

ONWARD,
CURIOUSLY

◆ CRAIG JAMES ◆

ONWARD, CURIOUSLY

A Field Guide
for Navigating Complexity
in an Uncertain World

Craig James

Wet Water in the Lake Media™



The Rockies • Colorado

One of many places along the trail that ultimately became this book.



ONWARD, CURIOUSLY

*A Field Guide
for Navigating Complexity
in an Uncertain World*

Copyright © 2026 Craig James
All rights reserved.

Digital Edition, Version 1.0

Wet Water in the Lake Media™

an imprint of Cat-Strat Services LLC
ISBN: 979-8-9977582-0-2

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews, educational discussion, or other uses permitted by applicable copyright law.

This book is intended for educational and reflective purposes only and is not intended to provide medical, legal, financial, psychological, or professional advice.

Cover and interior illustrations were created by and with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools under the direction of the author.

For updates and additional resources, visit
www.OnwardCuriously.com

Many people walked parts of this trail with me before it reached you.

Their questions, observations, encouragement, and occasional “Craig, you’ve already said that” helped make this Field Guide better.

I’ve thanked many of them by name in the Acknowledgments at the back of the book.

Craig James
August 2026

The trail continues.

A Note on Creation

Onward, Curiously emerged through years of coaching conversations, observations, lived experiences, reflection, questions, and writing.

During the development of this Field Guide, artificial intelligence became an unexpected companion in the creative process.

At first, I found myself wondering where “my” ideas ended and the technology’s began. I tried to keep track, carefully separating concepts, wording, and contributions.

Over time, that question became less important.

The work evolved through hundreds of hours of conversation, writing, rewriting, organizing, deleting, expanding, refining, and rethinking.

Sometimes I arrived with a fully formed idea that AI helped me clarify. Sometimes it challenged my thinking, suggested an unexpected connection, or helped me see something I had not yet seen.

Often its greatest contribution was simply remembering where an idea belonged, holding pieces of a growing manuscript together so I could remain present with the thinking rather than continually searching through pages of notes.

In some ways, the process mirrored the subject of the book itself.

Curiosity rarely develops in isolation. It grows through conversation, experience, reflection, other people, and, increasingly, new kinds of tools.

Every story, perspective, question, and conclusion in these pages has passed repeatedly through my own experience, judgment, revision, and voice.

AI assisted as an editor, organizer, research partner, creative collaborator, and occasional co-drafter. I decided what stayed, what changed, what disappeared, and what ultimately became part of this Field Guide.

The illustrations throughout the book were also created with the assistance of artificial intelligence under my direction.

The result feels authentically mine, while also reflecting something I have come to appreciate more deeply through writing it:

Very little meaningful work is created entirely alone.

Before Setting Out

Welcome. This guide was designed with digital reading in mind, including phones and tablets. On an iPhone or iPad, Apple Books makes it easy to bookmark pages, search the text, and return to passages. Adobe Acrobat and other PDF readers offer similar features.

Navigating the Guide

Use the interactive Table of Contents to jump directly to chapters and sections.

Reading on a Small Screen

Use whatever zoom, orientation, or display settings make reading most comfortable. On a phone, turning the device sideways or zooming in may help. Comfortable reading matters more than preserving the exact page view.

Finding Your Way Back

You don't need to read this guide in a perfectly linear way. Bookmark a page. Highlight something. Make a note. Wander ahead and come back. The Table of Contents can serve as a map whenever you want to return to an idea.

Help Shape This Guide

This guide will continue to evolve. If something resonates, feels unclear, sparks a question, or suggests another possibility, your feedback is welcome. Share your thoughts at www.OnwardCuriously.com.

Every trail begins with a map. Then comes the walking.

INTRODUCTION

Let Me Ask You a Question

A Word Appears

An Important Time

Contained Within This Field Guide

Before the First Step

THE TUG

Chapter 1 What Shapes Us

Chapter 2 The Illusion of Certainty

Chapter 3 Curiosity as a Different Response

ENTERING THE FIELD

Chapter 4 What Curiosity Really Is

Chapter 5 The Stories We Stop Questioning

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Chapter 6 Seeing What's Really There

Chapter 7 The Art of Noticing

Chapter 8 The Problem as a Doorway

WALKING DIFFERENTLY

Chapter 9 The Space Between

Chapter 10 Other Hikers on the Trail

Chapter 11 Who Am I Becoming?

THE RETURN

Chapter 12 The Practice of Curiosity

Chapter 13 Onward, Curiously

▲ Trail Signs

Continuing the Trail

Those Who Walked With Me

Voices Along the Way

Conversations That Feed Curiosity

Words from the Trail

About the Author

INTRODUCTION

Let Me Ask You a Question

When has a question changed your life?

I'm not talking about a decision or a circumstance.

A question.

Take a moment and think about it.

Most of us can remember events that shaped our lives.

A career move.

A relationship.

A diagnosis.

An unexpected opportunity.

A painful loss.

But somewhere around many of those turning points, there may also have been a question.

Who am I becoming?

What do I really want?

What am I afraid to face?

Maybe the question came first.

Maybe it arrived much later, after something had already changed.

Sometimes we don't recognize the important question until we can look backward and think:

Oh. *That's* what I was really trying to understand.

Questions rarely announce themselves as turning points.

More often, they make a little room.

They interrupt an assumption.

Loosen a conclusion.

Point our attention somewhere we hadn't been looking. And, every once in a while, a question changes what becomes possible next.

Maybe that's one reason questions matter so much to curiosity. They can make a little room before we decide what something means.

But curiosity is larger than the questions we ask.

Sometimes it looks like noticing. Listening. Waiting. Looking again.

Sometimes it eventually asks us to stop questioning and choose—yet a question can be a doorway.

What else might be here?

What might I not understand yet?

What can I see from somewhere else?

Those are the kinds of openings this Field Guide explores.

Not because every question needs an answer. And not because questioning is always better than knowing but because reality is often larger than what we can see from one place.

This Field Guide began with an opening like that too... but not with a question. Rather, it began with a word.

A Word Appears

About a year ago, I was walking on a treadmill, looking through a window at the trees beyond the glass, when a single word drifted into my awareness.

Curiosity.

That was it.

No lightning bolt.

No great revelation.

I wasn't trying to solve a problem, meet a deadline, or figure out my next project. I was simply walking and looking out a window.

And somehow I became curious about curiosity.

Looking back, I suspect the circumstances mattered.

There was movement, but not much urgency. My body was doing something while my mind had a little room to wander.

Just enough quiet for a word to appear.

More importantly, perhaps, I noticed it.

I sometimes wonder how many ideas, observations, questions, and possibilities pass through our lives without ever becoming visible to us. Not because we aren't intelligent or imaginative. We may simply be occupied with something else when they pass by.

This one happened to land. For a while, I didn't do much with it. It sat there.

I tugged on it occasionally. Collected some thoughts. Created a rather ambitious Notion workspace.

Then mostly let it sit some more.

Around that same period, a foot injury disrupted some of my usual routines and eventually became one of several experiences shaping what I noticed and wrote.

I don't think the injury happened so I could write a book. It hurt. I would have preferred that it didn't.

But life has a way of placing things beside one another that we don't necessarily recognize as connected while they're happening.

A word.

A treadmill.

A sore foot.

A question that kept returning.

There was another thread running underneath all of this too.

For nearly twenty years, I'd been talking about writing a book. I had ideas. Notes. Starts. Plenty of "someday."

But no book.

Then this question kept pulling me back.

I don't think curiosity magically turned me into an author. But it gave me something I wanted to keep following.

And somewhere along the way, almost before I realized what was happening, I was finally writing the book I'd been talking about writing for two decades.

Curiosity wasn't only becoming the subject. It had become part of what got me moving.

I followed the question. And one question led to another. Curiosity began appearing in coaching conversations, relationships, grief, aging, technology, work, the body, the stories we tell ourselves, and the very ordinary things we walk past every day.

Some questions felt enormous.

How did I come to be here?

Why do we hold so tightly to some conclusions and remain open to others?

Other questions were less profound.

How exactly does an EV do that?

Curiosity didn't seem particularly interested in staying inside one category.

Neither was I, apparently.

Over time, subjects that initially seemed unrelated began revealing something they shared.

Life is usually more complex than it first appears, and reality is often larger than our first interpretation of it.

And when our interpretation changes, what becomes possible can change with it.

Somewhere along the way, I realized I wasn't only exploring curiosity. Curiosity was also exploring me.

It was changing what I noticed, how quickly I concluded, what I was willing to question, and even what I thought this book was becoming.

I didn't know where the thread would lead. I'm not sure I do now. Maybe that's appropriate.

I noticed a word.

I followed it.

And somehow, here we are.

An Important Time

We live in an extraordinary moment.

Never before have we carried so much information, connection, and possibility in our pockets. We can learn almost anything within seconds, communicate across continents with ease, and interact with technologies that would have sounded impossible only a few years ago.

It is, in many ways, a remarkable time to be alive. Yet many of us have rarely felt more overwhelmed—not because information is scarce, but because it is endless.

Headlines, notifications, opinions, predictions, responsibilities, opportunities, and uncertainties compete constantly for our attention.

Sometimes it feels as though we are being asked to understand everything before we've had the chance to truly consider any one thing.

We live in a world that encourages us to consume more—more information, more opinions, more content, more of everything.

Before long, it can begin to feel as though we are no longer simply consuming more but that the consuming begins *consuming us*.

In the midst of all this, we naturally long for certainty. We want answers and we want clarity.

We want solid ground beneath our feet.

There is nothing wrong with that desire. Certainty helps us orient ourselves.

It helps us decide, commit, act, and move.

But many of life's most meaningful experiences refuse to fit neatly inside it.

Growth doesn't.

Purpose doesn't.

Relationships don't.

Grief certainly doesn't.

And the future never has.

Some questions are meant to be answered while others seem to accompany us.

Some may need evolution more than resolution.

Sometimes life asks us to move before we fully understand and to trust before we can prove.

To explore before we conclude.

That has made me wonder whether we sometimes ask certainty to do a job it wasn't designed to do.

Perhaps uncertainty isn't a flaw in life. Maybe it is one of life's most reliable features.

Reality has a way of remaining larger than our explanation of it. It continues revealing itself long after we think we understand what we're seeing.

This is where curiosity enters the story—but not as another technique and not as another productivity strategy.

Not as another demand on an already busy life but more as a different way of meeting reality.

A way of remaining open to what is unfolding before us.

Of staying in relationship with uncertainty a little longer before rushing toward a conclusion.

Of allowing another possibility to become visible before deciding the journey is complete.

That doesn't mean curiosity is the right response to every moment.

There are times to question and times to decide. Times to open possibilities and times to narrow them. Times to reconsider what we believe and times to stand behind it.

Curiosity is not meant to replace conviction, discernment, practicality, or action.

Simply, it can help us notice when we have arrived at them too quickly—and create just enough space to see what else may be here before moving on.

Some days the stakes feel considerably larger than our own overloaded lives.

We open the news and find war, political division, climate disruption, suffering, institutions under strain—problems so large that curiosity can seem almost quaint beside them.

Curiosity doesn't solve those things.

A question is not a peace treaty and wonder is not climate policy.

Openness is not a substitute for action, courage, expertise, or conviction.

But I wonder whether even a little curiosity can keep hopelessness from becoming another form of certainty.

When the future looks frightening—it is easy to assume we already know where everything leads.

When conflict hardens, it becomes easier to believe we already know who the other person is.

When a problem feels enormous, the possibilities we can see often get smaller.

Curiosity may not give us the answer, but maybe it can keep the frame from closing too soon.

That is where another possibility begins.

Maybe some of this feels familiar to you.

Maybe you're in a season when something that used to make sense doesn't quite fit anymore.

Maybe you're making a decision and wish you had more certainty than you do.

Maybe you're working with people—leading, teaching, coaching, caring, creating, parenting, collaborating—and you're regularly reminded that human beings are considerably more complicated than our first explanations of them.

There are practical aspects here too:

In organizations, a second look can expose an assumption before it becomes an expensive decision.

It can reveal the system behind a recurring problem, help a leader hear what a team may not yet be saying, or uncover an option that wasn't visible in the first frame.

Curiosity doesn't replace expertise, judgment, or action. It simply gives them a fuller picture to inform what comes next.

Maybe you're a little weary of a world that seems to ask us to know what we think about everything, immediately.

I don't know what brought you here, though I'm glad you're here.

If any of these moments sound a little like where you are—perhaps these pages can offer some room... room to notice what you may have stopped noticing.

To stay with “I don't know yet” a little longer while an answer hasn't quite earned its way into view.

To widen the frame around a problem and become a little more curious about another person—and perhaps about yourself.

And when the time comes... to know enough for now—and to choose. To move forward.

Not perfectly.

Not with certainty.

Just with enough awareness to see what is here and take the next step.

That's my hope. My hope is that this Field Guide offers a little room rather than another system to master.

I hope it becomes:

A place to notice.

To wonder.

To reconsider.

A companion for a walk.

A conversation worth revisiting.

Maybe even a little respite before continuing
down the trail.

Contained Within This Field Guide

Every trail has its markers.

As you move through these pages, you'll encounter a few recurring features designed to help you notice what matters, carry a question a little farther, or find your way back to an idea later.

● Field Observations

Most chapters close with four brief observations drawn from the trail we've just walked. They aren't meant to summarize everything. Think of them more as things worth carrying forward. A distinction. A reminder. Something you may recognize differently once it appears in your own life.

Questions for the Trail

Most chapters also close with four questions. In the final chapter, those questions become The Bearings. They aren't quizzes. And there is no expectation that you answer all of them.

Some may lead somewhere immediately. Others may travel with you for a while, then show up unexpectedly in a meeting, on a walk, while driving, or in the middle of an ordinary Thursday. Notice which ones have some life in them for you.

Trail Signs

Along the way, you'll encounter a small set of Trail Signs: simple distinctions that can help us look again when something feels confusing, obvious, urgent, or difficult to see clearly.

Symptom vs. System.

Snapshot vs. Trajectory.

Map vs. Territory.

Forecast vs. Weather.

Observation vs. Interpretation.

You'll meet each one where it naturally belongs in the journey.

They are also gathered in the Field Reference at the back of the book so you can return to them later.

None of these features is meant to become another system to master.

Use what helps.

Leave what doesn't.

Perhaps return later. The trail may look different from somewhere else.

Before the First Step

Nothing to rush here.

You don't need to agree with everything in these pages nor do you need to answer every question.

You certainly don't need to become "more curious," as if curiosity were another capacity you need to perfect.

This said, I do think curiosity can help us live a little better.

Not by turning us into endlessly inquisitive people. And certainly not by asking us to examine every thought until life becomes one long exercise in navel-gazing.

But something more practical.

Curiosity can help us see our lives a little more clearly, hold what we think we know a little more lightly, and respond a little less automatically.

This can create something surprisingly valuable:

More awareness of what is actually here.

More openness to what we may not yet see.

And a little more choice about what happens next.

The payoff isn't curiosity itself.

It's what curiosity can make possible in how we meet our lives.

Notice...

What catches.

What irritates.

What feels obvious.

What you immediately want to challenge.

What keeps returning after you've moved on.

You might want to underline something.

Or skip something.

Or come back later.

All good.

This Field Guide isn't meant to be completed in some usual sense.

It is meant to accompany... like a walk with someone who occasionally points toward something and says:

Huh, look at that.

Sometimes what you notice will confirm what you already knew. Other times it may complicate things.

Sometimes it may offer a little more room around something that had begun to feel fixed. And other times nothing much will happen at all.

That's okay.

The aim isn't permanent curiosity. It is perhaps a little more awareness of how we are meeting what is here. A little more freedom to notice when another way of seeing might help. A little more willingness to remain open when openness serves.

And, when the time comes, enough clarity to choose and move.

Other times you'll need to put the book down for a while and then come back. The trail doesn't require some particular pace.

A friend named Jim Burke reminded me of something recently that I love.

At some point, a book becomes the reader's. I may have written these words, but you'll bring things to them that I can't. Your experiences, questions and stories. You'll make connections I didn't make. And may even find something here that I didn't know I was saying!

That's part of the magic. The book began with me. But from here, what it becomes is largely yours.

Take what helps. Leave what doesn't. And notice what happens along the way.

Welcome to the trail.

PART I

THE TUG



Chapter 1

What Shapes Us

Not long ago, I found myself standing near Niagara Falls, where my parents had spent their honeymoon decades earlier.

As I watched the water rush what felt like immediately underfoot at the horseshoe-shaped Canadian edge, I found myself thinking about time. About journeys. About the strange way life unfolds.

My parents are now gone. My wife and partner-in-life, Sue, has lost both of her parents too.

Stories unfolded.

Lives lived.

"Done".

Standing there, I began thinking about all the moments that had quietly shaped my own life.

Conversations that seemed ordinary at the time but later proved important.

Opportunities I accepted. Opportunities I declined. A moment with my mom. People who appeared unexpectedly and somehow altered the direction of things.

Some of those moments were obvious turning points.

Many weren't.

Like a lot of people, I've occasionally wondered about the roads taken—and the roads not taken. What if I had stayed with acting after high school?

What if I'd followed a different professional path after working with some of the early technology pioneers who impressed me at the time?

What if I'd chosen differently at one of those intersections that seemed relatively ordinary at the time?

I'll never know.

And maybe that's not really the interesting part anymore.

What interests me more is how difficult it can be, while we're living through something, to recognize how much it may be shaping us.

A job is just the job.

A person enters our life.

We say yes to something.

A conversation is just a conversation.

Sometimes we say no.

We develop a habit without really deciding to develop it.

We become accustomed to an environment.

We start believing a story because we've heard it (or were told it) enough times.

Then... years later, we look back and think:

Oh, I see now. That mattered.

Niagara brought some of that home for me. Not because I suddenly understood the path that brought me there. I didn't. But I could see more of it.

Which made me wonder about something else.

If so much of what has shaped us becomes obvious only in retrospect, what might be shaping us right now?

Something we barely notice?

What are we responding to?

What is pulling at our attention?

What nudges us one way or another?

What are we becoming accustomed to?

Sometimes the influence is loud. Sometimes it is barely a tug.

Tug and Push

I've come to think of some of these influences as tugs and pushes.

A tug can be subtle. Something catches our attention.

An idea.

A person.

A possibility.

A place we keep thinking about for no obvious reason.

It doesn't necessarily demand anything from us. It just seems to say:

Hey. Look over here for a minute.

Sometimes we tug back and we follow the thought.

We call the person.

We ask the question.

We walk a little farther down the trail—just to see what's there.

I've always liked that quality of a tug—the sense that something has caught us before we fully understand why.

But I've also become less convinced that every tug is one we ought follow.

Fear can tug.

A headline can tug.

Novelty can tug at us.

So can an idea that genuinely matters.

The fact that something has our attention tells us something but it doesn't necessarily tell us what to do with it.

Pushes work a little differently.

They tend to come with more momentum.

Deadlines.

Expectations.

Responsibilities.

Other people's needs.

Our own habits and commitments.

Sometimes it's simply the accumulated pressure of a life already in motion.

Pushes aren't necessarily *bad*. A promise can push us to show up when we don't particularly feel like it. A deadline can help us finish. Conviction can push us to act after we've explored long enough.

Life contains plenty of both.

Maybe the useful thing isn't learning to prefer one over the other but rather becoming a *little more aware* of what is moving us.

*Where is it coming from?
What keeps pushing me?
What keeps tugging at me?
And is this mine to respond to?*

We won't always know.

But noticing the forces themselves gives us a little more chance of participating in where they take us—because one of the strangest things about what shapes us is how easily we stop noticing it at all.

Noticing What We Don't Notice

Ever noticed how many things you don't notice?

For example, we rarely notice the air we breathe. Not because air isn't important, but because it is always right-there. Always.

It surrounds us so completely that it fades into the background.

Most days we move through it without a second thought.

We notice it only when something changes—like the wind picks up or the room becomes stuffy.

The environments in which we work, live, love, and play can work this way too.

We adapt to them.

We normalize them.

We stop seeing them.

The older I get (older, not old, for the record ;) the more fascinated I've become by this simple reality.

Human beings are remarkably adaptable and we've become accustomed to things with surprising speed.

Ironically, that adaptability can make us stop seeing what is *right in front of us*.

What once felt unusual becomes familiar.

What once captured our attention becomes part of the scenery. It might even become boring.

A new home feels like just "home" in no time.
A new job eventually feels like... the job.

Even major life changes have a way of becoming the backdrop against which ordinary life unfolds.

In many ways, our modern attention environment can become like the air we barely perceive.

And when I speak to attention environment, I mean more than “technology”.

It includes the pace, information, expectations, habits, people, platforms, and countless little cues that continually influence where our attention goes.

We live inside environments every day, yet rarely stop to examine them.

The noise.

The urgency.

The almost constant invitations to look here, respond there, worry about this, consider that.

After a while, all of it can begin to feel like life itself. But it isn't life.

It is part of the environment through which we experience life—and it can shape us without our noticing. Technology is only one part of that environment—but it has become an extraordinarily powerful one.

I want to be careful here because I genuinely appreciate much of what today's technology makes possible.

We can communicate across continents, access extraordinary amounts of information, and explore ideas that would have been difficult—or impossible—to pursue a generation ago.

A simple question can lead to a fascinating afternoon of learning.

An unexpected conversation can open an entirely new area of interest.

I've benefited enormously from all of that.

But abundance has consequences too.

The same technologies that connect us can overwhelm us. The same information that informs us can exhaust us. And the same abundance that expands possibility can also make it harder to know what deserves our attention.

This is where Tug and Push become a bit more interesting.

The world around us has become remarkably good at creating pushes that can feel like tugs.

A headline creates a question. A notification creates a tiny mystery.

Something provocative practically *begs* us to look.

An argument invites us to take a side before we've even decided whether we particularly care about the argument.

None of these things is necessarily bad... but something catching our attention and something *deserving our attention* are not the same thing.

This distinction has become increasingly interesting to me.

What is pushing me to respond?

What is tugging at me to explore?

*What is simply pushing at my attention
because something—or someone—has
become very good at doing exactly that?*

These are the questions... and we need to
have the courage to ask them.

We won't always know the answer, but
perhaps noticing the environment gives us a
slightly better chance of recognizing the
difference.

And maybe the point is to ask the question—
not seek the answer.

Whenever an environment changes, it's
worth becoming curious about what that
environment might be doing to us.

What is it asking of us?

What does it reward?

What becomes normal... over time?

I see some of the effects in coaching conversations.

Clients usually don't arrive because of one dramatic event.

More often, what they're carrying seems to have accumulated over time. The pace, expectations, responsibilities, relationships, and demands that have gradually become part of the environment around them.

It's become part of *them*.

Nothing necessarily feels unusual.

It's just about the room they've been living in.

Which makes me think about environment in another way:

As a room.

The Room

Imagine standing there while a dozen people are calling your name at the same time.

One wants your opinion.

Someone wants your money.

Another wants your attention.

Someone wants you to agree.

Individually, none of those requests may be unreasonable but collectively... they can become an exhausting blur.

