

Why Did Curiosity Kill the Cat?

Virginia Apperson

I've been curious about this old saying for quite some time, wondering what wisdom it could possibly offer. Each time I approach it, I feel somehow admonished by these words, but yet, ironically, my curiosity persists. For me, curiosity suggests possibility, resourcefulness, and creativity, but this frequently spouted proverb, also, hints of a reprimand, limits, a preferred ignorance.

Probably we could all dig up some memory of a crotchety teacher or weary parent who was intolerant of our youthful questions. When I was in high school, my friends and I had a day camp for 3-5 year olds. The kids' curiosity gushed like Niagara Falls. "Why does the rabbit hop?" "Why does the sun shine?" "Why do we have to take a nap?" "WHY?" "WHY?" "WHY?" "WHY?" "WHY?" As I revisit those summers, I feel a slight quiver of appreciation for the tenacity of this belief system. Oh, ok, I confess it might have happened once, maybe twice, that I looked down into one of those angelic faces and exclaimed in exasperation: "DIDN'T YOU KNOW? CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT!!!!"

If heard too much, this rebuke wears one down, silencing a yearning to know. The quest for knowledge seems to have become, all too often, systematic and ordered - a veritable head trip. It's the messier, juicier questions related to intimate connections that are usually subjugated and silenced. The infamous Inquisition was anything but an inquisitive era. An accused witch was not allowed to have a lawyer. Trials were held in secret. Anyone that supported the witch was considered an accomplice. Torture was used even after a confes-

sion of guilt to "validate" the verdict and to elicit the identities of the accused's "accomplices" (Walker, B, The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, p. 441).

Though this era is an outrageous example of curiosity killing the cats, I am often astounded to discover how intolerant we continue to be of the darker shadows in one another's lives. So often, it seems that partners and parents, i.e. significant others, care little about the feeling and interior life of their loved ones. Isn't this the realm where curiosity is most often held suspect? A refusal to wonder about and wander through the briars and swamps of one another's soul existence suggests barren and sterile relations. Though it may be boring, tedious, and lacking in passion, it is apparently safer and simpler not to ask. The "don't ask, don't tell" policy rules. And so, we seal our true selves off from one another, not daring to be curious even about the lack of curiosity.

History reinforces such a stance, as it is steeped in culprits whose misdeeds vindicate a simplistic and reductive interpretation of curiosity. Pandora opened the box of suffering and grief, unleashing misery onto mankind. Semele's insistence that Zeus reveal himself in the fullness of his glory resulted in her own annihilation. Prometheus stole fire from the gods and was punished mercilessly for this gift of enlightenment to humans. Eve, in her quest for the knowledge of good and evil, was banished along with Adam from paradise. For Bluebeard's wives, unlocking the door to the forbidden room, resulted in their own brutal murder.

If you hadn't experienced the contrary nature

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John Waterhouse - *Pandora*, 1896

of curiosity before, this motley mythological and biblical crew may have confirmed that the rule of thumb best be “don’t ask.” However, when we dissect the word, it becomes even more curious that an inquisitive nature is viewed with such suspicion. Its derivation is the Middle English word *cure*, meaning care and attention (Skeat, ed. *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 149.) Curiosity’s cousins are curable, curate (“one who has cure of souls”), curative, curator and accurate. Curiosity’s heritage is literally rooted in an intention to heal, not to destroy. Or is it quite that simple?

This etymological perspective helps me further understand why I have been so perplexed by this idiom. My work as a Jungian analyst is utterly dependent on the crucible of curiosity. If I didn’t care or attend to the stories of my clients, each hour would be like floating in an abyss. I hadn’t thought of curiosity as a prerequisite for my profession, but in truth without it, I would be quite impotent.

The above-mentioned “crimes of the curious” arguably resulted in significant contributions. However, the perpetrators were treated ruthlessly and certainly did not reap any personal rewards from their escapades. So maybe the first lesson here is to remember that curiosity is not for the faint-hearted and clearly comes at a cost. But if we are now entertaining the possibility that there might also be a healing component to curiosity, then the questions to pose, perhaps, are *when does curiosity kill the cat, and when does curiosity cure the cat?* How can we create a receptacle strong enough to withstand curiosity’s alchemical wizardry? I’d like to look at a tale that offers a little more insight and differentiation into this perplexing issue of curiosity and its transformative potential.

