

**“Consciously Curious”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
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**Reading**

selection from “The Masked Philosopher,” Michel Foucault

“Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity is seen as futility. However, I like the word; it evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental.

I dream of a new age of curiosity.”<sup>1</sup>

**Sermon**

I want to tell you about someone whose life impacted many thousands of people though I would suspect that most of you haven’t ever heard of her.

Her name is Rachel Held Evans. She died at the age of 37 after a sudden illness just last Saturday. I did not know who she was and hadn’t heard her story until friends began sharing their sadness about her death on social media. And then, suddenly, I was seeing her name on my Facebook feed, in the news, and in e-mail newsletters from various groups. So, I became curious. Who was she and why had she had such a profound impact on people?

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture, Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. Ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 328

Rachel grew up in Birmingham, Alabama until the age of 12 and then in Dayton, Tennessee from the age of 13 through her college years, and it's where she stayed and made a home with her college sweetheart and eventually her young children.

Dayton is the home of Bryan College, a Christian college named for William Jennings Bryan that teaches its students to adopt a biblical worldview. Dayton is famous for the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial. Students of evolution might remember that a public school teacher by the name of John Scopes was put on trial for his teaching of evolution, which a piece of legislation in Tennessee had just made illegal. The whole trial was a bit of a spectacle and primarily put on display the debate over the separation of church and state as well as the divide between those who adhere to literal interpretations of the Bible and those who take a more liberal approach to their understanding of Christian scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Rachel was the daughter of a school teacher and also a professor of Christian theology. She was raised in a nondenominational evangelical home. In her faith community, curiosity was not a strong religious value. Right belief and right practice were more important than asking one's own questions and seeking out one's own answers.

Rachel took her religion seriously and as a young girl tried to evangelize even amongst the already faithful. To this end, she once wrote the plan of salvation on a small piece of paper, folded it into a paper airplane and then sent it sailing across the fence into the backyard of their Mormon neighbors.

But, while Rachel was a student at Bryan College, she became more curious and began to have her own doubts.

She writes, "You might say that the apologetics movement had created a monster. I'd gotten so good at critiquing all the fallacies of opposing worldviews, at searching for truth through objective analysis, that it was only a matter of time before I turned the same skeptical eye upon my own faith."<sup>3</sup>

Following her own natural curiosity and doubt, Rachel began to ask more and more questions of the evangelical Christian faith in which she was raised. In particular, she

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/scopes-trial> Both sides of the trial claimed victory, but the original piece of legislation - the Butler Act - was upheld and the anti-evolution movement continued.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions* (Zondervan, 2010).

became curious about people who her faith told her were condemned to an afterlife in hell. Her curiosity about the circumstances of their lives and what she understood about the nature of God led her to have doubt.

Rachel pursued a career in journalism, and on the side she took her questions to a public platform through a blog called “Evolving in Monkey Town.” She also ventured onto Twitter and wrote a memoir about her evolving faith journey.

Over the course of the decade and more after graduating from college, Rachel amassed thousands of followers on her social media platforms. She also wrote a few more books and began speaking across the country and organizing with other Christian leaders who were looking to make reforms within their communities. With wit and humor and broad inclusivity, she created a new space for former evangelical Christians to retain their faith even with their questions and to find community. She also inspired cadres of Christian seminarians.

Friends who wrote a remembrance of her that was published in the Washington Post called her “an irrepressible learner” who “delighted in theology.” At the end of her life, Rachel was attending an Episcopal church not too far from her home in Tennessee. Rachel’s curiosity changed the course of her own life and also the lives of many others who felt validated in their own thirst for truth and self-discovery.

Her story illustrates how curiosity - that desire to know more - can lead to a journey of profound change. I imagine that many of you can relate to Rachel’s journey of departure from one religious community to another or might hear parallels in journeys of conversion and transformation of other kinds - leaving one field of work for another or choosing to make a significant change in lifestyle or a relationship after following your own curiosity.

When we follow that impulse to learn more, to know more, it can lead us to expand what we thought possible. As we begin to ask questions, answers may emerge that we might not have known were there. Venturing out in this way isn’t always easy.

The Reverend Ellen Quaadgras puts it this way, “...to be curious, genuinely curious, we have to let go of certainty, let go of conviction, let go of the ways we’ve always

perceived things, or how others do things, or the way things have just always been. And that takes courage.”<sup>4</sup>

To be curious, we have to allow ourselves to be, even for a short while, in a place of uncertainty, of not knowing. Living in this gap takes courage because it is often a place of vulnerability. It means opening up the space between what was and what can be or of what we think we know and what might actually be true.

