

“Curiouser and Curiouser, said Alice”
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

Our topic today is curiosity. I consider it a positive term for people who are seeking answers about the world around us. I like it, because I’m also quite familiar with the term “nosy.” These days I try not to follow lines of inquiry that truly are none of my business, and I’ve learned not to overwhelm people with my questions, most of the time, but you can be sure I’m always collecting information on the many topics that interest me.

I was a child who preferred reading over most other activities. I had sets of hand-me-down mystery series, like Nancy Drew, Trixie Belden and Judy Bolton, that described a world that was unfamiliar and so interesting. I tucked away tidbits that I thought might come in handy someday.

Like one time Judy Bolton’s car slid into a ditch during a rainstorm. She and her friend took shelter in a nearby house even though no one was home. I found this bit of fiction to be fascinating and, clearly, memorable. They were hungry, so Judy made a perfect batch of biscuits—from scratch, without a recipe!—using ingredients she found in the kitchen. She set out a dollar when they were done, which apparently is how one avoids being charged with burglary. I thought it must be normal behavior in other parts of the country, but I certainly haven’t ever had an experience like that. Also, I can’t make biscuits without a recipe, so I’m really not qualified.

But beyond the odd behavior of fictional girl detectives, I was also picking up the beginnings of a sense of social justice, of people facing challenges that I never could have imagined. I learned through these books that there is systemic injustice, and there are problems that can’t be solved by hard work and a positive attitude.

I believe the awareness I developed of other people, places and cultures during childhood opened my mind and nurtured my curiosity. My hometown was isolated. My family didn’t have the means to travel much. But I was developing a sense that, even as a small-town girl, I was part of a larger world and that maybe I had a role that could someday be important.

Is curiosity a hardwired personality trait, or is it something we develop, in my case due to childhood interests? I have no idea. But I do think exposure to diverse ideas and people can open minds, even if it’s through books or other media instead through direct experience.

Curiouser and Curiouser, said Alice © by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

I’m fascinated by this idea that curiosity can be unruly. “Curiosity is deviant,” writes Ian Leslie. Or as Lynn Ungar preached last Sunday, “Curiosity, it turns out, is the enemy of authority, the enemy of received wisdom, the enemy, perhaps, of common sense. It is dangerous, subversive.”

Her sermon was the perfect introduction to this month’s theme, Awakening Curiosity. If you missed last week, did you know you can listen to previous sermons from our website or even on the church center

app on your phone? You can find the written text if you prefer to read and the spoken sermon as a recording. Anyway, that's how I know what Lynn said last week when I wasn't here.

When I titled this morning's remarks as 'Curiouser and Curiouser,' I was surely thinking of upside down world we find ourselves in where the outrageous actions of the administration are only outdone by subsequently more outrageous actions, and how it feels like we've all become Alice in Wonderland, confused by the nonsense and fully disoriented.

"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English). —Chapter 2, Alice in Wonderland.

But it does feel like there is an opportunity in all of this nonsense. I'm not saying I like the nonsense – and nonsense isn't a strong enough word to describe the harm being done to real people. But all this disruption and dizzying change does make clear that things were never so great for all of us. Compromises that had been made in our previously ordered world were not serving us either, but didn't harm enough of us to cause massive protests and economic disruptions such as took place on Friday.

"I don't like the look of it at all," said the King: "however, it may kiss my hand, if it likes." — Chapter 8, Alice in Wonderland.

Our theme this month is not just curiosity, but it is Awakening Curiosity. I went down a little rabbit hole myself about the term awakening, being awake, wokeness and found a little clip of spiritual teacher Eckhart Tölle saying:

"The term awakening has been used over thousands of years since the time of the Buddha and before. The essence of the teaching of the Buddha is to awaken. The word Buddha itself means to be awake, the one who is awake. The Sanskrit root of the word is to be awake. Buddha is not the name of a person but describes a state of consciousness. Then go to Jesus and there are quite a few parables that talk about not going to sleep but staying awake." Said Eckhart Tölle

It is my experience that curiosity is a natural human trait. I think that's how babies grow up to be toddlers to be kids – we're curious about the world and learn at an incredible rate.

I think curiosity is an innate human trait and that it has to be socialized out of a person if it is no longer present. If an annoyed parent quashes your curiosity at an early age, it might not feel safe to ask questions. So, I think the term awakening is apt – because our curiosity might have gone to sleep. We make assumptions and move on. We are comfortable with our current and cultural understandings. We quit asking questions.

