



2017

Curiosity and What To Make of It

Rebecca Gearhart Mafazy
Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Gearhart Mafazy, Rebecca, "Curiosity and What To Make of It" (2017). *Honorees for Teaching Excellence*. 48.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/teaching_excellence/48

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the University Archivist & Special Collections Librarian at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Curiosity and What To Make of It

Honor's Day Convocation, April 12, 2017

Rebecca Gearhart Mafazy

Professor of Anthropology, Illinois Wesleyan University

Our curiosity about the world and about each other is one of the defining characteristics of being human. Curiosity drives creativity: how can we do it better? Curiosity drives courage: how far can we push our boundaries? And Curiosity drives compassion: how can we understand one another more deeply?

We are born with insatiable curiosity. It is the reason we as babies touch, smell, and taste everything and everyone around us – we want to fully engage with the world; it is our nature. Think of how much self-confidence and bravery it takes for us as toddlers to start walking, even though we know we will fall down, and start talking, even though we know nobody will understand us perfectly. This lack of inhibition, that seems to stem naturally from curiosity, is why anthropologists believe children are the inventors of the world's languages.

Recently, for example, aboriginal children have created a new language called *Warlpiri rampaku* in Australia's Northern Territory. Like all new languages, this one combines words from languages spoken in the region with new ones, has its own structure, and in this case, a tense that does not exist in the other local languages, making it a completely unique way of communicating. That children all over the world, since the development of human language 100,000 years ago, have worked together to create effective ways to communicate and identify with each other, demonstrates the amazing things we are capable of, when we let our creativity be guided by our innate curiosity.

What I have observed among Swahili children in coastal Kenya is that young children eagerly play with other children in their neighborhoods, in spite of differences that separate their parents, such as ethnic background, religion, or economic class. When we are young, the categories adults use to divide people are insignificant to us, and we simply enjoy each other's company while impervious to the social divisions in operation all around. As we grow up, we are taught to focus on each other's differences, and gradually allow stereotypes to over-ride our childlike inclination to treat everyone as a potential playmate.

Children are also masters of nonverbal communication, which is an instinctual way we enhance our verbal communication, whether we are conscious of it, or not. Scholars who study the physiology of emotion, and language and the brain have identified at least six facial expressions that correspond to emotions all humans share: sadness, happiness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise.

For over two thousand years, Indian classical dancers have taken advantage of the ability to communicate through facial expression or *navarasa* by incorporating nine "moods" into Indian classical dance drama.

Uma Kallakuri, a local Indian classical dance guru, here with IWU students in her “Indian Classical Dance & Dramatic Performance” course, is a master of conveying and evoking emotions through the facial expressions and gestures that make up this elaborate nonverbal communication system.

Uma teaches her students that each *rasa* or facial expression not only communicates a specific emotion, but evokes emotional response among the audience, allowing spectators to engage with the performance on a psychological and even on a neurological level. This works because facial expressions such as happiness and anger produce distinct changes in our brain activity. For example, a smile produces feel good neurotransmitters such as dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin – in us, when we smile, and also in the people we smile for.

A smile can also mean different things to different people, and appearing to be too happy has certainly gotten me into trouble on more than one occasion. The first time this happened was when I went out East to Mount Holyoke College, where my big Minnesota smile was received with quite a bit of suspicion.

Interacting with students who were more cosmopolitan than I was, better educated than I was, and who considered my Scandinavian heritage exotic, was part of learning to navigate the terrain of a new place and new people, some of whom were from parts of the world I had never even heard of before.

My first roommate, Loyce, for example, was from the West African country of Ghana. And though she hailed from the vibrant city of Accra and I from the sleepy town of Anoka, we helped each other get over homesickness and culture shock by listening to each other’s stories about our families and the friends we left behind, what our neighborhoods looked like, and how the food we missed tasted.

Loyce, my African History professor, Fi Herbert, my Senegalese French professor, Samba Gadjigo, and Girma Kebede, my Ethiopian geography professor nurtured my fascination with the magnificent peoples of Africa, whose histories and cultures led me on a journey of inquiry and discovery that included travelling to East Africa as a junior. And that was a big leap for me.

But my parents assured me as I boarded the plane, that all adventurers have a basecamp to return to, and mine was my family, who would be there for me when I came home. And that simple message gave me the confidence to travel half way across the globe to try out life in a completely different society.