To open up this space, we have to allow ourselves to become emptied of what we thought we knew.

This is illustrated in a story often told in Zen Buddhist circles. There are different versions, but it goes something like this. A student of Zen meditation went to visit a Zen Buddhist master to ask the master to teach him about meditation. The master invited him to join him for tea and poured tea into a cup for the student as the student talked and talked. As the student rattled on, the master kept pouring the tea until the tea began to overflow from the cup. The student watched as the tea poured out until he could no longer restrain himself. “Stop! The cup is full. No more will go in!” he blurted out. The master responded, “This is you. How can I teach you Zen if your cup is already full?”

The lesson, of course, is that we can only take in new knowledge and learning after we empty our cups, which is a metaphor for clearing our minds.

This kind of emptying can give us the space to then notice our own curiosity and leave space for new wisdom to form.

Following our curiosity doesn’t always lead to quite as dramatic of a change as it did for Rachel Held Evans, but it is always a creative and generative process - a process that allows something new to form in the space of uncertainty or unknowing that fosters curiosity.

The author Elizabeth Gilbert says this about curiosity: “[C]uriosity is an impulse that just taps you on the shoulder very lightly, and invites you to turn your head a quarter of an inch and look a little closer at something that has intrigued you. And it may not set your head on fire; it may not change your life; it may not change the world; it may not even line up with previous things that you’ve done or been interested in. It may seem very random and make no sense. And I think the reason people end up not following their

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.westminsteruu.org/services/being-a-person-of-curiosity/>

curiosity is because they're waiting for a bigger sign, and your curiosities, sometimes, are so mild and so strange and so, almost, nothing — it's a little trail of breadcrumbs that you can overlook if you're looking up at the mountaintop, waiting for Moses to come down and give you a sign from God..."

I love this image of curiosity as an impulse that taps you on the shoulder very lightly. This lightly tapping impulse asks for our attention. It asks us to notice something that we have found interesting and to pay attention - that newspaper article that catches your eye, a piece of art hanging on a wall in a café, a bird call you haven't heard before. In this noticing, there might then be discovery.

Gilbert continues, "Sometimes, following your curiosity will lead you to your passion. Sometimes it won't; and then, guess what? That's still totally fine. You've lived a life following your curiosity. You've created a life that is a very interesting thing, different from anybody else's. And your life itself then becomes the work of art — not so much contingent upon what you produced, but about a certain spirit of being..."<sup>5</sup>

Yes, sometimes curiosity can lead us down paths of dramatic transformation, as in the case of Rachel Held Evans. Her curiosity was paired with skepticism and doubt and ultimately with courage to blaze a new trail.

But, as Elizabeth Gilbert points out, curiosity can also be a little trail of breadcrumbs amounting to nothing more than living an interesting and interested life, which actually is quite a lot.

This kind of curiosity keeps life new and fresh. It keeps us open to wonder.

It's the kind of curiosity that we celebrated last Saturday in remembering the life of Carolyn Silsby, long-time member of the Women's Alliance and church-goer here and teacher of biology and math at Montpelier High School.

Her curiosity led her on a successful career as a teacher who passed on her passion and curiosity to others and led her to many adventures, near and far, learning more and more about the world.

At its core, curiosity requires openness. Rather than declaring "I know," we invite with "I wonder."

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<sup>5</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/elizabeth-gilbert-choosing-curiosity-over-fear-may2018/>

The Buddhist nun and teacher Pema Chödrön says that someone once told her: “The best spiritual instruction is when you wake up in the morning and say, ‘I wonder what’s going to happen today.’ And then carry that kind of curiosity through your life.”<sup>6</sup>

I wonder what’s going to happen today.

This kind of openness and uncertainty offers an invitation. An invitation to notice the teachers and teaching moments all around us.

I’d like to invite you now to reflect for a moment on what you are curious about now, in this moment. Where is there space for doubt or unknowing? What impulse do you have lightly tapping at your shoulder inviting you to explore?

If you feel comfortable, I invite you to share with someone near you for just a moment.

As Michel Foucault says, curiosity evokes care, a sharpened sense of reality, a readiness and a passion for seizing what is happening now.

May we live with this readiness and openness for the change and discovery that awaits us.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Pema Chödrön on The Importance of Powering Down, <https://vimeo.com/77057376>