



Curiosity may be harmful to cats, but how about to Unitarians?

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Being a curious sort, I wondered what the origin of “curiosity killed the cat” was. The reference is from a Ben Jonson play, *Every Man in his Humours*, only he said, “care’ll kill a cat.” In his use of care, he meant worry will kill the cat. The play is thought to have been performed in 1598 by *The Lord Chamberlain’s Men*, a troupe of actors including William Shakespeare. Shakespeare was no slouch when it came to appropriating a memorable line and it crops up the following year in *Much Ado About Nothing*: “What, courage man! what though care killed a cat, thou hast mettle enough in thee to kill care.”

The proverbial expression “curiosity killed the cat”, which is usually used when attempting to stop someone asking unwanted questions, is much more recent. The earlier form was still in use in 1898, when it was defined in Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*: “Care killed the Cat. It is said that a cat has nine lives, but care would wear them all out.”

Curiosity hasn’t received a good press over the centuries. Saint Augustine wrote in *Confessions*, in 397, that, in the aeons before creating heaven and earth, “[God] fashioned hell for the inquisitive.” John Clarke, in *Paroemiologia*, published in 1639, suggested that, “He that pryeth into every cloud may be struck with a thunderbolt.” In *Don Juan*, Lord Byron called curiosity “that low vice”. That bad opinion, and the fact that cats are notoriously inquisitive, led to the source of their demise being changed from “care” to “curiosity”.

Michel Foucault, in his book *The Masked Philosopher*, defends the cat:

Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatised in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity is seen as futility. The word, however, pleases me. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes “concern”; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervour to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.

I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist. Why do we suffer?... There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude, to prevent “bad” information from invading and suffocating the “good.” Rather, we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings.

The frequent rejoinder to “curiosity killed the cat” is “and satisfaction brought it back”. I’ve not been able to trace the source of this odd reply. The first citation of it that I’ve found in print is from an Iowan college magazine in February 1933. However, it is a clever response in that curiosity lights up several parts of the brain in an MRI scan, and satisfying that curiosity

lights up the same part of the hypothalamus as just having had good sex. No wonder Unitarianism is a curious faith.

Albert Einstein once observed that, “it is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education.” LeeAnne McIlroy’s poem “The Tree of Knowledge” shows us that it doesn’t have to be this way:

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 favourite 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,
An altar before thirty students,
All newly baptised—
The red stain of pomegranate seeds outlining
Their smiles

Curiosity frees us to seek truth and meaning like memorising times tables and diagramming sentences never could. Einstein knew that our capacity for life-long curiosity is unique among mammals, including cats. Other animals might be innately curious while they are young, but humans have the capacity to stay curious our whole lives.

That natural curiosity leads us to explore even if we didn’t know why or what for, to simply explore and to try and to test and to learn for our own sake. We can’t always predict what we’re going to need to know in the future, so we look far and wide and we store it for later.

While we never lose it completely, there is a way our natural, child-like, curiosity gets curtailed as we grow up. We absorb a whole host of messages about how we're supposed to be and think and what we're supposed to do — we don't even always notice the sight-limiting blinders we acquire over time. Don't even notice the range of topics we've lost interest in. Or the number of things we think we fully understand, that we've ceased to question or wonder much about. By the time we are adults, we've learned a particular set of viewpoints from the people around us or experiences we've had and we're frequently inclined to just stick with that.

Our curiosity may be inherent, but often gets side-lined; we may never lose it, but it's not what it was.

And in our society these days, the model is one of: have an opinion, voice it with conviction, and then voice it again (and maybe again and again)... In that environment, leading with curiosity, exploring questions, wondering if maybe we don't know as much as we think we do, this kind of attitude can feel out of step.

But to be curious, genuinely curious, we have to let go of certainty, let go of conviction, let go of the ways we've always perceived things, or how others do things, or the way things have just always been. And that takes courage.

UU minister Victoria Safford speaks of the courage to be curious using the metaphor of perception and sight. She writes:

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 wilful eye, and brave, because to see things as they are, each in its own truth, will make you very vulnerable.

In reflecting on her words, the Rev Scott Tayler has an epiphany:

Consequences. I'm not sure I've ever thought of curiosity in terms of consequences. But I think Safford's got it right. There is a type of curiosity that is about enjoyment and adventure. It invites us to experience life as a playground. But there is another type of curiosity that leads to consequences, that changes us. This kind of curiosity is about more than enjoyment. Indeed, it's the kind that drives us past enjoyment and comfort. It's not about enriching oneself; it's about altering oneself.

Let me offer an example. Jen Picicci observes how curiosity can make us kinder and gentler — less judgmental. She shares this anecdote:

Something clicked: Curiosity is the key to letting go of judgment, as well! I became even more certain of this about a month ago. I had taken my daughter to story time at the library. As we left the circle, I noticed one mom, a woman who had two children with her, was not engaged with her kids at all. In fact, she was sitting at a table turned away from the group, playing with her phone.

I saw this as a perfect opportunity to test out my new theory that curiosity would help me let go of judgment. My old thought would have been "Ugh, look at her! She's not

even paying attention to her kids! What’s so important on her phone that she has to look at it right this second?” ... but this time, I consciously shifted the direction of my thoughts, trying to be curious about her actions rather than making assumptions about them. Could she be waiting for a really important email from a family member or friend? Is she using her phone to search for a new job?

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

This is the type of curiosity we Unitarian Universalists have fallen in love with — one might even say, put our “faith” in.

We don’t want curiosity to just be fun or interesting. We want it to make us anew. In other words, the message of our faith is not simply “Be curious!” It’s “Be curious until there are consequences!”

It’s fine to be inquisitive for the fun of it. But at another level, we’re called to remember that curiosity is not a game. Well, maybe it’s the greatest game. The one that drives us to constantly become more, for our sakes and for the sake of others.

One last thing, in case you are curious, no cats were harmed in the preparation of this sermon.