

## I Wonder: The Healing Power of Curiosity

Sunday, May 10, 2026

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

### MUSIC

*Hymns:* #1003 Where Do We Come From?; #86 Blessed Spirit of My Life; #18 What Wondrous Love Is This?; I had planned to sing What Really Matters (Maggie Wheeler) but made an error.

*Special Music:* Curiosity (piano, Chris Sochor, b. 2004); XXIII, from 24 Preludes, Op. 53 (piano, Nikolai Kapustin, 1937-2020), What Was I Made For? (choir, Billie Eilish, b. 2001, from *Barbie*).

### READING

This is a reading is an excerpt of an essay by North Carolina resident Dee Dee Hooker about being a mother to her child. It was published in 1980 in *The Sun* magazine. She writes:

One day this Spring, it was raining lightly and I was letting Suzanne play on our miniscule porch while I was washing dishes. She called for me in her lilting sing-song way — “Mama — Ma-ma” — and I went to take her inside; but she took my hand, instead, and pulled at me to go with her out into the rain. I resisted at first, imagining both of us soaking and miserable, but I went. She’s never walked in the rain before, so off we went in our light jackets, into the light showers, splashing in every puddle in our way, stirring rainbows in the oil slicks, finding such amazing sights and sounds. What thrilled me the most was being led around by a child, and genuinely enjoying the discoveries, the freedom of vision. It was one of the nicest gifts I’ve ever been given.<sup>1</sup>

### SERMON

The practice of curiosity is good for the soul. When we observe and explore the world around us, when we try out new activities, we open ourselves to growth and wonder and joy. When we ask questions of other people instead of making assumptions or accusations, we practice respect. Curiosity won’t fix the problems of the world immediately, but it’s got a better track record than worry or despair. When we practice curiosity, we can slow down, diminish anxiety, and come up with new alternatives for action. The practice of curiosity can also be an expression of love.

Jud Brewer is a medical doctor and neuroscientist who writes about the biological aspects of emotional experiences. He writes that curiosity “comes in two flavors.” One is pleasant and the other is unpleasant. The pleasant form is called “i-curiosity,” in which the “i” stands for interest. When we pursue our hunger for knowledge and understanding, we are practicing interest-curiosity. We might practice it by choosing to learn a skill, get acquainted with a new person, read about something unfamiliar, try out a new kind of food, watch a nature documentary, travel or hike.

The other flavor of curiosity is unpleasant because it’s based in urgency, worry, and even fear. Brewer calls it “d-curiosity,” because it’s based in the d-word of *deprivation*. If we lack information and feel that we really must know the answer, we can feel restless. When will the flight arrive? When is the next train coming? When will I hear back about my job application? We might wonder: What am I missing out on?

Speaking of missing out, consider the smart phone. Say that you're in a meeting or getting together with someone over coffee. You may not be holding the phone, but as it sits there, you hear it vibrating. You notice the flash across the screen. For many of us, there's a strong urge to pick it up and look, even if we're not anticipating anything in particular, not waiting to hear from the boss, the doctor's office, or a family member. This urge can be very uncomfortable. We just *have to* know! That's deprivation curiosity. In short, the pleasant flavor of curiosity is wonder; the unpleasant one is worry.

In human evolution, curiosity has been important for our survival, just as it is for other animal species. It helps us find food to eat, which is pleasant. It helps us avoid getting eaten, which is unpleasant. Outside my window, the red and yellow finches at the birdfeeder are fun to watch. They evoke and reward my curiosity. They seem to enjoy the windfall of seeds; however, while they are feeding, they cock their heads in all directions to scan for danger. Almost any odd movement sends them fluttering away. *Their* curiosity has to do with avoiding harm.

But the birds only have to watch out for people, cats, and bigger birds. They don't have to worry about the notifications buzzing and flashing. They don't have to wait for a call. Brewer says: "Our human ancestors could actually resolve their curiosity (yes, that's a tiger; no, those berries aren't poisonous). [But in this modern era] we are swimming in an infinite sea of information. There's always another article, another update, another thing you don't know."

He says that the key to this distress isn't to fight our urge to know; it's to recognize it. When we feel that familiar pull to check our phone or the urge to listen to another update of the news, we can get curious *about the urge itself*. Instead of grasping to know the answer, we can try to practice awareness of our experience. We can be curious about the physical sensations of the anxiety that's known as deprivation-curiosity. For example, we might think to ourselves: "Oh, no, I don't know this or that thing, but I really want an answer!" If we become aware of this, we can pause. We can redirect our attention to asking: "What does this restlessness feel like in my breathing? When I notice that I am uncomfortable not knowing what's going to happen, what does that feel like in my body?"<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, each one of us is worthy of a curious exploration of our own experiences and our own stories. This is important. Unfortunately, many of us did not grow up in settings that encouraged us to be curious about ourselves rather than judgmental about ourselves. Hence, we are fortunate when we are in a situation in which curiosity is part of the structure, when it's an explicit expectation. For example, when we visit a helping professional for counseling of one kind or another, we expect them to be dedicated to seeing us as we are and helping us learn about ourselves. Or if we are taking a writing workshop, we can trust that the facilitator will provide a series of prompts for us to reflect and write about. Then we can discover what's inside us by seeing what we write. There is a scaffolding of curiosity in settings like these.

