

Curiosity – Vice or Virtue?

Richard Edlin, Edserv International

When one of my young grandsons comes to stay, you can be sure that among the first books that he plucks off the bookshelf and curls up on the couch to read is the one entitled *How Things Work*. He has a delightful curiosity in how aspects of the created order function (photosynthesis or the limbic system for example) or how human re-creations operate (such as the internal combustion engine or computers). He then takes great pleasure in sharing these discoveries with his siblings and his grandparents.

Conversely, his little sister who has an artsy temperament, has her own curious delight in looking at and sharing patterns and shapes in the design of clothing or costume jewellery.

For both of them, their curiosities provide ample material for wonder, reflection and praise when we end each day at the children's bedsides in prayer thanking God for what we have learned about Him and His world throughout the day.

So, as some ask, particularly in the light of comments by Christian luminaries, is curiosity a vice or a virtue? Augustine viewed curiosity as a vain desire. Aquinas considered that it could easily become an intemperate distraction. Twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger declared that curiosity was an undignified distraction from reality. In more recent decades, Griffiths concludes that, especially in the postmodern university, curiosity often has become an undignified self-indulgence. For his part, Littlejohn (2019), referring to the hours of relentless but often fruitless websurfing, engaged in by many people today, claims that curiosity can be a seductive and habitual diversion into salacious activities. Pornography or identity politics come to mind.

So how should one respond? Should we abandon the pedagogies of nurturing enquiry, curiosity, and cognitive dissonance among our students? Not a chance.

Instead, we can carefully examine the framework in which we as teachers (and parents and pastors too) encourage curiosity. Psalm 8, and the creation mandate of Genesis 1 show God giving to humankind the creative capacity to know about the world, to re-create in it, and to look after it as God's stewards. Creativity, imagination, and curiosity are central to this.

These capacities should lead to the righteous and humble wonder that the Psalmist declares in Psalm 139. In that psalm, David has ruminated upon God's incredible omniscience, omnipresence, and sovereignty. And then he pauses in the middle of this curious reflection to declare that, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain." David takes curiosity to a whole new level outside of ourselves, leading to a more awe-filled, authentic, and responsive understanding of our Heavenly Father.

Christian commentators are right in suggesting that curiosity should not be a hedonistic, distracting novelty. Curiosity and imagination should be wonder-filled delights, propensities

that we enlist in the breath-taking unwrapping of God's mystery parcel of creation, that lead on to a gospel-grounded worship and service of our Creator.

Indeed, whether we are talking about intellect, human relationships, employment, education, curiosity, or any God-given grace: let us not allow our students to take a good gift from God and turn it into an object of worship. Our own example and pedagogies must give curiosity and all other blessings their divinely-intended context.

And so we come to the telos question: towards what end. And the answer is Coram Deo – curiosity in the presence of God. So my grandson's forensic mindset, and my granddaughter's investigation of beauty in color and design, can be encouraged and celebrated not as ends in themselves, but as gracious curiosity gifts from a loving God, taking these youngsters beyond self-gratification and helping them wonderfully to understand God's world God's way.

Praise God for divinely-shaped imagination, curiosity and wonder – and praise Him for Christian schools and homes in which these virtues can be gloriously and faithfully exercised!

Richard Edlin
7 December 2019
redlin@edservinternational.org