was interested, while his twin brother stayed put because he was indifferent? Or is curiosity a feeling like hunger, which comes automatically when our minds sense a need for more information?

It is true that some people appear more curious than others, and different people seem curious about different things. Some people are curious about the physical world, while others inquisitively probe the world of ideas; still others eagerly explore the realm of feelings and emotions, both theirs and others. Even so, these ways of expressing curiosity spring from a common source.

The word curiosity originally meant “the application of care or attention.” It meant “careful attention to detail.” The word curiosity also signified the ingenuity and skill someone could attain through accurate observation and attentive awareness. Curiosity originates with care. It is the discipline of caring enough to pay attention. When this happens, curiosity turns from a danger into an opportunity.

Notice how curiosity works. When you pay attention to what you know, you begin to realize what you don’t know. When you become aware of what you see, you begin to discern what you don’t see. Only by carefully tracking the orbit of the planets did Copernicus realize that the Earth was not the center of the solar system. Only when scientists calculated the mass of the universe did they realize we don’t know where most of it is. Only when you notice the strained look on someone’s face do you become aware that you don’t know its cause. Curiosity is the discipline of caring enough to pay attention and thereby learning enough to make wise decisions about how to respond.

Allow me to take one final step and say how this kind of attentive curiosity can become a spiritual discipline. As you carefully pay attention, what does your curiosity motivate you to look for and prepare you to see? In its highest form, curiosity invites us to see the presence of the divine in the people and world around us.

Near the end of Walt Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself,” we find a passage in which Whitman rejects the idea that God is a separate object of our attention, like an apple or a tree. Rather, Whitman suggests, we experience God through our experience of everything else. He writes:

And I say to [hu]mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God...
I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least...
Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's
name...

I hear and behold God in every object, Whitman says, in each hour and each moment, in the faces of men and women, and in my face. What exactly do we see when we see God in this moment or this day, in the face of someone we meet or in our own reflection? What is the signature of the divine?

In my way of thinking, the idea of God names our conviction that the past has a refuge and the future has a source. We know that atoms are never lost in physical reactions. In the same way, we have abiding faith that no experience, no matter how painful or lonely, will ever be lost or eternally forgotten. We also know that possibilities must come from somewhere. We have faith that the future can unfold in a purposive

and meaningful way, even though it sometimes doesn't. God is the name we give to our confidence that the past has a refuge and the future has a source.

Curiosity becomes a spiritual discipline when we see the divine in other people. When our attention is careful enough, we bear witness to their past and help them realize their potential. We become the presence of the divine when people feel, because of our presence, that their past is safe and their future is possible. Their past may be filled with pain and their future shrouded in doubt. No matter: we mediate the presence of the divine when we bring comfort and hope.

When we invoke the idea of God, we name our conviction that the past has a refuge and the future has a source. To say that we are the presence of the divine in this world is not a metaphor. We are the presence of the divine.

Curious monkeys may end up in zoos, but curious people end up in something like heaven. They turn danger into opportunity. In a world filled with pain, they create a place of refuge and a source of hope. They discover the road to wisdom.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.