

Reading ONE

A Mash-up from writers who lived between 1844 and 1955: Charles Steinmetz, Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, Anatole France

The greatest virtue is curiosity. I think, at a child's birth, if a mother could ask a fairy godmother to endow it with the most *useful* gift, that gift should be curiosity. Never lose a holy curiosity. Be curious always! Knowledge will not acquire you; you must acquire it. So the most important thing is not to stop questioning. Your curiosity has its own reason for existing. If you tell me that curiosity killed the cat, I say only that the cat died nobly. There are no foolish questions, and no one becomes a fool until he stops asking questions. Indeed, curiosity is the very basis of education; and the one real goal of education is to bring us into the condition of continually asking questions.

Reading TWO

From the Culamalunkya Sutta of The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha

It is as if a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and kinsmen were to get a surgeon to heal him. Suppose he were to say, I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me.

Or suppose he were to say, I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know whether he is tall, or short....until I know what color his skin is;...until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow;...until I know whether the bowstring that wounded me was fiber or reed or sinew or hemp or bark;...until I know whether the shaft that wounded me was of wild or cultivated lumber;...until I know with what kind of sinew the shaft that wounded me was bound - whether of an ox or a buffalo or a lion or a monkey;...until I know what kind of arrow it was that wounded me - whether it was hoof-tipped or curved or barbed.

Before knowing all this, that man would die.

Similarly, a good life does not depend on knowing whether the world is finite or infinite, or whether there is eternal life, or whether the body and the spirit are distinct. Regardless of one's view, there is still birth, old age, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, sorrow, and despair... So I have not spoken of matters that are not conducive to spiritual peace.

And what *have* I explained? I have explained suffering and its causes. I have explained that suffering can be cured and how to cure it. For *this* is what is useful.

Tasting the Apple: The Ethics of Curiosity

By Guy Newland UUFCM 10/25/2009

Curiosity means inquisitiveness, the desire to know and learn about *anything*. A blogger who calls herself Green Whale vividly conjures it up: "I want to know about imaginary numbers, Saturn-shaped black holes in interstellar space, the Pueblo Indians, differential equations, Norse mythology, chaos theory, cytology, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, women in the Medieval Ages, how to read music, the habits of orangutans in the rain forests of Sumatra, Sanskrit, syllogisms, illuminated manuscripts, and how the first encyclopedia came to be published. Not least, *I want to know why I want to know all these things*, what this fire is that burns in my belly and that can be fed only by the pleasure of finding things out—only by knowledge for its own sake."¹

When I have mentioned that I was going to speak today on the *ethics* of curiosity, some folks have wondered, *curiously*, what question there could be: curiosity, it seemed to them, is obviously and unambiguously good. As suggested by our reading from Eleanor Roosevelt and so forth, a characteristic of modernity is unreserved enthusiasm for the sort of insatiable and omnivorous curiosity that Green Whale finds in herself. Einstein and friends celebrate curiosity as self-justifying, naturally *good*—and indeed one of the very highest virtues.

Lenny Bruce claimed that his politically incorrect humor made Unitarians so mad that they burned a question mark on his front lawn. That he could tell this joke shows how famously we UUs integrate curious questioning into our spirituality. The third of our seven principles encourages spiritual growth in an ongoing, open-ended process of learning. We teach children to wonder about world religions; as adults, we continue to learn about different traditions and evolve our own spirituality. And of course our fourth principle invites us to keep analyzing, searching, *asking questions* in search of truth and spiritual

meaning.

But note that the fourth principle calls not for relentless, headlong, truth-seeking at any cost. It calls for questioning that is both free and *responsible*. Even within our very modern principles, the word “responsible” hints that it may be problematic, or even immoral, to be guided *only* by curiosity, carrying out any experiment that might suggest itself. Perhaps inquisitiveness is not an independent and unambiguous good, but something that is good only within certain constraints. Let’s explore what curiosity has meant and consider this problem: How can it be constrained in such a way as to be responsible—and yet still be *free*?

