

*Curiosity Cured the Cat*  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver**  
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**Reflection on the Theme** *By Emily Layfield*

For nearly a decade I had what looked, on paper, like a genuinely great job. Good mission, good colleagues, good pay — a real salary, finally, after years of barely scraping by in professional theater, and training in a marketable skill set, data analytics. The only problem was I really just... didn't like doing it. Lots of what I was doing didn't really strike me as all that important or engaging, and very gradually over the years, getting things done for work became increasingly a slog that I would more and more frequently need to stay up all night to force myself through.

This struck me as an absurd problem. Again, on paper, this was a fantastic job. Data analysis was clearly the most lucrative skill I now possessed, and for a lot of those years I was my family's primary breadwinner, so not doing it felt like a wildly impractical, selfish decision, and just trying to find a different place to do it felt like it would be giving up all of the good things about my job while keeping the main part I didn't like. It was so hard to imagine a possible future that made sense. Historically I have made many of my major life decisions by imagining where the path could end up and working backwards to what action I needed to take right now, discarding the ones that required wildly impractical actions or assumptions on the way. But using my existing decisionmaking model meant accepting this job as inevitable and "not wanting to do it" didn't feel like a good enough reason to stop. Not everybody gets to like their job, right? I could suck it up and make it work.

It took my husband sitting me down and saying, essentially: you are miserable, and we will figure it out, but you have to leave that job, it isn't worth it — for me to finally admit that if my decision-making style kept landing me stuck and miserable, and worst of all, impacting my family too, I needed to figure out a different approach. The metaphor I landed on instead was planting seeds. Not all seeds will sprout, but I can plant a bunch of them and nurture the ones that do, and course correct along the way rather than having to decide if a seed isn't going to sprout before it even gets planted.

That approach led me to train as an ADHD coach. I started taking on clients on the side and gradually managed to reduce my hours at my job, and this past year I finally left it entirely. During that time I also joined this church and started getting involved, and over the past few years have ended up discovering to my surprise that the kinds of tasks I actually enjoy, contemplation and writing and speaking and

meaning-making and relationship and institution building, actually have an existing job title, minister. Especially as an atheist, I wasn't someone who would have thought to put 'minister' anywhere on my list of possible ends to plan backwards from. And yet I've been spending this spring applying to divinity school and for scholarships, and I am very grateful to have recently gotten this church's sponsorship as an aspirant with the UUA at April's board meeting. I expect to start classes this fall. I hope I can keep remembering that sometimes things that seem inevitable aren't, and the feeling of being trapped might just be an invitation to plant something and see what grows.

### **Curiosity Cured the Cat** © *By Lynn Ungar*

It's a delight, if a bit disorienting, to be here in the pulpit rather than the pews. Chairs. It feels, I admit, like a bigger responsibility to be up here trying to deliver something in the way of wisdom at a time when our national leadership seems to be more in favor of bluster and blunder and whatever off the cuff remark sounds tough in the moment. My sweetie pointed out that much of the reason she was so obsessed with following the Artemis mission was that it was such a relief to see knowledgeable, very smart grown-ups cooperating to do a thing that required the utmost in expertise and care. We are, I should think, people who are generally in favor of wisdom as a thing. Our more recent articulation of UU values does not obviate our long-standing statement of UU principles, including our commitment to a "free and responsible search for truth and wisdom."

What isn't quite so clear is just exactly how you go about that free and responsible search for truth and wisdom. It's complicated, right? We don't have a single authority to appeal to to say "this is truth and wisdom" and "this is heresy, and is wrong." The fact that I'm here talking for an extended period of time doesn't mean that I have any more authority than I do when I'm sitting in the congregation. Frankly, neither do my ordination or my two ministerial degrees. You get to decide for yourself whether anything I have to say adds to your store of truth and wisdom. UU ministers don't have any definitive kind of authority, but neither does the Bible or any other religious scripture.

We don't have a single authority, so how do we know what qualifies as truth and wisdom? Well, there's common sense. I won't put you on the spot, but I can tell you that I was at a large lecture at a large conference where the speaker asked the audience "Who thinks that we need more common sense?" And pretty much every hand in the room went up. I hesitated. My hand kind of hovered in that in-between place of not really agreeing but also not wanting to buck the crowd.

