

PROLOGUE

A Cure for What Ails Us

The human brain had a vast memory storage. It made us curious and very creative. Those were the characteristics that gave us an advantage—curiosity, creativity and memory.

—David Suzuki

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CHEATING DEATH

In the mid-1980s, Gary Swan and Dorit Carmelli (1996), researchers at SRI International, rounded up more than 1,000 men who had previously participated in a three-decade study of their health behavior and outcomes to ask them an unusual series of questions. By now, the men were all around 70 years old with plenty known about their medical histories: their blood pressure and cholesterol levels, frequency of drinking and smoking, whether they had fought cancer or heart disease, their education levels, cognitive abilities, and general mental health. Following a hunch that a subtle yet powerful dimension of personality might be a critical, hidden driver of their health outcomes, the researchers asked the men—and, for good measure, their wives—to respond to a 10-question survey . . . and then sat patiently on the answers for five years.

When they reconnected with the couples in 1991, they found that among the 2,000-plus people originally surveyed, 126 men and 78 women had passed away. That simple fact created a comparison group of survivors and nonsurvivors and invited a captivating question: Was there anything in the men's medical histories (no similar medical histories were available for the women) or in how they had answered those 10 simple questions five years earlier that might have predicted their shorter lifespans?

As it turns out, the answer was yes. How both men and women answered those questions revealed a subtle, yet powerful, facet of their personalities, which in turn appeared to predict their longevity.

The survivors demonstrated higher levels of a single, key personality trait than those who had died. In fact, for the men, only age and cancer seemed to be more predictive of their mortality. In other words, a personality trait appeared to be more strongly tied to their mortality than their cholesterol levels, smoking, education levels, and mental health. For both men and women, in fact, scoring one standard deviation above the mean (or at the 84th percentile) on the survey reduced their risk of dying five years later by about 30 percent.

So what was it? What personality trait helped these study participants live longer?

You'll find the answer on the following page.

Well done. You turned the page.

In a way, the simple action you just took reflects what the survivors in Swan and Carmelli's study were more capable of doing than nonsurvivors—demonstrating curiosity. The short personality test had asked the senior citizens to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 4 on statements like these: “I feel like exploring my environment,” “I feel stimulated,” and “I feel eager.”

At first, Swan and Carmelli were at a bit of a loss to explain exactly why such a strong link between curiosity and longevity would exist. One possibility, they surmised, might be that fading levels of curiosity are a canary in the coal mine, warning of the onset of Alzheimer's or other mental deterioration. Yet another possibility was that as people age they often face health and mobility challenges, so curiosity might predict whether they approach such challenges as solvable problems or succumb to despair and decreased interpersonal interactions, hastening their demise. All Swan and Carmelli could say for sure was that more curious seniors were more likely to be alive five years later.

CONFRONTING OUR CONTRADICTIONS ABOUT CURIOSITY

Despite this and many other powerful benefits of curiosity, we humans tend to have mixed views about it, both as individuals and as a society. Consider all the stories and inherited wisdom we've absorbed since our youth that paint curiosity as lurid fascination and temptation. In the Bible and Greek mythology, curiosity prompts Eve and Pandora, respectively, to unleash evil upon the world. Folk wisdom warns us about “curiosity killing the cat.” And not so long ago, Eleanor Roosevelt found herself forced to defend her intellectual curiosity, which her critics groused was unbecoming of a First Lady. Even modern Internet searchers seem to harbor caution about curiosity: Type the words *is curiosity* into Google's search engine, and it autofills with the words *a sin*.

Certainly, at times, our need for intellectual closure and getting to the bottom of something, even if it means extracting lurid details, can reflect morbid curiosity, as researchers discovered when they sat students down at a table and told them to be careful with a pile of ballpoint pens left over from a previous experiment because

some were electrified and would shock them if touched. As it turns out, like Pandora peering into her infamous box, the students couldn't resist the "shock value" (pun intended) of touching the pens (Hsee & Ruan, 2016). Thus, this little experiment appeared to demonstrate that curiosity may sometimes lead us to indulge in counterproductive or self-destructive urges.

