CURIOSITY

A few years ago, I was speaking with a minister who had requested a consultation about a curriculum for their Protestant church's young people. He had graduated from an interfaith seminary and our initial hour and a half discussion generated a broad area of mutual understanding. Like his seminary, we Unitarian Universalists draw upon a wide variety of religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Humanism, Judaism, direct experience of transcending mystery, world religions, etc. as listed in the front pages of our gray hymnal. It was a satisfying, encouraging beginning. We made plans for a joint Sunday service at their sanctuary and collaboration on a religious education curriculum.

Their board blocked a joint Sunday service, something that can happen in a hierarchical organization like most Protestant churches. Here, we believe the wisdom of all congregants may be respected and shared freely. We do not restrict the pulpit to only ordained clergy. After a month passed and no curriculum development crossed my desk, I inquired. The minister sent what his congregation's religious education committee had developed--an "ecumenical" curriculum. The difference is that "ecumenical" is limited to the Christian world and "interfaith" includes many religions. I read through it, and while it often

quoted Jesus from the Second Testament of the Christian Bible, it did not refer to insights from any other religion. It taught a general feel-good, be-nice curriculum, with some interesting exercises for the younger people, but did not match the respectful variety and comprehensiveness of UU curriculums. It did not appreciate the variety of faiths, nor suggest children might grow from visiting other religious congregations. Instead of pouring out a variety of faiths from which children might be surprised or enthralled, they wished to pour the children into one viewpoint mold.

I asked the minister about the limited Christianity focus, and he responded that it included all the virtues of the world's religions but did not "use the labels." That would be like describing mindfulness meditation without referencing Buddhism in any depth. The cultural context matters to spiritual concepts like compassion or love. Within Buddhism, compassion is seen as the necessary response to profoundly realizing that we all degenerate and die. Within Christianity, compassion is a recommended value due to Jesus Christ's universal love, transmitted from a loving, merciful God. There are significant differences due to significantly different contexts. I gave up trying to help that minister, because he apparently lacked curiosity about faiths beyond his immediate, Protestant environment.

One morning, listening to National Public Radio, I heard about a branch of Story Corps called One Small Step. One Small Step involves submitting a brief profile online and then you invite, or are invited, to interact with another person for 50 minutes. The interaction would be recorded and submitted to the Library of Congress. I decided to experience interacting with someone similar in some ways but quite different politically. Several times in the past year people in this congregation, and elsewhere, had wished that people with a liberal turn of mind could interact with conservatives for an exchange of views. There used to be an effort by a UU family therapist from Minnesota to bring together several people with different viewpoints in a discussion group, but it foundered when too few conservatives registered. I thought I would look for someone in One Small Step who was quite different and see what the interaction evolved into. As a psychotherapist, I am skilled at interviewing people who seek therapy, but that is an unequal power and status difference, formed for a distinct purpose of helping someone feel and think better, but One Small Step is based on equality. I established a profile and listed some of my interests. One person responded, who was a little different from me, but we couldn't co-ordinate times. Then, an Asian woman immigrant, rural resident, and swing voter responded and we talked. Maria turned out to be just a little different in viewpoint, although very different in ethnic background, and we had a sweet exchange of views and experiences. She said her

husband had characterized their fifty-two-year marriage as “Goody Two-shoes marries Dirty Hippie Wise-guy.” He had died two years before but he and I might have gotten along very well. The most important thing I learned was that Maria was quite sad that the Palestinian family in Gaza that she and her husband had fostered for five years were probably killed during the Israeli attacks on Gaza. She had not heard from them for months. My heart sank. But my curiosity had been rewarded. I had learned of a dimension of American commitment to peace of which I had been ignorant.

As I pondered curiosity, I was idly scanning the New York Times and came across a story about Anne-Laure Le Cunff, who claims that, and I quote:

> “curiosity is a feature of our biology designed to help us learn more broadly . . .it requires a gap between what you want to know and what you find out. . . .curiosity puts the entire brain into a mode of heightened receptivity, not just for the specific thing you want to know but also for everything around it—learning deepens across the board.” (New York Times, 7/12/26, Opinion Section, page 4)

OK, I thought, here’s where Unitarian Universalism shines. Whether you are looking for purpose in life, or the answer to a question through an internet search, being curious heightens receptivity to learning in general. Don’t we want our children to be curious that way, because hasn’t it been healthy and rewarding for us to engage in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning? It isn’t just the answers we find that we treasure, but the way our world expands once we suspend

a nit-picking pursuit of a particular answer, or avoid the A.I. generated summary of what others have thought.

