

# purposeful curiosity

How asking the  
right questions will  
change your life

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1

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*To Lydia,  
the most curious girl in the world*

## Preface

*The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.*

—PLUTARCH

IT WAS A WARM SUMMER AFTERNOON ON MYKONOS, A GREEK ISLAND known for its picturesque town, gorgeous beaches, and vibrant nightlife. Iraklis Zisimopoulos, my best friend, whom I have known since we were both seven years old, and I were talking about his new hospitality ventures on the island. At one point, he interrupted our conversation, turned to me, and said, "You must be the most annoying person in the world!" I was taken aback by his comment. Puzzled, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"You fire one hundred questions per minute. I can't stand you!" he replied laughing. "We're supposed to be having a quiet afternoon, and you act like an investigator. What will you do with all this information, anyway? Will you ever use it?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I find what you're doing quite interesting, but to be honest, it's doubtful that I'll use any of what you're telling me."

Guilty as charged: I am a curious person, actively engaged in the act of learning and exploring.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I'm a bit too curious at times. Academics are like children. We share an unwieldy curiosity, but I had never thought of it as a problem, and so the conversation with my friend hit a chord. It bothered me for a while, but when the summer ended and I returned to London in the fall to teach at Bayes Business School, that summer day with my friend became a distant memory.

Throughout my professional life, I have been deeply invested in helping people advance their curiosity into new and better ways to live and create. This goal has served me well in my present roles at Bayes Business School (City, University of London): as professor of innovation and entrepreneurship, associate dean for entrepreneurship, and investment committee member of Bayes Entrepreneurship Fund (the school's venture capital fund). My passion for curiosity also informs my work as director of Avysson Advisors Ltd., an innovation management consultancy, and as a business consultant and coach.

My mission is to inspire a movement that awakens purposeful curiosity as the foundation of innovation. I am personally invested in this cause because I am a father and an educator.

During the semester, I noticed that many of my students drifted from topic to topic, wanting to discover more about what they were learning but without the patience to drill down deeply into a specific subject. Their interest seemed superficial at best. My recognition of this tendency reminded me of the summer conversation I had with my old friend. I realized that my students didn't know how to channel their curiosity in a way that was useful for discovery and ideation. They didn't keep

asking questions about a specific topic; they just moved on to the next thing.

Like many of us, they are distracted by the flood of information we are bombarded with through social media, newsletters, texts, email, and streaming services. They become like butterflies, flitting from flower to flower without landing on one long enough to drink deeply of its nectar.

We are the generation of right now. Instant gratification is expected because of the ease with which we can distract ourselves and the ton of information at our fingertips. We can order both food and romance from the comfort of our sofas. Technology has made us more complacent and draws us to an ever-increasing comfort zone. Streaming entertainment services, food delivery, and dating apps support the ecosystem of convenience.

*When we dedicate considerable time to investigate, to find answers beyond the first glance, the obvious or expected can be exhilarating and deeply satisfying.*

The facts back me up: The internet has given us unprecedented access to knowledge that grows, like our curiosity, exponentially each year. There are 2.5 quintillion (a quintillion is a million trillion) bytes of data created each day.<sup>2</sup> Google search queries increase around 10 percent per year.<sup>3</sup> Out of trillions of searches every year, 15 percent of our queries are original, having never been seen by Google before.<sup>4</sup> Around 3.5 billion people carry a smartphone.<sup>5</sup> The average American checks their phone 344 times a day.<sup>6</sup> Most people, on average, spend 3 hours and 19 minutes a day on their phones.<sup>7</sup> In 2020, we spent, on average, 7 hours per day online.<sup>8</sup> In 2020, daily social media usage was 145 minutes per day.<sup>9</sup>

I can be guilty of indulging in social media distraction, too. Like my students, I use my personal technology to go on aimless internet searches about both important and unimportant topics, gaining superficial knowledge before moving on to the next thing. The upside is convenience and novelty. The downside is that we can lose interest in any journey that takes more than a few minutes and a few clicks on our smartphones.