I describe that first trip to East Africa as being bombarded with extreme opposites: People who were faced with economic challenges beyond my comprehension while being more generous with what they did have than I could fathom; landscapes filled with plants, birds, fish, and other wildlife more beautiful than I could have imagined, and some of the largest, unhealthiest settlements in the world, where no one should have to live.

What I learned on that trip was that the strength of the human spirit is intricately tied to the strength of the bonds people have with their families and communities, and that deep happiness and contentment is found playing gin rummy

with friends, especially by kerosene lantern, which was how I spent many evenings with my host family, Zainab and Saidi, on Lamu Island, Kenya.

Zainab went far beyond her role as my Swahili language tutor. She decorated me with henna, (which she is doing here in this photo, on the left), taught me how to make samosas from scratch, and explained interesting Swahili cultural practices such as the seclusion of mothers and their newborns during the first forty days of the infant's life. Zainab also had questions for me. She wondered how American parents allowed young, unmarried women, like me, to travel to unknown and potentially dangerous places, where any number of things could go wrong.

And Zainab's husband, Saidi (pictured here on the right), tested this hypothesis by taking me on an all-night fishing expedition in a traditional Swahili sailboat made out of wood, teaching me how to ride a donkey, and how to use very sharp chisels to carve Swahili designs into wood. Saidi introduced me to African reggae and I shared my Santana with him. He was very skeptical about the durability of our wooden houses, the sustainability of our massive cornfields, and the suggestion that fish stay alive under frozen lakes in the winter; he did not believe a single one of my ice fishing stories.

Zainab and Saidi taught me that explaining ordinary things to people who live very differently is a chance to see oneself from another perspective. These kinds of interactions, when people from different backgrounds listen and ask, are openings for understanding – both about others and about ourselves. This give and take, cross-cultural exchange forms the basis of how we cultural anthropologists do our work. But you don't have to be an anthropologist to let your curiosity about different ways of being in the world take you on little journeys of discovery.

Nurturing our curiosity about how other people see the world and live in it can begin simply by getting up the courage to initiate a conversation with someone you don't know. This could be someone who seems a bit out of place, a member of a different ethnic group, someone from a different part of the country, or from abroad.

I help my students get a taste for this by assigning projects that take them across campus and into the community to integrate into a group to which they do not already belong. This can be an RSO, a faith-based group, an athletic team, or it can be working with one person who represents a group, such as the women community leaders with whom my visual anthropology students worked last semester.

These interactions with people the students might not naturally gravitate toward help them get used to the initial discomfort of being around people with whom they are unfamiliar, and build up their confidence integrating into a new group.

Success in these endeavors encourages students to take their skills to the next level, and venture into the world on a May Term travel course, an international summer internship, or on a semester abroad program. These experiences help students replace stereotypes with meaningful personal interactions that often lead

to friendships like those that set me on my path to becoming an Africanist scholar thirty years ago.

One of the distinct pleasures I have as an anthropology professor is introducing my students to a host of extraordinarily talented and passionate local cultural experts, who I regularly invite into my classrooms or to lead campus workshops that expose students to new cosmologies, or ways of understanding the world and our relationship to it.

Carol and Eliida Lakota are sisters of Native American heritage, who I met soon after I came to IWU. I invite one or both of these inspiring women to campus at least once a year to share Lakota Medicine Wheel teachings, which in this time of human-induced climate change, remind us that the four legged, the winged, the creepy crawlers, the swimmers, the plant people, and we two leggeds are all members of one family, and need to care for one another and our beautiful, Mother Earth.

That the decisions we make today will affect the next seven generations is one of the messages that Carol and Eliida imaginatively communicate through powerful creation myths, humorous stories, and personalized craft projects that deeply resonate with students.

Peter Magai Bul is another person who I am honored to introduce to my students. Peter was born in Southern Sudan, and is among the thousands of Lost Boys who fled bomb raids and military kidnappings in the late 1980s, and walked hundreds of miles on foot without food or water to refugee camps in Ethiopia and then Kenya, where he lived for a decade before obtaining refugee status to come to the United States in 2002.

Peter's willingness to tell of the near-death experiences he had as a child, and how he took on the adult role of parenting hundreds of orphaned children barely younger than himself, helps students grasp the horror we are capable of unleashing and enduring, and the long-lasting impacts of war and destruction.

Like many of the Lost Boys of Sudan who now live in the U.S., each of Peter's accomplishments in the States: learning to speak fluent English, to drive a car, to become economically self-sufficient, to integrate into American society while maintaining his Dinka sensibility, is motivated by his commitment to helping his relatives and friends still living in refugee camps in East Africa or in the war-torn villages of South Sudan.