"If there's no meaning in it," said the King, "that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any." —Chapter 12, Alice in Wonderland.

My curiosity at a young age was piqued by the fact that so many of my friends spoke languages other than English at home. I thought my family was so boring that we spoke the same language at home as at school. Carina Gómez spoke Spanish, Athena Wong spoke Chinese (I don't know which Chinese language because I didn't know then to ask), Shinya Akamine, Japanese. That fascination with the homes of my friends – Carina's house had jars of dried beans in the kitchen! – led to a lifelong interest in languages, the study of linguistics, a stint in the Peace Corps, and a preference to this day for television shows in Spanish, Italian, and French. I watch the *Law According to Lidia Poet* in Italian but with

subtitles in Spanish because the proximity of the languages help me better follow the Italian. We all have our idiosyncrasies, our curiosities.

This love of languages, of course, led to a study of cultures and my fascination with the Intercultural Development Continuum – that scale I’ve talked about before that describes the developmental shift from a monocultural mindset to a multicultural understanding. It ranges from stages of denial, through polarization, minimization, acceptance and adaptation. The continuum refers to developmental stages in relationship with change and difference. Denial is the stage in which we don’t recognize the difference. Polarization is when we judge difference as good or bad, as polar opposites: A stage we are all too familiar with at this point in history. Minimization is when we minimize differences – we see them, but we don’t think they matter very much. Acceptance is when we see difference and accept them – don’t minimize, but appreciate them. Adaptation is when we can not only see the differences, but we can navigate within them. We can adapt our behavior to the new environment or situation. These are developmental stages and orientations toward difference, and I’ve found the framework helpful over the years to remain curious about difference and battle my own tendency to acclimate to the world around me and make assumptions.

“Speak English!” said the Eaglet. “I don’t know the meaning of half those long words, and, what’s more, I don’t believe you do either!” —Chapter 3, *Alice in Wonderland*.

By moving up the continuum, developing through these stages, we open ourselves up and remain curious about difference, rather than shutting down and denying or rejecting it.

In this increasingly strange and bizarre world, how do we remain curious and not acclimate ourselves to the terrors and injustice we daily witness?

Culture is made up of lots of things we make assumptions about

- What is a breakfast food?
- How does one sit?
- What is gender and what are appropriate gender roles?
- Is looking someone in the eye respectful or insulting?
- Do meetings start on time or when everyone has arrived?
- What does “on time” even mean?

We make our assumptions because everyone around us is making the same assumption, so it rarely occurs to us to question the culture we’ve inherited. That is the danger that in these bizarre times, at some point it could start to feel “normal” that we incarcerate people who are fleeing persecution from another country, or that ICE kill people who dare witness their actions or try to protect the people they harm, or that women can’t receive reproductive care in certain states, or that people who are nonbinary or trans can’t travel because they can’t get documents that identify them accurately. We must continue to ask the questions Lynn posed last Sunday, “who does this benefit? Who does this harm?” We must remain curious about these abuses rather than adapt ourselves to their reality.

It was all very well to say “Drink me,” but the wise little Alice was not going to do that in a hurry. “No, I’ll look first,” she said, “and see whether it’s marked ‘poison’ or not.” —Chapter 1, *Alice in Wonderland*.

One thing I love about our religious tradition is that we are covenantally based. That is, we don't have a creed – a set of beliefs you must subscribe to in order to belong. Instead, we create covenants or promises with one another about how we are going to be with each other. These promises surface our assumptions, making full participation in the community easier for all. When we don't make evident our assumptions, then people with different assumptions don't know how to interact with us. We wind up attracting only others with the same assumptions. (ie – same culture) By negotiating covenants, we create a path for better inclusion, by surfacing those assumptions, discussing them, and deciding if we wish to maintain those understandings or change them.

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” “What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar, sternly. “Explain yourself!” “I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, Sir,” said Alice, “because I am not myself, you see.” —Chapter 5, Alice in Wonderland.

