
CobaltSaffron

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True passionate curiosity

An old teacher once told me, “Choose any one thing; if you stay with it long enough, research and experiment with the elements that make it up with true passionate curiosity, you will understand how anything and everything functions. Choose any two things that appear to have no direct relationship, apply the same methods, and you will know how Nature thinks and feels.”

This is one of only a handful of ideas that have sustained their original impact on me through the course of my life, remaining so penetratingly relevant that it has actually altered my approach to everything from my work, to raising children, to reading a newspaper or walking across the street. At its essence, the implication is that a connection, a working relationship, does exist between any two, and therefore all, independent things. The ethic born from this implication is that we as human beings have the freedom and the need to comprehend the connection—to construct a bridge with our imagination between our own needs and the innate potential of anything we happen to come across.

The process to doing that, as I’ve discovered, is infinitely complex. (So, at least I’ve gotten that far in knowing Nature.) The greatest minds throughout history have all enacted some version of this idea. Indeed, one could define the stepping stones of human evolution as steps made up by connecting apparently unrelated and often seemingly irrelevant matter and images: sand and fire formed glass; crushed plants and minerals created ink and paint to transport the ideas of writers, painters and musicians; moldy food produced the cure for bacterial infections; the search for a spice or fabric caused the discovery of continents and cultures.

In my study of this idea, I’ve tried to isolate the key components that appeared to be so casually assembled when I first heard it. For example, “with true passionate curiosity.” Seems simple enough. Then again, religions and the major schools of thought throughout the world have spent thousands of years trying to design a technical map in response to passion and curiosity. A few describe passion as the opposition to resolution. Some have settled on an open mind with compassionate interests. Others have interpreted it as a little specifically directed curiosity with moderate passion as a means to get what one wants. Still others have split the two, promoting passionate imposition as the solution to the discomfort and awkwardness of genuine curiosity.

I've learned a lot from persons who seem to have a real gift for applying passionate curiosity in such a way as to come up with extraordinary discoveries: an old beekeeper who lived on a dirt floor, a basketball player who delighted in being double-teamed with just a second left on the clock, a biologist who studied evolutionary mutation in cockroaches, a child staggering through the final stage of an incurable disease. Each of these persons had an unusual knack for intuiting that something imperative was somewhere else other than where one would think to look.

Curiously and, I think, passionately, I've rarely met such an individual well up in the hierarchy of a religion or spiritual organization. As with any form of specialization or exclusivity, the further along you go, the more difficult it is to be genuinely curious about what exists outside of your own already-defined methods and goals. Every club, however holy or intelligently conceived, has a set of precepts that are meant to limit and hone perception toward a defined path and what lies at the end of it. This is like a particular style of music. Each style suggests, explicitly or implicitly, that the solutions you're looking for already exist within the defined style. Which makes it difficult indeed to consider that real discovery, revelatory insight into the nature of life and one's life, may not be within the set of precepts one is working within, however infinite or absolute one passionately believes they are.

Passion is most easily provoked by awareness of opposition. That is, it's easy to feel passionately about the opposition to what one wants and its direct relationship to what one wants, as in, say, the pursuit of happiness. Desire may be deeply felt, but it becomes passionate only when one notices that what is desired is not so easy to acquire. This is what gives birth to "the enemy," and probably to suffering itself. Unfortunately, it is also most often the demise of sincere curiosity. Once opposition is identified, there is no question to ask except how to get rid of it. The imagination shrinks to fit into the frame of opposing forces, and almost everyone experiences this from one side or the other, choosing which side according to style preference.

A number of great ideas have sought to break the frame. For example, the value placed on paradox so emphasized in many Eastern schools of thought and the themes of forgiveness and loving one's enemy in Christian traditions. Such ideas extend from an underlying sense that there does exist some kind of essential mysterious harmony, and we just have to find it. Male and female, black and white, virus and host, opposing opinions, arrow and target, have an obvious bond to each other, representing two parts to some kind of whole that implies a harmonious relationship between the two will produce a superior result for both.

The search for such a harmony is a large part of the game of life. Religions, economics, politics, psychology and the health sciences all look to establish their version of a functional harmony of well-being in the individual and the community in which he lives. And each of us

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looks to one of these, or a stylized combination of them, for answers in our own individual search. Historically, we spend a lot of time and energy arguing and selling the superiority of our chosen system of answers over another; part of our time and energy is allocated to the actual pursuit, and the rest is spent trying to validate the way we're going about it. Finally, there's not much left over for genuine curiosity, and our passion is already spent on pursuing, arguing and selling. We end up with virtually no harmony at all, and nothing more compelling to show for it.

True passionate curiosity is a subtler approach to harmony, one born from our original childlike fascination and love for life. It is not the search for answers to obvious questions we're trying to solve, or being clever in reaction to the inconveniences of opposition one faces in life, or temporarily appreciating casual distractions. It is more along the lines of an active inquisitiveness toward whatever one might happen to come across—a kind of piercing peripheral vision along the way. Not just stopping to smell a rose alongside the road we're on, but allowing the rose to provoke imagination, to fuel the context of engagement, to open doors to mystery. And even further, choosing to passionately explore whatever is on the other side of those doors, following the sense that curiosity itself is imperative.

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In this spirit, this small monthly newsletter is meant to offer sustenance for true passionate curiosity. The hope is to provide a forum for original insight into personal evolution in real-time, alive and questioning now, rather than to exchange or list existing answers and niceties, or discuss the superiority of one position or idea over another; to aid in keeping our perception and imagination vital, looking for clues to mysterious alchemy. Much like forming glass from sand and fire.

Darrell Calkins
January 2005

Upcoming event:

‘Creating and Transforming Relationships’
February 19 & 20 - San Francisco - USA

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