Many of us live in some version of the room every day—mentally, emotionally, digitally.

What interests me is not how much is asking for our attention... but where it is coming from.

Key questions:

*How much is coming **at** us?*

*And what, if anything, is emerging **from** us?*

When enough voices are calling our name, we can begin responding to whatever is loudest, newest, most urgent, or simply closest at hand. The room starts to feel normal.

The room hasn't done anything wrong but we've simply forgotten we're standing in it.

Maybe that's the useful thing about seeing the room.

It doesn't make the demands disappear. Rather, it gives us a little better chance of distinguishing the pushes and pulls around us from the quieter *tug* that may actually matter.

● Chapter-1 Field Observations

Much of what shapes us becomes difficult to see once we have adapted to it.

A tug or a push can tell us that something has our attention. It doesn't necessarily tell us what to do.

Our environments can influence what we notice, expect, and respond to without our being especially aware of them.

Sometimes simply noticing the room gives us a little more choice about how we move within it.

Chapter-1 Questions for the Trail

What has been tugging at my attention lately?

What has been pushing me—and what might be the source of that push?

What in my environment has become so normal that I barely notice it anymore?

What might be shaping me right now that I may only recognize later?

Chapter 2

The Illusion of Certainty

One of the most common themes I encounter in coaching conversations is *uncertainty*.

Interestingly, clients almost never describe uncertainty as “uncertainty.”

They don't say, “*Hey Craig, I'm struggling with that uncertainty thing today.*”

Rather, uncertainty tends to arrive wearing other costumes.

Stress. Overthinking. Frustration. Indecision. Second-guessing. Conflict. Anxiety.

Sometimes an almost irresistible desire for reassurance.

Humans want to know whether they're making the right decision—and they want to know *what will happen next*.

They want to know what another person is thinking.

They want to know whether things are going to work out.

On the surface, these concerns can look quite different.

Wait?

Stay or go?

Take the job?

Trust the person?

Say something or let it go?

Yet if we stay with the conversation long enough, a common thread often begins to appear. The longing to *know*.

And perhaps just as importantly, the longing for things to be understandable.

In many ways... all of us are trying to find our footing in a world that refuses to reveal itself all at once. (Darn Universe!)

We make decisions without complete information. We form relationships with people we can never fully know. We “plan” futures that haven't happened yet, and then occasionally seem surprised when those futures don't cooperate.

Surprise!

Of course certainty can feel reassuring.

Sometimes it feels like progress and sometimes it feels like safety.

The more I noticed this pattern, the more curious I became about the relationship with the idea of “knowing” itself.

Why the heck do we want to *know* so badly?

Really?

What do we mean when we say we “know”, anyway?

And what are we hoping *knowing* will give us?

There are practical reasons, of course.

Human beings have always needed to recognize patterns and make sense of what is happening around them. Knowing where food could be found mattered.

Knowing whether something represented danger mattered. Knowing whom we could trust mattered.

Uncertainty wasn't merely philosophical. It had the potential to make you someone else's lunch.

And even now, answers can bring relief.

They reduce the number of possibilities we have to keep considering. They help something make sense.

They can give us a direction and allow us to get on with things.

So I've become less interested in criticizing our desire for certainty and more interested in what may be underneath it.

Relief.

Safety.

Control.

Predictability.

A little solid ground.

Maybe even rest.

Beneath the desire for certainty, sometimes
there is simply a desire to...

exhale.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Perhaps certainty sometimes gives us
something that feels a little bit like *control*.

If I know what it means, I can respond.

If I know them, I can stop recalculating.

If I know what comes next, I can prepare.

Of course, knowing doesn't actually give us control over everything that happens next (but it can make the world feel more containable).

The challenge is that life doesn't always provide certainty in the quantities—or on the schedule—we'd prefer.

People remain mysterious. Relationships change. Health changes. Markets change. New information appears. Things happen that weren't in the plan. Life continues revealing itself... ready or not.

So perhaps the more interesting question isn't whether we should want to “know”. Of course we do.

It's more about what happens next.

Knowing, Understanding, and Closing

We've been talking about knowing for a while now—wanting to know, feeling that we know, and sometimes wanting the relief that knowing seems to provide.

But the word itself is surprisingly slippery.

We say:

"I know."

"You know."

"Now I know."

And we may mean very different things.

This feels familiar.

I have the information.

I've experienced this before.

I'm pretty convinced this is true.

Those aren't quite the same thing.

Know what I mean? ;)

There's another little puzzle inside the word:

How do we know when we know?

It sounds circular I know... but I mean it literally.

How much information, experience, evidence, or confidence does it take before "I think this is true" becomes "I know"?

Of course there isn't a fixed quantity.

The threshold shifts with the person, the situation, and what is at stake.

Maybe that's part of what makes knowing interesting.

The feeling of knowing can become quite solid even when what we actually know is still changing.

Think about the things you once knew—or thought you knew—that later changed.

An opinion.

An assumption about another person.

Something you believed about yourself.

A prediction about what would happen next.

That doesn't necessarily mean we were foolish or wrong at the time.

We were working with what we could see and understand, then.

This brings us to another useful distinction: the fact that knowing and understanding aren't quite the same thing.

I can know that the sun will set this evening without understanding much about why it appears to do so.

I can know that someone is upset without understanding what is happening underneath their reaction.

I can know the facts of a situation and still not understand how those facts relate to one another.

Understanding has something to do with relationship: patterns, context, how one thing connects with another.

Even understanding can change as more becomes visible. That may be one reason so much of life doesn't feel like a simple movement from ignorance to knowledge.

It feels more like a movement from one understanding to another... from *"this is what I think is happening"* to *"oh... there's more here than I realized."*

I've experienced this enough times now that I'm a little less suspicious of changing my mind.

I'll change it.

Sometimes changing our understanding doesn't mean the earlier one was worthless. It just means reality kept revealing itself.

Then... there is *closing*.

Closing is different.

Closing happens when what we know—or *think* we understand—becomes the boundary around what we are still willing to see.

We move from *"this is what I understand right now"* to *"this is all there is to understand."*

This can happen quickly.

We hear one side of a story and decide what happened.

We experience one difficult interaction and decide who someone is.

We have a setback and begin deciding what it says about our future.

The question is whether the conclusion has become more final than the information that produced it.

Knowing gives us something to work with whilst understanding helps us see more of how things fit together.

On the other hand, closing tells us we've *seen enough*.

All this said... sometimes we close a *little* sooner than reality has earned.

The Hidden Cost of Premature Closing

When our current understanding becomes a conclusion too quickly... curiosity pays the first price.

But not the only one. We also stop gathering information.

We become less likely to notice what doesn't fit. A contradiction that might have taught us something becomes easier to explain away.

An interpretation hardens into fact.

A third possibility never enters the frame because we've already decided what the choices are.

We can even miss what is right in front of us because we are so busy seeing what we expected to see.

That can happen inwardly too.

A conclusion about another person, a situation, or ourselves can begin protecting itself.

What confirms the story stands out. What complicates it becomes easier to dismiss.

Nothing dramatic has to happen.
It's just that the field gets smaller.

That's the cost of premature closing. Not that we fail some test of curiosity.

We may make a choice from less information than was actually available.

Miss a more useful explanation.

Overlook a different response.

Fail to notice something about our own assumptions that deserved another look.

And when we later discover that we were wrong, the corrected answer may not be the only lesson. Another question may be worth asking:

Why did that explanation make so much sense to me at the time?

Not as self-criticism but as information about how I was *seeing*.

The goal isn't to avoid conclusions. We need conclusions.

Sometimes we've looked long enough. It's time to decide, act, and move forward.

The issue isn't closing. It's closing before reality has had enough chance to speak.

Or refusing to reopen when reality gives us reason to.

Premature closing doesn't come from knowing too much.

It comes from treating what we know so far as though there's nothing else that could change the picture.

Clarity

A Hidden Brain podcast episode helped me realize something I hadn't yet put into words.

Certainty is not the antidote to uncertainty. Clarity is.

The two are not the same.

We can be clear about what we don't yet understand. We can be clear about what matters. We can be clear about the next step—even while important questions remain.

Curiosity helps us get there.

Rather than demanding that uncertainty disappear, curiosity can help us get clearer about what is actually here.

What do I know?

What am I still assuming?

And what is clear enough for me to do next?

Curiosity doesn't necessarily give us certainty.

It can give us something more useful:
enough clarity to orient ourselves without
pretending we know more than we do.

Clarity is not the absence of uncertainty.

It is a different relationship with uncertainty.

● Chapter-2 Field Observations

Wanting to know is deeply human.

Knowing, understanding, and closing are not quite the same thing.

A conclusion can be useful without needing to become permanent.

Clarity may be less about eliminating uncertainty and more about seeing enough to take the next step.

Chapter-2 Questions for the Trail

Where might I be assuming I already know enough?

What do I understand here—and what am I still assuming?

Where might I have closed something a little sooner than reality has earned?

What would enough clarity to take the next step look like?

Chapter 3

Curiosity as a Different Response

One of the ways we make our way through a complicated world is by simplifying it.

We have to.

There is far more happening around us than we could possibly take in all at once.

So we sort.

We categorize.

We make distinctions.

We decide what matters and what doesn't.

We decide what feels safe and what doesn't—what deserves a response and what can wait.

Most of the time, this is quite useful.

But I've become interested in what happens when the categories we use to simplify something become smaller than the thing itself.

A decision becomes stay or go.

A relationship becomes good or bad.

An outcome becomes success or failure.

We find ourselves staring at two choices and assume those must be the choices.

Sometimes they are... but sometimes reality is a little less cooperative.

The struggle isn't always that we haven't figured out whether A or B is right... it's that we haven't noticed that the question itself is framed as "A or B."

That brings us to binary thinking.

The Limits of Binary Thinking

Binary thinking sometimes gets a bad rap.

Yes or no.

Right or wrong.

Stay or go.

Good or bad.

A or B.

Too limiting.

But the truth is, binary thinking can be enormously useful.

Sometimes something really is either/or.

The light is on or it isn't.

We accept the offer or decline it.

The restaurant is open or closed.

Even *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*
understood this.

Four answers.

One is right.

Pick one.

Human beings are constantly sorting and
categorizing.

It helps us move through a world that would
otherwise require far more processing than
any of us has available.

So the problem isn't binary thinking itself but
rather, the problem begins when we apply
binary logic to things that aren't especially
binary-able.

Relationships. Leadership. Identity.

Growth. People. Love.

These things tend to be less cooperative.

I remember being younger and having a surprisingly clear idea of what being grown-up would look like.

At some point, apparently, *I would arrive*.

Life understood.

Career established.

Questions answered.

I'll be all *growthed-up*.

Except, of course... that's not quite how things happen in life.

The older I've become, the more I've noticed how many parts of life resist the categories we try to place around them.

A relationship can be both loving and difficult.

A decision can be right for now... and still worth revisiting later.

Someone can disappoint—yet still be a good person.

We can feel grateful for a life... yet curious about changing it.

Two things that appear to contradict each other can sometimes both contain truth.

That doesn't mean every situation is complicated—or that we should make simple things unnecessarily complex.

Sometimes yes really is yes.

Sometimes no really is no.

But sometimes the frame we've been handed—or the one we've handed ourselves—is smaller than what is actually here.

And when that happens, asking only “*Which of these two choices is right?*” may keep us from noticing something more interesting.

Maybe there's another choice.

Maybe things aren't quite “either/or.”

Maybe there is another way of seeing things.

Which is where a third option starts to become interesting.

The Third Option

Binary thinking can narrow not only how we see something... but what we believe our choices are.

We start with:

A or B.

Stay or go.

Accept or decline.

Say something or let it go.

And again, sometimes those really are the choices.

But I've become increasingly interested in what happens when we pause long enough to ask:

Wait... Are those actually the only choices here?

Scenario: Suppose an important choice comes down to:

Stay or go?

Perhaps there really are only two paths.

But what if staying doesn't have to mean staying *exactly as things are*?

Maybe we stay... but also change something.

Maybe we have a conversation we've been avoiding.

Maybe set a boundary.

Ask for something different.

Try a new arrangement.

Maybe "going" doesn't have to mean going... *right now*.

Maybe another month.

Try things for a while.

Gather a little more information.

Sometimes a third option isn't a completely "different" path. It might be a different way of walking one of the paths that is already in front of us.

It can be useful to **not** invent a completely new option. Sometimes it's simply to question the way the original choice has been framed.

What looked like:

Should I stay or go?

may turn into:

What would need to change for staying to feel right?

Sometimes such an inquiry reveals another option. Maybe it changes the terms or timing of one of the original options.

And sometimes, after looking again, we choose one of the original two. The point isn't to *avoid* choosing A or B but rather, it's to make sure A and B are *actually* the choices we're making.

The Freedom of “Not Yet”

One of the most liberating additions to “I don't know” may be one small word:

Yet.

“I don't know yet.”

The word is kind of magical. It leaves the question open without requiring us to stand still.

Sometimes a choice isn't only A or B... or a variant of A or B... but the fact that *time* may be part of the choice too. I may not know yet whether I should stay or go—but I may know that I need another conversation, or two.

I may not know where something is ultimately heading... but I may know what I'm willing to try, next.

I may not have enough information for the final decision... but I may have enough for the next step.

That's what I've come to appreciate about the idea of “not yet.”

It doesn't necessarily mean:

I refuse to decide.

It can mean:

*The answer hasn't earned its way into view,
yet.*

I don't need to pretend otherwise.

Not forever.

Not never.

Just not... yet.

Sometimes that's enough to keep the
question open long enough to allow life to
move, forward.

● Chapter-3 Field Observations

Binary thinking can be useful until the frame becomes smaller than the reality.

An apparent either/or may be hiding other possibilities.

Curiosity can change what becomes visible –and what becomes visible can change what becomes possible.

“I don’t know yet” can leave possibility open without requiring us to stand still.

Chapter-3 Questions for the Trail

Where might I be treating something as either/or when there may be more here?

What third—or fourth—possibility have I not considered?

Is the choice itself the problem, or might I be framing the choice too narrowly?

Where might “I don’t know yet” be more honest (and more useful) than forcing an answer?

PART II

ENTERING THE FIELD



Chapter 4

What Curiosity Really Is

By this point, something slightly circular may have happened.

Perhaps you've become curious about curiosity.

The more I've explored the word, the more interesting it has become to me.

What the heck is curiosity, really?

We use the word casually.

Someone is curious about a new restaurant. A child wants to know how something works. We wonder about the origin of a word. We wonder what happened to an old friend or why a problem keeps showing up.

All curiosity, perhaps.

But what is *actually* happening in those moments?

One useful way to think about it comes from psychologist George Loewenstein, who has written about what he calls the information gap—the space between what we know and what we want to know.

There's something I don't know... but I might be able to know it.

That little gap can be surprisingly powerful. And surprisingly sensitive to how much uncertainty there is.

Too little uncertainty? *Boring*.

Too much? *Overwhelming*.

But somewhere in between... where enough is known for us to have a foothold and enough remains unknown to catch our attention... curiosity can come *alive*.

It helps explain why we can become fascinated by something we knew very little about five minutes earlier, while another subject leaves us completely unmoved.

Something has to catch. There has to be enough there to give us a foothold—and enough still unknown to make us want to follow.

Maybe you know this feeling.

Sometimes it's a question.

Sometimes a contradiction.

Sometimes it's something that doesn't quite add up—or a little detail catches us.

Or we simply have that little feeling:

Wait a minute. There's more here.

Not every unknown does that.

And not every unknown needs to.

Some uncertainty is genuinely threatening
and sometimes we need information quickly.

And at times the useful thing is not to remain
curious but to make the best decision we can
with what is available and then move on.

There are other moments when *not knowing*
isn't truly dangerous.

It's just... not knowing.

Mac Bogert likes to say:

"Life is a near-death experience."

That line grabbed my attention.

But as Mac points out... when we stop and think about it, how many actual near-death experiences have we had? Really.

Not many.

Yet the mind and body can sometimes respond to uncertainty as though considerably more were at stake.

I don't know if I chose right.

I don't know what they're thinking.

I don't know how this will turn out.

Uncomfortable?

Absolutely.

Potentially important?

Sure.

But dangerous or life threatening?

Usually not.

I've become more interested in recognizing this difference.

Sometimes uncertainty really is telling us to pay attention, get more information, protect ourselves, or act.

Other times, the alarm is simply the experience of *not knowing*.

They're not the same thing.

If everything already feels completely known, there may be nowhere for it to go.

But when something remains unfinished enough to catch our attention, yet not so unknowable that we turn away, the mind can lean into it.

Maybe that's part of why curiosity feels so alive. There's something that has become possible to discover.

Of course, an information gap doesn't explain all of curiosity. It doesn't explain why we can become curious about another person, ourselves... or why one question stays with us for years while another disappears very quickly. And it certainly doesn't explain everything curiosity can become once we begin following it.

But it gives us a useful starting point, and that is that curiosity seems to begin somewhere between what we already know and what we sense *might* be there.

A gap. A tug. A little unfinished business.

And sometimes that's enough to make us want to take a peek.

Curiosity and Creativity

During a Friendship Bench Zoom conversation, a participant named Melissa Hughes shared an observation that stayed with me.

Ask a room full of kindergarteners if they're creative, she said, and nearly every hand goes up. Ask the same question of a room full of teenagers and far fewer hands remain in the air.

That made me wonder what happens in between.

I don't think raised hands prove that children are naturally creative and teenagers somehow aren't. Life is more complicated than that.

But as we grow older, many of us do become more aware of what is expected, more conscious of whether an idea is good or not, and more practiced at recognizing what is realistic, appropriate, useful, or likely to work.

Those are not bad capacities.

Discernment matters. So does judgment.

But useful filters can become narrow ones.

Somewhere along the way, we may become anxious to ask whether an idea is practical, productive, sensible, or worth the time—and a little less willing to follow it simply because it catches our attention.

This can narrow curiosity.

And when curiosity narrows, creativity has less room to play.

I also think many of us carry a fairly narrow picture of creativity itself. We associate "creative" with artists, musicians, writers, designers, inventors—people who make recognizably creative things. But creativity can be much more ordinary than that.

It can begin with seeing differently. Noticing patterns and connections. Seeing a relationship that wasn't obvious before. Imagining a possibility that hadn't occurred to us.

Of course that might become a painting, a business, a story, or an invention. Other times it becomes a better question, a different way into a difficult conversation, a new arrangement, or a solution that wasn't visible when we first looked at the problem.

This is one of the places where curiosity and creativity seem like siblings.

But they still aren't the same thing.

Curiosity opens something. Creativity begins working with what has opened.

Curiosity may notice two things that don't seem related but lingers there long enough to become interested.

Creativity begins asking what might happen if we put them together.

Curiosity says:

Huh. That's interesting.

Creativity says:

What could I do with that?

JenLyn Ford describes it this way:

"Creativity is curiosity unconstrained by discipline."

I like the expansiveness of that.

Not because discipline is the enemy of creativity. Eventually ideas need shape. Constraints can help us make something real. Editing matters. Judgment matters. At some point, possibilities have to become choices.

But those capacities may be most useful after something has had enough room to breathe. To emerge.

If we evaluate too early, the very filters that help us refine an idea may keep us from discovering it in the first place.

So perhaps the invitation isn't to become less discerning as we grow older but rather to notice when discernment has arrived a bit too soon.

At the Heart of It

While hiking with my friend Kevin Dilley, a community journalism director, he shared a thought that stayed with me:

"Curiosity is at the heart of everything."

We kept walking and talking.

Kevin has spent much of his career in journalism, so asking questions isn't simply something he finds interesting. It is part of the work. Good journalism requires wanting to understand what is actually happening—not merely confirming what we already believe happened.

That distinction became more interesting as we continued to walk and talk.

It became clear that understanding rarely arrives as a download. More so, it emerges through conversation... as we ask, listen and share.

Maybe something doesn't quite fit, so we look again. Maybe another question appears. Maybe what we thought we understood turns out to be pretty close.

Or super wrong.

Kevin also talked about curiosity as being in service of joy. I liked that idea—not because curiosity is always light or cheerful. Some of the things we're curious about are difficult, painful or frightening.

But there can be something deeply alive about wanting to know and about discovering something we didn't know five minutes ago.

About being surprised and finding something around the next bend that we couldn't see from where we started.

As our hike continued, the conversation evolved further, toward skepticism.

At first, skepticism could sound like the opposite of curiosity.

Kevin suggests it's not.

Healthy skepticism can actually serve curiosity. It asks for evidence, pushes on an assumption, and says, "Wait a minute. How do we know that?"

Not because it hopes to kill the idea, but because it wants to know whether the idea holds up.

Journalists depend on this as do scientists, physicians, investigators, leaders—and, frankly, anyone who has ever received an email and thought, “Well, that can't possibly be the whole story.”

Skepticism can keep us from accepting something too quickly—while still leaving room to be surprised.

Curiosity remains open.
Healthy skepticism examines.
Cynicism feels different.

Cynicism has largely stopped exploring or expecting to be surprised.

On a hike, curiosity wonders what might be around the next bend. Healthy skepticism checks whether we're still on the trail. Cynicism decides the view probably isn't worth the climb.

A little unfair to cynicism perhaps... But maybe not entirely.

Cynicism can be difficult to recognize because it rarely announces itself. It can arrive sounding experienced, smart, practical, worldly—even realistic.

It can sound like this:

"She always does this."

"People don't change."

"We know how this is going to go."

So I've noticed how much difference two little words can make and those two words are:

I wonder.

"She always responds that way" might be based on a ton of real experience.

But it is still a declaration.

What if we look at it this way instead:

I wonder what's happening here? I wonder if she'll respond that way this time? I wonder what I might not be seeing?

Those questions don't erase the pattern. They simply keep the pattern from becoming the whole person—the whole story—or the future.

“I wonder” works a little like “yet.”

It doesn't require us to throw away what we already know. It just leaves a little room for what we don't. Sure, sometimes we're right but the question framed this way helps determine whether we're still reachable by something that might show us otherwise.

That's the important difference.

Healthy skepticism still wants to know what is true. Cynicism, on the other hand, has become much more invested in what it already believes.

None of this means we should abandon discernment or conclusions. We need them. We need conviction too.

It's just that there are moments when another question is what we need.

Curiosity doesn't require us to give up conviction, but it helps conviction to arrive with its eyes still open.

Kevin and I continued to walk. We contemplated what mode we might be in at any given time. We didn't call them "modes" but the questions emerged.

Maybe the issue is less whether we are curious or convinced than whether we recognize what the particular moment is calling for.

Sometimes curiosity asks us to loosen our grip *just long enough* to see whether there's something else that might be true.

Other times, conviction asks us to take hold and to make a move.

Beyond Questions: Openness

One of the most common misconceptions about curiosity is that it's all about asking questions.

Questions matter, for sure. They're one of curiosity's favorite tools.

But a question, by itself, doesn't make us curious—or make curiosity “happen.”

We can ask a question while defending a position. We can ask a question when we think we already know the answer. We can ask a question to put someone else on the defensive—or to prove something more than discover something.

