

A HOLY CURIOSITY
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OPENING WORDS *The Tree of Knowledge* ~ LeeAnne McIlroy Langton¹

I noticed that most of my students
Were gazing longingly out the window
On an unusually beautiful
Southern California morning
I paused in my lecture to discover
That they were collectively noticing the unusual fruit
Exploding on the tree just outside our window
“What kind of fruit is that?”
They wondered with more curiosity than
They had ever shown for Plato or Rousseau
And so I told them about the pomegranate
How according to the Q’uran, it filled the gardens of paradise
How its image had once adorned the temples of Solomon
How it doomed Persephone to Hades
How it symbolizes prosperity and fertility in Hinduism
How it came here to us:
From the Iranian Plateaus to Turkey
Across the Mediterranean and transported across the oceans
By the Spanish conquistadors
How the city of Kandahar – now bombed and ravaged –
Was once reputed to have the finest pomegranates in the world
I told them that this was my favorite tree
And then we all went outside for a moment –
To marvel at this tree
Just staring for a moment
While the wind blew
Across our faces, a tender caress across the ages
And then the moment was gone –
The next day I walked into class
And someone, anonymously, had placed a single pomegranate
On my desk at the front of the class, (*put pomegranate on bemah*)
An altar before thirty students,
All newly baptized –
The red stain of pomegranate seeds outlining
Their smiles

STORY FOR ALL *The Gruffalo’s Child* ~ Julia Donaldson

¹ <http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2014/03/leeanne-mcilroy-langton-tree-of.html>

A 'child' heads out a night, curious about the Big Bad Mouse, finding other curious creatures along the way.

READING

Holy Curiosity

~ Alicia Forde²

In the story of the Little Prince,
there is a compelling scene in which he
arrives on a new planet and encounters a businessman.

We know it's a businessman because he is counting
he is too busy counting to lift his head in response
to the Little Prince's greeting.

He is behind his desk working on a huge ledger,
counting, much like this:

"Three and two make five. Five and seven make twelve. Twelve and three make fifteen. Fifteen and seven make twenty-two. Twenty-two and six make twenty-eight. Twenty-six and five make thirty-one. Phew! Then that makes five-hundred-and-one-million, six-hundred-twenty-two thousand, seven-hundred-thirty-one."

When he takes a breath, the Little Prince asks:

"Five hundred million what?"

It is such a simple question isn't it?

But, the man, the one counting only responds to the Little Prince in this way:

"Eh? Are you still there? Five-hundred-and-one million

I can't stop...I have so much to do! I am concerned with matters of consequence.

I don't amuse myself with balderdash. Two and five make seven..."

Matters of consequence.

There is he was, behind his desk counting without pause
counting a thing of beauty whose name he could not remember

"The little glittering objects in the sky" he called them.

Stars!

He was counting and recounting stars, gathering them up
by the millions, owning them, banking them in hopes of one day
being rich from selling them.

He was tending to matters of consequence.

The businessman in this story is by no means unique!

When invited into a moment of human connection

When invited to ponder the little glittering...the stars,

to notice and grow playfully curious about them

He declined. He would lose track of counting.

He would have to stop, break away from his ledger, look up

² <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uucollective/2012/05/holy-curiosity/>

...take in and behold the "little glittering objects in the sky."

The stuff of dreams...

To take them in would mean opening himself up to learning more...

He declined because the matters of consequence to which he was attending were far too important and could not wait.

All questions were interruptions...

All moments of being invited to engage were "balderdash" he had no use for the person before him seeking to be in relationship

So it is with all of us sometimes.

We are drawn into important tasks and forget the whole world around us ready for our curious gaze.

What if we attended to each other...

To those ordinary encounters and conversations with intrigue?

What if instead of clinging to certainty we paused and made room for holy curiosity?

The poet Rumi writes:

This being human is a guest house

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness

Some momentary awareness comes

As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all, he says.

