

CURIOUS ABOUT EACH

A meditation by Galen Guengerich
All Souls NYC Online
Sunday, June 28, 2020

In his speech on the floor of the House of Representatives during the impeachment trial of Donald Trump last year, Representative John Lewis said, “When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something. To do something. Our children and their children will ask us, ‘What did you do? What did you say?’ For some, this vote may be hard. But we have a mission and a mandate to be on the right side of history.”

When Lewis died last week at the age of 80, our nation and our world lost one of its most powerful champions for civil rights and human rights. A close colleague and confidant of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Lewis went from being a central organizer and celebrated spokesperson of the civil rights movement in the 1960’s to become one of the most influential and respected leaders on Capitol Hill. I encourage you to watch the new documentary *John Lewis: Good Trouble*. It’s a compelling vision of how one person can make a difference, coming at a time when we desperately need such a vision.

The key to Lewis’s vision was his clarity about the relationship between the one and the all. In his book *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change*, Lewis puts his vision in its simplest terms: “We are one people, one family, the human family, and what affects one of us affects us all.”

Throughout his life and his career as a legislator, Lewis paid ceaseless attention to both ends of that spectrum — to how the needs and longings of each affect the wellbeing and potential of all. The promise of America, in his view, was its founding commitment to liberty and justice for everyone — and that means, he insisted, each and every one of us.

In an interview after Lewis’s death, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York’s 14th District was asked what she had learned from Lewis. She replied, “For me, it was how deeply personal he was with each and every individual he encountered... If you actually ever had the opportunity and deep privilege of encountering and meeting with Mr. Lewis,... [it was] the way with which he made every person feel seen was so profound.

In the wake of the publication of my new book two months ago, I’ve been thinking and speaking a lot about gratitude. As I describe it, the way of gratitude restates in a different way this essential dynamic between each of us and all of us. Our lives as individuals are made up of our relationships to everyone and everything else — to our own minds and bodies, to the people around us, and to the natural world.

Everything that makes our lives possible and, if we are fortunate, sometimes wonderful, comes to us from sources beyond ourselves.

The appropriate spiritual response to this elemental reality, in my view, is a deep and profound sense of gratitude. But the way of gratitude is a two-way street. In response to all we have been given, we owe something back in return. The way of gratitude is the way of reciprocity. Just as the people and world around us give us what we need to survive and hopefully also to flourish, and just as we want to be treated with dignity, fairness, and justice, it's our obligation to help ensure that other people and the natural world are treated in the same fulsome way.

A life of reciprocity begins with careful attention to each. As John Lewis said, your obligation to say something or do something comes when you see something. But you have to be looking in order to see. You have to be attentive and interested. You have to be caring and compassionate.

Here's the problem. No one wakes up in the morning and suddenly decides to become caring and compassionate. We become concerned about the needs of the people and world around us – the needs and longings of each – as a consequence of being curious about them.

The dictionary defines curiosity as “the desire or inclination to know or learn about anything... a feeling of interest leading one to inquire.” It's true that some people appear more curious than others, and different people seem curious about different things. Some people are curious about the physical world, while others inquisitively probe the world of ideas; still others eagerly explore the realm of feelings and emotions, both theirs and others. Even so, these ways of expressing curiosity spring from a common source.

The word curiosity originally meant “the application of care or attention.” Curiosity originates with care – caring enough to pay attention.

In his two-volume treatise on psychology published in 1890, William James notes that curiosity has a double-edged character. Using the evolutionary framework provided by Darwin, James points out that being attracted to unknown sensations and experiences is adaptive, because it increases knowledge. On the other hand, the anxiety provoked by fear of the unknown is also adaptive, because the new experience might be dangerous.

For example, James says, the rustling in the reeds at the water's edge could be your dinner – or you could be its dinner. If the rustling in the reeds is indeed an alligator, you are better off knowing of its presence than continuing to live in ignorance. Curiosity motivates us to investigate the uncertain and explore the unknown.

Notice how curiosity works. When you pay attention to what you know, you begin to realize what you don't know. When you become aware of what you see, you begin to discern what you don't see. Only by carefully tracking the orbit of the planets did Copernicus realize that the Earth was not the center of the solar system. Only when scientists calculated the mass of the universe did they realize we don't know where most

of it is. Only when you notice the distraught look on someone's face do you become aware that you don't know its cause. Only when you pay careful attention to the effects of oppression and inequality on individual lives do you become aware that these injustices are not accidental, but intentional. Curiosity is the discipline of caring enough to pay attention and thereby coming to understand your obligation in return.

Near the end of Walt Whitman's iconic poem "Song of Myself," we find a passage in which Whitman redirects human curiosity from its historical focus on an unknown and unknowable God to human action and interaction. He writes:

And I say to [hu]mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God...
I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least...
Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's
name...

I hear and behold God in every object, Whitman says, in each hour and each moment, in the faces of the people around me, and in my own face.

In his 1998 book titled *Achieving Our Country*, the leading twentieth-century American philosopher Richard Rorty links this text to Whitman's view of America's character as a nation. Whitman wanted Americans to take pride in what America might make of itself on its own, Rorty says, rather than by virtue of its obedience to any authority — even the authority of God. For this reason, Whitman wrote: "*Be not curious about God / For I who am curious about each am not curious about God.*"

Rorty goes on to say, "Whitman thought there was no need to be curious about God because there is no standard, not even a divine one, against which the decisions of a free people can be measured. Americans, he hoped, would spend the energy that past human societies had spent on discovering God's desires on discovering one another's desires. Americans will be curious about every other American, but not about anything which claims authority over America."

Rorty adds, "Whitman viewed the United States as an opportunity to see ultimate significance in a finite, human, historical project, rather than in something eternal and nonhuman. [He] hoped that America would be the place where a religion of love would finally replace a religion of fear... [He] wanted to put hope for a casteless and classless America in the place traditionally occupied by knowledge of the will of God. [He] wanted that utopian America to replace God as the unconditional object of desire. [He] wanted the struggle for social justice to be the country's animating principle, the nation's soul."

Few if any Americans have embodied this animating vision better than John Lewis. He fully understood that the work of the divine in this world is our work to do. In

his book *Across That Bridge*, he says, “Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet.”

In an interview some years ago, Lewis described a formative experience during his childhood. He says, “As I was growing up in rural Alabama, I saw all around me the system of segregation and racial discrimination. The visible signs in the little town of Troy, the population of about 7,000, we saw the sign that said ‘colored only.’ White only. Colored waiting... In a little 5&10 store was a civil fountain, a clean fountain for white people to come and drink water, but in another corner of the store there was a little spigot, a rusty spigot, (that) said ‘colored drinking.’ And I became resentful of the sign and all the visible evidence of segregation and racial discrimination.”

John Lewis saw something. He was paying attention. It told him what he needed to say throughout his life. It told him what he needed to do with his life.

The same is true of your lives and mine. If we remain curious about both what is wonderful in the world around us and also what is terrible, we will learn what we must treasure and what we must transform. What’s beautiful in our lives and world will nurture us, and what’s terrible will motivate us. As the presence of the divine in this world, we are everywhere and always the prophets of possibility.