We've all heard questions like that (and we've probably even asked a few).

Sometimes a question isn't really a question at all. It's an argument in disguise. Or a conclusion wearing a question mark.

That realization has made me pay a little less attention to whether someone is asking questions—and pay more attention to what seems to be underneath them.

Curiosity seems to require some willingness to encounter what we don't already know... and perhaps to have some humility too.

But not humility as a weakness or self-doubt.

More simply, it's realizing that reality may be larger than my current understanding of it.

Expertise matters.

Experience matters.

Knowledge matters.

Yes.

But healthy expertise can leave a window cracked open.

I can know quite a bit and still be open.

Open to:

New information.

Another person's experience.

Something I hadn't noticed before.

Reality itself.

So curiosity is larger than the questions we ask. The questions matter yes... but the openness behind them might matter even more.

Here's another word to consider:

Adaptation.

Living things adapt.

As do relationships, organizations, families, and communities.

Something changes. We respond.

Sometimes consciously.

Quite often not.

Curiosity may have an interesting role in that process because adapting requires us to remain responsive to what is actually changing.

This matters as we grow older, too. Curiosity can keep us leaning toward novelty—new experiences, ideas, relationships, and ways of seeing—rather than slowly shrinking life to what we already know.

Research on healthy aging has also pointed to the value of staying socially engaged, learning new things, and remaining cognitively active. Curiosity may be one way we keep leaning in those directions.

What worked before may not work now and what we believed about someone may no longer quite fit.

What once helped us “succeed” may now be something we no longer need.

Curiosity can help us adapt rather than merely repeat our most recent successful response.

Curiosity as a Way of Relating

A phrase that keeps returning to me:

Curiosity is a way of relating.

The more I sit with the idea, the more useful it becomes.

Most of us think of relationships as something we have with other people. Of course we do. We have those, for sure.

But our relationships extend much further.

There is the relationship with ourselves.

With time.

With place.

With things.

With money.

With technology.

With our past... and whatever we imagine about our future. We even have a relationship with uncertainty.

Whether we think of it this way or not, we are constantly relating to what's happening around us—and within us.

These relationships can become automatic.

We can *relate* to a problem as something to eliminate or as an uncertainty to escape.

Or we can become a bit more curious about the relationship itself.

How am I relating to this?

That question has become surprisingly useful to me.

Not simply: *What is happening?*

But: *How am I meeting this?*

Am I defending?

Open?

Avoiding?

Interested?

Trying to control?

Already convinced?

None of the responses are automatically wrong. Sometimes defending something matters. Sometimes we need to act quickly. Sometimes conviction is exactly what the situation requires.

But noticing the *relationship itself* gives us something we didn't have before: a little more awareness of how we are *participating* in the experience.

That's one reason I've come to think of curiosity as something larger than a behavior.

It isn't simply asking one more question.

The situation itself may not change—such as the difficult email. It will remain a difficult email.

But the way we meet it *can change*.

That's the key.

That's the magic.

And sometimes that changes what becomes possible, next.

This is also why curiosity feels, to me, like even more than a way of living, learning, and leaning in.

It feels like a way of participating in reality.

Not controlling it. Not pretending everything should be endlessly open. But participating.

Meeting what is right here while remaining available for something we may not have seen just yet.

That's one way to describe what curiosity has come to mean to me.

Not a technique.
Not simply a question.
...But a relationship.

And perhaps, from time to time, the question
beneath all the other questions is simply:

How am I relating to this?

The more I sit with that question, the more
places it seems to reach.

Sue and I have started sketching some of
these relationships—time, money, place,
things, technology, others, ourselves.

I think of it loosely as a relationship trunk.
Not another framework to master, just a way
of noticing how much of life is... relationship.



RELATIONSHIP TRUNK

— THE CORE OF OUR HUMAN RELATIONSHIP LIFE —



WE GROW. WE CONNECT. WE GO ONWARD.
ONWARD, CURIOUSLY.

● Chapter-4 Field Observations

Curiosity often lives between what we know and what remains unfinished.

Curiosity opens; creativity begins working with what opens.

Healthy skepticism examines without closing; cynicism stops expecting surprise.

Curiosity is more than questions. It is a way of relating while remaining reachable by what we may not yet see.



Chapter-4 Questions for the Trail

What has me curious right now—and what about it is pulling me closer?

Where might curiosity be opening something that creativity could begin shaping?

Where am I genuinely examining something—and where might I already be expecting the answer?

How am I relating to what is in front of me right now?

Chapter 5

The Stories We Stop Questioning

By now, you might be wondering how any of this actually becomes something practical you can use. Something to put into practice.

You might be thinking:

Okay, okay.

Curiosity matters.

I have a better feel for what it is.

I get it!

But what do I “do” with it?

Fair.

Such a question has led me to another.

If curiosity is as natural and human as we've been suggesting it is... maybe the practice isn't always about making ourselves *more* curious.

Maybe part of the idea here is noticing what tends to get in the way of it.

I've seen this show up repeatedly in coaching conversations.

People rarely get stuck because they aren't intelligent or because they're lacking information either.

More often, something they believe they already understand has become difficult to see around.

A story.

Not necessarily a dramatic one.

Often a familiar one.

Maybe even a comfortable one.

A story that has gradually stopped feeling like a story and started feeling like... reality.

That is where this chapter begins.

What Happened? What's the Story?

Children often seem naturally curious.

They ask.

They explore.

They experiment.

They notice things adults walk right past.

They wonder why. Then why again. They play with ideas, objects, language, rules—and sometimes with our patience.

Adults are certainly capable of curiosity. But adulthood brings a lot along for the ride:

Habits.

Expertise.

Deadlines.

Experience.

Expectations.

Responsibility.

People depend on us! And sometimes there's a fair amount of scar tissue along for the ride.

As we progress through life, many of us become understandably better at *getting through the day* without stopping to wonder about it.

During a Friendship Bench conversation, Nick Heap introduced me to a word that illuminated this notion: *adulthood*.

The word made me pause.

It got me thinking about what can happen as we accumulate the very things adulthood asks us to accumulate.

We gain experience and perspective. We become more competent. We learn what tends to work—and/or what doesn't.

We develop shortcuts that keep us from having to rediscover the world every single day.

Of course—thank goodness!

Can you imagine having to become endlessly curious about how to operate the coffee maker every single day—or being so fascinated by how a shower works that you end up not taking one?

But there can be another side to all that experience.

What we learn becomes what we *expect*.

What we expect becomes what we *assume*.

What we assume can become *the story through which we see what comes next*.

Human beings are awesome at creating stories.

We have to be.

Something happens... of course we ask what it means.

Someone responds strangely and we begin explaining why.

A relationship changes.

A job doesn't work out.

A friend doesn't call back.

Something succeeds.

Something fails.

We connect dots.

We make a story.

Stories give life continuity.

They help us make meaning. They can offer coherence, predictability, even protection.

They give us a through line we can hold onto when reality itself feels messy or out of control.

There's comfort in believing that things make sense, even just a little... and even when the story we are using to make sense of things... is incomplete.

Stories also help us belong.

Families, organizations, cultures... they all have stories.

We inherit stories too.

Stories about success, failure, work, money, aging, relationships, what people like *us* do.

What people like us *don't* do.

Many of these stories can be useful. Maybe even some are essential.

Without them... life would become, well, exhausting. We need to contextualize and make sense of things.

So I don't think the idea here is to somehow "un-story" our lives.

No, not at all. I'm not sure we could if we tried.

The more interesting challenge is to remember that a story is still just... a story—and that stories become particularly powerful when they disappear from view.

We stop thinking:

This is how I'm interpreting what happened.

And begin thinking:

*This **is** what happened.*

We stop thinking:

This is one explanation.

And begin thinking:

*This is **the** explanation.*

An interpretation becomes a fact.

A conclusion becomes the truth.

One perspective becomes *the-only-one*.

I've started thinking of this as a kind of story-a-fi-cation. A verb. An act.

We don't necessarily realize we're doing it.

That's part of what makes it interesting.

The story becomes the water in which we're swimming... and once that happens, it becomes harder to notice where the story ends and reality begins... and when our perception of reality becomes, well, all wet.

Jim Burke and I were talking recently about simulations and reality when a wonderfully slippery question emerged:

When does something become real?

Reality gets a vote, of course.

But so do perception, interpretation, memory, and meaning and sometimes separating them is harder than we think.

So, yes, it's useful to ask, *What else might be true here?*

But sometimes part of us would really rather *not* know.

And so, here's another question to consider:

Why?

Why We Look Away

If stories can limit what we see, why don't we question them?

Sounds reasonable enough.

...Until we realize the story is *ours*.

Curiosity isn't difficult because asking questions is difficult.

It's difficult because questions can end up asking *something of us*.

They may ask us to admit that something we believed for a long time isn't quite as true as we thought it was.

Or that we misunderstood someone.

Or that we just got it... *wrong*.

Or that a way of working, leading, relating—or living—that once made perfect sense... no longer fits so well.

This can be uniquely *uncomfortable*.

It takes us looking straight into... the mirror.

Our stories aren't merely intellectual.

They can protect things.

They protect... our:

Identity.

Belonging.

Reputation.

Competence.

...Sense of control.

Even our understanding of who we are.

Whoa.

Just sit with that for a sec.

If I've spent years believing that I'm good at something—questioning that story can feel like more than reconsidering an “idea”.

It's questioning *me*.

If I've organized my life around what a “success” is... another possibility may ask me to reconsider my decisions, relationships, and even the way I've measured myself.

If a group I belong to sees the world one way, becoming curious about a potential other way may carry a significant social cost.

So the story can tend to give us somewhere to stand.

Even if it isn't the *whole* story.

This is important to remember.

We don't necessarily hold tightly to a story because we're stubborn—or closed-minded.

Sometimes it's that the story has helped us navigate.

It may have protected us or helped us belong.

Letting curiosity back in can temporarily take some of that solid ground away. This can be scary.

But we need to loosen one explanation before another can arrive.

This can take many forms.

We may discover that someone we had neatly placed in a certain category is way more complicated than we thought (usually the case).

We might realize that something we blamed entirely on *someone else* has a little bit of us in it too.

Ugh.

Curiosity has a cost.

Sometimes the cost is simply inconvenience. As simple as having to slow down and look again.

Other times, the cost is greater.

It can mean admitting we were *wrong*.

It can mean disappointing people who prefer an earlier version of us.

It might require grieving an identity we've outgrown before we really know what's next.

Or it might simply mean remaining... just for a little... in an uncomfortable place where the old story no longer quite works and the new one hasn't taken shape. At least not, yet.

These are the reasons we look away.

...And it's okay.

This happens not because we aren't capable of curiosity—but because sometimes not looking... protects us.

Looking often asks for *courage*. The courage to remain present when a familiar explanation begins to no longer quite work.

Enough to say:

I may not have the whole story here.

And then stick around long enough to see what happens.

The Invisible Lens

So when hiking a trail, it is easy to assume that the path directly in front of us represents the landscape in front of us.

Of course!

But then we round a bend.

A valley appears.

A ridge emerges.

Something that wasn't visible from where we were standing a minute ago suddenly becomes part of the new-view.

Nothing about the landscape changes dramatically... but we did.

Our position changes, and with it... what becomes available to see changes.

I've come to think stories can work a little like this. Over time, an assumption or explanation can become a lens through which we experience what happens next.

The tricky part is that we usually see through the lens long before we see the *actual lens itself*.

We don't think:

I'm seeing this through a particular story.

Rather, we usually think:

This is what... I see.

...That's a pretty big difference.

What happens?

A story about someone becomes *the* person.

A story about what we're capable of...
becomes *the* boundary.

A story about what success looks like begins
deciding which possibilities can even be
considered.

The lens doesn't necessarily distort all things.

In fact, such lenses may help us see
something quite clearly.

That's what lenses were born to do.

But it's important to remember that every
lens has a certain point of view.

During a Friendship Bench conversation,
Jennifer Fiedler helped bring this metaphor
to life for me.

She talked about the difference between a telephoto lens and a wide-angle lens.

A telephoto lens can bring one detail remarkably close, making something distant vivid and clear.

A wide-angle lens does something different. It gives us more of the scene. More context. More of what surrounds us.

Neither lens is “better”. They simply reveal different things.

This stuck with me because I realized that our attention can work similarly.

Sometimes we need the close-up. And sometimes what we're seeing only begins to make sense when more of the scene becomes available.

So the useful question might be:

Do I know I'm looking through one?

(A lens, that is.)

Because once we begin noticing the *lens itself*, something changes.

We gain room.

The facts may not change.

The person may not change.

The situation may not change.

But another way of *seeing them* becomes... possible.

I'm not talking about endlessly questioning our own perception... or assuming that every interpretation is somehow suspect.

Sometimes what we're seeing is pretty darn accurate.

It's simply to ask:

What am I seeing? And what lens might be shaping what I see?

Sometimes that second question doesn't change much.

Other times, we round the bend and suddenly realize that there is way more landscape to consider.

The Different Story

Over the last few years, Sue and I have spent a significant amount of time exploring the question: *What comes next?*

At different points, the question has taken us
to Europe.

Spain.

France.

Portugal.

Then closer to home.

Buffalo.

Denver.

Vermont.

Maybe Canada.

Different places.

Different possibilities.

Different versions of the future.

At first, we approached the question the way
many people approach important decisions.

We assumed there must be a “right answer” hiding somewhere.

The right place.

The best choice.

A future we could somehow “figure out” if we gathered the right amount of information and insight.

So we set out to do so. We researched. Compared costs. Explored neighborhoods. Imagined lifestyles. Built spreadsheets. Ran scenarios. (Still do, by the way).

For a while, each new piece of information seemed as though it might move us closer to the “answer”.

Eventually I began to notice something about the question itself.

We weren't only looking for a place to live.

We were carrying an assumption about how the decision was supposed to work.

Somewhere out there was the right future.

Our job was to find it.

Once we found it, presumably, the uncertainty would end.

Except another possibility kept appearing.

Then another.

Columbus, Ohio?

Puerto Rico?

Staying where we were for a while longer.

At one point, even renewing a lease began feeling strangely consequential, as though staying for another year meant choosing against everything else.

Then a different thought appeared:

What if a lease is just a lease?

What if staying for a while doesn't answer—or un-answer—the larger question?

That shifted something.

The circumstances hadn't changed, but the story had. Instead of treating the future as one *correct* destination that's waiting to be discovered, we began seeing several ways a meaningful life might unfold.

And that changed the questions.

Not just:

Where do we want to live?

But:

How do we want to live?

What do we want an ordinary day to feel like?

Eventually choices will be made.

But I think we discovered something before
we discovered the answer.

Sometimes the story shaping a decision is
larger than the decision itself.

And when we finally see what's been shaping
us... we can begin deciding whether it still
deserves to guide us.

.

The Beginning of Freedom

Something shifts when we begin to see a story as a story.

Before that moment, the story can feel almost indistinguishable from reality.

This is who I am.

This is who they are.

This is what happened.

This is how things work.

Then, occasionally, we catch sight of the lens itself.

And the story becomes something different. Not necessarily wrong. Not necessarily something we need to throw away.

But an *interpretation*.

One way of making sense of what we have experienced.

This distinction can create a surprising amount of space.

Not freedom from responsibility or freedom from consequences.

No.

Certainly not the freedom to make reality into whatever we want it to be.

But something simpler.

To revise.

To respond differently.

The freedom to reconsider.

To discover that another possibility may exist beside the one we had been treating as the inevitable.

Maybe this is one of the gifts of curiosity.

It doesn't change the world in front of us—but maybe it helps us see how we have been seeing the world.

Stories.

Assumptions.

Lenses that had become so familiar that we can't even see them anymore.

...And when something invisible becomes visible—we're no longer completely inside it. There's... some space.

Inside that space—possibility can begin to appear.

That's where freedom starts.

Not with having *every option*.

Not with knowing *exactly* what to do next.

No.

It begins with recognizing that the story we have been living inside... may not be the only story available to us.

At least not... now.

● Chapter-5 Field Observations

Stories help us make sense of life. They can offer coherence, belonging, predictability, and protection.

A story becomes especially powerful when we stop seeing it as a story.

What feels like reality may sometimes be one interpretation of reality.

When we begin to notice the lens itself, other possibilities can come into view.



Chapter-5 Questions for the Trail

What story am I carrying about a situation right now?

What might that story be helping me make sense of—or helping protect?

Where might I be seeing through a lens that has become so familiar I barely notice it?

What else might become possible if this is not the only story available to me?

PART III

BENEATH THE SURFACE



Chapter 6

Seeing What's Really There

What gets our attention first is often what is easiest to see.

The conflict.

The symptom.

The thing that hurts.

The missed deadline.

And sometimes that really is the thing that needs our attention.

Sometimes the flat tire is a flat tire.

But by now we've also seen how easily the first thing we notice can become the whole thing in our minds.

So rather than make that case again, I want to offer five simple distinctions that can help us look more carefully when something feels obvious, urgent, confusing, or just a little too easy to explain.

I've started thinking of them as Trail Signs.

A symptom can belong to a larger system. One difficult moment can sit inside a longer trajectory. A map can help us navigate without containing the whole territory.

A forecast can feel compelling while the actual weather is doing something else.

And what we observe can quickly become what we think it means. None is a formula.

They are simply reminders to ask what kind of view we may be looking at before deciding what to do with it.

The first Trail Sign begins with what has our attention.



Symptoms vs. Systems

What's really underneath this?

What larger system might be at work here?

One of the most natural things we do when something goes wrong is respond to what we can see.

The symptom.

Of course.

Symptoms tend to be visible. Immediate. Sometimes painful. They announce themselves.

Systems are often quieter.

But what do we mean by a system?

A system isn't simply a hidden cause somewhere underneath the problem. It is the larger web of relationships, structures, behaviors, conditions, and history interacting with one another over time.

Peter Senge's work on systems thinking helped me appreciate this distinction years ago. What we see happening is often produced not by one thing, but by the way many things are interacting.

A family is a system.

An organization is a system.

A relationship is a system.

One of the places this distinction became real for me was, quite literally, under my feet.

During the period when this Field Guide was beginning to take shape, I was dealing with a stubborn foot problem.

At first, the question seemed pretty obvious:

What's wrong with my foot?

The pain was in a particular place. Naturally, that's where my attention went. I wanted to know what I had injured, how to fix it, and how quickly I could get back to walking normally.

The painful spot felt like the problem.

But the longer I lived with it, the more I began noticing that the foot wasn't operating by itself. Other parts of my body were responding. Movement was changing. Weight was shifting. One thing seemed to affect another.

The symptom was still real. It just wasn't necessarily the whole system.

That distinction really caught me.

In fact, some of the curiosity that eventually sent me much deeper into this book grew out of those questions.

What if the thing getting our attention isn't the whole thing?

What if what hurts, breaks down, frustrates us, or stops working is also information about something larger?

A sore foot had somehow become a question about systems. Go figure.

And once I began seeing the distinction there, I started seeing it everywhere. Even the way we walk involves muscles, joints, movement patterns, balance, and compensation working together. Change one part and something else may respond.

That's what makes symptoms both useful and potentially misleading.

A struggling employee may be telling you something about an employee but the struggle may also be speaking to the culture, the role, the manager, conflicting expectations, workload, trust—or some combination.

A recurring argument in a relationship may be about the thing we're discussing or may sit inside a pattern that's been building and we've been ignoring for years.

An exhausted leader may simply need some sleep, or the exhaustion might be revealing something about the way the organization has learned to operate.

I see this in coaching conversations all the time.

Someone arrives carrying the situation of the day: a difficult meeting, a frustrating exchange or a decision that didn't quite go as planned.

Those details are useful data, but if we stay with them for a while, the issue at hand begins to point toward things beyond itself.

It's useful to quietly ask:

What keeps recurring here?

What seems to reinforce it?

What else is interacting with this?

What is the larger thing this moment belongs to?

That's the systems move.

Not dismissing the symptom, but following it.

And sometimes, the system isn't "beneath" the symptom but surrounding it:

Habits.

Culture.

Expectations.

Relationships.

Those things rarely operate alone. They bump into one another, reinforce one another, compensate for one another, and eventually create something that becomes visible. Those visible symptoms are real and often they need immediate attention.

But even more powerful is the fact that they may also be the doorway into seeing the governing system. So the first Trail Sign is that simple. Look at what has your attention and then ask:

What larger system might be at work here?

Snapshots vs. Trajectories

What happens if I look longer?

What becomes visible when we look not just across space and systems—but across time as well?

A trajectory.

A snapshot can tell us something true. It can be a difficult week, a disappointing result, a painful day or a frustrating conversation.

But each of those gives us only a point in time. One point is a snapshot. Several points, however, begin to reveal an arc.

A snapshot sounds like:

What's happening here?

Where a trajectory asks:

What's happening over time?

This is different from the familiar distinction between short-term and long-term thinking.

A trajectory isn't simply a snapshot viewed from farther away. It adds movement.

Is there a trend?

In what direction?

What is changing?

What pattern is emerging?

Is momentum building or fading?

The same moment can mean something very different depending on the direction of travel and arc.

One difficult week may sit inside a year of genuine progress and a setback may be an interruption rather than a reversal.

The opposite can be true too.

One terrific quarter may not mean a business is healthy. One wonderful conversation won't erase a relationship pattern.

Time gives moments context.

I've seen this in coaching conversations when someone arrives discouraged by what happened yesterday. Sometimes that deserves the attention.

But when we look back over six months or a year, something else can become visible.

You can see that someone is handling things differently than they used to or they're asking different questions. Recovering faster. Making choices they weren't making six months ago. With this broader view, we often discover that a snapshot might still be difficult while the trajectory may be encouraging. Or the other way around.

This said, a trajectory is not a forecast.

It doesn't tell us with certainty where we will end up (neither does a forecast). Rather, it helps us see a pattern that has been moving in a certain direction.

We can change direction. Circumstances can change. New information can appear.

The point is: When one moment begins feeling like the “whole story”, look longer. Ask yourself things such as:

What pattern is emerging?

What direction is it moving?

What's been happening over time?

While snapshots matter, sometimes the trajectory tells us something the snapshots simply can't.

Maps vs. Territory

Am I mistaking the map for reality?

Maps help us navigate by simplifying the landscape. They leave out trees, sounds, weather, and what it feels like to stand somewhere.

If a map contained *everything* in the territory, it would no longer be much of a map.

Same-same for metaphorical maps.

Frameworks. Plans. Diagnoses. Categories. Strategies. Beliefs about people, organizations—and ourselves.

They make a complicated world easier to interpret and move through, in part, because they leave things out.

The trouble begins when we forget the distinction.

A map is a useful representation.

A reduction.

But quite often reality stops fitting within it.

Suddenly the person we've labeled difficult does something generous... or an employee we thought wasn't adapting well surprises us.

Maybe a strategy encounters a market we didn't anticipate.

This can happen with our own self view, too.

Maybe a story we've carried about ourselves no longer explains who we are becoming.

That's when this Trail Sign becomes useful.

Not:

Throw away the map.

But more so:

Hold the map lightly enough so that the territory has room to still surprise you.

