

Emotional Equations

by Chip Conley

Chapter 11

[Curiosity = Wonder + Awe]

I was born in Orange, California, under the influence of, and just five miles from, the Magic Kingdom of Disneyland. My earliest recollections are of walking down Main Street, meeting Mickey Mouse, and being thrilled by the experience of driving a car in Autopia and frightened by the Matterhorn ride. At age five, when I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I answered with a "who," not a "what": Walt Disney. I spent much of my childhood drawing fanciful layouts of my ideal amusement park, which ultimately became my boutique hotels.

At almost fifty years of age, Disney was already a successful film producer, director, and entertainment innovator when he began sketching his vision for Disneyland. Following his calling and working around the clock, he spent five years creating and developing the world's most iconic amusement park. When Disneyland first opened, observers marveled that it was as if a ten-year-old child with a fifty-year-old's wisdom and urban planning skill had created the "happiest place on Earth."

Walt Disney was bigger than life to many people, but he suggested that we could all emulate him: "Somehow I can't believe that there are any heights that can't be scaled by a man who knows the secrets of making dreams come true. This special secret, it seems to me, can be summarized in four Cs. They are curiosity, confidence, courage, and constancy." Disney believed that his drive, stamina, and ability to pick himself up after some pretty big career letdowns came from the first of the four Cs. Albert Einstein had an abiding respect for this emotion as well, writing "I am neither especially clever nor especially gifted. I am only very, very curious."

Creativity tends to get more attention than curiosity, as there's something tangible and actionable associated with the quality. Curiosity typically is an activity without a predetermined purpose. It's the fertilizer of the mind. Yet there's lots of evidence to suggest that it's like blood in our veins, an essential, life-affirming emotion that keeps us forever young. Curiosity can also be the escape hatch for both anxiety and depression. When you are feeling the oppression of either of those emotions, you also likely feel a dimness, narrowness, and declining interest. Being curious is being open: open to learning, open to loving, open to stumbling, open to life. The psychologist Todd Kashdan calls curiosity "the engine of growth."

Warning: Curiosity requires you to admit that you don't know what you don't know. While this may induce some anxiety (we're all so conditioned to have the right answer), this can be a potent launch pad to curiosity. Asking "How do you do that?" or "I don't know - can you show me?" means we let go of having the right answer or being competent. Curiosity allows us to explore with the open mind of a child, without preconceptions, and may very well keep us from

growing old too fast. As Satchel Paige asked, "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you were?"

I went to an inner-city high school, and some of my friends used to call me "curious white boy" as a term of endearment. I was fascinated with the *mélange* of cultures we had at Long Beach Polytechnic High School, famous for being "the home of scholars and champions." At the time, I didn't realize that the label I'd earned was a compliment. Yet we all have a choice: we can avoid asking questions for fear of finding answers that threaten our beliefs and preconceptions and the status quo, or we can face the big questions with a curious heart and mind.

CURIOSITY FUELS CREATIVITY

Sony founder Akio Morita said, "Curiosity is the key to creativity." I believe it surpasses creativity as the most essential trait of a successful businessperson in the twenty-first century, especially in the global economy. One of the most trusted axioms in business is that a great manager finds the answers, while a great leader discovers the questions. That's particularly true in an era when the world is in a constant state of change. Curiosity has also proven to be a great ingredient in resilience, a trait particularly valuable in an extended economic downturn. Resilient people aren't made of steel; they just provide themselves with more options, and those options come from a curious mind.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it helped the most famous business theorist and author of all time, Peter Drucker, live to the age of ninety-five. Drucker was offended whenever he was called a "guru" and throughout his life characterized himself as either a "student" or a "bystander." In fact, the title of his memoir is *Adventures of a Bystander*: He believed that people are meant to "live in more than one world," partly to keep a fresh mind, partly to synthesize ideas across disciplines, and partly because having a diverse life means that when part of your life is askew, you can turn to other parts of your life to help balance it.

Drucker coined the phrase "knowledge workers" to define the role of businesses in the new information age we were entering a generation ago. He wrote, "The leaders of the past knew how to tell. The leaders of the future will know how to ask." He glorified the idea of learning and development as an essential part of the corporate infrastructure and the mind-set of those who would flourish within a company. In his own life, he would pick a new subject to learn every three years, from Japanese art to arcane economics. In his free time, he would study the subject with such ferocity that he was able to teach it to others.

The social psychologist Carol Dweck has done landmark research on how your "mind-set" - more than any other factor - determines whether you will be successful. At one end of a spectrum are those who believe that their success is based upon their innate ability; at the other are those who believe that their learning defines their success. Dweck describes the former as having a "fixed" mind-set, while the latter have a "growth" mind-set.

You may not be aware of your mind-set until you have to deal with failure. People coming from a fixed mind-set dread failure, which they consider a negative reflection of their abilities, so they often aren't willing to risk being curious or risk-taking. People with a growth mind-set see

failure as a constructive path toward improvement. Dweck has shown that how we encourage our kids has a lot to do with their capacity to be curious and open to learning. (It's better to say, "Great job, Sally, you worked very hard" than "Great job, Sally, you're very smart.")