But it turned out the speaker and I agreed. We are far too ready to turn to common sense as our source of authority, our test of truth and wisdom. But what is common sense? Common sense is the sum total of our assumptions, our unquestioned prejudices and our belief in our expertise in areas where we know very little. People are willing to assure you with absolute conviction that a variety of things are common sense that are demonstrably untrue.

People have told me—and have probably told you—that cutting taxes on corporations creates jobs. That’s just common sense. If you give people handouts they won’t work as hard—common sense. Punishing children for bad behavior makes them behave better—obvious common sense. The list could go on and on of things that are common sense knowledge—and also counter to tested reality.

*It’s just common sense* turns out mostly to be a stand-in for *I have not investigated this question in any significant degree, but I have heard this expressed by people who I care about, so it must be true.* Let me give you another example, because it’s telling on myself. How about “Diversity is good for communities.” Surely that is compelling common sense. Denying that truth would be in itself committing an act of prejudice.

But I listened some while back to a Hidden Brain podcast that talked about how studies have shown that on a variety of measures, children do better with elementary school teachers who are the same race as they are. Black men are significantly more likely to agree to getting preventative health measures if their doctor is Black. People are more likely to repay loans if the loan officer is the same race as they are and customers in retail stores express more satisfaction if they are helped by someone of their own race. It turns out that if you are looking for creativity and innovation, diversity in a group really helps. But if comfort and trust are significant factors, homogeneity helps. Huh.

My common sense turns out not to be a whole lot more reliable than that of people whose politics or social norms I don’t care for. Hmm..... So we don’t rely on authority, and it turns out that common sense is unreliable at best. So what do we have? Well, if you read the title and description for this service, then you probably see what’s coming. What we have is curiosity.

Which, to be fair, also seems pretty suspect. I mean, as a trait, curiosity does not fare well in the realm of saying and myth and fairy tale. “Curiosity killed the cat.” Pandora unleashes all the evils of the world because she just is too darn curious about what is in the box. Even the biblical story of the fall of humankind rests on the notion that Eve gets people kicked out of Paradise for all time because she just

has to try a taste from the forbidden fruit. In case you miss the part where curiosity is to blame, that fruit is from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The message seems clear—if people—and particularly women—were just not so annoyingly inquisitive, everything would be so much better.

The question is...better for whom? Curiosity, it turns out, is the enemy of authority, the enemy of received wisdom, the enemy, perhaps, of common sense. It is dangerous, subversive. It asks questions like “how do we know this is true?” It also asks questions that stir the pot like “what would happen if...” and potentially disruptive questions like “who does this benefit? Who does this harm?”

Curiosity is not particularly conducive to the smooth functioning of any well-oiled machine. You can't very well take something apart while you are in the process of using it. And if you are a parent you are probably keenly aware that however much you value curiosity in children, there are a whole lot of times when you just need something to *happen* without a massive interrogation being involved.

Which might explain why a variety of educators and change agents recommend thinking of action and reflection—which is to say progress and curiosity—as a kind of endless loop. You ask questions about what needs to be done, about obstacles and resources and potential outcomes, and then you give it a try. And then, after a pre-determined time, you get back together and ask more questions. What worked? What didn't work? How did it feel? Who did it help? Who did it hinder? What was missing? What changed? And then you reframe the project in light of the questions, and try again. Until it's time for more reflection, more curiosity.

That cycle of action and reflection is not necessarily the most comfortable way of going about things. It takes time to interrupt what you are doing. It takes humility to consider whether you have been doing things the right way—or even moving in the right direction. If you have a complex process in which every well-oiled cog is turning at just the right speed, you might not want to mess things up. But then, if you don't ever stop to ask questions, you might find that you have an extremely efficient process for creating something that people don't actually need.

Curiosity interrupts. It gets in the way of business as usual. Which is exactly why curiosity is the key to wisdom, the key to what might be able to save us all. Because most of our lives are spend moving down well-worn paths in our lives—and well-worn paths in our brains. Our brains literally arrange themselves to make it more efficient to act and to think in the ways we are used to.