When we think of teachers or mentors who made our lives better, it's often because they were curious to know who we were. Preschools and elementary schools in particular invite children to explore their world and their lives. Likewise, one role of a parent or other care provider is to bear witness to the child's discoveries, as we heard in the reading by Dee Dee Hooker. When it began raining, her toddler insisted that she come outside and explore. The mom went along, even though she knew they'd get soaked. But she writes that it thrilled her to be "led around by a child, and [to share in] the discoveries, the freedom of vision" of a child.<sup>3</sup> Curiosity is natural to children, which means it's natural to human beings when we are adults

too. Whether giving attention to our own experience or interacting with others, the practice of curiosity is as basic as asking, “I wonder” –asking and not rushing to supply an answer.

This reminds me of Spirit Play.<sup>4</sup> Several years ago, in Religious Education for children at UUSS, we used a Unitarian Universalist curriculum called Spirit Play. It makes use of the teaching methods of the late Maria Montessori and a number of religious educators. At the heart of a typical session, the children are in a circle around the lead teacher, called the Storyteller. The story of the day could be from UU history or a parable in the Bible, from a spiritual tradition like Buddhism, or from folklore. Sitting on the floor, the teacher tells a story while handling small human figures and other objects on a cloth background spread out on the floor.

After telling the story in this way, the Storyteller asks a set of open-ended questions, wondering questions. For example: I wonder if you have heard this story before? I wonder what your favorite part of the story is? I wonder what this makes you think about?

No matter the statement a child makes, the Storyteller’s response is not the familiar words of “That’s right” or “Good answer.” Whatever a child might say will be met with wonder. If a child expresses an opinion... whether it’s insightful or judgmental, the teacher’s reply is the same as when the child asks a question: I wonder!

An expression of curiosity is also a suspension of the urge to have an answer. I wonder. Perhaps this could come in handy for adults, such as when we’re caught off guard by someone else’s remark. If what they say seems harsh, argumentative, judgmental, or just plain weird, try saying “I wonder.” Translation: I affirm that you have said something, but I’m not going to engage with it right now. *I wonder.* It’s a way to avoid getting caught.

It’s important to remember that you cannot make other people be curious. When a person is telling me something they have strong feelings about, I can think to myself: “Hmm, it feels as if they are not curious about where I’m coming from. They just want to talk.” Sometimes I might dare to ask: Are you curious about my perspective? Do you want to know what I think, and why I think this way? I might do this, or I might just let it go and take a mindful breath.

That has happened when I’ve been in conversation with relatives. If they want to gossip or complain about another person, I tried to ignore it. Sometimes I’ve stayed silent. Maybe next time I’ll try responding with just two words: “I wonder.”

On social media, if someone posts an assertion about a public figure or something I care about, it’s tempting to set them straight. Or at least I’d like to let other people in that thread know about my alternative point of view. But instead, I could simply say: “I wonder if that’s true.” Or I could just log off. After all, the world will not be healed by online arguments, whether we win them or not.

To be sure, in these times, curiosity and respect seem to be under siege. Anxiety is afflicting everyone. And there are so many things to worry about.

However, as the author Dan Zadra says: worry is the misuse of imagination. This is helpful to remember when bad news continues to shock us and break our hearts. It is a misuse of our imagination when we worry about what else could go wrong. To be sure, we don’t want to fool ourselves or be in denial of what’s going on. We don’t want to be unprepared for any new challenges. The news is upsetting, for sure. But practicing curiosity can reduce the sense of overwhelm.

So let's take the time to be curious about new possibilities. Considering the current threats to democracy, for example, I wonder what new forms of community will be sparked by the innovative organizing that we have witnessed in the past few years. In cities large and small we've seen or participated in acts of solidarity and mutual care in which people protect one another. Given these accomplishments, I want to remain curious about further possibilities residing among us. I want to learn and imagine how ordinary people can be strong and resilient when we reach out and build community. I wonder: What organizations are emerging right now to harness the possibility of a better world? In every age of history, there have been some really good surprises. There are many places to put our time and care. That's something good to be curious about.

Curiosity is not a quick fix to problems, but it provides a space for new ideas, a space to make new connections. As we recite every morning here at UUSS, fear is outworked by hope. The practice of curiosity is an expression of hope. But it's also hard work.