Reality gets a vote.

When what we're encountering doesn't quite fit what we expect, welcome the mismatch. It's information.

Maybe the map is incomplete.

Perhaps the territory changed.

Maybe we need to revise our thinking.

Use the map—but when reality and the map disagree, keep looking.

Forecasts vs. Weather

What is true right now?

Forecasts are useful.
They help us prepare.

We check the weather report prior to a hike.
We look at projections before making a business decision. We imagine how someone might respond before having a difficult conversation.

We consider what could go wrong (or right).

Sometimes such preparation is exactly what helps us proceed wisely.

However, forecasts have an interesting way of "becoming" the weather.

Not literally, of course, but in our minds.

In business, it can happen easily. A budget describes what we intend. A forecast describes what we expect. A projection helps us prepare for what could happen.

None of those are the same as what's actually happening... yet we can become so attached to the forecast that we begin responding to it as though it's already fact.

This happens in ordinary life too. We expect a conversation to be difficult—and we enter it braced.

We worry a decision will lead somewhere painful and then begin living emotionally inside a future that hasn't arrived yet.

I do this probably more than I realize.

The mind is remarkably good at rehearsing weather that isn't happening.

I notice this in ordinary moments too.

An email arrives.

Uh-oh. What's wrong?

The phone rings unexpectedly.

Uh-oh.

Often nothing bad actually happens. In fact, a message can be good news, a compliment, an opportunity... or simply something completely benign. Yet our minds can be prone to produce the bad-weather forecast before even checking the sky.

There may be something quite human in that. Research on what psychologists call negativity bias suggests that potentially negative information can receive priority in our attention, and ambiguous situations can sometimes tilt toward a negative first interpretation.

Some part of us might rather prepare for a storm that never arrives than fail to notice one that does.

So this can be useful.

But it's still just a forecast.

Sometimes it's right.

Sometimes it's wrong.

Storms do arrive.

Conversations can be hard.

Risks can be real.

This is why forecasts matter.

But sometimes we discover: *Huh. It's actually not raining (at least not yet).*

That's the distinction.

A forecast tells us what may happen.

Weather tells us what is happening.

One helps us prepare for possibility. The other asks us to respond to reality. The trouble begins when we stop noticing which one we're facing.

That's when this Trail Sign becomes useful.

What is happening here?

What do I actually know right now?

What is the weather or the forecast?

That doesn't mean ignoring what may be ahead. If the forecast says snow, bring a coat. Maybe boots too.

But when we arrive, look around. The weather will tell us what reality is truly asking of us in the moment.

Observation vs. Interpretation

What did I actually observe?

Imagine three people watching the same high-end BMW drive past.

One smiles.

"They must have worked incredibly hard to afford that."

Another rolls their eyes.

"They're just trying to impress people."

The third barely notices.

"Nice car."

What actually happened?

The same thing.

A BMW drove past.

It's everything else that arrived afterward.

This is what makes this Trail Sign slightly different.

An observation is what we can describe without assigning motive, cause, or meaning.

Interpretation begins when the mind starts answering: *What does this mean?*

And because that answer can arrive almost instantly, observation and interpretation feel like one thing.

Our minds do this kind of thing all the time.

A meeting gets canceled.

A friend doesn't return a text.

Someone walks past without saying hello.

A coworker responds with only a few words.

Whatever it is... something happens, and almost immediately the mind begins thinking: *What does this mean?*

We're meaning-making creatures. We connect dots, recognize patterns, draw on experience, and construct explanations that help us navigate an endlessly complicated world.

Interpretation isn't the problem.
We can't function without it.

The interesting part is how quickly interpretation happens. So fast that we often experience our interpretation as though it were part of the observation itself.

Interpretations: They ignored me. She was angry. He doesn't respect my time. That meeting went badly.

Maybe. But they aren't quite the same as observations:

They didn't return my text.

She spoke very little.

He arrived twenty minutes late.

That gap can matter.

Curiosity doesn't ask us to suspend judgment forever or pretend we don't have instincts. Sometimes our first interpretation is quite accurate but sometimes an observation becomes judgment before we realize we've made one. Perhaps we're seeing only one small piece of something larger and it's useful to pause and ask ourselves:

What did I actually observe?

What am I making it mean?

What might I still not know?

Sometimes the answer changes nothing.

Other times one conversation, one missing piece of information, or one additional perspective changes things quite a bit.

Reality doesn't change but our understanding of it can.

This is when Trail Signs are of value. They help us see...

What has the trajectory been?

What is actually true right now?

What might the territory be telling me?

What larger system might be involved?

And: *What did I actually observe?*

None of the questions tell us what to do, but they interrupt the automatic move from

There it is to I know what it means.

Sometimes a tiny interruption is enough:

What do I actually know here?

From there, we may have a better place to decide what comes next.



FIVE KEY TRAIL SIGNS

WAYS TO SEE BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Use these signs to widen your view, check your assumptions, and make wiser choices.



1 SYMPTOM VS. SYSTEM

Look deeper.

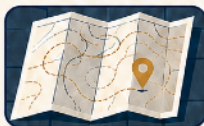
What we notice first is rarely the whole story.
Explore the structures and patterns underneath.



2 SNAPSHOT VS. TRAJECTORY

Look longer.

Today is not the whole story.
Consider the trends, cycles, and history.



3 MAP VS. TERRITORY

Hold your map lightly.

Our models help, but reality is richer.
Stay ready to update your understanding.



4 FORECAST VS. WEATHER

Come back to now.

Predictions are useful, but reality is happening.
Stay present. Adjust as conditions change.



5 OBSERVATION VS. INTERPRETATION

Distinguish what is... from what we make it mean.

Check the facts. Notice your story.
Choose interpretations that serve understanding.



CURIOUS PRACTICE: When something gets your attention, pause and ask:



"What might be part of the system shaping this?"

The Wisdom of Compensation

My foot has made more appearances in this Field Guide than I ever expected, but it's been a good teacher.

The foot problem had become more complicated than the place that hurt.

I noticed that my gait changed. I was protecting the painful area without thinking about it. Weight shifted. My ankle began hurting.

I realized that the foot story became a compensation story.

My body was adapting.
Not perfectly.
Not painlessly.
But intelligently.

One part changed—so other parts responded.

Those responses create conditions of their own.

A changed gait affects an ankle. The ankle influences how we move. That movement changes where load goes next.

Cause and effect begin looping into one another. This is easy to miss.

Compensation doesn't simply respond to the system. It begins *changing* the system.

What started as a response becomes part of the conditions that shape what happens next.

Then I noticed something else.

There was a callus beneath my right big toe. I thought of it mostly as... well, a callus.

It was like a little record across time. Pressure accumulating there long before the flare got my attention.

Snapshot and trajectory.

Then my podiatrist showed me something I hadn't been expecting from the films.

I had been born with an extra little bone beneath that part of my foot that appeared to be contributing to the mechanics.

Suddenly the painful spot had a different story.

It was still painful. Still real. Still something I wanted to address. But it was no longer the whole story.

There was the symptom.

There was the larger system.

There was what hurt today. There was a much longer trajectory. There was the map I had been carrying about what I thought was happening. And then there was the actual territory of the foot, gait, ankle, hip, pressure, anatomy, movement, and years of adaptation.

The five Trail Signs had somehow ended up right under my feet. Literally.

What became most interesting to me was the compensation itself.

Teams compensate.

Bodies compensate.

Families compensate.

Relationships compensate.

Organizations compensate.

Something changes in one part of a system, and another part begins carrying more of the burden.

A colleague absorbs work that isn't getting done somewhere else.

One person in a family becomes the dependable one.

A relationship develops a pattern that keeps things functioning without ever addressing what created the pattern.

A muscle shifts a little more load because another part hurts.

Sometimes compensation is enormously useful. It may be exactly what allows a system to function when conditions change.

That's adaptation.

But adaptation has costs.

The part doing the compensating may eventually become tired, overloaded, or painful... and when compensation works well enough, we may not even notice.

Until something finally says:

Okay. Time out.

This is why I've become interested in compensation not as a problem to eliminate, but as something to notice.

Because compensation can reveal how a system has been adapting.

What changed?

What began carrying more?

What might this problem reveal?

What's shifted to keep things going?

Maybe that's the useful thing about compensation.

It can show us not only where something hurts, but what the larger system has been doing in order to keep functioning.

What's adapted?

What has been carrying more?

And what might it be costing?

Sometimes the next move isn't simply fixing the parts that hurt. It may also be helping the larger system find a different way to carry the load.

● Chapter-6 Field Observations

What first gets our attention may be real without being the whole picture.

A snapshot can be true without telling us the whole trajectory. Looking longer can change what the moment means.

Maps, forecasts, and interpretations can help us navigate reality without being reality itself.

Sometimes compensation reveals what a larger system has been adapting to.

Chapter-6 Questions for the Trail

What has my attention right now—and what larger system might it belong to?

What becomes visible if I look longer?

What map, forecast, or interpretation might I be carrying into this situation?

What might be driving the system's compensation?

Chapter 7

The Art of Noticing

What are you noticing right now?

Really.

Maybe something in the room.

A sound.

The temperature.

A thought that has been hanging around while you've been reading.

Maybe, until I asked, none of those things were particularly present to you.

But they were there.

You may even have been seeing or hearing them. You just weren't noticing them.

I've become interested in this distinction.

Seeing isn't necessarily *noticing*.

Something can be directly in front of us without really registering. We can hear words without taking them in. We can walk past the same objects hundreds of times without really seeing them.

Of course we can't notice everything. Thank goodness.

Imagine remaining consciously aware of every sound, sensation, object, thought, facial expression, memory, smell, movement, and bit of information arriving at once.

We'd be exhausted in no time.

Yet it's useful to think of awareness as something broader, like a field of what becomes available to us.

Attention is more selective. Sometimes we direct it. Sometimes something captures it before we've decided anything at all.

Either way, something comes forward and something else moves into the background.

Sometimes the field becomes so crowded that almost nothing stands out.

That may be one of the paradoxes of living in a world that shows us so *much*, all the time.

Curiosity doesn't require us to notice everything but it helps us become a little more available to what registers.

Perhaps there is such a thing as *pre-curiosity*—that little moment before curiosity becomes a question.

Something catches. Repeats. Irritates. Delights. Feels slightly unfinished.

We might not quite know why it has our attention—and we may not know whether it matters.

But something has registered.

This is one of the easiest places to lose curiosity—before we even realize it was beginning.

We dismiss the thought. We reach for the phone. Explain the odd detail away. And move on.

Sometimes that's what we should do.

But every once in a while, the small practice of noticing...

Huh. Something caught.

Is worth noticing. To resist the need to explain something immediately.

The comfort of "I already know" is compelling. The impulse to dismiss what doesn't fit is seductive.

Our need to be right can be powerful.

None of those is inherently a problem. Indeed, sometimes we need to decide, narrow, dismiss, or move on.

But when they happen automatically, unconsciously... they can close the door before we even notice curiosity had an opening.

Maybe part of the practice is simply catching that moment.

There are other kinds of blockages that keep curiosity at bay.

Dr. Tony McCaffrey has spent years studying a classic problem in psychology called functional fixedness. The basic idea is wonderfully simple: once we know what something is for, that familiar function can make its other features harder to see.

A candle wick is a wick at its core. Until, for a particular problem, it becomes useful to notice that it is also a piece of string or that melted wax can have multiple purposes. Tony's work on innovation has explored how breaking things into more generic parts can help us notice properties and possibilities that were there all along but were hidden by the way we had already categorized them.

I love this because it suggests that noticing isn't always a matter of looking *harder*.

Sometimes we can be staring directly at something and still not see it. The blockage may be the label we've placed on it.

Tony's research is specifically about problem solving and the way we perceive objects. But I find myself wondering how often some version of this happens in regular life too.

We jump to what we think we know and see all the time.

We know what this thing is for.

We know what this problem is.

We know what that person is like.

We know what this meeting is about.

Perhaps the little practice isn't to throw away what we know but rather to loosen things just enough to ask:

What else is here?

What else might this be?

What might the label hide?

Allowing Curiosity

I've sometimes wondered whether trying to be curious can actually make curiosity harder.

Be curious. Ask better questions.

Stay open. Notice more.

All useful invitations.

But curiosity doesn't always respond particularly well to being ordered around.

Sometimes the harder I try to produce it, the more it begins to feel like another task or one more thing to do “correctly.” This is ironic.

In fact, I think that curiosity depends less on forcing ourselves to become curious and more on becoming available to what already has our attention (or might) if we just gave it a little more room.

That word matters: *available*.

A room can be full.

So can a day.

So can a mind.

Schedules, notifications, responsibilities, unfinished conversations, worry, expertise, expectations, the thing we need to remember at 4 a.m.

Life fills space very efficiently.

But curiosity needs room in which to appear.

That doesn't necessarily mean creating hours of empty time or dramatically rearranging our lives.

Sometimes all that's needed is just a tiny bit of extra space. A walk without filling every second with something to listen to.

A few minutes before reaching for the phone. Sitting with a question without *immediately* searching for an answer. Letting someone finish what they're saying before deciding what we think. Looking at something familiar for just one beat longer.

Net-net, there's a difference between chasing curiosity—and making ourselves available to it.

I was reminded of this one day at a coffee shop. I happened to strike up a conversation with two people, Tom and Jenifer. We didn't know one another. We just started talking.

I asked them what they thought about curiosity.

Tom said something that struck me. He said he's more content than curious.

A feeling of enoughness that doesn't require the next thing to arrive immediately.

This got me wondering whether contentment and curiosity (which can sound almost opposite) may actually get along pretty well.

Curiosity doesn't always require dissatisfaction.

We don't have to dislike what is here in order to wonder about it. We don't have to turn every experience into a hunt for something better. Maybe we can be content and curious at the same time. And maybe there is a kind of curiosity that isn't chasing anything at all.

Not curiosity as pursuit,
but *curiosity as presence*.

Being with what is here right now while remaining interested in what else this moment might hold.

Curiosity isn't another performance requirement. But when something tugs, catches, bothers, delights, or simply refuses to disappear, perhaps we can give it another moment.

Ask: *Huh. What's that?*
...And see what happens.

Noticing Is Data

If something catches our attention, does that mean it is important? Maybe.

A tightening in the chest.

Someone's tone.

A sudden burst of energy around an idea.

If something has registered, it's often worth noticing.

But that doesn't mean we immediately know what the noticing means.

Noticing is data.

It isn't necessarily a conclusion.

If I feel uneasy in a conversation, the uneasiness is real. Something real is happening in me.

But:

"This person can't be trusted."

Well, that's an interpretation.

It might be accurate. Maybe I'm picking up on something important. Or maybe they remind me of someone else I once knew.

Maybe I'm tired.

Maybe I walked into a conversation that's carrying something that began long ago.

The feeling?

Real.

What it means?

Still open.

I've seen this in coaching.

Someone mentions something almost in passing, then moves on. A few minutes later, it comes up again.

Then again.

Sometimes I'll gently point it out:

"You know, this seems to be a repeating pattern."

Often there's a little pause and they realize they hadn't noticed that they hadn't noticed.

I love moments like that. Not because repetition proves anything. Not that I want to "catch" anyone.

But such things are clues.

Something is asking for a little more attention.

This applies with positive things too. An idea keeps returning. A person lights up over a possibility. Something captures their interest.

That's why I've become more interested in the things that catch, tug, repeat, irritate, delight, or linger.

Not as instructions.

Not as truth.

But as data.

What's the deeper question?

Not just:

What am I noticing?

But...

How Am I Noticing?

There is noticing. And then there is noticing that we are noticing.

I can be irritated and notice:

Huh. I'm irritated.

I can be completely absorbed in a conversation and suddenly become aware that I've stopped listening and started preparing my response.

I can walk into a room and feel myself drawn almost immediately toward the person I know—or instinctively avoiding someone I'd rather not engage.

Most of the time, attention simply does what attention does.

It moves. Selects. Narrows. Widens. Gets pulled toward one thing and moves away from something else.

We don't need to supervise or analyze every single second of it.

That would be exhausting.

And more noticing isn't always better.

But we can turn awareness into another form of monitoring basic things:

How am I feeling?

What am I missing?

What am I noticing?

Am I noticing correctly?

Sometimes the most useful thing is not to inspect the experience more closely but to just *be* in it.

Walk.

Listen.

Absorb.

Let the moment happen without standing beside ourselves and taking copious notes. Noticing is useful when it gives us information and just a little more freedom.

It doesn't have to become another job. It can be simple self-inquiries.

Am I scanning for what's wrong?

Looking for evidence that I'm right?

Waiting for someone to disappoint me?

Or perhaps it's simply noticing some beauty today.

Humor.

Possibility.

What's working.

The world may not change very much in any given instant... but our way of attending to it can.

The way I'm noticing can shift before I consciously realize it.

I get impatient.

My body tightens.

My attention narrows.

Everything starts feeling urgent.

Or maybe I'm simply tired or hungry.

None of these signals tell me what the situation means.

But they may tell me something about the *condition of the noticer*.

One might realize...

Huh. I'm narrowing.

I'm scanning.

I'm bracing.

This can be useful information.

We aren't neutral cameras pointed at reality.

We arrive with a body, a history, a mood, expectations, experience, biases, fears, hopes, stories, and whatever happened just before.

All of these can affect both what comes forward and what fades into the background.

We learn from life experiences what and how to notice.

Experience can shape how we see the same situation—what looks like risk to one person may look like opportunity to another.

Something learned years ago can make a particular tone, behavior, possibility, or threat stand out almost immediately.

Other things may remain nearly invisible because nothing in our experience has taught us to look for them.

That doesn't necessarily make our noticing right or wrong. But it does mean that what becomes obvious to us may say something not only about what is there, but about what we have been conditioned to see.

And occasionally becoming aware of how we are noticing things gives us a little more freedom with regard to where attention goes, next.

It might look like this:

Maybe I'm listening mainly for where I disagree.

What happens if I listen instead for what they're actually trying to say?

The goal isn't to become some perfectly objective observer. Again, the invitation is simpler: every once in a while, *notice the noticer.*

That's it.

How am I noticing this?

What does my lens reveal?

What seems to be pulling my attention?

And what might it make easier to miss?

This points toward attention and its *direction.*

The Direction of Attention

Attention.

Where it points influences what enters the foreground, what remains in the background, and what we may miss entirely.

Sometimes attention points outward:

Toward the room.

The conversation.

Another person.

Sometimes it points inward:

Toward a thought.

A feeling.

A little voice within us.

Attention can move between these directions quickly.

Someone says something.

We notice their words.

Then we notice our reaction to the words.

Then we notice what we think they mean.

Attention moves.

This may sound obvious, but I've found it surprisingly useful to ask:

Where is my attention right now and where is it pointed?

Because where attention goes affects what becomes available to us.

If I'm focused almost entirely on what is happening *inside* me, I may miss something important in the person across from me.

If I'm attending only to *everyone else*, I may miss what my own body and emotions are telling me.

If I'm looking for risk... risk becomes easier to find.

If I'm looking only for possibility... I may jump right past something requiring caution.

Neither direction is inherently better.

We need other people.

We need the world inside us.

We need our own experience.

We need the world outside us.

The interesting part is noticing where the beam has gone.

I've had conversations in which I was so busy monitoring myself—

How am I coming across?

Did that make sense?

What should I say next?

—that I become considerably less available to the actual conversation.

And I've had other moments when I was so focused on solving what was happening around me that I barely noticed how tired, tense, or unsettled I've become.

The information was there.

My attention was somewhere else.

Maybe this is one reason curiosity can sometimes feel absent when it isn't. Our attention may simply be occupied. Pointed somewhere else.

That doesn't mean we need to keep swinging it around in some heroic attempt to notice *everything*.

Of course not.

Again, that would be exhausting.

But from time to time, we can check in.

What's happening in me?

What's happening around me?

What else might become visible?

Sometimes the movement is tiny.

From the thought to the body.

From the problem to the person.

From what is missing to what is already here.

That last move has become especially interesting, because sometimes curiosity isn't about discovering something new.

Sometimes it simply helps us finally see something that has been there *all along*.

What's Already There

This particular observation began with Sue.

One day, while we were sitting in our apartment, she started noticing things around us.

The teal cup.

The rug with leaves woven into it.

The little table we rescued from the trash.

The plant that somehow lives in spite of us.

Nothing dramatic happened.

None of those things just appeared.

They had been there all along.

Sue was simply noticing them—and something about that caught my attention... and that was *her* attention.

She noted how coordinated and beautiful that accidental design was.

Pure gratitude without planning.

How much of what surrounds us every day is right there, fully present, but we barely notice it?

Take a look around wherever you are right now. Just for a second.

What do you see?

That little moment with Sue stayed with me because familiarity has an interesting effect on attention.

Sometimes we miss what is there because the label we've given it limits what we can see.

The more accustomed we become to something, the easier it can be for that thing to disappear into the background.

The room.

The little rituals of life.

The friend who always answers.

The person we've lived with for years.

The body that carried us through the day.

Nothing is necessarily wrong with this.

If everything familiar kept presenting itself to us with the intensity of something brand new... we'd probably never get anything done.

But occasionally curiosity can make the familiar visible again. Not by changing it, but by seeing it.

I can look at that little rescued table and suddenly remember where it came from. I can notice the texture of the rug instead of merely walking across it. I can see the plant as a living thing rather than part of the furniture.

Something changes.

Not out there.

In here.

Maybe it's called gratitude.

And often that appreciation can arrive simply by *seeing*.

What is here that I have stopped noticing?

What has been quietly supporting me?

What has become almost too familiar?

What would I miss if it disappeared?

Those questions don't *force* gratitude.

They simply shift the light a teeny bit.

Sometimes appreciation follows.

Curiosity doesn't manufacture appreciation.

It can uncover it.

So curiosity isn't always reaching toward the unknown. Sometimes it brings us back into relationship with what is.

I have Sue to thank for helping me see that more fully.

But there's another part of this: *where* our attention goes.

Of course it can't look everywhere all at the same time.

The Moving Spotlight

Attention is a little like a spotlight.

Wherever the beam lands, something becomes easier to see (and almost everything else becomes a little harder to see).

I was reminded of this while dealing with my foot issue. At one point, I read an article about a condition that causes tingling.

Almost immediately, you got it...

Wait. Is my foot tingling!?

What fascinated me was that I had been paying pretty close attention to the foot for weeks.

No tingling.

Then I read one sentence about tingling, and within seconds I feel it.

(Or thought I did.)

Had the sensation been there all along, buried among thousands of other bits of information? Was I noticing something new?

Or had attention become so focused that I was beginning to amplify or interpret a sensation differently?

Don't know.

A little while later, I became absorbed in something else.

Forgot about the article.

Forgot about the tingling.

No tingling.

Then my attention returned to my foot.

There it was again.

The tingle.

...Maybe.

The spotlight moved and what became easiest to notice seemed to move with it.

This happens with more than bodies.

Someone says something mildly irritating, and suddenly we notice every other irritating thing they do.

We become interested in an idea and begin seeing examples of it everywhere.