But sometimes the ways we are used to are not particularly functional. Some of us have well-worn tracks in our brains that tell us that we are not worthy or not safe or not capable. Some of us have well-worn tracks in relationships that lead us into the same fights over and over. All of us live in a cultural fog of unconscious bias and structural injustice.

Curiosity serves as a way to side-step those patterns, to create a pause or a bend in those well-worn paths. The other day someone posted a graphic in a Facebook group that I'm on that said "Your expectations stand in the way of your observations." Your expectations stand in the way of your observations. So much of the time we see what we expect to see, what we have always seen. Curiosity is what turns our heads to take in a bit more of the view. And when we see more of the picture, we have more choices in how to respond.

When we're caught up in anger or judgment or self-righteousness, our responses become automatic, cruising down the well-worn path. Speaking from an excessive amount of personal experience, I can assure you that it is possible for a person to present an argument that is thoughtful, well-reasoned and supported with reliable citations that is still...an argument. A trip down the predictable road with predictable results. Speaking, again, for myself, I purely hate the fact that facts and well-reasoned arguments do not change people's minds—that, in fact, they tend to make people even more strongly entrenched in their pre-existing beliefs. It offends me to the core of my being. It is, unfortunately, true.

Which means that every time I explain to someone on Facebook just exactly why it is that they are wrong, I *know* that what I am doing is worse than useless. And I do it anyway. Well-worn path.

And the only thing that saves me is when I can find my way back to curiosity. When I can give up my need to convince someone they are wrong, and just try to understand where they are coming from. Not because that will make them different, but because it might make *me* different.

In the heat of an argument, in the slide down the well-worn path, it frankly feels like too big of an ask to insist that I be empathetic or loving or creative. I mean, it would be great. But I am a parent, and so I have had ample opportunity to watch myself go off the deep end with my volatile kid. I have known all of my child's life (and she's now 27) that yelling is counterproductive. I know that it is purely ridiculous to argue with a child who, in that moment, is completely incapable of being rational. I even know that remaining calm and neutral is unlikely to help. Empathetic and loving and creative are great ways to be with a child who is losing it because you have called them on what they did wrong and they are doing

their best to lay the blame on you. I'm not sure, however, that any of them are things that I have managed to achieve under the circumstances.

Curious is a bit more attainable. What am I feeling? What is she feeling? What am I trying to get out of this? What is she trying to get out of this? How might I change the circumstances so that we can get unstuck? (As a complete tangent, I will give you this one piece of parenting advice. If you are getting embroiled in an argument with your kid, go vacuum. You will not be able to hear anything they are saying. You will not be tempted to say anything over the noise of the vacuum. You will stop making things worse. And your house will get cleaner. This is the only piece of parenting advice I have.)

Well, that's not true. My other piece of parenting advice is the same as my advice for dealing with other challenging relationships is the same as my advice for spiritual growth and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Get curious. Practice curiosity in low-stress environments so that you will be able to access it when your blood pressure rises. Practice wandering and wondering, whether that be out in nature or in a library or amongst the vast rabbit holes of the internet. Embrace curiosity as a way of life, a spiritual discipline.

The poet e.e. cummings puts it this way:

*nothing proving or sick or partial. Nothing false,nothing difficult or easy or small or colossal. Nothing ordinary or extraordinary,nothing emptied or filled,real or unreal;nothing feeble and known or clumsy and guessed....Nothing believed or doubted;brain over heart, surface:nowhere hating or to fear;shadow,mind without soul. Only how measureless cool flames of making;only each other building always distinct selves of mutual entirely opening;only alive. Never the murdered finalities of wherewhen and yesno,impotent nongames of wrongright and rightwrong;never to gain or pause,never the soft adventure of undoom,greedy anguishes and cringing ecstasies of inexistence;never to rest and never to have;only to grow.*

*Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question*

The cycle of action and reflection is the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question. It is freedom and responsibility. Maybe it is even truth and meaning. But it is the only route into wisdom that I know, and it is a road without end.