

We visited our neighbors last week to meet their new puppy Oscar and to see their son, Charlie, who is three-years-old, soon to be four. I was playing with Oscar and Charlie, and Charlie started asking me questions about dogs, then branched out into the wider animal kingdom and within five minutes or so was asking me questions about the cosmos and dark matter and galaxy formation. I had been warned about Charlie and his love of questions, so I began counting how many questions he asked me in the half-hour we were there. Thirty-one.

Walking home, I wondered if research had ever been done on young children and the questions they asked, so when I got home I went online and found a recent article in London's *Telegraph* newspaper written on just that topic. A recent study in Britain tracked 1,000 mothers with children ages two to ten and it discovered that children asked their mothers nearly 300 questions a day. A day being from 7:30 AM to 8 PM. Four year-old girls were the most inquisitive, asking on average 390 questions per day, which averages out to about one question every two minutes, if my math is correct.

Do you want to know the toughest questions they asked? *Why is water wet? Where does the sky end?* (That's a cosmos question) *What are shadows made of? How do fish breathe underwater?* and *Why is the sky blue?*

The most unusual question asked during the study was, *What happens if a dog and a cat are sick on a zebra?*

Children were more likely to ask questions of their mothers than their fathers. When they have a question, 82% of children ask their mothers first. And this is just pathetic, but it turns out the most common response given by fathers, when asked a question by their children, was, “Go ask your mother.” Oh, for crying out loud, come on, guys.

We’ve been talking about the cycles of life, how each age group, from infants to the elderly, offer specific gifts common to their age. Last week, we talked about infants and their innocence. We thought about how as we age, we tend to become more jaded or cynical, but infants remind us of the importance of innocence and purity. Today, I would like us to think about young children and the gift they have to offer us—curiosity.

Of course, people of any age can be curious, but young children tend to be more inquisitive. The British study showed that as we age, we ask fewer questions, though the questions tend to be more complex and difficult. But in terms of sheer curiosity, young children have us beat hands-down. So if it’s a child’s role to ask questions, then it is an adult’s role to answer them, and to answer them well. Because first answers are crucial.

First answers are crucial because they have a way of lodging more deeply in our brains. Those first answers really embed in us. I was visiting some friends last year and the woman's father had passed away. Her little daughter asked, "Why did Grandpa die?" And before I could say, "Because he smoked like a chimney, got cancer, and died," the mother said, "Because God wanted him home." So now there's a little girl running around who believes that when someone dies, it's because God knocked them off.

Answers form a child's understanding of the world. This is why "undoing" our earliest understandings are difficult. In fact, for some people it is so difficult, they will retain those first answers even when it is injurious to their mental, relational, and spiritual well-being. I know an elderly man who had an undiagnosed learning disorder. When he was a child he asked his parents why he didn't do well in school. They were deeply frustrated and told him, "Because you're not very smart." All these years later, he still talks about how he's not very smart, even though he's accomplished a great deal. But you see, that first answer stuck. First answers are important.

In fact, I'm inclined to believe that our responses to our children's questions might do more to inform their worldview, intelligence, and character than any other one thing.

Here's an example of that, something I've actually witnessed. Two children, not related, asked their parents, *Why are people poor?* The first parent said, "Because they're lazy." The other parent said, "People are poor for a number of reasons," then explained the causes of poverty in language a child could understand. Now would you prefer your child walk around thinking all poor people are lazy and deserve whatever misery happens to them? Or would you prefer your child develop a more nuanced understanding of human suffering that encourages compassion and creativity? Our responses to our children's questions might do more to inform their worldview, intelligence, and character than any other one thing.

I know that by the time your child or grandchild or nephew or niece has asked you the 300<sup>th</sup> question of the day, you want to lock them in the closet, but resist the urge. Because we don't want to discourage questions. What we're really saying when we tell a child to stop asking so many questions is, "Stop learning. Stop thinking. Stop growing."

The Bible is of two minds on the subject of curiosity. God grabs the attention of Moses with a burning bush, knowing Moses's curiosity will not permit him to ignore it. Drawn to the bush, Moses is appointed to liberate the Hebrews and begin a nation. When you think of it that way, curiosity was instrumental to the founding of Israel.

But there are also instances when people in the Bible weren't well served by curiosity. King David saw Bathsheba bathing on the roof and became curious. Curiosity is a common response when men see women bathing, but in this instance it created all sorts of problems.

In the first book of Samuel, it was said the Ark of the Covenant was carried into the village of Bethshemesh, and though they had been warned not to open the Ark, seventy men were so curious they couldn't resist. They "looked into the ark of the Lord and the Lord slew seventy of them." I would have been one of the seventy, sprawled on the ground, smote by the Lord. I was the kind of kid who, when my parents told me to cover my eyes, would peek through my fingers. A fair reading of the Bible suggests God made use of curiosity and also punished it.

As for me, I'm an advocate of curiosity, knowing no other way to learn than to wonder, seek, and explore. Last Sunday, I said I could not in good conscience worship a God who would command the slaughter of Egypt's first-born children. Today, I say I cannot in good conscience worship a God who would condemn curiosity. Indeed, I don't for one moment believe seventy people were killed by curiosity. I think the only thing curiosity can kill is ignorance.