Be grateful for whoever comes,

Because each has been sent

As a guide from beyond.

Every moment, every interruption, has something to offer something to teach...

The beauty is in being able to greet each new or familiar arrival with a learning mind rather than a knowing mind.

And, forgive ourselves when we are not able to...

What if you had one moment today in which you were gently interrupted from "tending to matters of consequence" or in which you encountered the unfamiliar

What if you paused and viewed that moment as a guest?

An unexpected visitor from whom you had much to learn.

What questions would you ask?

How would you listen?

How would you choose to be?

MESSAGE *A Holy Curiosity* ~ Rev. Julie

The closing circle at the Canadian ministers' gathering this past week included the invitation to speak two words into the centre...the first to describe how we were feeling in the moment, the second to name what we were taking from a packed week...packed with deep conversations, business, and programming. I said I felt 'full'...full of ideas, full of stimulation, full of food. And that I was taking 'inspiration'...Inspired by our collective visions for the future of this faith, inspired by the commitment of my colleagues, inspired by possibility. It was a full and inspirational week.

Heading to the airport at midday on Friday, my cab drove right into the middle of the student climate action strike in downtown Calgary. After a week of snowstorms and hail, the day was warm and sunny, and large groups of students and their allies were gathered on either side of a busy street chanting responsively, from side to side. "What do we want? Permafrost. How do we want it? Frozen."

I rolled down my window and hooted my support, and the cab driver, surprisingly, honked in agreement. It was exhilarating. Then, all too quickly, the moment passed, and I was tossed into reflection. I thought about a conversation I'd had a few days earlier with a respected colleague, who told me of a personal transformation... an awakening calling them to focus on the climate crisis...in their ministry, but also with their body. That is, they are embracing a willingness to put themselves at physical risk to speak up for the planet. "We may only have twelve years," they said, "and the upcoming federal election will determine who is going to be our leaders for at least the next five."

I had listened, feeling chastened. I mean, in the face of that kind of commitment, one has to wonder what I am doing with this one wild and precious life, on this one wild and precious planet.

And I thought with dismay about my ministry and this morning, and how we're focusing on curiosity... an ostensibly benign and toothless subject. Ostensibly.

Curiosity, says poet/composer/blogger Nik Beeson, "is the human trait that has enabled a physically feeble species...to become completely dominant. It's the drive that has led to every important invention and exploration... Curiosity is a dynamic of ongoing inquiry... It's a proactive journey of questioning, rather than a reactive defensive entrenchment. Curiosity is a call towards something, rather than a flight from something."³

Curiosity is an enabler, a driver, a call. It is dynamic, and virtuous, and proactive. Curiosity has superpowers.

We have already touched upon the power of curiosity for our earth and our place in the universe...curiosity as an encounter with the world's holiness. To marvel at a pomegranate tree, until the wind blows a tender caress across our face.⁴ To ponder the little glitterings...the

³ <http://www.nikbeeson.com/why-curiosity/>

⁴ <http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2014/03/leeanne-mcilroy-langton-tree-of.html>

stars...the stuff of dreams...and to pause to welcome as a guest all that we encounter.⁵

When we listen, and watch, and get curious about the natural world, we are changed. Yes, the world becomes more vivid, more alive. And yes, the ensuing love for the world makes it less likely we will do it harm, and makes it more likely that we will work for its salvation. But it also changes us. Us. Inside. Curiosity makes us less fearful, more open...less reactive, more engaged, less entrenched. Curiosity softens our hearts...for ourselves, for others, and for our planet.

Joanna Macy, speaking of hope in uncertain times, has said that if we're not afraid of our despair, nothing can stop us. And this is another of curiosity's superpowers. It has the power to make us fearless. In her book, *Rising Strong*⁶, Brené Brown lifts up curiosity to as a necessary tool to navigate the turbulence of the 21st century. She suggests that curiosity helps us to get up again and again, and to make it through. She encourages us to feel what we are feeling, and to notice where we are getting triggered. And then to get curious...curious enough to walk into our own story.