The easy access to ever-growing portals of information has created ideal conditions to satisfy our innate curiosity while at the same time encouraging a superficiality that prevents us from doing deep dives into subjects. Despite the rapid pace of technological advancements and the ease with which we can now find information instantly on our own for many topics, we are not witnessing an equivalent surge in deep curiosity journeys. In fact, the easy access to information and our connectedness seems to have had the opposite result. We have become addicted to breadth over depth, worshipping quick and straightforward answers. We want to know the answers to things even when there is no apparent benefit. In this book, I call this attitude *frivolous curiosity*. A recent study by Ming Hsu, a neuro-economist from University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business, and his team reported that our brains can overestimate the value of information that makes us feel good but that may not be useful.<sup>10</sup> Don't get me wrong. In the right amounts, frivolous curiosity can be highly beneficial. It can help us leave the known path and experiment. Learning by chance something today may be helpful tomorrow. It's not that I am against this approach, but it should not be the norm. Why is going deep with our interest in a given subject or problem becoming more challenging than it was in the past? What is preventing us from channeling our curiosity more deeply and toward a defined purpose?

I decided to discover why this butterfly approach to intellectual exploration was growing and what it might mean for innovation,

business, and the future. More importantly, I wanted to learn how we could become more intentional about the benefits of going deeper. This book is the result of that undertaking. It lifts the veil on the way accomplished individuals channel their curiosity to a particular purpose—toward advancing science and human understanding, discovering new lands and opportunities, or reaching a significant goal. This is what I call *purposeful curiosity*, the kind that gets you off your couch and propels you to solve complex puzzles. It is about immersing yourself into the unknown with clarity, passion, courage, and a positive, enterprising attitude. This kind of curiosity requires effort, patience, and resources and may lead you to exhaustion, but it is also overwhelmingly meaningful, rewarding, transformative, and, often, fun. Purposeful curiosity has tremendous benefits. Curiosity—the urge to know, to see, or to experience—is what motivates information-seeking behavior.<sup>11</sup> This drive has long been associated with positive emotions, lower levels of anxiety, strengthened relationships, achievement, and longevity.<sup>12</sup>

Purposeful curiosity helps steer inquisitiveness toward goals that we care about and that give meaning to everything we do. By solving puzzles along our journey, we often uncover diverse new pathways, surfacing ideas, problems, and solutions that may be loosely related to the mystery and each other. The path to the destination, and even the destination itself, may be unclear. I won't claim that purposeful curiosity is always fun; it can be, of course, and it can also be difficult and frustrating. But that is where its value is. When we dedicate considerable time to investigate, to find answers beyond the first glance, the obvious or expected can be exhilarating and deeply satisfying. For a space explorer, successfully launching a rocket is an immense and complex challenge. For an Olympic athlete, winning a gold medal means a lifetime of hard work, both physical and mental, but the effort is worth it. For a soprano, hitting the right note is exceptionally difficult. For most

of us, devoting sustained attention toward a challenging purpose is an arduous task! Yet, moving beyond your original boundaries of knowledge and skill is its own deeply satisfying reward.

In this fuzzy process, a concentrated effort to overcome obstacles, to eliminate mental resistance with resilience, plays a key role. Masters of purposeful curiosity develop an ability to sustain focus and attention. I have talked with several of these experts for this book. The resulting insights will help put you in their shoes and let you feel their triumphs and tribulations. You will discover the hidden threats to their journeys, the setbacks (even the disasters) they've experienced, and how they mitigate all these challenges to successfully reach their destination. Many of us romanticize the idea of embarking on the unknown. Actually, purposeful curiosity is more like waking up every morning, walking into a boxing arena with Mike Tyson, not knowing if you will take him down or if you'll get punched in the face. Sometimes the work goes smoothly, but more often you will meet frustration that takes grit and determination to survive.

The purposefully curious have learned to overcome setbacks—and learn from them—and leverage them for success. Working through problems without distraction makes us all better able to solve the problems and be more productive. In a world where even stepping away from our devices for a few moments is increasingly difficult, this level of sustained focus is undoubtedly valuable but also achingly challenging. The substantial achievements of my interviewees are the triumphs of purposeful curiosity. They've developed strategies to remain resilient and view mishaps as solvable puzzles rather than insurmountable roadblocks. Drawing on their journeys in this book, I bring together actionable, practical strategies and advice that anyone can employ to think like they do. I will repeatedly ask you to stop and think about what this all means for you and your life.

Although not everyone aspires to explore Antarctica, go to Mars, or invent a groundbreaking new product, we all search for meaning and we strive for progress in our daily lives. Purposeful curiosity comes into play in many aspects of life. You might simply be trying to become better at what you do, or you might be preparing for a new job—leaving your current career and pursuing something more fulfilling. Maybe you are trying to see through the noise of fake news or make sense of an information overload. Or you might be trying to commercialize an innovation, improve your health, or teach your children the value of solving a puzzle. No matter what you are doing, you can benefit from thinking like a purposefully curious person. My thesis is that at its core, a curiosity project can bring rich rewards, whatever your purpose. There are exciting mysteries to solve everywhere, but focused exploration is much more inclusive and accessible.

My goal is to make purposeful curiosity the new normal. Consider this book a master class in curiosity. Driven by an internal desire to become much better at it myself and learn anything I can to leverage its transformative power, I started researching everything I possibly could about curiosity. As a field researcher, I dove deep into this topic over the last eight years to uncover its inner workings. I immersed myself in academic studies, articles, and reports having to do with psychology, science, culture, and innovation. I talked to more than sixty people from many walks of life and professions to understand their purposeful curiosity journeys, and I consulted leading experts. Fortunately, success leaves clues. Among them are space and polar explorers, investigative journalists, entrepreneurs, investors, creatives, innovators, engineers, scientists, educators, and athletes (see the appendix for the detailed list of interviews). When I was compiling this list, I searched for people who exhibit a consistently pioneering spirit, who use their curiosity for creative problem-solving.

This book offers the tools to replicate their successful journeys. Each chapter covers a building block:

1. **Uncover your itch to know:** We can learn to find an itch and cultivate it. By focusing on a purpose that gets us up in the morning, and with a conviction that everything is understandable, we can transform any possible interest into an insatiable itch that drives our passion and fuels our perseverance.
2. **Go down the rabbit hole:** Our curiosity turns into a formal project when we share our excitement with others and allow ourselves to take ownership by investing time, energy, and resources.
3. **Conquer your fears with curiosity:** To conquer your fears, first, focus on partly muting the external world. Second, turn your curiosity inward to defeat your inner critic and explore who you are meant to be. Third, reframe your fears into impossible riddles, future regrets, and small experiments. Finally, turn your fear into something that becomes second nature to you.
4. **Become an expert—fast:** The best way to learn about our new shiny object is by creating our personalized curriculum and tapping into the knowledge of the community. We must listen and absorb as much as we can.
5. **Ask, "Who's with me?"** You must assemble the dream team. This is about hiring people who fit the CURIOUS acronym: They are *collaborative*, *unabashedly* passionate about the subject, *resilient*, and *iconoclastic*. They are also interested in *outside* issues beyond their area of expertise, feel an *urgency* to act, and *seek* surprises.
6. **Get ready:** To optimize your curiosity journeys, identify all the things that can go wrong and try to mitigate them methodically.

7. **Leap into the unknown:** To enhance our curiosity journeys, we must learn to set boundaries and prioritize. We must direct our experiences with all our senses and build a rhythm by breaking down the journey into manageable steps. We may also need to create our own tools if they do not exist. And finally, we must take corrective actions when they are needed.
8. **Develop resilience in the face of adversity:** To overcome setbacks and build resilience during our curiosity journeys, we need to remind ourselves of our purpose, reframing each setback as an opportunity to intentionally explore. We should create a strong support network and, fueled by positive emotions like excitement and interest, crack each mystery setback as a detective would.
9. **Turn the ending into your new beginning:** Reflecting on our completed curiosity projects, we must ask ourselves one crucial question: "Am I still curious to explore this field?" Depending on our answer, we can take one of two directions. Path A: We are still excited about our chosen field, and we have more shiny objects to explore further. Path B: We feel that we have exhausted this field, and we are keen to exit the current area and branch out to a curiosity journey in a new field.

As I said, reading this book and using its strategies for your own curiosity journey, new business venture, or research project will not make the strategies any easier. But they will become richer, deeper, and more meaningful. Think of this book as a curiosity manifesto and a practical manual designed to help individuals, teams, or organizations channel their curiosity to move ahead in their careers and lives, solve fascinating problems, and innovate. Through the curiosity journeys that I share, I want to change your beliefs about

what is possible. I hope that the ambitious and groundbreaking challenges that my interviewees go after and their outstanding achievements will educate, motivate, and inspire a new generation of explorers and dreamers.

Curiosity should become the pursuit of many, not the privilege of the few. My goal is to encourage all of us to be purposefully curious and continue our natural lust for discovery. I want to help inspire a movement that awakens purposeful curiosity as the foundation of greatness and positive impact. I am personally invested in this cause, and I ask you to join me. The world needs us. Are you purposefully curious to find out more? Read on.