

Curiosity is holy

Children are good at asking questions that build relationship.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [September 12, 2018](#) issue



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After years of interviewing people for radio, employment, and various journalistic projects, I've decided that incurious people do not make great conversation partners. To be absent of curiosity is to display a lack of interest in others, even if unintentionally so. It's difficult to build a close friendship with someone who places a low priority on getting to know your world. Knowledge or information may get shared. But if the other person doesn't take joy in creating a welcoming space for you to flourish, the conversation struggles to ever get rolling.

Psychiatrist Alfred Margulies once proposed that wonder is what's really required to understand another human being. Wonder, he wrote, "promotes a searching attitude of simultaneously knowing and not knowing." It blends astonishment with curiosity, a winsome combination that ends up fostering a deep appreciation of the other. Wonder and curiosity keep us from behaving as if we have other people figured out.

The opposite of this searching attitude plays out in much of the political reasoning that partisan bias stimulates in our day. 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 further entrenches their deeply held beliefs. The one antidote to this politically motivated reasoning, Kahan argues, is curiosity. A curiosity mind-set opens one up to exploration and surprise that extends well beyond the desire to confirm one's own beliefs.

Children are exemplars of curiosity. The questions they ask often have as much to do with relationship as they do with gaining new information. When a child asks, "Why do grown-ups sometimes cry when they're happy?" or "Do ants survive being flushed down the toilet?" she gains the attention of another person and hopes for a response. Relationship is at stake. If an adult squelches the "why?" of a child, relationship gets thwarted.

I've long thought that when the disciple Thomas asks to see and touch the wounds of the resurrected Christ, he's interested in relationship more than anything else. It isn't doubt so much as holy curiosity that fills him. His query of Jesus opens the door to a relationship that will require all kinds of personal change in his future.

In the case of our own spiritual lives, questions of God and of other people are essential to the character of faith. To be without questions of God is less an indication of confident faith and more a lack of spiritual depth.

For people who decide that faith has more to do with obtaining answers than asking questions, writer Edward Hays has a different idea. He imagines the question mark as a holy symbol. Whereas the exclamation point "!" is emphatic and insistent, the "?" is really a bent over "!" that has bowed its head in humility. Open to a spirit of exploration and wonder, the question mark is both a prayer tool for everyday people and a creative tool of artists, geniuses, and explorers.

We could say, "God is love!" Or, we could say, "God is love?" Notice the wonder and astonishment in the second example. Building such curiosity into our lives of faith is

not only our calling; it's also a vital clue to our depth as interesting people.

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