Brown says that curiosity makes it possible for us to 'rumble'...that is, to get honest, and to dig into tough things, and to gain a deeper understanding of ourselves. Doing this 'rumble', she says, is how we engage in our lives with courage and compassion. Rumbling helps us to imagine new, more courageous stories that transform who we are. Rumbling creates new possibilities.

And all because of getting curious.

Oh, and then there's another superpower...curiosity has the power to make us vulnerable.⁷ Okay, even saying that, as if it's a good thing, makes me a little nervous. I'm not so sure I want to be vulnerable. But I also know invulnerability is more to be feared. Trying to be invulnerable, invincible, and always right fosters self-righteousness, disconnection, and polarity. And those kinds of positions are pretty much what have gotten us into this fine mess.

When my colleague told me about their commitment to climate change action, I thought about it in relation to my commitment to undoing white colonialist culture. I felt challenged to hold racism up against climate change as if we had to choose one...as if they are in some kind of competition. I recognized that little voice inside that didn't want to 'switch teams' or to abandon my commitment. I didn't want to be wrong about focusing on dismantling whiteness. I said this to my colleague: that the pain of racism and the pain of our earth are cut from the same cloth; if we don't heal one, the other cannot be healed. And as we heal one, we will heal the other. In order to do what needs to be done to turn the tide of climate change, we have to address the systems of white supremacy that have led us down a destructive path, and which try to keep our feet glued to it. And that as we undo whiteness, we will have the solidarity, across diversity, to do the hard stuff that needs to be done to change our relationship to the planet.

I don't want to give up on what I've committed to...but what if I'm wrong? If I'm really going

⁵ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uucollective/2012/05/holy-curiosity/>

⁶ <https://www.meaningfulhq.com/rising-strong.html>

⁷ <https://medium.com/@nikbeeson/curiosity-vulnerability-93d8acbff258>

to be open-minded, I have to be curious about the commitments I've chosen and be open to making adjustments, right? I have to find new and humble ways to be both committed and open.

When we're curious, we admit that we might not have the answer, or that the answer we have might not be right, or might not be complete. Curiosity necessarily arises from a state of unknowing, so it requires us to show our soft and ignorant underbelly.

In an article about intellectual humility⁸, Brian Resnick says that to be curious is to be open to learning from the experience of others. He feels that our society wrongly rewards confidence and bluster, noting that Michel de Montaigne, way back in the 16th century, said, paraphrased, that "the plague of humankind is boasting of our knowledge." (I think we all know where certainty has gotten us.) When we think we are right, then the 'other', whoever or whatever that might be, is wrong.

When we are sure we are right, we enter into judgment. And just as curiosity softens our hearts, judgment hardens it. Certainty...the certainty of being right or having the capital T truth, puts up walls between us...walls that make it impossible to connect across difference.

Dan Kahan, professor of law and psychology at Yale University, has shown that pitching information and analysis to people for the sake of altering their political viewpoint usually serves to further entrench deeply held beliefs. But, Kahan argues, a curiosity mind-set opens one up to exploration and surprise that goes beyond the desire to simply confirm one's own beliefs.⁹

I wasn't alone in that cab, and when the driver honked at the protestors, and went on to speak of his support of the students, my co-passenger went into curiosity mode. They asked questions. They asked what the cabbie thought needed to happen (remember, we were in Alberta.) But when, in what I judged to be a spectacular leap, the driver made an impassioned connection between climate change and the need for licenses for anyone who wanted to have a baby, I had a kneejerk reaction. My interior metal door slammed shut. 'Okay, enough,' thought I. 'Can we just have silence for the rest of the ride?'