We buy a certain kind of car and, somehow, the roads are filled with them. A problem at work gets our attention, and soon the problem seems to be everywhere.

Sometimes we aren't the ones moving the spotlight.

Someone else points, *"Did you notice that?!"*

A friend offers an interpretation.

A headline tells us what deserves our attention.

A doctor mentions a symptom we hadn't been thinking about.

A colleague describes someone as difficult.

Suddenly we begin noticing evidence that seems to support all of the above.

The thing we notice may be completely real.

But it's worth remembering that someone else may have helped aim the beam.

The landscape hasn't necessarily changed. The illumination has.

And the thing in the beam can begin to feel like the most important thing in the landscape.

At times it is, other times—not so.

Something can feel enormous partly because the spotlight is on it.

And something important can remain nearly invisible because the beam hasn't gotten there yet.

Simply notice.

What's in the beam?

What's outside of it?

Not because something better or more important is necessarily waiting. Maybe nothing is.

But quite often moving the spotlight changes what becomes available to notice.

We can notice things in our own perception:

I notice the conflict—and my fear.

I see the problem—and what's working.

I disagree—and still hear what makes sense.

Nothing had to disappear.

The beam simply moved.

And then, of course, our minds begin doing
what minds do.

We interpret what we see.

We decide what matters.

We form conclusions.

That is necessary of course.

We can't wander around forever saying,
"Interesting..."

At some point we have to make sense of things.

But enhanced noticing can give us just a bit more to work with before we move forward.

We're not talking about certainty or perfect objectivity.

Rather, we're talking about additional awareness around what the spotlight may be illuminating—and what it may be leaving in the dark.

Curiosity can move the beam. But even when we're alert to where the beam points... things can be unsteady.

This is when we need to become still.
Enough steadiness to remain with what the
spotlight reveals.

We need some footing.

Finding Footing

I do a little balance exercise while brushing
my teeth. Stand on one foot. Then the other.

One day I noticed that my left side was
considerably steadier than my right.

This surprised me. I'm right-handed, so I
tend to think of my right side as the
dominant one.

Then I remembered something from years
ago when I ballet skied.

I planted, balanced, and spun primarily on my left ski while my right leg lifted, rotated, and helped create the trick.

Huh.

One side wasn't stronger and the other weaker.

They were just doing different jobs.

One provided stability.

The other helped create movement.

They weren't competing.

They were cooperating.

I've been thinking about that.

This chapter has been about what becomes visible when attention shifts.

All of it is useful until what comes into view unsettles us.

An assumption stops holding.
A relationship looks different.
Something in us changes.
Our work no longer fits.

The ground can feel a little less solid than it did before.

This is when curiosity needs something besides openness. It needs footing.

And by footing, I don't mean certainty.

I don't mean having enough information to know what to do... but rather, footing is more like having enough steadiness to remain present with what is... without needing to immediately escape it, explain it, or force it into resolution.

Enough ground beneath us to keep looking.

We usually know something about our footing when we ask:

Can I stay present?

Can I tolerate not knowing?

Can I hear without defending?

Can I choose rather than react?

If I can, I may have enough footing, for now.

If I can't, that is information too.

Maybe I'm exhausted.

Overloaded.

Frightened.

Too close to the situation.

Maybe I need more information, more time, a conversation with someone I trust, or simply some rest before curiosity becomes genuinely available again.

Footing isn't some sort of moral achievement.

Sometimes we have it.
Sometimes we don't.

And footing isn't the same thing as confidence or conviction. Confidence may grow from good footing. Conviction may eventually allow us to move from it.

Good footing isn't the same thing as standing still. It is what allows movement.

A skier makes constant tiny adjustments to remain upright. A hiker keeps responding to the terrain beneath each step.

Stability is not rigidity. It is responsiveness.

Life gives us plenty of practice.

Health changes.

A career changes.

Someone we love dies.

A relationship changes.

A plan we counted on stops being the plan.

When our footing gets disrupted, the understandable impulse is often to get back to solid ground as quickly as possible.

Back to "normal."

Back to what we "knew."

Back to the map we were carrying before things changed.

Sometimes we can.

Sometimes the ground is different now.

And maybe we are too.

The task may not be recovering the old footing. It may be finding enough footing for where we actually are.

Someone we trust.

Something we know.

Something that matters.

Something we can influence.

Then the next step is ours to take.

We don't need the whole trail to feel solid.
Sometimes we just need enough footing to enter the next traverse.

● Chapter-7 Field Observations

Attention selects. What comes forward is only part of what is present.

Salience and significance are not the same. Attention can make what it illuminates feel larger.

Familiarity and labels can make what is already present harder to see.

Seeing more sometimes requires enough footing to remain with what comes into view.

Chapter-7 Questions for the Trail

What is catching my attention?

How am I noticing it?

What might familiarity or a label hide?

What would help me stay with what I discover?

Chapter 8

The Problem as a Doorway

What if the problem isn't the problem?

But rather:

*What if the problem is **not only** the problem?*

This is different.

Sure, sometimes the problem is *really the problem*.

A flat tire.

A missed deadline.

A medical emergency.

Something happened.

It needs attention.

Maybe quickly.

There is nothing particularly enlightened about standing beside a flat tire wondering what the universe is trying to teach us.

Sometimes we need a jack.

But other experiences aren't as cooperative.

A decision refuses to become clear.

A relationship suddenly feels different.

The same conflict keeps showing up at work.

A disappointment won't quite leave us alone.

Something in our life still functions, technically—but somehow no longer fits.

Those experiences may need action too...

but sometimes they ask something of us before they ask for a solution.

That's where I've found the distinction between importance and immediacy useful.

Something can matter enormously without needing to be resolved right away.

In fact, sometimes our urgency to solve something narrows what we're able to see.

We can be prone to...

Identify the problem.

Name the cause.

Choose the fix.

Done.

But... maybe not.

Sometimes the problem isn't just the problem. It's information too.

This has changed the way I think about problems.

I don't need to welcome every one of them.

Some are painful, expensive, frightening, or just plain annoying.

I'm not saying we should call problems "friends".

Yet, I've learned not to make enemies of all of them.

Curiosity can change our relationship with a problem... just enough to see that it may be more than something to eliminate.

Sometimes it can be a signal.

A lever.

A teacher.

A doorway.

Not because a problem itself is somehow good.

But because its arrival may reveal something that was harder to see, before.

It can reveal...

A pattern.

An expectation.

A story we're carrying.

Something in a relationship.

Something in a larger system.

Maybe even something in ourselves.

None of this makes the original problem somehow disappear.

Of course not.

The difficult conversation is still... difficult.

The foot still hurts (it does).

The disappointment still... disappoints.

Curiosity isn't some clever way of somehow pretending otherwise.

But it can let us ask whether the thing that has our attention might also give us access to something else.

Something useful.

That's what I mean by a doorway. A doorway doesn't always tell us what we'll find on the other side. And we don't have to walk through every door we encounter.

But occasionally... instead of moving immediately toward the notion of *How do I make this go away?*

...we might stay with the experience just long enough to ask: *What else might really be here?*

Sometimes that's enough to give us one more place to look.

One More Place to Look

When a problem appears, attention often narrows. This makes sense. If something hurts... yeah!... we look at the hurt.

Something breaks.
We look at the break.

If smoke is coming from the kitchen, it's probably not the ideal time to contemplate the larger "meaning of fire".

But once the immediate response is handled, some problems give us another possibility... and that possibility is what happens, next.

That's the move I'm interested in here.

A problem might have already captured our attention.

Curiosity lets us remain with it for another beat.

An email arrives and the words bother us.
It happens (a lot).

But before typing and replying... notice what else comes with the reaction.

Ask oneself:

What part landed so strongly?

What expectation did it bump into?

Is anything about my reaction surprising me?

The email hasn't changed. I haven't decided that the email is a symptom of a larger system... part of a trajectory... evidence of a hidden problem... or the entrance to some profound discovery.

Maybe it's just an email message.

But for a moment, I can allow the problem to become information as well as an irritation.

The point isn't to make every problem deeper. It's to give reality *one more chance* to show us what belongs here before we decide what we're facing.

What Friction Reveals

Friction receives our attention.
It's understandable.

A straightforward plan suddenly isn't.
Someone pushes back on an idea.
A comment lands strangely.
An email irritates us.
Something rubs.

Usually, we want the rubbing to stop.

Fix the misunderstanding.
Defend the position.
Get agreement.

Make it go away.

Sometimes that's what needs to happen.
But I've become interested in what friction
can reveal before we smooth it over.

A problem may tell us that something isn't
working.

Friction can show us where the contact is.

*What is rubbing against what?
Is it one need against another?
An expectation against reality?
A value against a compromise?*

The friction isn't necessarily pointing toward some big, huge, hidden problem.

Sometimes it's as simple as the friction itself *is the information*.

I'm not saying friction is good.
It isn't, always.

Some conflict *is* unnecessary.
Some relationships *are* unhealthy.
Some situations simply *hurt*.

I don't think difficulty becomes more noble because we become curious about it.

But friction can be *informative*.

Think again about the difficult email.

Perhaps there is nothing especially profound going on.

Maybe the person wrote it poorly.
Maybe I didn't read it quite right.

Perhaps we're both tired and should revisit the whole thing, tomorrow.

But if the message keeps bothering me...
can I become curious about the bother,
itself?

Maybe I need to ask:

Why is this landing so hard?

What did I expect, instead?

What feels threatening here?

What matters enough to stir this reaction?

Curiosity doesn't tell me in advance which of those is true.

It lets the friction become information instead of just being an irritation.

I've noticed this in coaching conversations.

Someone will describe a situation with considerably more energy than the situation requires.

They may be frustrated.

And sometimes I find myself wondering:

Why does this particular thing have so much charge?

Not because the reaction is wrong but because the reaction may be telling us something.

Friction often occurs where expectation meets reality.

One person's need meets another person's (different) need. A value meets a compromise. An old story meets new information.

...Who we thought we were meets something we didn't expect to discover, about ourselves.

Sometimes the friction belongs to the situation. Sometimes some of it belongs to us.

Usually, it's more complicated than an either/or—and that's precisely why friction can be interesting.

We don't have to treat every irritation like an archaeological dig. But when something keeps rubbing, repeating, or carrying more emotional weight than we understand—these questions can be useful:

What's rubbing against what, here?

What seems to be meeting what, here?

What might this friction be trying to tell me?

What does each side seem to need or value?

The answers point toward a boundary and a conversation.

An expectation that needs some revisiting.
Or maybe we discover that we're simply
having a bad day.

Friction doesn't tell us what to *do*. But it can help us see where the contact is occurring.

The Expanding Frame

Curiosity can make another move.

It can change the boundary around what we're calling the "problem".

We all experience it.

An email arrives.

At first, the frame may contain only the email.

These words.

This tone.

My reaction.

Maybe that's enough.

But widen the frame slightly and the email sits inside a relationship.

Widen it again and we notice expectations that were never discussed.

Roles that have changed or a way of working together no longer quite fits.

Nothing about the email has changed.

But the boundary has.

That's what I mean by *expanding the frame*.

It's not just "looking deeper."

It's not just "looking longer."

It's asking:

*What the heck belongs inside the boundaries of **this** problem?*

Friction can show us where something is rubbing. Expanding the frame asks what the rubbing might "belong to."

Sue and I have a way of exploring this in our coaching work.

Someone brings something to the room.

A missed deadline.

A difficult employee.

A frustration that keeps returning.

A conversation that went sideways.

A decision they can't seem to make.

That's where we begin.

But the thing they bring isn't necessarily the "it."

Sometimes the frame around the problem is simply too small.

A missed deadline may also belong to unclear authority.

A difficult employee may sit inside expectations that were never made clear.

Every once in a while, Sue and I find ourselves thinking:

Ah...

There's the *it*.

And...

What's behind the it?

Occasionally we arrive at what we call the behind-the-behind-the.

We're not assuming every problem has some hidden psychological truth buried underneath.

Sure, sometimes a missed deadline is a missed deadline.

Sometimes the email is just an email.

Sometimes the thing really is *the thing*.

But.

Other times the problem isn't hidden underneath what we're seeing.

It's sitting around it.

Right here.

Visible.

We might find that the individual problem may be relational.

The relational problem might also be structural.

What looks like one person's difficulty might belong to the environment surrounding them.

And sometimes, we may simply have the scale wrong. If we're not careful:

One single bad meeting becomes "the culture."

One difficult interaction becomes "the relationship."

That's how the small thing becomes the *whole* thing.

The opposite can happen too.

A structural problem becomes “a difficult employee.”

A relationship pattern gets reduced to one uncomfortable email.

The larger thing gets squeezed into the smaller one.

Sometimes widening the frame isn't about finding something deeper. It may simply be about checking whether the size of our conclusion matches the size of what is *actually happening*.

The original situation doesn't disappear, but we can find ourselves responding to more of what belongs to it—not merely the first frame we put around it.

I'm not talking about endlessly searching for something deeper.

Nor assuming the obvious answer must be *wrong*.

But rather, just noticing when we may have drawn the boundaries around the problem too tightly or too broadly.

That's the point.

Sometimes we widen the frame and arrive right back where we started.

And other times the "thing" isn't the whole thing but rather, just part of the... *it*.

Trailheads

Every hike begins somewhere. Often at a trailhead.

The trailhead isn't the destination. It's the place where the walking begins.

Trailheads are also often turning points in life:

Career changes.

Relationships ending.

Health interrupting "the plan".

Something that disappoints us.

Something... breaks.

Of course we want to fix what can be fixed.

Get back on the trail we thought we were walking.

But... sometimes there is no returning.

Or at least not to exactly where we were.

Sometimes the disruption becomes the trailhead itself.

I can trace the beginning of this Field Guide through a sequence of events.

My mother's passing led Sue and me to move some of her furniture. Moving the furniture contributed to my foot injury. The foot injury slowed me down.

And somewhere inside that slowing down, I began writing this book.

Mom.

Furniture.

Foot.

Field Guide.

I certainly wouldn't have drawn that route on a map.

And I want to be careful here.

My mother's death did not happen so that I could write a book.

The foot injury wasn't secretly a gift from the universe.

Loss is loss.

Pain is pain.

Sometimes something difficult is simply... difficult.

But effects (not just causes) have effects.

What happens next becomes part of what happens after that.

Life keeps moving.

Years from now, I have no idea what this book may influence—or what those influences might influence in turn.

Maybe very little. Maybe something I can't possibly see from here.

That's part of what excites me.

No idea.

A trailhead only tells us where one trail begins but it doesn't promise where the trail will lead.

Sometimes we can look backward and see the path very clearly:

Oh. That led to that. And that somehow led here.

Other times we may never understand the sequence whatsoever.

I don't think curiosity requires us to find "meaning" in every single thing that happens.

But it can leave us a little more available to what might emerge, afterward.

What now?

What's possible now?

What is this (moment) asking of me?

Sometimes the answer will be:

Nothing... just yet.

Sometimes we need to grieve.

Recover.

Repair.

Wait.

Sometimes we simply need to deal with what has... happened.

But occasionally, maybe even much later... we look down from the helicopter, and realize that we have already begun walking somewhere... new.

The thing we thought was only an ending has also become a *beginning*.

Not because an ending isn't real.

But because life... continues.

Maybe that's one of the most hopeful things about a trailhead. It doesn't erase where we've been.

It simply reminds us that, from here, there may still be somewhere else... to go.

● Chapter-8 Field Observations

A problem can be real without being the whole problem.

Friction can reveal where expectations, needs, values, or realities are meeting.

Expanding the frame changes the boundary around what we consider part of the problem.

A disruption does not have to be a gift to become a doorway to something else.

Chapter-8 Questions for the Trail

What else might be here?

What seems to be meeting what?

Have I drawn the frame too tightly?

What might this problem open?

PART IV

WALKING DIFFERENTLY



Chapter 9

The Space Between

Something happens.

We respond.

Most of the time those two things feel almost inseparable.

Someone says something and I begin defending myself.

A plan changes and my mind starts reorganizing the day before I've even finished hearing what changed.

Something delights me and I move toward it.

Life happens.

We respond.

Thank goodness.

If we had to thoughtfully reconsider every single response to everything that happened... heck, we'd never make it through breakfast!

Much of life depends on habits, instincts, experience, and patterns that operate without much conscious involvement from us.

But every once in a while... something else becomes... *possible*.

Will you lean into that word with me?

Possible.

So often we become aware of ourselves responding. But what if we lean into the pause. Maybe only for a second.

Sometimes considerably longer. I've become fascinated by this.

Chapter 7 was largely about *noticing*—what registers... what gets our attention. How the spotlight moves.

This chapter, however, is a slightly different move.

Not simply:

Something registered.

But:

*I can see what is happening **in me** as "it" happens.*

The irritation can be there.

There can be defensiveness.

An urge to answer quickly.

Nothing disappears.

But now...

I am truly aware of it.

Sometimes I catch that awareness in the moment.

Sometimes much later.

Ah. There it was.

Either way, awareness (and time) can create a little space around the reaction.

Not enough to make everything perfectly objective. Not enough to erase habit, fear, history, personality, biology, or whatever happens in our lives.

But *just enough* to help oneself wonder:

What just happened in me?
What am I about to do?
*Is that what I actually **want** to do?*

It doesn't mean that first impulse is wrong.

Not necessarily.
Sometimes it is *exactly* right.

If I touch a hot stove... Yeah, I hope I don't
pause for a reflective curiosity practice
regarding hot-stove-ism prior to moving my
hand.

Sometimes experience has already given us
what we need.

We know what matters.
We know the boundary.
We know what action is required.

But plenty of life is less obvious.

I can feel myself becoming defensive in a conversation and I can sense an old habit preparing to respond like I often do.

I can see an assumption arriving so quickly that I almost mistake it for "fact".

This is when awareness can matter.

Once I see something happening in me, I can become more choice-able in what happens... next.

Choice-able-ness doesn't mean unlimited freedom.

Quite often options are few.

Many choices are hard.

Sometimes circumstances choose... for us.

But.

Even then, there may be something available
in how we meet *what is here*.

A pause.

A question.

A response.

A boundary.

A next step.

A decision not to decide, yet.

Maybe it's simply noticing:

I'm doing that thing again.

Awareness doesn't guarantee a choice. But
without awareness... many choices never
become visible.

Ever.

This is where some of the earlier work in this Field Guide begins turning into action.

“Noticing” helps something... register.

Awareness allows us to recognize participation in what is happening—and sometimes that creates just enough space for responses to become a little less automatic.

Maybe that's where choice begins. In the space before the choice.

The gap can disappear (or get filled) pretty quickly.

We fill it with explanations...

With activity.

With certainty.

With the answer we usually give.

Sometimes we fill it simply because an unfinished space is *uncomfortable*... when what it may need is to **stay open** for just one more beat.

Just long enough to notice what we're carrying into it. Enough for something else to become visible.

Enough to discover that the first answer may not be the only one.

When Holding On Gets in the Way

Years ago, my friend Steve Rucinski shared a leadership lesson about juggling that has stayed with me ever since.

He noticed something fascinating while teaching baseball players to juggle. Many of them struggled.

Not because they lacked coordination but because they have spent years becoming exceptionally good at catching and *holding onto* baseballs.

In baseball, *holding on* is part of what's required. You grip the ball, control it, protect it, and release it only when the moment is right.

Juggling asks something different. You can't keep the balls moving by holding on to them.

Every catch depends upon a rapid release.

The rhythm isn't:

Catch.

Catch.

Catch.

It's: Catch. Release. Catch. Release.



That image has stayed with me because we carry (and hold on to) considerably more than physical things.

We carry plans.

Expectations.

Explanations.

Commitments.

Old conversations.

We have ideas about how things should turn out.

Sometimes we're holding on so hard that other things can't arrive.

Sometimes another question is one more thing to juggle, yes.

But maybe the most useful move is to release.

Let go.

Not abandoning everything. Just put something down long enough to see what changes.

Let go of the explanation, the expectation and the need to know where things are going.

Occasionally, a question we've been squeezing so tightly no longer has much room to surprise us.

Sounds easy, but it's not.

Holding on gives us continuity and helps us feel oriented.

Especially if we've already invested time, emotion, identity, money, or hope in something. Putting it down can feel like giving up.

Sometimes it might be—and persistence might be what the moment needs.

But persistence and gripping aren't quite the same thing.

One keeps us engaged. The other can make it difficult to notice that the terrain has changed.

This happens all the time in coaching conversations. Sometimes the same question has been carried for so long that it begins to feel heavy.

Analyzed.

Explained.

Revisited.

Trying to get to the bottom of it.

Sometimes another round of thinking doesn't help, and it's time to put the question down and let it go.

Not because it doesn't matter anymore or because we're giving up.

It's just that holding something continuously changes our relationship with it.

For a moment, just stop trying to solve it.

Talk about something else.

Take a walk.

Sleep on it.

Let the mind go elsewhere.

Occasionally, when we return, the situation feels different. Maybe nothing new appears. Maybe what changes is our grip.

That's the part of release that's interesting.

Curiosity isn't always another question—sometimes it's providing enough space around the question for it to become alive again.

We do this *holding on* in our stories about ourselves too.

I can't do that.

I'm this kind of person.

I should be farther along.

It has to happen this way.

Maybe some of those stories contain plenty of truth. But what happens if we loosen our grip just for a moment?

Not erase them—but what becomes visible when our hands aren't *quite* as full?

Sometimes the second look comes from looking harder. Sometimes it comes from putting something down.

This can be uncomfortable at times—but it's valuable.

Before We Know

There is an awkward little territory between what we thought we knew and what we come to understand next.

Sometimes that transition lasts only a second. Other times it stretches across a conversation, a decision, a week, or maybe a whole season of life.

Either way, an old understanding has begun to loosen, but what comes next isn't fully formed yet.

We know something's changed. We may know the old explanation no longer quite works. We might even know what we don't want.

But we don't yet know what comes *next*.

"I don't know yet."

Four words that can feel remarkably peaceful in one moment and almost intolerable in another.

Sometimes "not yet" feels open—and other times it feels like standing in fog.

We want the answer.

The plan.

The decision.

The diagnosis.

The thing we can put our hands around and say:

Okay. This is what we're doing.

I understand that impulse.
Uncertainty can be tiring.
It can also be frightening.

When we don't know what comes next, the
mind has an understandable urge to fill the
space.

An explanation.
A decision.
A forecast.

Anything that gives us something solid to
hold.

I've done that plenty myself.

But a tiny space can let the old
understanding loosen a bit.

The next understanding isn't here yet—and perhaps we don't have to rush to manufacture it.

Sometimes curiosity helps by opening not just space for a new understanding but another possibility too. And maybe we don't have to search too far ahead.

But then, after we let the breathing room happen, it's time to come back to.

Now.

And ask:

What do I know?

What don't I know?

What is happening in this moment?

Right now.

A widely used grounding exercise called 5-4-3-2-1 can help bring attention back to the present—the now moment.

The versions vary slightly, but one goes like this:



Nothing magical happens.

The future is still unresolved when you're finished.

But the practice simply gives attention somewhere real to land.

The chair beneath you.

The sound in the room.