Curiosity examines the WAY we think, not just the thoughts themselves. To return briefly to Maria and her husband, having transcended ethnic differences themselves, they might have seen Palestinians as deserving of equal humanitarian respect to Israelis. They might have looked upon the assertion of some Israeli's that the land was "God-given" and asked: Whose God? Who says this? Perhaps they had looked more deeply under the surface of labels and assertion and counter-assertion for a deeper wonderment, a profound understanding.

Having led you this far, I will explore the limits of curiosity. There are lots of ways to pursue truth that must be systematic. Although curiosity is necessary to formulate a focus, we then need to state a hypothesis and decide on a way to test it. Curiosity seems at first glance to be simply a beginning stage to increased understanding. Daydreaming, knocking around the internet, or browsing in the library, all make incidental discoveries rewarding. We can feel our brains growing from new neurons. These broadly thrown nets of discovery are part of curiosity. From there, to continue the example I mentioned earlier about compassion, we would need to do some close reading and make some important connections between the ideal of egalitarian compassion and the rationale for recommending it. Are we compassionate toward others because some deity we recognize will

approve of us, or because we grasp the finitude of life and the futility of being cruel. We would need to make comparisons with other religions as well and explore the difference between compassion and, say, kindness to strangers. We would experience psychological and emotional openness. One question would beget two or three, or ten other questions about stuff we discover on the way to an answer we may never find. Or the questions may arise out of interactions in unexpected areas of experience.

Three years ago, I was invited by some of the Christian clergy in Dobbs Ferry, where we were then renting space from South Presbyterian Church, to take part in an ecumenical Day of Prayer. I accepted the invite as way to make contact with local clergy and maybe open up a dialogue, although the Episcopalians and fundamentalists did not appear and the two rabbis who live in Dobbs Ferry were not invited. We planned the service on zoom, for an October Sunday at the local riverside park. I felt comfortable leading The Lord's Prayer as loosely translated into naturalistic and contemporary idioms of New Zealand.

A lot of things went wrong with this service. The harsh wind knocked over and broke the earthenware centerpiece. Everybody was wind-whipped and cold. The Hudson, a tidal river, began to flood the park as a high tide came into shore. A lot of us here have no interest in Christianity and a lot more actively avoid Christianity, due to uncomfortable childhood experiences. I respect that. But even

in an unlikely context like an outdoor Christian prayer service, we might beneficially affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every human.

I unexpectedly discovered something valuable during this service. Christian services often have something called the Passing of the Peace. Clergy greet people in the congregation, shake their hands, and wish them well with: "Go in peace." I was interested in what brought people out to a service in such unwelcoming weather, so I asked people how they were feeling and followed it up with another question, not just as a rote ritual greeting. A couple of Protestant congregants wanted to tell me how they truly felt, and one very frail old woman gripped my hand as she told me in detail and at length about her poor health and her fear of dying. This heart-felt encounter enabled me to empathize with her feelings and inquire whether she was sharing them with her parish minister. I felt privileged to encounter someone on the raw edge of what it means to be human and to recommend ongoing spiritual support. Religious services are not the core of spirituality but the framework within which people experience something transcending the immediate experience. Religious services give permission for curiosity about deeper concerns.

Curiosity has motivated some of us to engage with interfaith gatherings and sometimes we have attended demonstrations, handed out leaflets, and attended holiday observances. When we show up to these gatherings, we demonstrate that

we are living out our words about acceptance of one another regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin or political party. We are living out our responsibility to be curious about others who are different. When we show up, we also implicitly demand that others be curious about us as well. We implicitly demand that we be taken seriously as spiritually equal. When I registered for One Small Step, as I mentioned earlier, there were eight religious viewpoints to choose from and Unitarian Universalist was one of them. We are numerically tiny compared to Christianity or Islam, but obviously considered significant. Or significantly loud-mouthed.

Some rabbis and priests apparently consider us a threat, perhaps because we accept couples with Jewish-Christian religious backgrounds. Not all rabbis or priests are as anxiously irritated as the rabbi who responded angrily to my summary of Unitarian Universalism at an interfaith clergy meeting with, "So, you accept Satan worshippers?" I'll own it; I am comparatively brash around other clergy, having developed an allergy to self-serving piety and a reactivity to snarky criticism. I am also trying to overcome that reaction, to be actively curious about others' feelings, experiences, and motivations. Sadly, other clergy aren't often self-revealing. Often what I get is a cognitive jab about conceptual consistency in Unitarian Universalism, as with the above rabbi. No problem. They at least know I am curious, as I wish everyone could learn about us. Wanting to learn about

others is at least a good way to get closer and make a difference in our polarized culture. May we always probe beneath surface interactions to be curious, with sensitivity, about the deeper motivators, the profoundly motivating feelings, in our fellow humans. May we demonstrate that engagement is how we are fully alive to questions when facile answers do not suffice. May we show, through the energy we pour into being known and knowing, that all people have inherent worth and dignity.