

In Praise of Curiosity

President's Address
La Sierra University Convocation
September 30, 2010

My child, do not forget my teaching, keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

My child, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble; when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence."¹

I am delighted to add my welcome to that of Pastor Oberg and Provost Pawluk. Whether you are new to La Sierra, or if you are now beginning your senior year, please know of our joy—as faculty and as members of the staff—in your decision to make La Sierra your academic and spiritual home. It is truly our hope, and it is our prayer, that this will be one of the finest years of your life.

Albert Einstein, often regarded as the father of modern physics, wrote: “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery everyday. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

These words powerfully affirm the privilege we have been given this year as we together participate in the adventure of learning at La Sierra University. College is the most intentional time in one's life for the holy curiosity that Einstein encourages to be developed and celebrated.

There is no better place than La Sierra University for this to take place. For here, we are committed to creating a space that is safe for students and professors to ask the most thoughtful questions, to seek the best answers—to be caught up in the joy of discovery, and, in so doing, to be established in our faith and in our learning—just as we have sung.

As a community of nearly 2,100 students and 300 faculty and staff, the value we place on learning is one that we recognize as God-given. From the moment we first opened our eyes, we have been incessant in our quest to understand the world that we are a part of.

Dr. In-Kyeong Kim, a professor in our University's Department of Psychology, helped me to better understand this when I asked her to share the insights she has gained from the research that she and her students have conducted in her lab.

Dr. Kim said, "I study the origins and nature of physical knowledge. Although I study lifespan developmental changes, my research focuses mainly on infancy and early childhood. I am very curious about what is going on in young babies' minds. What do they know? How do they know? And what do they do to figure out how the world operates?"

"I find that babies are a lot smarter than we take them to be. They come into this world well equipped with core knowledge and skills covering many different domains. However, it is really their curiosity that enables this core knowledge to be enriched and developed.

"From the moment babies are born, they orient themselves and selectively pay attention to new stimuli and try to figure out their perceptual, cognitive, spatial, and social environments. The more I study, the more I discover and each new discovery really amazes me how these curious minds develop, and this continues to stimulate my curiosity." Many of us would have a difficult time being patient with these infants. But not Dr. Kim! Do you sense her enthusiasm?

As children, we spent our early lives asking questions. It is how we learned. It still is. Here at La Sierra University we believe questions are as important as answers.

Students, the professors who sit before you are committed to walking with you as you make this important journey. Only a very small percentage of the world's population has the privilege of obtaining a college education. An even smaller group has the privilege of spending the rest of their life at college as professors.

These are men and women who will serve as lifelong mentors. Your questions, your ideas, yes—even your fears—are safe, for these professors will take their greatest joy in seeing you grow and mature—both intellectually and spiritually. You are in a safe place to search and to discover. Thinking is our work at La Sierra, and we ask that you enthusiastically participate.

The Bible is full of stories of curious people very much like each of us—men and women who have questions, fears, hopes and joys. In these stories we find a picture of God who is always looking for ways to capture our attention, encouraging us to think, to look more deeply, to reconsider.

One of my favorite stories takes place early in the Book of Exodus. When we join Moses in the third chapter, he is standing in the midst of a great desert. There, under the glare of the sun, he has had years to reflect upon his life. The stories of his mother's bravery and commitment to see him live, his adoption by Pharaoh's daughter, growing up in the midst

of unimaginable splendor, and then, in a flash of righteous anger, murder. The prince becomes a fugitive, sheep his unruly companions.

Beginning with verse one of chapter three, we read: “Now Moses was looking after the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a blaze from the middle of a bush. Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up.

“Moses said, I must go across and see this strange sight, and why the bush is not being burnt up. When Yahweh saw him going across to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush. “Moses, Moses!”

“Here I am,” Moses answered. “Come no nearer,” said Yahweh. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”

Here we come face to face with mystery. Moses, looking across the desert, sees a bush on fire. He is curious; he’s never seen anything like this. And so he moves closer to investigate. And as he gets nearer, he realizes something very strange is taking place—the bush does not burn up, the fire does not weaken. Standing close enough to feel the heat of the flames, God speaks.

Have you ever been curious about how God speaks? In Scripture, most of God’s intensely profound and history-changing encounters come during the common experiences of life.

Moses was tending his flock. Then a burning bush. He questioned whether what he was seeing was real, and he decides to investigate. In the process, Moses hears the voice of God. Not only does he hear the voice of God, Moses is given a mandate to serve:

God says, “And now the cry of the children of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them, so come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the children of Israel, my people, out of Egypt.” It is a duty, a calling, and in the verses that follow, Moses will question whether he is worthy: “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” Yet God calms his concern as He declares “I shall be with you.”²

Moses will return to Egypt, will face his fears, will learn to trust in the power of God, and will deliver God’s people from oppression.

Students, Moses’ experience reminds us that we must never lose a holy curiosity. There will be times when we see the unusual in the midst of the mundane—and when this happens, we should not continue business as usual. There will be times when our curiosity requires us to look twice, to look more deeply, to reconsider. May we never

forget that God presents himself in different ways to different people. If you are not curious, if you are not paying attention, you may miss the way God wishes to present himself to you.

While reflecting upon the way in which curiosity encourages us to think more deeply, I emailed Dr. Doug Clark, Professor of Biblical Studies and Archeology in the School of Religion. I asked him if there was a word in Hebrew that embraces curiosity, and he referred me to his research on Ecclesiastes 3:11 and the little word ‘olam:

“God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity, ‘olam, in the hearts of humans, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

What did God place into the human heart? Some translate ‘olam as “eternity” and others as a “sense of the past and the future.” So then, God has placed in the human heart and mind a sense of the past and the future, the entire universe.

Dr. Clark concludes by asking, “Could this mean a sense of curiosity? Could it be that the whole universe and the quest to explore and understand it are actually a divine gift and that we should thank God for implanting it? Perhaps it is part of the human condition to be curious.”³

I am convinced that curiosity—this commitment to think, to question, and to learn—is the doorway that leads to the biggest and richest adventure of our lives. As humans, made in the image of God, curiosity endears us to the heart and mind of God, encouraging us to be caught up in the life-long pursuit of truth.

This morning, I wish to assert, with Dr. Kim, and with Dr. Clark, that it is indeed our work, as humans, to be overtly curious. I join Dr. Samuel Johnson, who lived in the 18th century and is recognized as one of the most distinguished men of letters in English history, in his belief that “Curiosity is, in great and generous minds, the first passion and the last.” And I acknowledge that, like Moses, we must never stop paying attention, lest we miss the moment that God is attempting to communicate with us.

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery everyday.”

La Sierra University: “Never lose a holy curiosity.”

Randal Wisbey
President

¹ Proverbs 3:1-6, 21-26, New International Version

² Exodus 3:1-12, New Jerusalem Bible

³ Doug Clark, “In Celebration of Curiosity.” *Journal of Adventist Education*, 64 (April/May) 2002: 9-13.