I want to get back to this idea that curiosity is unruly and deviant. It is deviant in much the same way early unitarian and universalist beliefs were deviant from the Christian tradition. As soon as the Trinity became the established doctrine, unitarians who questioned that creed were labeled deviant or heretical. And as the notion of Heaven and Hell became codified in Christianity, the Universalists, who preached universal salvation, became deviant and heretical. Questioning the established religion, even if it was out of innocent curiosity, became dangerous and life-threatening – think of Michael Servetus, burned at the stake in 1553. Servetus didn't question the right of the Catholic church to establish the doctrine of the Trinity, he only questioned the whether that doctrine should be used to persecute Muslims and Jews when it was not biblically based – that is, he was curious that the Trinity is not actually mentioned in the Bible, despite the teachings of the Catholic Church. Servetus wrote *On the Errors of the Trinity*.

The thing about culture is that it isn't generally obvious to us, these assumptions, until we come across people with different assumptions. We talk about the political polarization in our country as “culture wars” and that is not misnamed – only in war, it is not only the instigators and warriors who get hurt, but a lot of innocent people do, too. I think there are a lot of people in this country who think both political parties are equally self-serving and dismissive of their actual needs. This is perhaps the opportunity in all of this nonsense – that we look beyond the current power structures – “the power of the people over the people in power” as an activist put it Friday at the Philadelphia May Day protest, as covered by the BBC.

And it is by asking questions that we dismantle the power structures we have assumed and upheld: who does this benefit, who does this harm?

“If everybody minded their own business,” the Duchess said, in a hoarse growl, “the world would go round a deal faster than it does.” —Chapter 6, Alice in Wonderland.

When I titled this morning's remarks as 'Curiouser and Curiouser,' I was surely thinking of upside down world we find ourselves in where the outrageous actions of the administration are only outdone by subsequently more outrageous actions, and how it feels like we've all become Alice in Wonderland, confused by the nonsense and violence and abuse and fully disoriented.

“Tut, tut, child!” said the Duchess. “Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it.” —Chapter 9, Alice in Wonderland.

Falling asleep to the horrors or acclimating ourselves to the reality of violence is a survival strategy. We don’t like pain, so we avoid it. We quit asking questions when it is no longer safe to do so.

But knowing that this is so, allows us to choose a different response. It allows us to stay awake and find others who are also awake for companionship and solidarity.

*“And the moral of that is—‘Oh, ‘tis love, ‘tis love, that makes the world go round!’”
“Somebody said,” Alice whispered, “that it’s done by everybody minding their own business!”
“Ah well! It means much the same thing,” said the Duchess,—Chapter 9, Alice in Wonderland.*

So as long as we’re hanging out with and speaking to people who share our assumptions, our biases, our culture we might – as Lynn indicated last week – we might assume our culture is just common sense.

*“And the moral of that is—‘Be what you would seem to be’—or, if you’d like it put more simply—
‘Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.’” —Chapter 9, Alice in Wonderland.*

Here’s the common sense story I love to share – it was an article in the Ogden, UT newspaper that my mother clipped out for me when I served in the Peace Corps in Honduras, in the late eighties. I didn’t go back to find the article, but they were quoting some people who had returned from a mission to Honduras who said something to the effect that “Hondurans don’t even know you’re supposed to eat Corn Flakes with cold milk!” To which my thinking was, “these missionaries don’t even know either that milk comes out of a cow warm or that it must be heated to be pasteurized and made safe to drink.”

Kind of like the pot roast story of the recipe passed down to a granddaughter who learns from her mom to cut the ends of the roast before cooking but didn’t know why she did it that way and asks her mom, the grandmother, only to learn it was because they didn’t have a pan large enough to hold the entire pot roast. Cold milk or warm milk in Corn flakes is surely a practical matter, one no more right than the other; but surely different due to different circumstances, including access to refrigeration.

Holy curiosity, Alicia Forde calls it. Why do we do it that way? “What does the dog do while I’m at school? Hey, how was the whole world made? And why do we have big hearts that can feel hurt and upset and afraid?”

“Do we treat our questions as holy or as interruptions? Are we attending to matters far too important to be interrupted by curiosity?”

Awakening curiosity allows us to question those important tasks and matters and rethink our assumptions, our cultural understandings, our power structures. “What if we attended to each other...” asks Alicia Forde, “to those ordinary encounters and conversations with intrigue?”

What if we were to awaken the curiosity of youth – sought the beginner’s mind – and quit telling ourselves that all the important things we have to do must come before the people in our lives, our neighbors, the other?

“But it’s no use now,” thought poor Alice, “to pretend to be two people! Why, there’s hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person!” —Chapter 1, Alice in Wonderland.

“What if instead of clinging to certainty we paused and made room for holy curiosity?”

Would we recreate a new day?