But my colleague continued to question. Openly. In the spirit of wondering. Which allowed me to breath and simply appreciate the encounter. Which allowed me to 'rumble'...to wonder why it can be difficult for me to listen to someone whose opinions differ...about what stops me from being more curious. And to consider how the cab ride would have been different if my curious friend hadn't been with me.

I want to learn to be less reactive. Engaging in the work of addressing our white fragility requires us to let go of reactivity, and to engage in a holy curiosity. Writer Edward Hays imagines the question mark as a holy symbol. Whereas the exclamation point [of certainty] is emphatic and insistent, the "?" is really a bent over "!" that has bowed its head in humility.¹⁰

We are existing in the midst of really big questions which seem to require certainty and right answers. We do not yet know how to reverse climate change. We don't know the way to undo

⁸ <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/1/4/17989224/intellectual-humility-explained-psychology-replication>

⁹ <https://peterwmarty.com/2018/11/07/curiosity-is-holy/>

¹⁰ <https://peterwmarty.com/2018/11/07/curiosity-is-holy/>

white colonialist culture. It's going to take all of us. All of our imaginations. All of our perspectives. All of our experience. None of us can do it alone. And, we cannot honestly be curious while simultaneously being certain that we are right. We cannot openly wonder unless we are willing to be changed by the 'other'.

If we want to change the world...we're going to have to build bridges of understanding. We're gonna have to listen as if we don't know. Because we don't. We're gonna have to change our interior structure of re-activity...and get humble, and curious with one other, and be open to difference.

For in this time of uncertainty, and in this faith that values questions over answers, we need not to lay down gauntlets of knowing, but rather, paths of curiosity, because it is with intellectual humility that we just might find our way.

(nod to Linda to come to piano)

So let us practice curiosity. In every moment. As Alicia Forde wrote¹¹: "The beauty is in being able to greet each new or familiar arrival with a learning mind rather than a knowing mind."

So... "What if you had one moment today in which you were gently interrupted from 'tending to matters of consequence' ...[one moment] in which you encountered the unfamiliar?"

I offer you such a moment. Here lies this single pomegranate...an altar of wonder before us. We're going to pass some pomegranate seeds among you. Take one, or a few. Silently offer them to the person next to you. Then simply consider their uniqueness, their colour, their shape, their taste. Experience curiosity.

(ritual)

May the 'red stain of pomegranate seeds outline your smiles'¹² and fuel your curiosity. Now and always.

Blessed be.

READING *How Curiosity Can Help Us Be Kinder and Less Judgmental* ~ Jen Picicci¹³

Letting go of judgments hasn't become a natural and automatic part of my life quite yet, but a skill I've recently learned that's making a huge, huge difference can be summed up in one word: curiosity...

There's something so freeing about giving a person the benefit of the doubt and coming up with possible reasons for their behavior that go beyond the obvious. It feels so good to operate this way...

...skip over your first reaction and look for something deeper... try imagining what could be going on in their lives ...Try putting yourself in their place for a moment.

Your harsh judgments of them won't help you be compassionate or get better service, so you may as well get curious about what's going on, which will allow you to be kind and non-judgmental

¹¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uucollective/2012/05/holy-curiosity/>

¹² <http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2014/03/leeanne-mcilroy-langton-tree-of.html>

¹³ <https://tinybuddha.com/blog/how-curiosity-can-help-us-be-kinder-and-less-judgmental/>

Ask questions instead of making automatic statements. Making judgments always involves black and white statements that put you in the right. Shifting to curiosity means shutting off that automatic response and asking thoughtful, insightful questions.

...The bottom line is that judgments are assumptions, not truths.

[Judgments are] about you being right and the other person being wrong. They don't feel good or serve you. Being curious is kinder and gentler, and creates an environment where it's clear that we're all different people, dealing with life as best we can.

CLOSING WORDS *May We Be Changed* ~ Scott Taylor

May we go with courage,
hungry for a curiosity that challenges
and changes us,
knowing that our answers are never complete
and the questions make us whole.

Blessed be. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME