

Curiosity

Assembly by Andrew O'Sullivan, Teacher of English, October 2019

The pictures you see behind me were taken by Mr. Wilson Bentley. Known nowadays by the nickname 'Snowflake Bentley', he's one of my favourite examples of a true obsessive. From 1885 to 1931 Bentley took over 5000 photos of snowflakes, catalogued them all, and is credited with first suggesting the idea, based on his observations, that no two snowflakes will be ever alike.

I have the greatest admiration for Snowflake Bentley, as I do for anyone who follows their passion. For those who devote their life to a religious vocation. For climate change protesters. For those who have fought, and in many cases died, for the cause of freedom, tolerance and respect. Many of you in this hall already have your peculiar passions – whether it's the civilization-building capacity of ants, or 19th Century double-reed embouchure techniques – or some of you may, for all I know, have an obsessive love of Japanese Peace Lilies. But today I want to talk to you about celebrating the non-specialist. As Mrs. Rowley told us recently in the Cathedral, the best specialists have a bigger picture. And, in truth and by the laws of statistics, most of us will settle for a life where we know a bit about a lot as much as knowing a lot about a bit. So I would like to share some observations with you this morning about how you might act on a deceptively simple suggestion which was made to you all by the Headmaster at the start of term. That suggestion was to be curious.

In many ways our sense of curiosity is well-served by social media. It can be a wonderful way of exploring and developing your knowledge – you follow one article to another, which links to another, and so on.

But social media thrives on pace. Clickbait is encouraged by our electronic masters at Google and Facebook and the like; the more links you visit, the more infinitesimal sums of revenue are generated. And when billions of clicks are happening every day, those infinitesimal figures multiply quickly. It takes active effort to slow things down to allow yourself time and space to think, to turn ideas round, to respond emotionally, critically and intellectually as well as instinctively. Social media doesn't encourage this, because it's less profitable. It needs you to be quick. But think of relationships. Those which form at the drop of a hat are liable to be lost just as quickly. Your most cherished relationships are the result of years of exchange, of little bits of contact here and there, which add up to the rich tapestry of friendship. So it is with curiosity. The psychologist Sherry Tuckle defines what she terms Talk Therapy as "[Slowing] things down so that they can be opened out". And similarly, I think when we're looking at our own sense of curiosity, that slowness is key. Make time, on occasions, to read that long, difficult article that someone posted. Look at the

Wikipedia front page, which changes daily according not to a perception of what might generate money but what provides a fair snapshot of the human race on this particular day. Make time for the suggestions in Miss Farmer's Weekly Wonder. Challenge yourself to be active in your curiosity, rather than submitting passively to the material that an algorithm has decided you would be most comfortable with.

I'm an English teacher, so I suppose it's fairly predictable that at some point I'd argue the value of reading. But our Library is just over there and it's wonderful. But why is it that reading makes such a difference to intellectual development, to the way we think, to our formation of character? Jacqueline Wilson (writer of Tracy Beaker) commented that "Reading a novel is [...] our nearest approximation to knowing what's going on in another person's head." And that takes time. Again, the space for emotional response is so much more generous when you have spent many hours, rather than minutes, on a subject. And crucially, good books – and I'm certainly not talking only about fiction here – are unpredictable. By all means follow a series from time to time, but sometimes surprise yourself, pick one at random. One could define a 'good' book as one which challenges you, gets you thinking in new ways. And that is as good a way to satisfy curiosity as I know.

Mr. Plumley spoke to us last week about why it is he is fascinated by the intellectuals and visionaries of Vienna, and said: "For me, they are the people who get to the nub of what it is to be human." The opening of his sentence says a huge amount: for me. Because the subjectivity of curiosity is the wonderful thing about it. What fascinates one person might not seem to the next person an especially big deal. But one person's informed fascination can open a subject up to another, with tolerance, patience and trusting conversation. And so I'd like to leave you with some final thoughts about how to encounter, develop and cherish your own curiosity.

1. Trust your own judgement. If you find it fascinating, it's fascinating.
2. Trust those you respect. If they find it fascinating, it's fascinating. We could apply a sort of Pascal's Wager here. Think - your friend is fascinated by something. You don't quite see it. She wins. But open yourself to it, allow yourself to share in it, and you both reap the benefits.
3. Challenge yourself. Strike a balance between deepening what you know and discovering what's new. Perhaps this will give you a rich general knowledge – but you never know if, like Snowflake Bentley, you might end up discovering something which will change your life.