

What Does It Mean To Be a People of Curiosity? ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

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What does it mean to be a people of curiosity? That is our Soul Matters theme for the month of May. The short answer is that it means being bold and daring and sometimes even outrageous. I think about the first time our son brought home a certain young woman to meet us. You know how this meet the parent thing goes – it can be a pretty angst filled experience. It is best to be prepared in advance, and I suspect she was well-prepared. Why? Because she sat down with Barry and started asking him questions about his accordion. To his delight she conversed with him for quite a while about one of the things he is passionate about, something about which she knew nothing. Do I think she was coached in advance? Most certainly. Do I think she was genuinely curious about the accordion? Maybe not, but she was genuinely curious about the person who loved playing the accordion. It was a good start to what turned out to be a long-term relationship. That curious young woman is now the mother of my grand-daughters.

Meeting the parents can be a worrisome. But, as Rev. Kimberly Debus writes, “We can lean into worry’s opposite – curiosity. As Rabbi Marcia Prager teaches, where worry says, ‘Oh no, what is going to happen?’ curiosity says ‘Oh wow! I wonder what will happen?’” To be a person of curiosity is to lean into the unknown with wonder and anticipation and even joy. To be a people of curiosity is to support each other in our wonderings. It is somewhat easy to think about ways to support curiosity in our children and youth. We are, after all, the people who understand religious education to be a process that involves questioning, exploring, and finding individual paths to individual truths. There is no orthodoxy in

Unitarian Universalism. There is no creed; there are no doctrines. There is only the process of seeking truth. That applies not just to children but to all ages and all stages. For us, religious education is a life-long quest. Our congregations are learning laboratories for the perpetually curious.

To be curious is to be open. Open to new learning and perhaps more importantly, to unlearning. When we think we know, like, really know, what life is all about, that's when we are at greatest risk for missing out on what life is all about. Now for that little piece of sermonic nonsense you can blame long-time member Bob Foss, whose droll approach to the Question Box service a couple of months ago was this: "What is the meaning of life. I have always wondered?" Well Bob, the meaning of life is to continually unlearn what you think you have learned about the meaning of life so that there is room in your mind and heart for new insights into the meaning of life.

As one of the great minds of all time once said, "I have no special talent. I am just passionately curious." Good old Albert Einstein. So we learn continuously. And unlearn continuously. We are always open to new insights and new ideas. We are continuously enriched by new and different perspectives. And hopefully we have fun in that process! Hopefully we find joy in that process! Not always, but sometimes. Remember that Unitarian Universalism is all about process. The Seven Principles of our faith, those seven aspirational statements that guide us in the creation of liberal religious community, include several references to this process of truth-seeking. "We covenant to affirm and promote: (3rd Principle) Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; and (4th Principle) A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Those two principles lie at the heart of our Statement of Principles and Purposes. Therefore I could argue that curiosity lies at the very heart of who we are as a people of faith.

Spiritual growth and searching for truth and meaning are core values for us. They are the heart of the matter.

Just a few minutes ago you watched some of our youth cross a bridge. A mostly metaphorical bridge, representing their transition from youth to young adulthood. Bridgers, I won't pretend to know what was going on in each of your minds, but I hope that you were and are and always will be filled with curiosity about what life has to offer each of you on the other side of that bridge. And the bridge after that, and the bridge after that. When I was thinking about the bridging ceremony earlier this week a lovely and somewhat silly memory popped into my mind. Not sure why, but I accept those stream of consciousness moments as relevant to sermon writing. When our cat Clyde was a wee kitten, we kept him and his sister Bonnie in one room, gated off with a baby gate, until the kittens and the dog could get used to each other. At first the kittens spent most of their time hiding inside a bass drum. They gradually ventured out and explored the room, then spent more and more time at the gate, watching and sniffing. Then one day Clyde said, "I'm going over." With fierce determination he hooked his little paws into the openings in the gate and pulled himself slowly and surely to the top. Then tumbled over into a vast new world. Bonnie soon followed. I'll never forget that image of this tiny black kitten so determined to expand his experience! So curious.

So what is it with that saying about curiosity killing the cat? And that song of the same name? "It wasn't curiosity itself that killed the proverbial cat," wrote Kate Berardo. "What really got him in trouble was his inability to deal with the new situation he was in. And when it comes to learning about new environments, curiosity is key." Okay, but that hasn't always been our experience, has it? I remember hearing that 'curiosity killed the cat' thing as a warning when I was a child. Ask too many questions and you're in trouble. Stick your nose where it

doesn't belong and you're in trouble. Keep asking me why and you're in trouble. Kind of goes along with the children should be seen and not heard thing, doesn't it? A method of social control. So it is liberating to realize that curiosity doesn't kill anything. But being uncurious, unable to adapt to new circumstances, unable to learn new ways of being in the world, that can kill you!

Curiosity leads to adventure. And adventure leads to transformation. And as some of you may heard me say before, "We in the UU church are in the transformation business." We are not in the satisfaction business, we are in the transformation business. Personal spiritual transformation. Transformation of our beloved communities. Transformation of the world around us. Transformation of structures of oppression and marginalization that we previously did not even notice, or took for granted. That is a lot of transformation, which means a lot of risk, which means a lot of courage. That is a lot of transformation, which means a lot of enrichment and a lot of joy and a lot of adventure.

No wonder the Soul Matters packet for May begins with this quote from Rev. Victoria Safford. "To see, simply to look and to see, is an ethical act and intentional choice; to see, with open eyes, is a spiritual practice and thus a risk, for it can open you to ways of knowing the world and loving it that will lead to inevitable consequences. The awakened eye is a conscious eye, a willful eye, and brave, because to see things as they are, each in its own truth, will make you very vulnerable."

Two disparate quotes from two disparate people came to mind as I read Victoria's words. First, some of you may remember this quote from Bobbie Kennedy's campaign stump speech. "Some men see things as they are and say, why; I dream things that never were and say, why not." Did you know he was borrowing very, very liberally from George Bernard Shaw? The original goes,

“You see things; and you say ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were; and I say “Why not?”” Both of them are talking about the awakened eye; once you see things as they are and realize the disparity between what is and what could be, you are on the hook for making the changes for the better. Scott Tayler calls that the kind of curiosity isn’t just fun or interesting, it is the kind that ‘makes us anew’.

To be a people of curiosity is to be made anew. Not born again. That is actually a darn good description of a life curiously lived. But somebody got to it first and kinda ruined it for us. So we are people always being made anew. The other quote that came to mind as I read Victoria Safford’s words is – no surprise here – lines from a poem by Mary Oliver. The poem is entitled “When Death Comes” but it could just as easily have been entitled “When Life Comes.”