Your feet on the floor.

This breath.

Right here.

I like it because uncertainty has a way of pulling us away from the present.

We begin trying to live tomorrow before tomorrow arrives.

And sometimes the most honest thing we can say or do is:

I just don't know what will happen next.

But I do know what is here, right now.

It may not be enough to make a decision.
It doesn't have to be.

Sometimes we are simply gathering information and waiting for something to become a little clearer.

Allowing an emotion to settle.

Listening for what keeps returning.

Giving reality another chance to show up.

There can be wisdom (and comfort) in that.

There also can be some avoidance.

I think that's worth saying.

"I don't know yet" can become a very elegant way of never deciding anything and curiosity can keep a door open long after the moment has begun asking us to walk through it.

So the question isn't whether remaining in the space is better.

It isn't always.

The question may simply be:

Does this need more time... or am I using more time because choosing has become uncomfortable?

I don't always know the answer to that either.

But even noticing the question helps.

Sometimes clarity arrives and sometimes it doesn't.

At times we simply reach a point where we know enough... for now.

And sometimes there are things we don't need to resolve at all.

They remain unfinished. Unexplained.

Maybe even wonderful.

Letting the Wonder Remain

Not everything unfinished is a problem. I have to remind myself of that.

Sure, some things really do need resolution. A decision has to be made. A conversation needs to happen. A repair can't wait.

But other things may not be asking us for resolution at all.

Not long ago, I attended a celebration of life.

The person we were remembering had a puppy, and somewhere during the gathering I found myself wondering about the little puppy.

Did it know something had changed?

Did it miss its human?

Do puppies grieve?

I became curious about the puppy's curiosity too.

What was it noticing?

What did it understand?

What didn't it understand?

And then I noticed another impulse.

I could look it up.
Of course I could.

I could Google how canines experience grief. I could ask AI. I could probably find research, explanations, expert opinions, and more information than I knew how to use.

But I didn't.

Not because the answers wouldn't be interesting.

I just didn't need to turn the wondering into an answer.

Something about the wondering itself felt worth leaving alone.

I could simply wonder:

Does that puppy miss him?

That's it.

That stayed with me.

Adults can be remarkably efficient at converting wonder into explanation.

What is that?

Why is that happening?

What does it mean?

What should I do about it?

Useful questions.

But sometimes the answer arrives so quickly that the wondering barely gets a chance to be experienced.

Sometimes just let it be.

And that might be enough.

I listened to a *No Stupid Questions* episode not too long ago. The topic was "Do You Need Closure?"

It shared research suggesting that uncertainty can sometimes make positive feelings linger longer.

Secret admirer in grade school? The wonder makes it more exciting. Find out who it is, the thrill goes away.

Similarly when we turn the focus inward, we may notice something about ourselves that doesn't yet fit anywhere. We may ponder. We may wonder.

Maybe it becomes important later. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe another piece eventually joins it. Maybe the whole thing simply remains a small mystery.

Net-net, I'm beginning to appreciate that not *everything* needs to become known or useful immediately.

Wonder can have intrinsic value whether or not we ever discover what it's for.

Perhaps that's part of what makes wonder, wonder. It keeps something alive without demanding we finish it.

That doesn't mean postponing everything indefinitely. There are moments when uncertainty stops being spacious and starts becoming avoidance.

We've already talked about that possibility. But there are also moments when forcing an answer shrinks something that didn't need shrinking.

At least not yet.

Maybe that's one of the more meaningful forms of curiosity:

Allowing something to remain unresolved without treating unresolved as unfinished business.

Just wonder.

And letting the wonder remain.

But Then We Move

At some point, however, the space closes. Not necessarily because everything has become clear.

Sometimes it's simply time.

The conversation needs to happen.

The application needs to be sent.

The boundary needs to be set.

The trail forks and standing there forever becomes its own kind of choice.

This matters to me because curiosity can easily be mistaken for hesitation.

Keep exploring.

Ask another question.

Consider one more possibility.

Maybe.

Eventually, another mode of being begins to matter.

We choose.

We commit.

We move.

We act.

Not because uncertainty has disappeared,
but because we know it's enough, for now.

I think that phrase has become increasingly important to me. *Enough for now.*

It is different from certainty. Certainty wants the decision to be correct.

Permanent.

Settled.

Enough for now is more modest.

This is what matters to me.

This is what I can see from here.

This is what I understand right now.

So this is the step I am willing to take.

The step may turn out to be right.

It may turn out to need adjusting.

The trail may look different around the bend.

New information may arrive.

We may discover that what made perfect sense from one place looks different from another.

That doesn't mean the earlier choice was foolish. It just means we made it from where we were.

I've made decisions in my life that I would make differently today.

Of course.

I know things now that I didn't know then.

I'm different now too.

Sometimes looking back can tempt us to judge an earlier version of ourselves with information that version never had.

Maybe a fairer question is:

Given what I could see then, what was I trying to do?

That doesn't excuse every decision. Some choices really aren't the greatest. Some require repair. Some have consequences we have to own.

But movement always involves some degree of incomplete information.

Even deciding to wait is made without knowing exactly what waiting will produce.

There is no position completely outside uncertainty. So perhaps the aim isn't to eliminate uncertainty before moving, but rather to become more skillful at moving through and *with* it.

Look.
Notice.
Widen.
Question.

Wait when waiting serves.

And then, when the moment asks for it,
choose.

I like hiking for this reason.

You can stand at a trail junction studying the
map for quite a while.

Eventually, though, the map can't walk for
you.

You pick a trail.
You take a step.
You move, onward.

And as you move, the landscape begins giving you information that standing still could not. That's important.

Action doesn't only follow understanding. Sometimes action *creates* understanding.

We learn by moving.

We discover what fits by trying it.

We discover what doesn't.

We adjust.

Turn around.

Continue.

Maybe even laugh at how convinced we were that the other trail was obviously the right one.

Onward doesn't require perfect clarity. It requires enough clarity for the next step. And perhaps enough humility to remain responsive after we take it.

Because the goal was never to become permanently open or permanently certain. It was to have a little more freedom in how we meet what comes.

To recognize the space. Use it when it helps.

And then, when the moment arrives:

Move.

Becoming Choice-able

I've been using the phrase choice-able and I'm not just talking about someone who makes choices.

I'm talking about someone who becomes a little more able to recognize where choice is actually available.

That's different.

A surprising amount of choosing can happen without feeling much like choice at all.

Fear chooses.

Habit chooses.

Momentum chooses.

An expectation we've carried for years chooses. Sometimes circumstances narrow the field so much that very little appears available to choose.

There's some decision science behind this too. Herbert Simon used the term bounded rationality to describe something deeply human about choosing: we rarely have complete information, unlimited time, or the capacity to consider every possible option and consequence.

We make decisions from what we can see, with what we know, under the conditions we're actually in.

And behavioral economics adds another wrinkle. Defaults, inertia, and loss aversion can make continuing on the current path feel easier than changing it.

Even “no decision” can shape what happens next.

Choice-able doesn't mean escaping any of that. It doesn't mean *I can do anything*. Often we can't.

We may not be able to choose...

What happened.

What another person does.

The timing. The weather. The diagnosis.

The obligations already before us.

But within all of that, something may still be ours:

Whether I ask.

Whether I wait.

Whether I stop.

What I say next.

Whether I keep going.

Whether I stay or leave.

Whether I set the boundary.

Choosing has another quality we don't always discuss.

It closes something. At least for now.

Saying yes means not saying no. Taking one trail means not taking another one, at least in that moment. Even waiting means choosing not to move yet.

That's part of what can make choice uncomfortable. We would sometimes prefer to keep every possibility alive.

But eventually choice asks us to participate. The space between doesn't remove the uncertainty or the cost... it just gives us a chance to see a little more clearly what is ours to choose—before momentum chooses for us.

Becoming choice-able looks something like this:

Notice the moment.

Recognize what is mine and what isn't.

Remember what matters.

Choose enough for now.

Then move.

Then pay attention to what happens.

That last part matters.

Choice isn't the end of curiosity. Action gives us information that standing still cannot.

We try.

Reality responds.

We learn something.

Maybe we continue.

Maybe we adjust.

It's a little like the PDSA/PDCA cycles associated with Dr. W. Edwards Deming—Plan, Do, Study, Act; or the more familiar Plan, Do, Check, Act.

Maybe we discover that the choice needs revisiting. That's not failure. It's participation.

I think that's what choice-able has increasingly come to mean for me.

Not control.

But participation.

Choose.

Then take the next step.

See what the trail reveals.

● Chapter-9 Field Observations

Awareness can create a little space
between reaction and response.

Sometimes curiosity adds. Sometimes it
releases.

Not everything unresolved needs to
become an answer.

Being choice-able means recognizing
where choice is available and choosing
enough for now.

 Chapter-9 Questions for the Trail

Where is there space before I respond?

What might I need to put down?

Does this need an answer at all?

What is mine to choose now?

Chapter 10

Other Hikers on the Trail

As we round the next bend, something becomes increasingly obvious.

We don't walk alone.

This is probably a good thing.

Some of what has mattered most in my life has happened because someone else was on the trail with me.

Someone noticed something I missed.
Asked a question I wouldn't have asked.
Saw possibility where I saw a wall.
Walked beside me for a while.
Listened.

Sometimes they changed where I was going.
Sometimes they changed *me*.

These can be people we love. People with
whom we work. Others who are practically
strangers.

Other humans bring histories we didn't live.
Experiences we don't have.
Ways of seeing things that aren't ours.
Inner worlds we can never completely enter.

That makes relationships wonderfully
generative.

It also makes them complicated.

Understanding ourselves is difficult enough!

Then another person arrives with an entire
reality of their own. The nerve!

And unlike a problem, a plan, or an idea,
people don't stay still while we're trying to
understand them.

They learn.
Change their minds.
Surprise us.
Reveal.
React.

So do we.

Which means relational curiosity asks
something different of us.

Not simply:
What am I seeing?

But: *Who might they be becoming and what
might be true for them? What's happening in
me? What's happening between us?*

Other people aren't merely part of the landscape.

They're hikers too, and we're all on the move.

The Story Is Not the Person

One of the most useful distinctions I've found in relationships is a very simple one:

The story is not the person.

By story, I don't necessarily mean something invented or untrue.

I mean the meaning we gradually assemble from what we've seen or experienced.

What happened.

What we remember.

What we came to expect.

Over time, those pieces begin to cohere.

He's difficult.

She's dependable.

He needs to be in control.

She always comes through.

They don't handle conflict well.

The story may contain plenty of truth. It may have been built from years of real experience.

That's what makes it useful.

And convincing.

We need stories.

They help us organize what we've learned about another person without having to rediscover them from scratch every time we meet.

But somewhere along the way, a subtle shift can happen.

This is something I've learned about this person...

can become:

*This is who this person **is**.*

The story begins to look remarkably like the person... just like a map can begin to look like the territory.

Sue and I have been together for more than forty years. I know her pretty darn well.

And she can still surprise me.

That's not evidence that I somehow failed to understand her.

It's evidence that she is still a living human being.

And so am I.

People are larger than the stories we carry about them.

They're more complicated.

Responsive to circumstances.

Contradictory.

And, occasionally, more surprising than our explanations allow us to see.

Sue and I have been reminded of this while rewatching early seasons of Ted Lasso.

Nate begins as an overlooked, accommodating kit man who wants very much to be seen and respected.

As his circumstances change, different parts of him become visible. Some considerably less likable than what appeared early on.

Rebecca, the team owner, moves in almost the opposite direction. Hurt and revenge shape much of what we initially see and as circumstances change and connection grows, other parts of her become increasingly visible.

Neither character suddenly becomes an entirely different human being.

Different conditions reveal different expressions of who they are.

I find that fascinating.

Because this happens with real people too.

We meet someone in one job.

One relationship.

One season of life.

One set of circumstances.

And somewhere along the way, what we've seen becomes who we think they are.

Selfish.

Fragile.

Difficult.

Reliable.

Not ready.

Generous.

Confident.

Always like that.

Never going to change.

Maybe the label contains something real.

But a human being is not a label with shoes on. And they're not in that one moment forever.

People evolve. Circumstances change.
Something heals. Something hurts.
Confidence grows. Fears enter.

A new role asks something different of them.

Of us.

The person standing in front of us today is connected to the person we knew five years ago—but they're not exactly the same person.

Neither are we.

Virtual relationships make this even more interesting.

Over the last several years, many of us have come to know people remarkably well without spending much, if any, physical time with them.

We see a face on a screen.

We hear stories.

We know about their work, family, ideas, and struggles.

And our minds naturally begin constructing the rest of the world around them.

I sometimes think of it as a *room within a room*.

There is the little rectangle I can actually see.

And then there is the entire life I imagine continuing beyond its edges.

Their kitchen.
Their commute.
Their golf game.
Their friendships.
Their orderly desk.



The person they are when nobody is
interviewing them, coaching them, meeting
with them, or looking at them through a
laptop camera.

Much of that imagined world may be reasonably accurate. Some of it almost certainly isn't.

That's not a flaw. It's what minds do when information is incomplete.

The relational question is whether we remember that we've filled in some of the blanks.

Because once I become certain about who someone else is, something subtle can happen.

I stop asking.

I stop looking.

The story begins protecting itself.

I stop noticing what doesn't quite fit.

And loops are hard to un-loop.

Sometimes the loop is painfully ordinary.

I expect you to be defensive, so I arrive a little guarded.

You feel my guardedness and become a little guarded too.

I experience your response as evidence that I was right about you.

And around we go.

Now the story isn't simply shaping what I see. It is beginning to shape what happens *between us*.

Curiosity offers another possibility.

Not endless fascination with every detail of another person's life. That could get weird pretty quickly.

More so:

What may have changed?

What might I not know yet?

What might be true for them (today)?

Can I let them be larger than my story?

Sometimes my original story will turn out to be accurate. Sometimes a boundary still needs to be a boundary. Sometimes the person really did do the thing I thought they did.

Curiosity doesn't require naiveté.

It simply helps me remember the difference between what I've learned about a person and the person themselves.

The story is information.

The person is a person.

And perhaps one of the more generous things we can offer another human is enough room to remain unfinished in our understanding of them.

Curiosity with Love

Curiosity can sound inherently generous.

Often it is.

But not always.

I can be curious about you because I care about you.

I can also be curious because I want information or reassurance.

Or because I want to understand something before you're ready to explain it.

Or because not knowing makes me uncomfortable.

Those aren't quite the same things.

I've come to think *relational curiosity* needs something more alongside it.

Love.

Not necessarily romantic love.

More so the kind that remembers there is another human being on the other side of the question.

A person with boundaries.

Privacy.

Timing.

History.

Someone free not to explain everything.

That changes the question from

What can I find out?

to something more like:

*What would it mean to be curious in a way
that still honors you?*

Sometimes that means asking, other times it means listening.

Sometimes it means leaving a little more room than we would like.

And sometimes it means not asking anything at all.

The last one matters. Not everything we can become curious about is ours to know.

A question can be perfectly reasonable and still arrive at the wrong time.

Time and place.

Someone can love us and still not want to talk. Someone can trust us and still need privacy.

Curiosity should not erase another person's boundaries. In fact, perhaps one of the more loving forms of curiosity is remaining interested without becoming entitled.

I can wonder about what might be true for you without insisting that you tell me.

I can remain open to your experience without requiring access to all of it.

I can let your "not today" be information too.

That doesn't shut curiosity down. It just changes its posture.

Maybe mature curiosity includes knowing not only what to ask, but when not to ask it.

Less extraction.

More relationship.

Less:

Tell me so I can understand you.

And more:

I'm here if and when there is something you want me to understand.

Maybe that's curiosity with love. Not simply wanting to know more about another person but wanting to know them in a way that still allows them to remain fully their own.

Listening for Understanding

Colin Smith, who goes by “The Listener,” has helped me appreciate something about listening that I hadn't thought much about before.



ARRIVAL

— BE THERE. FOR THEM. —

*Five practices to help you arrive with presence,
so others feel seen, heard, and valued.*





1 STEP IN WITHOUT AGENDA
*Leave your rush at the door.
Take a breath. Let them set the pace.*



2 LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND
*Tune in with your full attention.
Seek to understand, not to respond.*



3 SHOW YOU'RE WITH THEM
*Reflect what matters to them.
Use your words, your face, your presence.*



4 HONOR THEIR WAYFORWARD
*They know their road best.
Ask what support would be most helpful.*



5 STAY WITH WHAT IS REAL
*Sit with the hard. Celebrate the good.
Your steady presence makes space for both.*



CURIOUS PRACTICE: When you're with someone,
pause and ask yourself:
"How can I be here for them, right now?"

Listening begins way before the first word is spoken.

It begins with arrival.

Not simply getting into the room, joining the Zoom, or sitting down across from someone.

It's about:

How did I arrive?

Where is my attention?

What am I carrying with me?

Have I already decided what this conversation is about—or what this person is going to say?

That matters because we rarely enter a conversation empty-handed.

We bring what happened five minutes earlier.

The email we're still thinking about. The response we're preparing. The argument we've rehearsed. The position we're ready to defend even though nobody has challenged it yet.

Sometimes we physically arrive long before our attention does.

I've done it plenty.

Some of the most important listening may happen before the other person says anything at all. Maybe there's a kind of pre-listening here.

A moment to notice how I'm entering the encounter before I begin trying to understand someone else.

Not another elaborate preparation ritual.
Maybe just enough to arrive a little more
“cleanly.”

To put down what doesn't need to come into
the room with me. To notice the story I've
already started telling. To become available
to the person who is actually here rather than
the one I've been anticipating.

Colin's reminder is wonderfully simple:

Be here. Meet the person where they actually
are. Not where I assume they are. Not where I
want them to be... but where they are.

Maybe that's the first act of relational curiosity.

And maybe it's why presence comes before technique or the clever question. Before reflecting back what we heard or trying to understand what someone means.

There is simply another human being in front of us. And the question, whether we ask it consciously or not, is something akin to this:

Am I actually here with you?

Because if I'm not, even excellent listening techniques can become strangely mechanical.

But when I arrive with enough attention to really be there, something changes. The other person no longer has to compete quite so hard for my presence.

And listening has somewhere to begin.

I've learned something in coaching that I didn't understand nearly as well when I started.

The loudest part of the conversation isn't always the most important part. Someone may give me five minutes of polished explanation about what's happening at work.

And then, almost under their breath:

"This is stupid."

Or:

"I don't know why this bothers me so much."

Maybe there's a tiny pause. A look away. A change in the face that lasts only a second.

I've learned to become curious about *those* moments. Not because every hesitation hides some profound truth.

And certainly not because I know what another person is feeling better than they do.

But sometimes the quieter signal tells us there may be more going on than the larger narrative is revealing.

I've found this useful not only in coaching, but when I'm helping leaders coach other people at work.

The little pause, the muttered phrase, the change in expression. It isn't necessarily telling us what the answer is but it tells us:

There's something here.

Maybe we stay there for another moment.

What is **really** going on here?

Not as interrogation but as an invitation to understand.

Our first judgment might be:

They're angry.

They're resistant.

They're checked out.

Empathy gives us another possibility:

Maybe there is more going on here than I can see.

That doesn't require inventing a kinder story and pretending it's true. It may simply mean holding the first story loosely enough to notice the other.

Perhaps they're tired.

Afraid.

Embarrassed.

Protecting something.

Maybe they're trying very hard not to say what they aren't ready to say.

We don't know.

And that's partly the point.

Sometimes kindness begins not with knowing another person's story, but with remembering that they have one.

And once we arrive, listening becomes something larger than simply talking less.

Many people think of listening as a function of being quiet. That can be part of it.

But listening isn't merely the absence of talking.

It's being in service of understanding.

Sometimes that means asking a question, other times it's reflecting what we've heard.

Sometimes it's offering an observation, sharing an idea, or gently challenging something.

Other times it's about saying almost nothing at all.

And sometimes, oddly enough, listening well may mean *talking more*.

Not because we need the floor but because that may be what the *other person needs* from us in that moment.

They may need help finding words for something. They may need us to reflect back a pattern they can't quite see. They may need a question, a story, an observation, or even a little more of our thinking before they can find their own.

The measure isn't how little we speak. It's whether what we're doing is in service of understanding.

That's a different kind of self-check.

Am I talking because I need to say something or because this seems useful to what is happening between us?

Years ago, Jim Smith taught me something about listening that has stayed with me.

Listen not only for what someone is saying but also for what they are feeling.

That changed something for me, because words don't always arrive carrying the whole experience.

Someone tells us what happened. But beneath the words there may be disappointment.

Fear.

Pride.

Relief.

Hope.

Something they haven't quite found language for yet.

Sometimes it's about just staying there for one more beat and not immediately offering advice or searching for the clever next question.

Just remaining interested. A little longer.

And if we ask something... remember that there's a difference between asking to get—and asking to give.

Sometimes we want something from the answer, definitely.

Information.

Agreement.

Reassurance.

Nothing inherently wrong with any of those.

But a question can also be offered in service of the other person. A chance to hear themselves say something out loud. An invitation to find words for something they haven't quite found yet.

In that sense, asking can become a form of giving.

What matters, though, is the posture behind the question. Inquiry and interrogation may look remarkably similar from the outside.

The difference often lives in what we're doing with the answer.

People can usually feel the difference.

Which brings us back to attention.

One of the stranger things I learned while experimenting with AI-enabled glasses had very little to do with the technology itself.

I wore them hiking, practicing French, identifying wildflowers, the kinds of things that made the technology interesting to me.

Then I started wondering what the glasses were like for everyone else.

Am I being recorded?

Is he taking a photograph?

Is he listening to something?

Talking to someone who wasn't there?

Even when I wasn't doing any of those things, another person wouldn't necessarily know that.

My attention, and even the appearance of my attention, had become part of *their* experience.

This stopped me.

The glasses weren't really the point.

Rather, it's realizing that *our* attention always has a social footprint and impact on others (and their attention).

Look at your phone repeatedly while someone is speaking and they notice.

Scan the room.

They notice.

Lean in and become completely present.

They notice that too.

Attention is not entirely private.

Where we place it can shape what it feels like to be with us. That's a surprisingly big idea hidden inside a very ordinary thing.

Someone can feel heard before we solve anything. Before we offer advice. Before we demonstrate expertise.

Sometimes simply through the unmistakable experience that, for this moment, we are actually here.

Listening.

And genuinely interested.

Like the old networking tip, *Don't be interesting—be interested.*

Presence not for extracting information from another person or proving how well we listen by how little we say.

Rather, meeting them closely enough, and responding in whatever way serves the moment, so that something more true has a chance to become visible.

Curiosity Between Us

Not long ago, I told Sue that I was strangely self-conscious about her reading this book.

She looked at me and said something like:

"I should be the last person you'd worry about."

And she's probably right.

We've known and loved each other for forty years. There are very few people with whom I feel safer.

But that was exactly what made my reaction interesting.

Perhaps I wasn't self-conscious in spite of how much I trust her but self-conscious because her opinion matters so much to me.

Huh.

It made me wonder about the other side of relational curiosity.

