

I am Curious about Curiosity
by
Daniel E. White May 11, 2026

“There came a point when Mom stopped reading the newspaper,” Sandee said. “She had been so curious about what was going on in the world. But it seemed to me that when her curiosity stopped, she was getting ready to move along to the next world.”

I’m intermittently curious myself. It’s hard to predict moments when something makes me wonder, wanting to know why, how, or what does this or that indicate. I married a curious person, so it is not unusual that she, as “the research department,” whips out her phone, and we begin our joint descent into fascinating rabbit holes of information.

It is hard to imagine not being curious. Maybe when that stops, it will be a sign about me, too.

We are born curious. Otherwise, how would we, as newborns, then infants, then children, have navigated our way, physically, socially, emotionally, toward adulthood? Isn’t a stereotypical toddler always asking why? Don’t adults need to be watchful as they explore spaces or try to ingest whatever they can reach?

Albert Einstein wrote’ “It’s a miracle that curiosity survives formal education,” and that quip has fueled scores of papers and lectures about how student curiosity can be killed in schools because the agenda for learning does not emanate from the natural curiosity in every child or because the methods of instruction stifle creativity and wondering.

One might amend Einstein’s critique by exchanging the words “formal education” for “unquestioning political belief” or “extreme religious teachings” or any other form of “absolute certainty.” The core trait of curiosity is a habit of asking why or how or what does this or that indicate.

I don’t think Mom knew the poetry of Mary Oliver. But as I knew Mom in her later life, I saw in her a manifestation of Oliver’s “Instructions for Living a Life:” 1) Pay attention. 2) Be astonished. 3) Tell about it. Mom’s curiosity indicated that she was “paying attention,” and her capacity for astonishment was, to me, astonishing.

Whether she “told about it” to anyone other than her family I don’t know. But she did surprise me with her wonderings, like when she said she was curious about whether or not reincarnation was real.

Curiosity can be a way to open up the world. Author Henry Miller wrote, “the moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes mysterious, awesome, an indescribably magnified world in itself” Have you never had the experience of asking about something, doing a little digging for information, and ending up by exclaiming “I didn’t know that! How fascinating!”

That happened to us recently. The Tucson Symphony Orchestra played Samuel Barber’s Violin Concerto one Sunday. After the concert, I mentioned Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” as being one of my favorite pieces of music. Judy loaded a recording of it on her phone, and we listened. She opened a web commentary about the piece.

We learned that the Adagio had been written as the second movement—the adagio—of a Barber symphony. Others, upon hearing the piece, and Barber, upon reflection about it, thought it might stand alone. Of course, it became one of the most well-known compositions written by Barber.

Judy moved on to a conductor talking about what it was like to conduct an orchestra playing the Adagio. There, we learned that each musician strives to hear the instrument of their neighbor rather than their own, an indication of the volume sought, and this conductor described his role as “fitting in” rather than leading, even to the point that he moved his arms more horizontally than vertically, visually supporting the blending of the instruments.

We ran out of time to pursue new tunnels in that rabbit hole. But what fun came from opening that commentary.

In the 18th century, Samuel Johnson contended that curiosity expands one’s mind—and the more that happens, the more curious you become. “He that easily comprehends all that is before him, and soon exhausts any subject, is always eager for new inquiries; and in proportion as the intellectual eye takes in a wider perspective, it must be gratified with variety, by more rapid flights and bold excursion.”

Not everyone, in my experience, seems curious or maybe they are, in ways that I cannot see. Still, the default position for many is to stick with the known, the secure, without wondering much about anything other than what they perceive. In a topsy-turvy world, there is a case to be made for stability. Being curious about the box did get Pandora into trouble.

Scott Shigeoka, from UC Berkeley, is a much-viewed TED Talk speaker. His professional work explores curiosity, so he set out to travel the country with the purpose of trying to know more about people with whom he might not typically interact—a nun in a convent, MAGA supporters at a rally, etc. He concludes that such curiosity about other people and other ways of thinking is an expression of love: I care, and I want to know more.

Mom lived to be nearly 96. I’m sure she didn’t ever abandon loving, but maybe she just reached a point where she was okay with not wanting to know more.

I wonder about that.

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