

For the past eight years, Joan only worked half-days at the school. She would get home around noon each day and we would have a lunch date. But since she became the librarian, I'm home by myself all day and while I'm getting a lot more work done, it's also lonely. So two or three times a week, in mid-afternoon, I go to Casey's, buy an English Toffee cappuccino, and take it to Joan. If I think she's having a hard day, I add a nip of brandy to it to boost her spirits.

But it's fun to go there, because there are always little kids in the library and I enjoy being around small children. I was there the other day, and a little guy came up to me and pulled on my pant's leg to get my attention. He was just a little fella, in kindergarten. So I bent down to see what he wanted and he hugged me. Didn't say a word, just put his arms around my neck and hugged me. Then he said, "Who are you?"

I said, "I'm Phil. I'm Mrs. Gulley's husband."

Before Joan went to work at the school, I had my own identity. Now I am simply known as Mrs. Gulley's husband.

But I told him my name. He thought about that for a moment. It seemed to satisfy his curiosity. He hugged me one more time, then went off to look at books.

Of course, any day you get a hug is a good day, so I left in a much better mood, not feeling so lonely any more. Driving home, I began to think about children and curiosity. I've never met a child who wasn't curious. What's the first thing babies do once they're strong enough to hold up their heads? They start looking around. They're curious about everything. In fact, if a baby isn't curious, if a child doesn't seem interested in his or her surroundings, the doctors and parents worry the child might be physically or mentally impaired.

Children are naturally curious. But not all adults are curious. Something happens to some people that stifles their interest in life. They don't engage other people, they're not inquisitive, they're easily bored. Other adults always want to learn more. They have a voracious appetite for knowledge and are interested in a wide variety of topics. It's a joy to be around people like that because they're so engaging and interesting.

We've been talking about the qualities of the spiritual life—gratitude, reflection, spiritual pacing or being present in the moment, mercy, and humility. This morning I want to add *curiosity* to our list. Every spiritually alive person I've ever known is curious. But not every religious person. In fact, religions often fear curiosity. They don't want people looking at things too closely, or asking questions. When something doesn't make sense, religions ask us to just have faith.

While religions are often uncomfortable with curiosity, spirituality encourages curiosity. You'll notice I'm making a distinction between being religious and being spiritual. This is because the primary concern of religion is to persuade people to give their assent and obedience to a creed or institution. While the primary concern of spirituality is intimacy with God. All religions begin as spiritual movements, but they gradually become more codified and rigid and eventually submission to rules becomes more important than intimacy with God. When that happens, when unquestioned obedience is more important than spiritual-aliveness, curiosity is no longer seen as a virtue, but as a threat.

So we start out life very curious, but as we age, we sometimes lose our sense of curiosity, our sense of wonder. And if you're a parent, you know exactly how this happens. Our children ask us for the tenth time in three minutes why something is done a certain way, or why the sky is blue, or how do birds fly, and we are tired and frustrated, and we say, "That's just the way it is." If we do that often with children, their curiosity fades and they eventually stop asking questions. Then we have to send them to college and pay exorbitant amounts of money in hopes they'll regain their natural curiosity and learn something. And really, when you think about it, all our adult life is an effort to regain that sense of curiosity, that sense of awe and wonder and inquisitiveness. If we don't do that, if that doesn't happen, we die before we're dead.

This past week I had to go to Chicago for a day and my friend Jim Mulholland went with me. We were together in the car for seven hours and had to talk about something, so we talked about curiosity. Jim said something very interesting. He talked about how Jesus didn't tend to seek people out. Instead, people sought Jesus out. They heard something about him, it caught their interest, and they sought him out. His response to their curiosity is very interesting and is a good lesson for us. He always respected their curiosity. He took their questions seriously. He wasn't dismissive or flippant. Even Nicodemus, who held a high position in religious circles, was intrigued by Jesus, but didn't want anyone to know it, came to Jesus in the middle of the night and was welcomed. If someone came to me in the middle of the night to ask me questions, I'm not sure I would be that welcoming. But because Jesus respected curiosity, he welcomed questions, so he welcomed Nicodemus.

What's the opposite of curiosity? Isn't it discouragement? If your questions aren't treated with respect, if you're told over and over to stop asking so many questions, if you're told you can't question certain things, wouldn't that be discouraging?

So how do we revive curiosity? By asking questions and by giving people's questions the respect they deserve. I believe that's the work of the church, to get people curious, to help people become alive again.

This is one thing I really appreciate about Quaker spirituality. At the heart of our faith isn't a creed to which we give our unquestioned assent and obedience. At the heart of our faith is a set of questions to which we give our attention—the queries.

I remember the first time one of those queries really opened up my life. It was 1979, and I was 18. The Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan and in response President Carter had re-instituted military registration. If you were 18, you had to register with Selective Service in the event of a draft. So off I went to the post office to register. A few weeks later, I was reading the queries—I can't remember now who had given them to me, but someone at meeting had and I was reading them—and I read the queries about peace. “Do you consistently practice the Christian principles of love and good will toward all people? Do you observe the testimony of Friends against military training and service?”

Well, those questions just stuck in my craw. I couldn't get them out of my mind, couldn't shake them. So I began to think and pray about what it would mean if I practiced the Christian principles of love and good will toward all people and concluded that for me it meant, at the very least, not participating in war, nor adding my name to the list of people who would go to war if called upon. I thought, “I have to tell the government I've changed my mind.”

So I went back to the post office and told the post office clerk I needed to fill out another form so I could tell the government I objected to war and its preparations. The post office clerk was a Quaker, Don Keller, and he just smiled, handed me another form, and said, "Write it in big letters."

But you see, it's the questions that changed me. If someone had stood in a pulpit and said, "You must do this." I wouldn't have done it. You know how 18-year-olds are. Instead, I was asked a question, and it made me curious. "Do you consistently practice the Christian principles of love and good will toward all people?" Eventually, that question changed my life. I began reading the other questions Quakers asked and as I opened my life to them, my world and my life opened up.

So let me ask you a few questions, if I may. Are you spiritually-alive or have you lost your curiosity and passion for life? Are wonder and awe a part of your life? If not, are you open to the presence of God in your life and to the remarkable changes it might bring? Are you ready to be curious again?