It's one thing for me to become curious *about you*. It's another for me to let you become curious *about me*.

To let you see something unfinished in me.
To hear what you notice. To allow your perspective to become information about something I may not be able to see from where I'm standing.

That requires a different kind of openness. Feedback is a good example. We can ask: "What do you think?"

Genuinely wanting the answer is another matter. Especially when the person matters.

But:

Can we hold it without deciding?

Can we hear what we didn't expect?

Can we resist explaining or defending?

That is relational curiosity too.

Not only: *Tell me more about you.*

But: *I'm willing to let what you see teach me something about me.*

Of course, that kind of openness depends on trust.

Curiosity between people is different when we believe our uncertainty, unfinished thinking, or honesty will be handled with care.

If we expect to be judged, corrected, dismissed, or used against us, something in us naturally becomes guarded.

We will reveal less, listen differently, and may start protecting our position before we've really heard the other person's position.

The armor goes up. Curiosity has less room to move around.

Trust doesn't automatically make us curious. But maybe it reduces some of the static.

When the signal between us carries enough respect, honesty, and safety, we don't have to spend so much energy protecting ourselves from one another.

More of us becomes available to the conversation.

Trust doesn't mean unlimited access. In fact, sometimes trust is what makes a clear boundary possible.

An example:

A friend and I had plans to meet not too long ago. There was a little pause on his part.

He said:

"You know, Craig—maybe not today. I'm not in the emotional space."

That was it.

No brilliant follow-up question required.

He had given me the information I needed:

Not today.

So we rescheduled.

I've come to appreciate that as a form of trust. He could tell me where he was, and I could believe him.

Sometimes curiosity between people opens a conversation. Sometimes it knows when not to pry one open.

Both can create understanding.

Then there is another way curiosity moves between us that I hadn't thought much about until a conversation with Amy Gallie.

Amy told Sue and me that statistics, by themselves, don't particularly capture her attention.

Put a bunch of numbers on a screen and... meh.

What does capture her?

A person who *is* fascinated by them. Someone whose face changes as they explain what the numbers reveal. Someone who clearly cannot believe how interesting this stuff is.

Amy doesn't simply become interested in the information. She becomes interested in the other person's interest.

I love that.

Sometimes the doorway into a subject isn't the subject itself, but rather the person who loves it.

Maybe you've experienced this. Someone starts talking about birds.

Economics.

Gardening.

Architecture.

Something you've lived a perfectly satisfying life without ever knowing.

But then their eyes light up. They tell you something you didn't know.

You ask a question. Then another.

Ten minutes later you're thinking:

Birds do THAT?!

Their fascination awakens some of your own.

In this sense I think curiosity can be contagious.

Like laughter.

Or courage.

Or hope.

And it's beautiful that it doesn't have to travel only one way.

Your curiosity can wake up mine. Mine can give yours somewhere else to go.

You notice something I missed. That changes what I notice. I ask a question that gives you another thought. You hand it back differently.

Curiosity begins feeding curiosity.

This can be wonderfully generative, especially when enough trust exists for neither person to need ownership of where the conversation goes.

This said, even a good curiosity loop doesn't have to continue forever.

Eventually we may notice that we've found something worth making, deciding, or doing.

Curiosity has done part of its work and now the conversation can change modes.

Sometimes what begins as shared wondering becomes shared creating.

At some point perhaps it becomes a decision.

Part of relational curiosity is being able to feel the movement together—knowing when to keep opening—and when something is ready to go somewhere specific.

This has me thinking about the environments we place ourselves in as well.

Some people, places, and conversations leave us tighter, more guarded—or simply tired. Others are more additive, expansive and freeing.

So it's worth asking oneself:

Where do I think more freely?

Who leaves me with more questions?

Where does conversation open things up?

Certain environments seem to do that:

A table where people are genuinely interested in one another.

A conversation where nobody has to prove they're the smartest person in the room.

Someone who brings an idea I wouldn't have encountered on my own.

People who can disagree without making the disagreement the whole relationship.

Places where curiosity, humor, knowledge, experience, and unfinished thinking are allowed to mix.

I don't mean that every interaction needs to be intellectually stimulating. Sometimes what we need most is quiet, or familiarity.

Or we need to be with someone with whom absolutely nothing interesting needs to happen.

There is value in noticing the environments that expand us.

What wakes something up?

What gives something back?

What makes me more available to possibility?

Maybe part of relational curiosity is not only how we show up with other people but also noticing where curiosity seems to come alive and thrive between us.

Think about when there are several people in such an environment.

Questions multiply. Ideas connect. Someone says, *"That makes me wonder..."* and someone else says, *"Wait, what if..."*

A half-formed thought becomes safe enough to say out loud.

People play a little more and defend a little less.

Your observation changes what I see. Mine gives you something else to notice.

And eventually no one quite knows whose idea it was in the first place.

Perfect.

I've experienced this in coaching conversations, friendships, conversations with Sue, and certainly in writing this book.

One person's question changes another person's question. Someone notices something I couldn't see.

I offer something unfinished.

They add something.

I see differently.

The curiosity isn't simply moving back and forth. It's about something being created *between us*. That's the part that's especially powerful.

Curiosity between us isn't agreement. It doesn't erase boundaries. It doesn't mean everyone remains endlessly open to everything.

Sometimes the answer needs to be:

No. I disagree. Not now. That's enough.

But when enough trust and openness are present, curiosity can become a relational condition in which something neither of us could see alone has a chance to appear.

That's why other hikers matter. They don't merely accompany us along trails we already know. Sometimes they show us terrain we hadn't noticed—and their questions enlarge ours.

They can make us more visible to ourselves.

And sometimes they tell us, lovingly, "not today."

● Chapter-10 Field Observations

The story we carry about another person is not the person.

Listening begins with how we arrive—and includes noticing quieter signals without assuming we know what they mean.

Relational curiosity honors boundaries. Not everything we wonder about is ours to know.

Curiosity can become something held between people, creating possibilities neither could see alone.

Chapter-10 Questions for the Trail

What story am I carrying about this person?

What am I noticing without yet knowing?

What would curiosity with boundaries look like here?

What might become possible between us?

Chapter 11

Who Am I Becoming?

There's a question in which I've become more interested as I get older.

Not:

Who am I?

But:

Who am I becoming?

The difference feels larger than it first appears.

"Who am I?" is often a search for a description.

A role.

A label.

A current condition.

Things like:

Husband.

Coach.

Friend.

Writer.

Or:

Successful.

Struggling.

Confident.

Lost.

Some of those descriptions may be perfectly accurate.

But even an accurate description belongs to a moment in time. It is still a description from somewhere along the trail—and we may no longer be standing there.

In coaching conversations, I see how easily a moment can begin masquerading as an identity.

A job change.

A lost project.

A recent setback.

A difficult season.

A disappointing result.

An interview that didn't go the way someone hoped.

Before long, something that happened becomes something about who we believe we are.

That's where *becoming* changes the question.

A difficult moment may be real without becoming a defining moment.

A role may describe us without containing us. Even something that has been true for years may not tell us who we'll become next.

"Who am I becoming?" isn't a *better* question than "Who am I?"

It's just that it treats identity as something living—rather than finished.

That's the difference.

Becoming gives us a way to take who we are seriously without treating who we are today as some sort of final verdict.

It lets us honor what is already true and still leaves room for what may be changing.
Emerging.

For something we are learning.
Something we are outgrowing.

Something we are recovering.

Something we haven't quite grown into yet.

There is a kind of freedom in that.

Not the pressure to become better and better versions of ourselves, but the possibility of remaining in relationship with our own lives as they unfold.

Who I am matters.

But who I am becoming reminds me that I am still participating. Maybe that's part of the power of becoming.

We don't have to reject the person who is here in order to remain open to the person who is taking shape.

The Problem with Permanent Labels

We label things because labels help.

They simplify. They help us communicate.
They give a complicated world some handles.

And, of course, we label ourselves too.

I'm not a leader.

I'm not creative (or I am).

I'm not a good networker.

I've always done this kind of work.

I'm not the kind of person who...

Sometimes the labels grow out of plenty of evidence. Perhaps I really haven't been particularly good at something.

Maybe a role has fit me for most of my life.

Maybe every experience I've had so far seems to support a conclusion.

The problem isn't that the label contains no truth, it's more about whether we've unconsciously turned a description into a boundary or a frame.

Years ago, I remember thinking about my friend Jim Smith, who was already doing work as a coach:

I'm not a coach. Jim is.

At the time, that was true.

Jim was a coach.

I wasn't.

At least not then.

Today, nearly ninety percent of my professional work is one-on-one coaching.

I wasn't wrong.

I simply wasn't finished... becoming.

Had I treated "I'm not a coach" as a permanent definition rather than an accurate description of that moment, I might never have tried coaching at all.

Instead, curiosity made the label a little less final.

I watched Jim.

Asked him.

Learned.

Tried.

(And he encouraged me.)

I began discovering what my own version of coaching might look like.

The label had described me accurately at the time... but it didn't decide what I could become.

This is where labels can become tricky.

"I haven't been good at this" becomes:
"I'm not good at this."

"I haven't done this before" becomes:
"I'm not someone who does this."

"This is the role I've played" becomes:
"This is who I am."

The shift is almost invisible.

Until life gives us information that doesn't fit.

Sometimes we resist that information.

Sometimes we surprise ourselves.

I've watched people I've coached become leaders after years of saying they weren't leadership material.

I've seen people become more direct, more creative, more patient, more courageous, more comfortable in their own skin—even though, at one point, they thought they weren't.

Not because suddenly they completely transform into different people.

Something that was possible in them simply became more available. Visible.

Identity can feel less like a photograph and more like something that's alive. Forming.

Alive doesn't mean undefined and it doesn't mean endless reinvention—but it certainly doesn't mean fixed or “done”.

This said, not every future version of ourselves is equally possible.

We have histories.

Bodies.

Temperaments.

Responsibilities.

Choices already made.

Things we're genuinely good at doing and things we probably never will be.

If I decide to pole vault in the Olympics having never pole-vaulted before, I'm probably setting myself up for disappointment—especially now, in my 60s.

There are realities that are part of the terrain.

But living things can still respond, adapt and learn at every stage of life.

We're not unfinished because we're defective projects waiting to be completed.

We're unfinished because we're *alive*.

Becoming occasionally asks for another kind of honesty too. It asks for a willingness to sit with ourselves for a moment.

Not as an improvement project or to make a list of everything we should become... but just to meet the person who is here.

And then to notice the person who is emerging.

What no longer quite fits?

What feels increasingly true?

What am I learning about myself?

There can be something surprisingly generous in that kind of self-honesty.

We may discover something we want to change or claim something good in ourselves that we've been reluctant to claim.

Becoming isn't always about inventing a "new" version of ourselves.

Sometimes it is about coming into clearer relationship with the person who has been taking shape all along. Not necessarily some perfected "higher" self floating above, but a self we can meet a little more honestly, a little more consciously, and a little more willingly.

The Surprise of Becoming

One of the things becoming has taught me is how difficult it would have been to predict much of my own life.

There are roles I now occupy that I never imagined occupying. People who became important to me whom I could not possibly have known were coming. Interests that appeared almost accidentally and then stayed.

Things I thought mattered enormously that matter considerably less now.

Things I barely noticed years ago that have become central to how I want to live.

I imagine that is true for many of us. We make plans because plans are useful.

We imagine futures because imagination helps us move toward them. We set goals, make commitments, build careers, choose relationships, create lives.

And then life... has its say.

Something that wasn't on the spreadsheet. We meet someone. We discover that what we worked very hard to achieve doesn't feel quite the way we expected.

Or we find ourselves unexpectedly good at something we almost didn't try.

I've watched this happen with coaching clients.

Someone comes into a conversation trying to figure out how to succeed in the role they already have—and a year later they are imagining an entirely different one.

Someone who has spent years trying to become more confident discovers that what they really needed was permission to stop performing confidence all the time.

Someone begins with a career question and ends up reconsidering what they want an ordinary day to look like.

These moments are privileges to witness.

Not because change itself is always good. It isn't.

And not because the newest version of us is necessarily better than the earlier one.

Sometimes becoming means recovering something we had lost or returning to who we were long ago.

Maybe becoming isn't always adding but also shedding, returning or discovering.

Sometimes it's simply noticing:

Huh. This is what matters to me, now.

I've had enough surprises in my own life that I'm a little less interested these days in declaring too confidently who I will be five or ten years from now.

I have intentions—but I also hope I leave some room for the person I haven't met yet.

The future me.

That may be one of my favorite forms of freedom. Not the freedom to become absolutely anything, but the freedom to remain somewhat surprising, even to myself.

And in a strange way, I'm already in conversation with that future version of me.

Earlier, trajectory helped us notice direction and pattern across time. *Becoming* is more personal. It asks not only where things may be heading, but who I may be becoming along the way.

It asks us to consider the person who may someday inherit some of what we are choosing and practicing now.

Every once in a while, I find it useful to let that person into the conversation.

The me that is later.

Sometimes the question is as simple as:

What might that future me be glad I did here, today?

He may surprise me.

I hope he does.

But even just imagining the conversation can loosen the grip of the immediate moment.

What feels enormous from three inches away may look different from farther down the trail.

It reminds me that today's choices don't end entirely today. That future version of me will inherit some of what I practice now: what I choose, what I avoid, what I keep trying, what I release, and what I allow to matter.

Life has a say, of course. Becoming isn't something I control nor is it something that simply happens to me. It increasingly feels less like a problem I am supposed to solve and more like a landscape I get to explore.

Trails taken—and some not taken.

That feels less unsettling to me than it once did. Maybe because I no longer need becoming to mean that something is wrong with who I am now.

I can fully be *this* person—and still *become*.

So can you.

The Myth of Arrival

Earlier we used the word arrival in a particular context with regard to listening.

Arrival meant becoming fully present with another person.

Here I mean the myth of self-arrival.

The idea that somewhere up the trail there is a finished version of me waiting to be reached.

Wise.

Confident.

Successful.

Whatever.

We organize a surprising amount of life around such destinations.

The title.

The house.

The degree.

The relationship.

Retirement.

The version of ourselves we imagine will finally feel settled once we get there.

Don't get me wrong: destinations matter. It feels good to finish something.

To reach a goal is good. Heck, I do strategic planning. Goals are part of the picture.

But we tend to judge our lives in terms of such destinations.

Yep. Made it.

So, I don't want to turn every destination into another lesson about how we should always start moving again.

Sometimes arrival deserves to be arrived.

Enjoy the view.

Have the dinner.

Celebrate the thing.

Be satisfied. Accomplished.

Be *here*.

But arriving somewhere is different from being finished becoming.

I think I used to blur those two more than I do now. There was often another version of me somewhere ahead that I thought I needed to reach. A little more whatever I thought needed improving at the time.

Get there, and things would be *just right*.

Maybe that is part of the problem with treating ourselves as products to optimize.

Products can be finished.

People are living systems.

We respond to what happens.

And life keeps happening.

We change because of people we meet, things we lose, things we learn, choices we make, and experiences we never would have chosen.

We can become more skillful without becoming complete and we can become wiser without reaching the end of inquiry.

We can know ourselves deeply and still surprise ourselves.

That doesn't make growth endless work.

Becoming is not a demand to keep *improving*.

It isn't a permanent self-renovation project.

Sometimes it's as simple as letting ourselves stop trying to become someone we never particularly wanted to be.

There are seasons when growth may simply mean inhabiting who we already are more fully.

The shift could be from seeing life as a series of finish lines to seeing it as an ongoing relationship with beginnings.

We arrive.

And then something begins from *there*.

A version of ourselves that could only have become visible after reaching this particular place.

That makes arrival no less meaningful but more meaningful because we don't have to ask a destination to do something it can't do.

Maybe there is no final version of us waiting somewhere up the trail.

Maybe there is simply this person.

Here.

Alive.

Right now.

Still capable of responding.

Still capable of being surprised.

Still capable of becoming.

And maybe that's enough.

Being unfinished doesn't mean staying permanently open.

We can decide, commit and know enough... for now.

And still remain, unfinished.

Becoming Matters

Who we are becoming matters because the person we are becoming participates in what happens next.

That may sound obvious.
But I think it changes something.

We often imagine the future as something that happens *to* us.

A door closes.
A job changes.
A move happens.
A health issue arrives.
A relationship changes.
An opportunity appears.

Of course much of life really does come toward us from the outside.

We don't control the whole trail, but we are not absent from what happens next, either.

The person we have become enters the next conversation.

That person brings history, habits, skills, wounds, confidence, fear, curiosity, judgment, generosity, defensiveness, humor, perspective... and whatever else has been forming along the way.

Which means becoming is not only about who we are—it changes what becomes possible *through* us.

I see this all the time in coaching.

Someone encounters a situation that would have overwhelmed them a year earlier. The situation may not be easier—but they are *different*.

Someone has a difficult conversation they once would have avoided, or they notice an old pattern before automatically stepping back into it.

Same person?

Yes.

Yet not quite.

Something becomes more available. Not because we can engineer ourselves into perfect humans and not because every change is progress. It isn't.

But the ways we practice meeting life become part of the person who meets life... next.

This is where practice matters. The ways we meet life don't always end with the moment. They leave an imprint on us.

If I repeatedly avoid difficult conversations, avoidance can become the habit.

If I practice staying present in one, that may become a little easier, next time.

Such shifts don't guarantee who we become –life is considerably less controllable than that.

But practice helps, and the process changes the person who's doing the practicing.

Maybe that's one reason I no longer think of curiosity as some sort of trait. It is not simply something we have, or don't have.

Rather, it's one of the ways we can meet reality.

And the ways we repeatedly meet reality shape something in us.

I can participate in what happens next as the person I have become so *far*.

And that person is still becoming.

Not to endlessly reinvent ourselves or to become more curious as though curiosity were another score to improve.

I suppose the point is that we can practice being curious about ourselves... and embrace the possibility that who we have been does not completely determine who we become next.

We participate in the trail ahead.

● Chapter-11 Field Observations

A label can describe who we have been without deciding who we become.

Becoming is not always improvement. It can mean shedding, returning, accepting, or surprising ourselves.

We can arrive somewhere meaningful without becoming finished people.

Becoming includes meeting ourselves honestly enough to notice what is taking shape.

Chapter-11 Questions for the Trail

What label about me may have become too permanent?

What feels increasingly true about me?

What am I asking an arrival to settle for me?

Who am I becoming through how I live now?

PART V

THE RETURN



Chapter 12

The Practice of Curiosity

The last chapter asked the question:

Who am I becoming?

Well that question naturally leads to another.

How do the things we've explored in this Field Guide become part of how we *actually live*?

Good question.

Not simply ideas or techniques... but something more lived than that.

At first, I assumed the practice of curiosity would simply be about becoming *more curious*.

Nope.

Not the case.

There are moments when another question can open something. When a second look matters. When staying with uncertainty a little longer can reveal something we hadn't seen.

Sure.

But there are other times when we've looked *long enough*.

A moment when something wants to be made—a choice needs to be made.

Time to move.

So the practice isn't about becoming permanently curious.

It is becoming more aware of how we're meeting what is here and a little more able to respond in ways the moment actually requires.

Curiosity may be part of it.

So may creating.

And conviction is too.

But this chapter is where some of the ideas we've been carrying become a bit more practical.

This said, practical doesn't only mean *doing*.

It's still about noticing before reacting... but it does involve *acting*.

We can remain with someone instead of rushing to an answer. But we can answer.

We can loosen an assumption and still assess a situation.

Over time, small ways of meeting life can become part of the person doing the doing.

The Practice Is the Gift

We often judge a practice by what it produces.

Did it spark an idea?

Did it solve the problem?

Lead to the breakthrough?

Sometimes it does.

But perhaps that measures only part of its value.

A practice also works on the practitioner.

If I become a little more able to notice before reacting, that matters even when no dramatic insight follows.

If I listen long enough to hear something I would ordinarily have missed, the conversation may change.

But something in the listener can change too.

If I learn to remain open when openness helps, create when something wants to take shape, and choose when I've seen enough, those repetitions gradually become part of how I meet what comes next.

The practice itself begins to shape us.

The process becomes part of the product.

That's why I don't think curiosity is simply a muscle we keep strengthening until we become more and more curious.

I think of it more as a range of motion we can practice.

The ability to open up when opening helps... and to remain with uncertainty when it serves us to do so.

To notice when we're closing too quickly, and eventually recognize when we've explored, enough.

We won't do any of that perfectly. But ordinary repetitions can make those movements a little more available when we need them. And fortunately, life gives us plenty of at-bats.

The Daily Trail

We can be prone to think growth happens in particular places at particular times.

A workshop. A retreat. A coaching session. A conference. A book.

Those things can be great... but they aren't where most of life lives.

Most of it happens on an ordinary Wednesday or in a dentist's waiting room.

Or when driving home from work, walking the dog, making coffee... or receiving an email we'd rather not receive.

Something opens.

Something catches.

Something doesn't go quite as expected.

That's the Daily Trail.

Not a practice we save for special occasions but the day itself is the practice.

Every day gives us moments to notice, reconsider, listen, choose, release, or simply pay attention a little differently.

Not dramatic breakthroughs. Ordinary moments that are repeated thousands of times.

So, given life's Daily Trail, it helps to carry a few things in our backpack. Not everything we own, but rather what we're likely to need.

Before the day begins, perhaps we carry a simple intention. Not a task or some productivity strategy. Just an orientation.

Perhaps today I'll take a second look.

Perhaps today I'll pay attention to what keeps tugging at me.

Perhaps today I'll notice when I've seen enough to move.

Perhaps today I'll notice an assumption before defending it.

No guarantees because we do so. Just like packing a compass doesn't mean it walks the trail.

We still have to walk it.

But maybe we'll have more of what we need, with us.

Those things can be small and fit in a backpack.

- Adding one word: *yet*
- Trading declaration with: *I wonder*
- Separating what happened from what we've made it mean
- Forecast vs weather
- From problem to person
- Racing ahead? Come back to here

Not formulas—just small ways of making a little more room.

A second look.

A missing piece.

A different response.

Small moves.

Different Moments, Different Modes

Back in Chapter 4, I described a hike with my friend Kevin Dilley. After the hike, I was reflecting on the concepts of curiosity, skepticism, cynicism and conviction.

A question came to me:

Maybe the issue isn't whether we are curious or convinced.

Maybe it's whether we recognize what this particular moment requires.

I've kept thinking about that.

The more I watch myself and the people with whom I work, the more I notice that we seem to move through different kinds of work as we meet what is in front of us.

I've started thinking of them as *modes*.

Sue and I think of modes in our consulting work. A team can be in "possibility mode" or in "practicality mode". Knowing which one to evoke, when... can make a difference.

Similarly, I think the idea of modes matters in the realm of curiosity too.

Three modes in particular showed up for me:

Curious Mode.

Generative Mode.

Conviction Mode.

They aren't stages, and we don't always move through them in order.

They do different work.

The distinction matters because we can be doing perfectly useful work at exactly the wrong time.

We can keep exploring when a decision is needed or start generating solutions before we understand what we're solving.