Looking back, we find that curiosity has rarely gotten the great press it gets from modernists. The living tradition we share draws from many sources, including Judaism, Christianity and wisdom from many other world religions, including indigenous and earth-centered traditions that instruct us to live in harmony with nature. And these traditions are, at best, ambivalent about curiosity. We inherit from them notions of curiosity that are more negative than positive and, on balance, highly cautionary. Saint Augustine is among many writers who link curiosity directly to lust. He writes that in the eons before creating heaven and earth, God "fashioned hell for the inquisitive". Primordially, the curious one was Eve, who felt compelled by curiosity to pluck fruit from the tree of knowledge despite her Creator’s clear instructions to the contrary. Following this line, long tradition treats curiosity as a superficial lust to see or to know something new, a shallow thrill-seeking. In the catalogues of 18th century booksellers, “curious” simply meant pornographic. Beyond this, Blaise Pascal argues that curiosity is the vanity of wanting to be *the one who knows*, the one who can tell others, the one who publishes first or has the hot gossip. Blaming Eve, traditional critics often regard this as an essentially *feminine* vice; for example, Victor Hugo writes that, “Without vanity . . . without curiosity, in a word, without the *fall*, woman would

not be woman." Even in the 20th century, we find Ambrose Bierce sardonically defining curiosity as "an objectionable quality of the female mind."

In the classical world, the curiosity of Prometheus led him to conduct the world's first experiment. He asked Zeus to choose between two offerings: bones hidden in a thin layer of glistening fat or delectable chunks of beef concealed in tough ox-hide. Zeus was fooled into taking the delicious-looking but inedible bones, and he retaliated against humans by taking fire away from them. On our behalf, Prometheus stole fire back and Zeus famously punished him by having eagles eat his liver for all eternity. Not satisfied, Zeus also retaliated against all humanity for the fire-theft by sending into the world the *first woman*. And who was this woman? Pandora. Hesiod tells us that it was not malice, but simple *curiosity* that led Pandora—just like Eve—to open what had better been left sealed, thus releasing into the world all its plagues and evils.

Let's look at another tradition from among our sources. I have worked extensively with very traditional Tibetan Buddhists. Some are real philosophers, as insistent as we are upon the value of reason. They take pride in a highly developed system of logic that is integral both to their education system and, perhaps contrary to what we would expect, to their meditative spirituality as well. Yet their attitudes about novelty, innovation and curiosity are antithetical to modernity as we understand it. The modernist feels that if something isn't new, it isn't worth saying, or painting, or writing or publishing. Moderns find a sense of worth in asking *new* questions, writing novels—*new* stories—and making art that defies tradition: To be creative, unique and innovative as an individual is central to the modern sense of value. Even when something is not altogether new—as things seldom are—modernity requires that they be marketed as though they were.

Opposite to this, traditional Tibetan Buddhists say that there are an infinite number of things to be known—the number of fish in the sea and so forth—and all of them are *already*

known by the buddhas, the enlightened ones, their deities. Knowing all, and wanting relieve suffering in the world, the buddhas choose to teach only what is actually helpful for that purpose. So if we, like the buddhas, care about what will be helpful to others, then we must focus on studying what the buddhas teach. Personal innovation is trivial or else betrays arrogance, because if some idea *is* actually new in the world, it must be either wrong or irrelevant to the practical purposes of alleviating suffering. Why? If it were useful and true, the buddhas would have already taught it.

This sort of cultural context has been pervasive in many periods and parts of the world. And within such contexts, human curiosity still *does* lead to new ideas—of course, naturally. But these new ideas must be framed as a revelation from on high or else the proper interpretation of an earlier revelation. Operating within the boundaries of this sort of piety, personal curiosity is good. But the curious who ignore these rules threaten tradition and thus may find themselves threatened by the authorities who guard tradition.

Although inherited from our sources, such attitudes are precisely what we reject in order to create an enlightened, modern, and liberal spirituality. We reject the idea that social norms and tradition are always better than the creativity of free-thinking, non-conforming individuals. The scientist gets tenure, or the Nobel prize, not for re-reading old ideas and singing hymns to their perfection, but for developing new ideas that displace old ones, constantly improving and reshaping our model of how the world works. Most of us reject the claim that everything worth knowing is already known, just as we reject the notion that evil springs from Eve's irrepressible curiosity. And we emphatically reject the structures of patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia that the Eden story legitimates. Having tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge, we want more.

In fact, we want as much as we can get. Curiosity is our birthright and our natural endowment. It is evident not only in humans, but in many animal species. Animal

behaviorists classify curiosity not as an instinct, but as an *innate emotion* that can be expressed in many flexible ways. Many suggest that the evolutionary basis of curiosity is foraging, the inquisitive seeking out of food and other resources.² Among humans, we can readily see that when infants and toddlers feel secure and loved, curiosity naturally carries them to new understandings and skills.³

But if we grant that inquisitiveness is natural and innate, and that it is *not* the source of all misery and evil, then does this mean that curiosity *per se* is always good? We have to consider this with care. Traditional critiques of curiosity are ugly, overblown and distorted, but perhaps had *some* merits; and perhaps the modernist romance with curiosity has left us with some blind spots.

