

Reading from *Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It* by Ian Leslie

Our oldest stories about curiosity are warnings: Adam and Eve and the apple of knowledge, Icarus and the sun, Pandora's box. Early Christian theologians railed against curiosity: Saint Augustine claimed that "God fashioned hell for the inquisitive." Even humanist philosopher Erasmus suggested that curiosity was greed by a different name. For most of Western history, it has been regarded as at best a distraction, at worst a poison, corrosive to the soul and to society.

There's a reason for this. Curiosity is unruly. It doesn't like rules, or, at least, it assumes that all rules are provisional, subject to the laceration of a smart question nobody has yet thought to ask. It disdains the approved pathways, preferring diversions, unplanned excursions, impulsive left turns. In short, curiosity is deviant. Pursuing it is liable to bring you into conflict with authority at some point, as everyone from Galileo to Charles Darwin to Steve Jobs could have attested.

A society that values order above all else will seek to suppress curiosity. But a society that believes in progress, innovation, and creativity will cultivate it, recognizing that the inquiring minds of its people constitute its most valuable asset. In medieval Europe, the inquiring mind — especially if it inquired too closely into the edicts of church or state — was stigmatized. During the Renaissance and Reformation, received wisdoms began to be interrogated, and by the time of the Enlightenment, European societies started to see that their future lay with the curious and encouraged probing questions rather than stamping on them. The result was the biggest explosion of new ideas and scientific advances in history.

The great unlocking of curiosity translated into a cascade of prosperity for the nations that precipitated it. Today, we cannot know for sure if we are in the middle of this golden period or at the end of it. But we are, at the very least, in a lull.