The same combination of fear and hatred that forced Peter and the Lost Boys from their homes thirty years ago is now fueling civil war in the new country of South Sudan. In his ongoing effort to resist surrendering to frustration and despair, Peter focuses on maintaining the school he built in his hometown, where an equal number of girls and boys are being educated. Peter's hope is that knowledge and understanding will ultimately win over ignorance and fear, and that the neighbors who fought so long and hard together to win their independence, will again unite as one.

And finally, I would like to introduce you to the master musician, composer, and performer, I Ketut Gede Asnawa, who has taught many IWU students to play the gamelan, an orchestra made up primarily of metallophones, xylophones, and gongs, and a hand drum played by the conductor. Asnawa oversaw the creation of the IWU gamelan in his home on the island of Bali in Indonesia, and was in Bali to bless the new instruments when they were played for the first time. The gamelan is indigenous to Bali, and because it is used to summon the gods and ward off evil spirits, plays a central role in almost all sacred and secular events. Every village in Bali has a community gamelan like ours.

Adriana Ponce's world music students will join students in my Theatre, Performance & Spectacle course to perform the IWU gamelan in just a few minutes. Asnawa will conduct the music, and his wife, Putu Oka Mardiani, will perform the Baris Dance, which features gestures and facial expressions that communicate the heroic emotions of Balinese warriors. As you enjoy the concert, please draw your attention to how each musician plays a unique but harmonically related melody, and to the interlocking soundscape, which musically replicates the interconnections and circularity of life.

Tapping into our innate curiosity about one another, with which we come into the world but unlearn as we get older, leads us to this collective wisdom:

- *we are mutually intelligible
- *we are mutually vulnerable
- *we are all related

Recognizing that the Warlpiri, the Swahili, the Lakota, the Dinka, the peoples of India, and Bali – in fact, each society on earth, has unique and creative answers to our common human problems, and insights into the great mysteries that elude us all, is the key to how we will survive as a species.

One way that societies communicate important messages is through art forms such as music and dance, that transcend our ephemerality by connecting us with those who have come before us and with those who will be here after we are gone, and who we hope will carry our messages forward.

Like biodiversity, cultural diversity is essential to our success on this planet. The quote by author, Jacqueline Woodson, that appeared on the t-shirts of some of the first year students in the fall, is worth contemplating here: "Diversity is about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together."

Senior, Lucy Sanchez, has shared her talents as an artist to encourage minority students at IWU to stick together and support one another along the path to graduation. But her mural is also a reminder to faculty, staff, and administrators that we are responsible for creating an environment in which all students thrive, and a message to students whose skin color, sexual orientation, or religion makes them part of the majority, that everyone's experience here is diminished if there are

minority students who feel like they don't belong at IWU or that this campus is not their home.

When my husband, Munib, came to the U.S. from Kenya, he faced many of the cultural obstacles all newcomers face, and those first years were a rollercoaster of exhilarating high points and terrifying low points. I was very proud of my family members and friends, who unconditionally welcomed Munib, and disappointed by others, who were too busy or set in their ways to take time to get to know him.

Yes, meeting someone new can be uncomfortable because such situations are fraught with social awkwardness and the possibility of miscommunication. But it is just these moments of mutual vulnerability that create openings for building trust and making meaningful connections.

Such a moment was when my Great Grannie Irene first met Munib. My grannie, who raised ten children in a tiny farmhouse in northwestern Minnesota without running water or electricity, did not have many opportunities to meet people from different parts of the world. When I introduced her to Munib, she swung open her arms and gave him a big hug, and while doing so, gently touched his hair. "It feels like wool," she said in awe. And though I gasped at what I thought was a terrible misstep, Munib did not miss a beat, and gently returned the gesture by reaching out to touch my grannie's hair. "It feels like cotton," he said, a little sheepishly.

And in that moment, when Munib and Grannie let down their guard to reveal their curiosity about one another, and allowed themselves to be vulnerable in the same way, they created a space to build a lasting friendship.

We owe it to ourselves and to each other to go out on a limb every now and then, and build bridges of understanding over the walls of fear and ignorance that separate us. Following our human instinct to reach out instead of close off, and letting our innate curiosity lead us to the courage and creativity necessary for true compassion, will enable us to create a campus, a community, and a country, where no one is an outsider, and everyone is at home.