How open are you to seeing failure as a positive growth experience? Are your kids more focused on *demonstrating* their competence (proving themselves) rather than *increasing* it (improving themselves)? Do you celebrate your children's fixed, innate qualities or do you help them see the incremental value of hard work and self-improvement?

ONE PART CHILD, ONE PART SAGE

Curiosity is a curious emotion. A component of curiosity is all about the childlike wonder ("The Wonderful World of Disney") that encourages us to explore our relationship with new discoveries, most of which are relatively simple. Yet Albert Einstein suggested something deeper when he wrote, "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality." In its purest form, curiosity mixes the sense of a child seeing the world for the first time with that of the wise elder who realizes that the more she knows, the more she doesn't know - and is delighted and maybe even a little humbled by that realization.

What's sad is the in-between time. Between our wondrous youth and our awe-struck senior years, we choose a narrower path, not by conscious choice but often because life's circumstances necessitate a little more linearity. Ironically, this is the time of our life-midlife when we tend to report the least amount of happiness. Certainty and structure may create predictability in your life but also lead to apathy and a slow atrophy of your curiosity muscles, as well as your mind and life spirit. In the early stages of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, one of the first signs that something is wrong is the inability to manage and deal with the curious or novel.

Let's explore these two components of curiosity: wonder and awe. Rene Descartes proposed that, "Wonder is the first of all the passions." It couples the sense of joyful, innocent surprise with a desire to know more. Surprise is one of the six most universal emotions and it's particularly prevalent in youngsters who haven't yet learned how to mask their sense of wonder about the world.

Adults have a mixed relationship with wonder. When was the last time you marveled at something as if it were the first time you'd ever seen it? As a kid, one of my favorite qualities about Disneyland was the illusion that it physically never ended. Walt, the master, and his architects created a design that didn't allow you to see any exterior walls when you were in the midst of the fantasy world. What subject in the world could give you that boundless, open sense of discovery? Too often, we lose the wonder when we rise five hundred feet into the air to see Disneyland for what it technically is (an amusement park) as opposed to what it emotionally is (a joyful world of possibility). Is it time for you to put on a "wonder"-ful new pair of glasses?

In *Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi asked highly skilled rock climbers, composers of music, chess players, and others what gives them a similar feeling to the flow they feel when doing their cherished activity. The number one response: "designing or discovering something new," a state that is almost synonymous with wonder. Perhaps joy is not the absence of unhappiness but, more purely, the presence of childlike wonder. Is it possible to regain that sense of wonder we all had before it was "educated out of us"? As the creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson says, "Children are not frightened of being wrong," which allows for creativity to happen. And, he warns, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original."

Wonder is often compared to awe, but awe implies a certain respect for the unknown, whereas wonder just bathes in joy. Wonder may lead to scientific discoveries. Awe leads to metaphysical or spiritual insights. We feel awe when we are humbled by something bigger than we are. Dacher Keltner devotes a whole glorious chapter to awe in his book *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life* and helps us imagine what John Muir must have felt when he first stumbled upon the Sierra Nevada mountains and Yosemite Valley. Perhaps you remember the awe you felt when the Apollo 11 astronauts projected their view of Earth from the moon, the first time this beautiful image of the entire planet was ever seen. There's a transformative element of awe that puts you into your proper place, connecting you to something grand.

Awe carries an element of humility and sometimes fear, since it truly makes us realize how small we are in the context of the miraculous, untamed world. Enlightenment and Transcendentalist writers wove wondrous words to describe the alchemy of beauty and the sublime that defines our sense of awe. Awe suggests vastness and power beyond what we know or can conceive of, which requires a certain amount of accommodation to that which deserves not just our devotion but also our sense of discovery. Keltner says, "The experience of awe is about finding your place in the larger scheme of things." It can make you feel either small and inconsequential or possibly large and connected with a sense of oneness with all that exists.

Yet awe has taken on some odd connotations today. The United States used a strategy of "shock and awe" during the bombing of Baghdad when trying to oust Saddam Hussein from power. On a lighter note, the word "awesome" has never been the same since Sean Penn hijacked it as his mantra, playing the spacey Jeff Spicoli in the movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.

CURIOUS TRIBES: THE BLENDING OF WONDER AND AWE

Internet communities alone aren't enough. We are naturally social beings who need the occasional hall pass to break us out of our cybercell at home or work so we can connect with our flock. And if there's one experience that can transcendently unite a flock, it's the experience of wonder and awe in a group setting.

I regularly experience curious joy when among three unique tribes: the annual TED Conference in Long Beach, California; the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah; and Burning Man in the northern Nevada desert, the largest interactive arts festival in the world. Though these three annual events are quite different, they are all immersive. They give me a "contact high" by being able to share my sense of wonder or awe at a mind-blowing lecture, an emotionally intense film, or an ethereal sculpture in the middle of the desert.