Young Psyche was becoming known far and wide for her beauty. Much to Aphrodite’s utter dismay, Psyche was being heralded as a new goddess. Aphrodite was livid that a mere mortal had captured such undeserved attention. She sent her son Eros, the god of Love, to dispose of the problem. The plan backfired, however, when Eros too became captivated by the exquisite Psyche.

Psyche was soon wed to Eros and lived in palatial splendor, but Eros only visited after the sun went down. The nights were glorious, but by day, Psyche was left alone with an understanding that her husband must remain faceless and nameless. He warned her: “If she yielded to the impious promptings of curiosity, she would exile herself forever from his embraces and from all the profusion of wealth that now was hers” (Neumann, *Amor and Psyche*, p. 13).

Psyche was willing to live this split existence, but her sisters, envious of Psyche’s fortune, were not able to contain their own curiosity. They convinced Psyche that her husband was really a monster and devised a plan to uncover his true nature and destroy him. Psyche reluctantly approached a sleeping Eros with a lamp and witnessed firsthand her husband’s own beauty and his divinity. A bit of hot oil scalded his skin, awakening Eros to his wife’s injudicious act. Eros vanished into the night, abandoning Psyche. Although the wicked sisters would soon meet a violent death, Psyche was left to the mercy of Aphrodite who would demand of her apparently impossible tasks were she to survive. In spite of many twists and turns, the tale ends happily ever after.

Loss is clearly a significant element in this tale of curiosity. It would seem that the cat indeed must be sacrificed but for a greater cause. One way to distinguish the sisters’ curious nature from Psyche’s is to consider their regressive and progressive tendencies respectively. The sisters operate out of a hateful, limiting stance. Their agenda is to squelch Psyche’s life (regressive). In contrast, Psyche’s curiosity leads her to a more individuated place, hard won at best, but ultimately rooted in a belief in herself and in her relationship with Eros (progressive).

The curiosity of Psyche’s sisters was born out of their jealousy and spitefulness. Psyche, on the other hand, proves to embody a more benevolent curiosity, a desire to know her husband and to bring their relationship into a conscious, related place.

[Psyche’s] need of knowing remains bound up with the greater need of loving. Even where the heroine Psyche is compelled to wound, she preserves her bond with her lover, whom she never ceases to conciliate and transform (Neumann, p. 75).

In Psyche’s illumination of Eros, she frees herself from an imprisoned existence dubbed by Erich Neumann as “the paternal uroboros” (p. 99), which keeps her barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen so to speak.

Love...is not possible in the dark, as a merely unconscious process; an authentic encounter with another involves consciousness, hence also the aspect of suffering and separation (p. 85).

That which curiosity has killed is the unconsciousness of Psyche and Eros. The phoenix that arises from the ashes is the possibility of a more genuine relationship between two distinct individuals, who are first grounded in themselves.

Isn't this the crux of each and every one of our own individuation processes? As we curiously proceed towards the fullness of who we are, the old ties that have bound us must break. As Jung so aptly said "The experience of the Self is always a defeat of the ego" (CW14, para 778). This is no day at the beach. We long for paradisiacal regression, where we keep the blinders on, but something propels us towards a more differentiated existence.

Isn't curiosity part of the job description when you sign up to be in a relationship, not only with others, but also with yourself? If you don't ask, who will? Individuation is facilitated by honoring and tending to the wounded places in our souls. According to Dr. Adolph Guggenbuhl-Craig,

[intimacy] only works if one opens to exactly that which one would never ask for otherwise. Only through rubbing oneself sore and losing oneself is one able to learn about oneself, God, and the world.
(Marriage: Dead or Alive, p. 51)

Psyche could certainly attest to these words. Like Psyche's sisters, Psyche's curiosity resulted in significant loss and separation. In dramatic contrast, however, Psyche's desire to know ultimately lead to differentiation and reclamation because of her loving stance. Her love provided the inspiration necessary to resurrect the cat. Thank goodness the cat had nine lives, so that it could withstand the challenges incurred by Psyche's curious spirit ■



John Waterhouse - detail from *Psyche Opening the Golden Box*, 1903