Several weeks ago our member Alicia led a workshop about bridging conversations, which means conversing with people across divides of political commitments. The bridge is built by the practice of curiosity. In one role-playing exercise, each one of us was asked to think of a political position that we disagreed with and then imagine how another person who believed in it would explain or defend that position. After some time to think, we paired up with another person and took turns listening. The first person explained their pretend position in just a couple of sentences. "I think that..."

The second person was not to refute or argue against the position, only to explore it with questions. Like: *What experiences have shaped your position?* It was helpful that we had a list of curious questions to refer to. Two of them were: *What are your concerns? What do you hope to see happen?* The guidelines encouraged us to paraphrase what we have heard to make sure we understood the other person and to make sure that they know we understand them. We can ask more questions, too: *Is there a principle you feel strongly about when it comes to this?*

We were instructed not to demand statistics or try to put the person on the spot about their opinions in any other way, only to stay curious. *It sounds like you really care about this. Can you say more?*

We each took a turn to do this. My conversation partner presented her case so believably that she annoyed me. I had to remind myself that she was taking the other side on purpose. On the other hand, I was impressed that she kept the space open between us with her curious questions for me. There was no hint of an agenda or assumptions on her part. Genuinely curious questions don't carry assumptions.

This exercise was tough. To our great relief, however, it didn't last long. We weren't expected to solve our disagreement, only to show some respect. Fortunately, our facilitator explained that we don't have to do this all the time. We don't have to conduct a bridging conversation with random strangers. And whether we know the person or not, we don't have to engage with someone who scares us. Nobody should feel that we must look for common ground with people who thinks that we don't deserve to live in safety and freedom. However, the bridging conversation is a useful tool in relationships that we already have and which we want to improve. Curiosity helps us to stay connected. We always have a choice to ask one more question.

In an online essay, artist and writer Jen Picicci says that our judgments get in the way of curiosity.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, judgments are just feelings and assumptions. They are not statements of truth. Judgments, she writes, “are about you being right and the other person being wrong. They don’t feel good or serve you.” The practice of curiosity is a form of empathy. As an example, she says: “Instead of assuming your sister didn’t call you because she cares about her new boyfriend more than she cares about you, try being curious about what’s really going on. Maybe she’s got too many things on her plate right now and could use some help.” Being curious, Picicci writes, can “create an environment where it’s clear that we’re all different people, dealing with life as best we can.”

I try to practice this curiosity when a person in a store seems rude or oblivious. They might be a jerk, or they might be worried about something and not very aware, or maybe they weren’t trained well. When I’m in the car in traffic and I feel upset at another driver, sometimes I realize that whatever caused them to make a mistake is probably not going to be corrected by me scolding them with the sound of my horn. But in any case, Picicci says, when it comes down to it, “Curiosity is good for *us*. Being judgmental doesn’t feel good, but being curious certainly does.”

The writer Maria Popova says: when we judge, we cannot understand. True curiosity is therefore a form of love.

Curiosity is good for the soul and good for the world. I wonder if we can put more curiosity into the world by sharing more curiosity with one another. I wonder.

Now, in the spirit of curiosity, I want to invite you to take about half a minute of silence with me. Whether you are here in person or you are with us at home, let’s be still together for a few moments. Let’s be curious about what that feels like for us.

I’ll let you know when it ends. Now let’s begin. [pausing a half minute] Thank you. I’d like to conclude with a prayer by Rev. Michelle Collins [adapted]:

O Spirit of Life and Wonder,  
Stir in us a living curiosity.  
When we meet what is unfamiliar, turn our fear into wondering.  
When we feel the urge to withdraw, grant us one more honest question.  
May we notice anew what we have passed by a hundred times.  
May we listen for stories we have never heard before.  
Let us meet each day not as a hurdle to overcome,  
but as a mystery to explore.  
And help us to learn more about the mystery which is each one of us.  
Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>1</sup>Dee Dee Hooker in “Readers Write: Being a Parent,” *The Sun*, July 1980.  
<https://www.thesunmagazine.org/articles/25369-being-a-parent>

<sup>2</sup> Jud Brewer, MD PhD, “The Curiosity Hijack: Why Your Brain’s Superpower Is Making You Miserable,” *Inside the Curious Mind*, online journal, accessed May 8, 2026 .

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<https://judbrewer.substack.com/p/the-curiosity-hijack-why-your-brains>. See his other essays about anxiety and changing bad habits at his website: <https://drjud.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Dee Dee Hooker, "Readers Write: Being a Parent," *The Sun*, July 1980, accessed May 8, 2026.

<https://www.thesunmagazine.org/articles/25369-being-a-parent>

<sup>4</sup> Spirit Play website: <https://spirit-play.com/about/>

<sup>5</sup> Jen Picicci, "When You Want to Judge, Be Curious Instead," *Tiny Buddha* online journal, accessed May 8, 2026. <https://tinybuddha.com/blog/how-curiosity-can-help-us-be-kinder-and-less-judgmental/>