The Nazi doctors were curious. Their experiments created horrific human torment, but scholars have argued that they were, by and large, psychologically normal. Like other scientists, and other humans, they burned with insatiable curiosity; they sincerely wanted to know. Their research was conducted with diligence and rigorous methodology; they were supported and honored by the medical establishment of their society and their government. But their scientific work was perfected by the same horribly evil acts wherein they completely failed as human beings. Thus, it would seem that something other than scientific curiosity must limit or constrain science in order for science to be humane.⁴

Consider a case that is happening here and now: The University of Michigan holds the remains of 1,400 Native Americans in its archaeological collections. Researchers and museum curators desperately want to keep these items in order to satisfy their curiosity, that is, to advance scholarly understanding of earlier human cultures. The Little Traverse band of the Odawa, the Bay Mills Indian community of Sioux St. Marie, and the Native American Graduate students of U. of M., have demanded that these human remains be turned over to Native groups for proper and respectful burial. As it happens, the Native American Graves

Protection and Repatriation Act requires that Native remains be returned to affiliated Native groups, and specifies that when no contemporary Native group can be clearly linked to remains, there be consultation with local Native groups on how to resolve the issue. The U. of M., under intense pressure, finally began such consultations last week—*nineteen years* after failure to do so became a violation of federal law.⁵

Or listen to the voice of Hopi scholar Frank Dukepoo: “Indigenous populations represent a large part of the world's genetic diversity, so scientists are very interested in us. To them, we are *objects of curiosity* rather than partners in research. Foundations and corporations fund and conduct research on us without meaningful consultation, without consideration of *our* interests. Scientists are simply determined to understand the structure and sequences of genes, and sometimes they even change the genetic structure of organisms, permanently altering life forms. . . . This contrasts sharply with our worldview, in which all life is a sacred gift from the Creator.”⁶

Certainly curiosity has been a prerogative of the powerful, a prerogative of empire. Colonialists and neo-colonialists, in pursuit of their interests, need local knowledge derived from missionaries, spies, satellites, explorers, trade-representatives, scholars, tourists, and co-opted natives acting as surrogates on the ground. The data thus obtained, in good faith or bad, is *knowledge as power*, and it is the property of the corporate or national empires that gather it. It rarely benefits the masses inhabiting and lending colorful diversity to the four corners of “our world.”

What *would* it mean to be responsible in our curiosity? To explore this, let's consider the roots of the word curiosity. It derives from the Latin *curiosis*, meaning "fastidious, diligent, curious, and careful." *Curiosis*, in turn, derives from the root *cura*, to care, which suggest both the meanings *to care for and cure* and *to worry about*.⁷ Curiosity's root “*cura*” comes down to us in words such as “*cure*,” (in the sense of healing), *curator* (one who takes

care of a collection) and the Anglican church's *curate* (a minister who cures, or takes care, of souls).

I will argue that curiosity forgets its better nature not only when it is idle or morbid, but also when it neglects its ancient etymological roots in *care* and *curing*. A responsible curiosity genuinely weighs the risks of any inquiry, the danger as well as the benefit of an experiment, technology or medicine. We should never treat persons as *objects* of curiosity, or as *means* to the end of our greater knowledge, but instead respect them as bearers of inherent worth and dignity.

Moreover, Buddhism and other traditions remind the curious to choose not only their methods but also their questions with *care*, grounding their search in ethical purpose. Modernists sometimes boast that they seek knowledge purely for the sake of knowledge, but we ought to be question whether this is an adequate justification. Buddhists are correct that there are always infinite questions that could be asked. When someone is wounded by an arrow, is it right to choose that moment to analyze from what species of bird the arrow-feathers were taken? We should ask questions and take actions that, as best we can judge, are likely to help.

And, of course, this is not hypothetical. Many are wounded now. Life is short and human suffering is great. Children are starving while the planet stinks with the waste products of our ravenous consumption. Our traditional sources tell us that, in the face of death, the way to find meaning and purpose is to serve others. Thus, a responsible search for truth is judicious rather than carefree, careful rather than careless, even in choosing its questions. We should set firmly in mind, and keep as our compass, a determination to care for other living beings.

If we are willing to acknowledge that curious inquiries ought to be responsibly constrained by an ethic of care, then who can or should interpret and enforce that ethic?

Governments actually can do much good, as in the case of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, or in the case of Title 45, part 46, of the U.S. Federal Code, which sets minimum ethical standards for dealing with human subjects in all research conducted at institutions accepting federal funds.