I celebrated my fiftieth birthday with more than a hundred friends in a camp we called "Maslowtopia" at Burning Man 2010. Each year, nearly fifty thousand people create a temporary tent city in the normally uninhabited, harsh Black Rock desert. Think *Mad Max meets Lawrence of Arabia meets Hair*. The mind-altering alchemy of art, spirituality, sexuality, and dancing under the stars is popular with the bobo (bourgeois bohemian) crowd of all economic, gender, and racial backgrounds.

My birthday tribe included folks aged seventeen to seventy. Because we were in a place dedicated to the unexpected, there was a certain amount of caution and anxiety when doctors, lawyers, and teachers packed up their rented RVs, said good-bye to the kids, and hit the open road for this experience. The one thing I said to a couple of my friends who almost chickened out was, "Stay curious" (sort of like the closing of Steve Jobs's famous Stanford commencement address: "Stay hungry, stay foolish.").

Over the course of the few days we were together, we had a transformative experience. We were in a utopian society with no money, not many rules, and an overall feeling that this was summer camp for adults. We also had a healthy dollop of awe. When the sun goes down on your first night at Burning Man, it's like being at Disneyland for the first time. The vastness of the night, the sheer beauty of the electrified art, and the sublime zeitgeist of human transformation all tell you that this is not something you could experience in the confines of your own home.

When I was a kid, a friend and I would catch pollywogs during school recess, wanting to see and understand their metamorphosis. Burning Man induces that sense of wonder and awe for me as a grown-up. When was the last time you went searching for pollywogs?

WORKING THROUGH THE EQUATION

Curiosity = Wonder + Awe

Take a look at your myths about curiosity. Adam and Eve were banished from Eden because of curiosity. Pandora opened a box, and it released evil, sickness, and unhappiness (with hope, too). Lot's wife was told not to look back on the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, couldn't resist a peek, and turned into a pillar of salt. Thirty years ago, your boss told you, "Don't stick your nose into other people's business." Your wife thinks you have a "morbid curiosity" about your own mortality. Our minds and culture caution us that curiosity taken too far becomes dangerous and obsessive. Has curiosity ever gotten you into trouble? Was it truly curiosity that was at fault? Pure curiosity comes with a deep quality of respect and non-judgmentalism. There's just a sense of wonder and awe. Snooping on your girlfriend's phone calls is not curiosity, it's jealousy.

Make curiosity a wonder-ful habit. Curiosity is meant to be fresh and spontaneous, but you may need to retrain yourself to become relentlessly curious. If you have kids and you're spending the whole day with them, play a game with yourself: keep a running count of how many questions your kids ask in one day, and do your best to match them - not necessarily immediately - over

the course of that same day. Ask the kind of naive questions your kids ask, such as, "Why does a banana turn from green to yellow to brown?" Also recognize that the two things adults are most curious about are other people's lives and how they themselves tick. So ask all kinds of questions of people, not as if they're on the witness stand but coming from a place of genuine curiosity. There are six simple starting points for your questions: who, what, where, why, when, and how. If you find someone particularly boring or your relationship is lethargic, be curious about why you've fallen into this rut. One of the best ways to address unresolved conflict or apathy in a relationship is for a couple to do something novel together to stoke the fires of curiosity.

Find awe. Awe comes in big packages - the grandeur of a mountain vista, an encounter with a higher power, the experience of watching a football game with eighty thousand other crazy fans (even the wave that occasionally travels around the stadium with people standing up and sitting down in synchronicity can produce a little awe). But it can also come in small moments or epiphanies: watching a mother duck tend to her ducklings after a wade into the water and thinking of your mother, listening to your favorite song with the top down in your convertible on a sunny day, or reading a poignant poem that captures exactly what you're feeling. "Awe" was once defined as fear or dread of a divine being, but modern dictionaries have shifted the definition to a "profound reverence in the presence of supreme authority, moral greatness or sublimity, or mysterious sacredness." Awe connects you to something bigger than yourself and in so doing opens you to the bigger questions - where curiosity sprouts.

Channel Peter Drucker. Every year, choose a subject to learn; become so expert in it that you can teach it to others. For my first year of doing this exercise, I chose to learn everything about natural hot springs, both academically and experientially - yes, it was a lot of fun. The greatest leadership mind of our time also recommended doing an annual review of what you've learned in the last year. I do this every year between Christmas and New Year's, and I keep track of not just the relevant new data or information but also some of the life lessons that have taught me something. John R. O'Neil, the author of *The Paradox of Success*, evolved this idea into an "annual learning curve checkup" in the context of your work with the intent of reviewing where you're still learning at work and where you're not. If all this sounds too big and bold for you, here are a couple of simple ways you can channel the curiosity of Peter Drucker: alter your habits of how you drive to and from work for five days in a row or be a little more adventurous about what you order at your favorite restaurant. Whether it's the new visuals you'll see on your commute or the broadening of your experience for your taste buds, shifting your senses is another way of opening you up to the emotion of curiosity.

Curiosity is a life-affirming emotion. Curious people are happier, more sociable, and more successful in their work. They live longer, too. This emotion moves us forward. It's the fuel of our creativity and innovation and the essence of how our thinking evolves over time. Most important, in a relentless recession, curiosity is correlated with resilience and inversely correlated with anxiety and depression. So what are you waiting for? Get curious!