COULD CURIOSITY BE A CURE FOR WHAT AILS US?

Nonetheless, as you'll discover in the chapters ahead, curiosity takes many forms. In its various incarnations, it has been shown to have far more positive consequences than negative ones, including the following:

- **Priming the pump for learning.** The more curious we are, the more we learn and recall later about our learning. Moreover, curiosity is more strongly linked to student success than IQ or persistence (Shah et al., 2018); however, the longer students stay in school, they less curious they become.
- **Creating better leaders and more engaged school cultures.** With 70 percent of employees—and teachers, for that matter—disengaged at work, school and district leaders should pay attention to this fact: Employee curiosity and engagement are strongly linked. Similarly, leaders' curiosity and their effectiveness are also linked, as well as the presence of curiosity in organizations and the success of those organizations.
- **Supporting better relationships.** When we're curious about others, we develop stronger relationships with them. However, interpersonal curiosity appears to be in dwindling supply, given the worrisome decline in college students' reported levels of empathy since the 1960s and an especially steep drop since 2000.
- **Making our students' lives more fulfilling.** On days when we feel curious, we also experience greater personal satisfaction; in short, people (and students) who report greater curiosity also report greater levels of happiness and life fulfillment.

What may be most enticing about curiosity is that it's not something we must learn or a skill to be developed. Rather, we're born

curious. Yes, some people are more naturally curious than others. Yet as we'll see in this book, curiosity is hardwired in all of us. No one needs to teach us how to be curious.

That's the good news. Here's the bad news.

As we'll also see throughout this book, our childlike curiosity often wanes as we grow older and the longer students stay in school. As any parent knows, toddlers ask lots of questions, almost incessantly. Yet research shows that by the time kids reach school age, their questions come fewer and farther between; whereas toddlers ask up to 100 questions per day, middle schoolers' daily questions dwindle to nearly nil (Bronson & Merryman, 2010). In short, it appears that as we grow older and are subjected to formal schooling, we seem to run out of curiosity.

COME BACK, CURIOSITY . . .

Why should that be? Why should something as essential to what it means to be human beings start to fade when students enter our schools? Could it be that they simply acquire more information about their environment and thus have fewer questions about it? Or could it be that something in their environment tells them to stop asking so many questions and get back to their schoolwork? Or could it be that we put them on a need-to-know basis, telling them to accept the world around them as it is, no longer experiencing the joy of discovery?

To answer these questions, we'll look more deeply at what happens to kids' curiosity when they enter school—a place that, ostensibly at least, ought to be designed to unleash it. We'll also examine what happens to people (of all ages) when we're curious—and when we're not.

Knowing that curiosity leads to better learning, better organizations, and better lives might lead us to ask a larger question: What would it look like to unleash the deep kind of curiosity that lies at the heart of discovery, science, and enlightenment and serves as the lifeblood of democracy—across not just our schools, but an entire society? That is, what would it look like if we were to arrange more of our classrooms, schools, daily lives, and interactions with one another to do more things out of curiosity?

The purpose of this book is to focus our attention on the many (and often subtle) ways in which we seem to quash curiosity and what that means for our kids, our schools, our society, and happiness as human beings. More important, though, we'll explore how together we can restore curiosity in everything we do, making our classrooms and schools better, preparing our students to lead more fulfilling lives, and in so doing, creating a better society for us and them.

LET'S GET CURIOUS

While this book will offer some practical ways to instill curiosity in our classrooms, relationships, and organizations, it's not designed to be a how-to guide or step-by-step manual for creating more curious schools overnight (*Curiosity for Dummies*, if you will). Such a book would be counterproductive because, as we'll see, curiosity doesn't always serve an obvious purpose. Nor does it follow a straight line. Indeed, it's often only when we allow ourselves and our students to engage in some childlike wonder and to engage in a bit of intellectual wandering that we arrive at deeper meaning, richer learning, and greater success.

Thus, this book is intended to pique your curiosity (and your colleagues' curiosity if you're reading it as part of a book study) and provide you with a deeper appreciation for how so many aspects of our classrooms, schools, lives, and society are better when curiosity is present.

So if you're curious, let's start wondering and wandering.