But we can't make governments that the final arbiter. In pursuit of *its* values and ideology, the Nazi Reich funded and fomented atrocious experimentation on Jewish and gypsy prisoners. Then again, the recent Bush administration notoriously and aggressively sought to constrain scientific inquiry so as to allow only research methods and research conclusions that fit its fundamentalist faith. Or take the case of the Dalai Lama, head of the Tibetan government in exile. He states that as a Buddhist he accepts anything established by reason and science. Yet when he heard presentations from Western academics on the latest and best scholarly analyses of Buddhist history, he was moved to remark that he could not accept their conclusions. "If I believed what you have just told me," he said, "then the Buddha would not be truly enlightened, but would only be a nice person."⁸

If we cannot fully trust religious institutions or the state to balance freedom and responsibility, then to what or whom can we turn? I suggest that the answer is: our own power, as individuals and in groups, to keep asking *deeper* questions. That is, to transcend the modern romance with pure curiosity as purely good, we need a healthy skepticism about our curiosities. Insatiable curiosity ought not be the one unquestioned and self-justifying thing; it must itself be investigated as to both its ends and means.

We are true to ourselves as fully *human* questioners when we are *meta-curious*, demanding to know *why* we spend so much time browsing or twittering or gossiping. How are we led to pass our days wondering about the sex lives of celebrities, the supposedly malignant nature of Muslims, or the amazing coolness of every newly invented gadget? Is this kind of curiosity actually making us happy? Might there be something more curing,

more caring, that we could ask?

Lucius Cassius, the honest and wise Roman judge, was in the habit of asking, time and again, *Cui bono?* (Who benefits?) Who benefits from my asking certain questions rather than others? Who benefits from the life-energy I dedicate to what I somehow find myself wondering about? Who will profit and who will, in the end, be happier? Curiosity can be free and responsible only when we abandon the modernist dogma that “There are no stupid questions, and so any curiosity I have justifies itself.” Isn’t this intellectual hedonism?

Oscar Wilde tells us that we have an insatiable curiosity to know everything except what is worth knowing.⁹ So there IS a good question: What *is* worth knowing? What is worth giving our lives over to wondering about? It is not a question one UU can answer for another.

I end this with just one possible answer: Plato thought we should seek first to know ourselves.¹⁰ Rather than wondering about the foibles of others, we could interrogate the very nature of our own questioning minds. While the Enlightenment in the West broke down religious barriers to inquiry about the external natural world, the enlightenments of some other cultures focused on “inner technologies” for systematically investigating and transforming the landscapes of our personal thoughts and feelings. Combining such insight with Western traditions of psychology and social justice, some say that we *best* prepare ourselves to care for others when we mindfully explore not molecules and machines, but the very specific textures of our most painful and troubling emotions. If we have the courage to look with care and steady gaze, with kindness *and* with curiosity, at our own wounded hearts, our own grief, anger, and shame, then we may find, sooner than we think, a measure of healing that we can share with others.¹¹

Well: I wonder if *this* is something worth being curious about.

¹ <http://iammyowncountry.blogspot.com/2007/04/curiosity.html>, slightly edited for use here.

² Wikipedia on curiosity

³ Amy Laura Dombro at <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/amylaurado408932.html>

⁴ http://www.focusing.org/apm_papers/rabinow.html

⁵ my interpretation of facts presented at: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2009/10/16/state/n123939D13.DTL&type=health>

<http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/michigan/news.newsmain/article/0/0/1567192/Michigan.Morning.Edition/Indian.Bones.and.Artifacts>, and other news sources including the Detroit Free Press.

⁶ The Indian People's Council on Biocolonialism publishes the on-line guide "Indigenous People, Genes, and Genetics". The original draft of this is credited to Frank Dukepoo, but what I cite here is an edited version of the current edition, which has been revised/updated by the Council since first created. See <http://www.ipcb.org/publications/primers/htmls/ipgg.html>.

⁷ We still use the word "care" to mean worry, as for example when we say "carefree". In fact, the expression "curiosity killed the cat" probably derives from the phrase expression "care killed a cat," wherein "care" means "worry," in 1598 Ben Jonson play.

⁸ From Don Lopez's *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

⁹ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_public_have_an_insatiable_curiosity_to_know/158689.html

¹⁰ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/to_be_curious_about_that_which_is_not_one-s/149018.html: Plato: "To be curious about that which is not one's concern while still in ignorance of oneself is ridiculous."

¹¹ Rebecca Crane's *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy*, p19