Or arrive with conviction when the situation still has something important to tell us.

None of those makes any given mode wrong. It's the mismatch that is the problem.

CURIOUS MODE

Opening what may still be here

By now, we probably don't need another explanation of curiosity. We've spent most of this Field Guide walking around inside it.

Curious Mode is the opening move.

We loosen our grip on what we think we know just enough for something else to become visible.

Maybe an interpretation isn't complete or something doesn't quite add up. A familiar explanation no longer fits or we simply feel that little tug:

Huh. There's something else here.

The useful move is not necessarily to ask ten more questions. Sometimes it is simply to remain open for another beat. Look again or *listen a little longer*.

Let the odd detail stay odd before explaining it away and hold the conclusion lightly enough that reality can get through.

The question underneath it all may be as simple as: *What else might be here?*

Curious Mode doesn't have to produce an answer. Its work is to make more available.

GENERATIVE MODE

Making something from what opens

Generative Mode feels different.

Curiosity opens the landscape whereas generativity begins working with what has become available.

Ideas connect. Pieces that seemed unrelated find one another. We combine, imagine, rearrange, experiment... and make.

Something that wasn't there before begins to take shape.

This is one reason I don't think creativity belongs only to recognizably "creative" people.

Generative Mode can show up in a conversation, a plan, a business problem, a relationship, a meal, a sentence, or an entirely different way of approaching something we've been doing for years.

The practical move here is almost the opposite of editing too soon.

Give the emerging thing some room and let one idea bump into another.

Try a combination that may not work.

Follow the connection before deciding whether it is useful.

I realize this mode can get a little out of control.

I've noticed it in myself.

One idea arrives... then another. Suddenly I have a big, huge Notes file that I can't make sense of later.

The key is that generativity isn't simply producing *more*. Thirty-seven ideas aren't automatically better than three.

The work is making something from what curiosity opened, i.e.,

What can take shape from this?

Curiosity discovers whereas generativity *creates* from discovery.

CONVICTION MODE

Narrowing enough to move

There are moments when more possibility is not what we need. We need to choose.

We need to make the call, have the conversation... end the thing.

Say yes.

Or no.

That's Conviction Mode. It narrows the field enough for commitment and movement.

Sometimes curiosity gets all the good press.

Open-mindedness sounds good.

Flexible sounds good.

Curious certainly sounds good in a book about curiosity. ;)

Conviction can sound rigid by comparison.

But that's not fair.

We need conviction.

A good exploration that never lands
anywhere eventually becomes another form
of standing still.

A good idea that is never given shape
remains an idea.

At some point, we take what curiosity helped
us see and what generativity helped us
create—and place some weight on the
ground.

This.

Here.

Now.

It doesn't require complete certainty, but it
requires just enough.

Enough understanding to choose, enough
alignment to commit, and enough footing to
put weight on the next step.

Then we move forward in a certain direction—
at least for now.

The “for now” matters, BTW.

It doesn't make conviction weak or somehow
ironically unsure... Rather, it makes
conviction *responsive*.

We can stand somewhere without
pretending it is the *only place* we could ever
stand.

Or go.

Reality still gets a vote.

CONFIDENCE MAY BE DIFFERENT
Footing for uncertainty and movement

I've also wondered where confidence
belongs in all of this.

At first, I thought perhaps confidence was another mode—but I don't think it is.

Confidence feels more like *footing*.

Something that can help us remain present while we're curious, take creative risks while we're generating, and put our weight behind a choice when it's time to move.

Curiosity can say:

I may not know.

Confidence can say:

I can handle not knowing 100%.

Conviction can say:

I know enough to choose for now.

These are different things.

Oddly, confidence can arrive before the footing does.

We can feel remarkably sure of something that we haven't examined thoroughly.

Confidence isn't evidence.

Without enough contact with reality, it can become bravado—or a very convincing way of being wrong.

We've all probably met that version in ourselves.

I've been surprised in my life when I've been so confident about something—until I learn how much I didn't know about what I thought I knew.

But when confidence is grounded—it feels different.

It doesn't need to know everything, but it knows enough and has enough footing to remain open at the same time.

Confidence can let us stay curious because we aren't threatened by not knowing, and it can let us stop exploring because we trust ourselves enough to move forward.

SO WHAT MODE AM I IN?

Noticing what the moment needs

I'm not suggesting we spend the day labeling ourselves. *"Here I am... I'm in Generative Mode again."*

The usefulness is simpler.

Sometimes it helps to recognize what kind of work is at hand.

Are we trying to understand, create,
decide... or something else?

They're not the same conversation.

I've seen this in groups plenty of times.

One person is still trying to understand the problem. Another is enthusiastically generating solutions. Someone else believes the decision was made fifteen minutes ago and would really like everyone to stop talking.

Nobody is necessarily doing anything wrong. They are just in different modes.

That mismatch can create its own friction. The curious person experiences conviction as premature. The person ready to choose experiences curiosity as delay.

The generator keeps producing possibilities while everyone else wonders when the meeting is going to end.

Sometimes naming the work changes the conversation.

We're still trying to understand this.

Let's generate for a while without evaluating.

Okay. We've seen enough. Let's choose.

The modes don't solve the problem.

They just help us stop confusing one kind of work with another.

SOMETIMES THE MODE ISN'T AVAILABLE

When footing changes what we can access

There is another part of this that feels important: we don't always have equal access to every mode all the time.

When we're frightened, exhausted,
overwhelmed, or feeling threatened,
curiosity may become harder to find.

Our attention narrows.

We may want an answer.

Now.

That doesn't mean we've failed at curiosity. It
may simply tell us something about our
footing.

So it can be useful to ask:

How available is curiosity to me here?

Sometimes space helps. Sometimes rest
helps. Sometimes another person's
steadiness helps.

And other times we simply aren't ready yet
and that's information too.

CURIOSITY THAT ISN'T REALLY CURIOUS

When a question is already a conclusion

There is one more thing worth noticing.

A question can sound open while carrying its conclusion inside it.

"Don't you think this is a bad idea?"

"Why does he always do this?"

"Wouldn't you agree that...?"

We've covered this territory already to a degree.

The test may be simple:

Could the answer actually surprise me?

If not, I may already have reached a judgment.

It helps to know in which mode I'm operating.

MOVING AMONG THEM

Opening, creating, choosing, returning

I don't think the goal is some perfect balance.

One-third curious.

One-third generative.

One-third convicted.

Life doesn't work that neatly.

We may stay curious about something for years.

Another situation may move from wondering to creating to deciding... before lunch.

And the movement doesn't always go in one direction.

We choose.

Something happens.

Reality gives us new information.

Curiosity becomes useful again.

That isn't necessarily indecision—it might simply be responsiveness and awareness.

Maybe the practice is becoming a little more able to move with what the *moment requires*.

Food for thought:

Open when opening helps.

Create when something wants to take shape.

Choose when enough has become visible.

Reopen when reality gives us reason.

Curious. Generative. Conviction.

They're different work at different times...
even though we're still on the same trail.

Curiosity Creates Its Own Trail

One of the surprises in writing this Field Guide was that, at several points, I became convinced I was nearly finished.

Ninety percent complete.

Then something unexpected happened. The remaining ten percent somehow became *another ninety percent*.

I wish I were exaggerating.
Not because the work had become disorganized. Quite the opposite.

The work itself had begun revealing more to explore.

Every conversation seemed to reveal another idea.

A hike suggested another metaphor. A coaching conversation uncovered another pattern. A cup of coffee with a stranger led somewhere I hadn't expected.

One thing kept connecting to another.

At first, this was frustrating.

"I'll never finish this thing!"

And, at moments, I believed it.

But eventually I began to see something else happening.

Once enough of the landscape came into view, paths appeared that I simply couldn't see before.

It took the heavy lift of the first ninety percent.

The ideas that once seemed random suddenly had somewhere to go.

Something I noticed months earlier connected with a conversation from yesterday.

One question opened another question.

A metaphor gave shape to something I had been trying to say.

The work wasn't simply becoming longer.

It was becoming *richer*.

Looking back, I think this was Generative Mode doing its best work.

Curiosity had opened the landscape. Now connections were beginning to form within it. There can be something almost abundant about that experience.

Not “more” simply for the sake of more.

More like:

Oh wow. There's more here.

More connection.

More possibility.

This makes sense now.

But of course this creates another challenge.

Eventually all those ideas need somewhere to go. Which brings me to scaffolding.

Scaffolding

As I was describing some of this process to Leo Zimmerman, I found myself using the metaphor of scaffolding.

That first ninety percent of the work had done more than create pages.

It had given new ideas somewhere to land and connect.

A conversation over breakfast. Something noticed on a walk. A sentence from a friend. Suddenly these things had somewhere to *belong*. The scaffolding wasn't creating the ideas. It was helping me recognize where they might fit.

Leo listened for a while and then added something I hadn't really considered.

Scaffolding is *temporary*.

We put it up so something else can take shape. And eventually, when the work has done what it needed to do, the scaffolding comes down.

The building remains.

I loved that.

Maybe some of the structures we create around emerging ideas work the same way.

A notebook.

A whiteboard.

A conversation.

A chapter outline.

A simple question we keep returning to.

They can give emerging thoughts somewhere to land long enough for us to see relationships that weren't obvious before.

But the container isn't the point.

Eventually, some of those separate pieces begin to connect.

What first looked like a pile of ideas begins to feel more like something we can inhabit.

And then, perhaps, some of the scaffolding can come down.

Which raises another question I've encountered repeatedly while writing this book:

How do we know when enough is enough?

Knowing When Enough Is Enough

We've already discussed one version of "enough" with another person, where enough honors a boundary that belongs to them.

This is a different type of enough.

This is an inward-facing one—i.e., recognizing when one's own inquiry has done enough work.

When creating has produced *enough*.

When a decision has been examined enough to move forward.

Just simply noticing when something in oneself has done enough of its work.

Otherwise, curiosity can become a rabbit hole. There's always another question to ask.

Another sentence to add.

Another connection to make.

Another distinction to sharpen.

Sentences I don't want to lose.

Writers sometimes talk about "killing your darlings"—letting go of something you love because it no longer serves the larger work. I've discovered how surprisingly difficult that can be.

Maybe I should keep exploring.

Maybe there is still something here.

Maybe this belongs somewhere else.

Maybe something I shouldn't let go quite yet.

All of those things can be true.

Yet, still... at some point, *enough is enough.*

And not only when we're writing.

We do this with ideas, plans, possessions, roles, stories about ourselves, even problems we're trying to solve.

Something may have been useful, meaningful, even beautiful... and still have completed its work.

Sometimes something we have "had" needs to go.

Curiosity helps us resist closing too soon, but that doesn't mean we should never close.

Conclusions, choices, and convictions are not failures of curiosity.

Sometimes they are what curiosity has been preparing us for.

The challenge is recognizing when continued exploration is still revealing something—and when it has begun to circle.

I've started thinking of this as a kind of tilt.

Any of the modes we've been discussing can tilt when we stay in it beyond the work it helps us do.

How do we recognize the tilt?

Curiosity can tilt into rumination. Or worry. When we keep asking, turning something over, looking from one more angle... and yet little genuinely new appears.

Generative Mode can tilt too.

Possibilities multiply faster than we can absorb them, and what felt abundant starts to feel overwhelming.

We have twenty-seven good ideas and, somehow, have no idea what we're going to do next!

Conviction Mode can tilt when a choice that helped us move forward becomes something we are no longer willing to revisit.

When direction becomes rigidity.

When we stop responding to what is actually happening because we've become so attached to what we already decided.

None of this makes curiosity, generativity, or conviction bad. It's just that a mode that was useful a few miles ago may not be what this part of the trail needs.

This can be surprisingly hard to notice. Especially when something has been working.

Sometimes protecting curiosity just means letting it rest a bit—and protecting a good idea rather than adding seventeen more. Sometimes protecting a decision means allowing reality to test it rather than defending it from reality.

This is part of practice too:

Noticing when something in us has done enough of its work.

At least for now.

And “for now” matters.

We can stop exploring without declaring the question finished forever. We can make something from what we've discovered without using every idea we've generated, and we can choose without pretending we possess complete certainty.

We can move onward while remaining willing to return if reality gives us reason to look again.

So maybe the question isn't simply:
Is there more here? (There probably is.)

The more useful question may be:
Is more what is needed right now?

Timing

Knowing when enough is enough doesn't necessarily mean something is finished.

Sometimes it means recognizing the timing of our own involvement—when to keep working, when to stop pushing, and when to let something go for a while.

Sue and I took golf lessons from an instructor named David many years ago.

He was helping us with tempo, which turns out to be considerably more important than simply swinging the club at the ball and hoping for the best.

A golf swing is an intricate sequence. Address. Takeaway. Backswing. Transition at the top. Downswing. Impact. Release and extension into the finish.

Those pieces don't merely happen. They have to happen in relationship with one another at *just the right time*.

In a well-sequenced downswing, the body begins unwinding and the motion travels through the torso and arms into the club.

The transition at the top isn't really a stop, but it can contain something that almost feels like one—a moment of gathering as the swing changes direction before releasing through the ball. Get the sequence badly out of time and all the individual mechanics in the world have a harder time working together.

Golfers often refer to this as *tempo*.

David had a much simpler way of teaching it. He said one word:

"Time... ming."

He stretched it just enough that you could almost feel the swing inside the word itself.

Gather.

Transition.

Release.

For some reason, hearing him say it changed something for me. The golf swing wasn't simply a collection of positions anymore.

It had cadence.

I've thought about that many times since. Understanding seems to have timing as do perspective, growth, relationships and ideas.

Not necessarily fast timing or slow timing.

More like a rhythm that belongs to whatever is unfolding.

Sometimes our work is to engage fully and other times our work is to stop trying to make the next thing... happen.

I was reminded of this recently while talking with a fellow named Johnny at a coffee shop.

We were talking about memory and wondering why some things become harder to remember precisely when we're trying hardest to remember them.

A name disappears. A detail fades. We reach for something we know we know, and the harder we grab for it, the farther away it seems to move.

Then an hour later, while washing dishes or walking somewhere: There it is! The name returns.

Johnny and I started wondering whether there might sometimes be something useful in that rhythm.

Not that forgetting itself is somehow good... it's more that the effort may reach a point where more effort stops helping.

We can engage. Search. Try.

Then release our grip for a while.

Ideas work this way too.

So can questions.

I've had thoughts I couldn't quite make sense of, set them aside, and then had something click days or weeks later when I wasn't consciously working on them.

Sometimes we call that incubation.

But I don't think incubation is something we can order around. Trying to force it would probably defeat the point.

But what we *can* do is make room for it. Engage something fully and do the work that seems ours to do.

Then stop chasing.

That isn't blind trust that the universe will take care of things for us.

We still have a role.

It is more about respecting a rhythm.

Some things need effort.

Other things need time.

And sometimes we don't know which until we've tried both.

The Practice of Returning

Sometimes, we return. Not because we failed to finish the first time. Returning is different from repeating.

We return to an idea after living a little more life and we return to a conversation with something we couldn't see the first time.

We return to a question and discover that the question hasn't changed very much—but we have.

...Something unexpected happened while writing this Field Guide.

The more I wrote about curiosity, the less it felt like a collection of ideas or techniques.

Increasingly, it began to feel like *returning*.

Returning to attention.

To wonder.

To reality.

To oneself.

Not adding another checklist to master, but becoming a little more able to return to capacities that may already be available when we need them.

Maybe that's one of the deeper rhythms underneath this whole Field Guide:

Engage. Release. Return. Look again.

One of my favorite moments on a hike is returning to the trailhead.

The parking lot is still there. The car hasn't moved. The same trees stand nearby. At first glance, it can look as though nothing has changed.

But something has.

The hiker.

Every mile walked, every conversation shared, every overlook, wrong turn, quiet moment, and unexpected discovery has quietly become part of the person returning to the car.

The trail wasn't simply something we walked... somehow it became part of the one who walked it.

Life can feel this way too.

We return to the same people, the same places, the same conversations, and sometimes even the same questions. Yet we never return as exactly the same person.

Perhaps practice helps us notice that. Not a permanent state of curiosity or perfect awareness.

Certainly not perfect answers.

Rather, a greater capacity to return.

To *look again*—when looking again is needed... to *create* when something new wants to take shape, and to *choose* when it's time to choose.

And, when necessary, to release something long enough to let life keep working on it.

Then return and see what's there.

Here.

Now.

And from time to time... get our bearings.

● Chapter-12 Field Observations

Practice lives in ordinary moments. Small moves—and the capacity to return—can shape how we meet life.

Curiosity, generativity, and conviction each do different work.

Our footing can affect which modes are available to us.

Even a useful mode can tilt when it stays beyond the work it needs to do.

 Chapter-12 Questions for the Trail

What small move might help here?

What mode am I in—and what does this moment need?

How available is curiosity to me right now?

Is more what is needed?

Pause here.
Before turning the page.

*What are you noticing now
that you weren't noticing before?*

*Inspired in part by Sarah Wilson's use of
an intentionally spacious page in *I Eat the Stars*.*

Chapter 13

Onward, Curiously

Somewhere along this trail, the title of this Field Guide changed.

For quite a while, I thought it was mostly about curiosity.

But the farther I went, the more I began to see that curiosity was only *part* of what I was trying to understand.

We don't get to stay in curiosity forever.
Life eventually asks things of us.

We choose.

We commit.

We have the conversation.

We decide what we believe, at least for now... and sometimes we simply take the next step without knowing exactly where the trail will lead.

That's the *onward* part.

Onward doesn't mean rushing. It doesn't mean never looking back, changing our minds, or returning to something we thought we had settled.

It simply recognizes that life moves... forward. Onward.

And we move within it.

Sometimes standing still becomes its own kind of choice.

But then there is the word *curiously*.

I've come to think *curiously* less as an instruction to keep asking questions... and more as a way of carrying openness while we move.

A willingness to notice—and be surprised.

To discover that the map we were using may need updating or to recognize that another person may be having an experience we hadn't imagined.

To notice when reality is giving us reason to look again.

Curiously doesn't mean we never become convinced. It means conviction doesn't have to make us unreachable.

And *onward* doesn't mean we have everything figured out. It just means we are willing to move with what we know, now.

Maybe that's what these two words have been trying to say to each other all along.

Onward keeps curiosity from becoming endless exploration.

Curiously keeps onward from becoming blind momentum.

We open.

We notice.

We make meaning.

We choose.

And *then* we move forward.

Somewhere down the trail, we look again.

Which is probably why, from time to time, it helps to get our bearings.

Bearings

Experienced hikers don't expect a perfectly marked trail. At some point the signs become less obvious, the path bends, the weather changes, or two trails suddenly seem to be heading in equally plausible directions.

That's when it helps to get one's bearings.

A bearing doesn't tell us where we should go.

It helps us understand where we are standing before we decide where to go *next*.

Throughout this Field Guide, we have kept returning to four directions. They showed up in different forms and in different places, but eventually I began to see them as part of the same orientation.

HERE.

SELF.

OTHERS.

POSSIBLE.

I have come to think of them simply as **The Bearings**. Not another system to master. And not a way of determining which “mode” we should be in.

They are simpler than that. I think of them almost like a compass you can carry in your pocket: four easy reference points to help you orient when the terrain gets confusing.

They don't give you solid footing, but they can help you notice where your footing is—and give you a few places to look before you move.

I find myself returning to them in very ordinary moments.

Before a difficult conversation or before replying to an email that's gotten under my skin.

When unexpected news arrives or when I'm lying awake at four in the morning and my mind has apparently decided it's a perfect time to solve everything.

Sometimes I use them when something simply feels off and I can't quite explain why.

Other times, I may be quite convinced about what I want to do—and getting my bearings helps me see whether that conviction still fits what is actually there.

That's an important distinction.

The Bearings aren't designed to keep us questioning.

Rather, our bearings may help us realize that we need to look just a tad bit longer.

The Bearings may help us see another person or another possibility and sometimes they confirm something much simpler:

I know enough.

It's time to move.

Sometimes one bearing is enough and other times it makes sense to move through all four of them.

There is no required order and certainly no score to keep. They simply give us a few reference points for understanding where we are standing.

Only we can decide what comes next.

Perhaps that is why I've found them useful when life gets complicated.

They don't provide certainty.

They don't remove ambiguity and they don't make the choice for us.

They simply orient us.

Orientation can help us take the next step a little more consciously.

So when something catches you, unsettles you, excites you, confuses you—or when you simply sense that it might be useful to look around before moving—perhaps just get your *bearings*.

Pause.

Notice.

Ask.

And then take the next step.

In fact, your first opportunity may be right now.



HERE

What's going on here?



SELF

What's going on in me?



OTHERS

What might be true for them?



POSSIBLE

What's possible?



HERE

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

N

W

E

S



OTHERS

WHAT MIGHT BE
TRUE FOR THEM?



SELF

WHAT'S GOING
ON IN ME?



POSSIBLE

WHAT'S POSSIBLE?

Wherever the trail leads.

May you keep noticing.

May you keep wondering.

May you keep becoming.

And onward, curiously...

Now you continue.



The Rockies • Colorado

One of many places that taught me
the trail rarely reveals all of itself at once.



FIELD REFERENCE

Trail Signs

The five Trail Signs gathered here are reminders, not rules.

Each offers a different place to look when something feels obvious, confusing, urgent, or incomplete.

Use the one that helps.

Then keep walking.



FIELD REFERENCE

THE FIVE TRAIL SIGNS

A QUICK REFERENCE

*Use them to widen your view
before you draw a conclusion.*



1 SYMPTOM ↔ SYSTEM

LOOK DEEPER.

What's seen on the surface may have deeper patterns underneath.



2 SNAPSHOT ↔ TRAJECTORY

LOOK LONGER.

A single moment is not the whole story.
What's the longer arc?



3 MAP ↔ TERRITORY

HOLD YOUR MAP LIGHTLY.

Every map is useful.
No map is the territory.



4 FORECAST ↔ WEATHER

COME BACK TO NOW.

Predictions are helpful.
Current conditions are real.



5 OBSERVATION ↔ INTERPRETATION

NOTICE BEFORE YOU DECIDE.

What happened? Then ask:
What might be the meaning?



THESE ARE NOT RULES. THEY ARE REMINDERS.
Use them. Return to them. Let them widen your view.

Continuing the Trail

Many people, books, conversations, and ideas accompanied me while this Field Guide was taking shape.

Here are some of the ones I'm especially grateful to carry forward.

Those Who Walked With Me

personal relationships and contributors

Sue James

for your curiosity, patience, love, and companionship, which are woven through nearly every page of this book.

Art & Syl – my parents

for bringing me here, shaping more of who I am than I will ever fully understand, and, though gone from this life, continuing to live in the ways I see, love, and move through the world. Whatever I am able to carry onward to others carries something of you too. I miss you. I love you. And I carry you with me.

Charlotte Wittenkamp

for your friendship and thoughtful editing from the very beginning. Your early feedback helped shape the tone of this book.

Mac Bogert

for your deep friendship and your loving, pull-no-punches honesty that made this book stronger.

Carey Corr

for your wisdom, generosity with your time, and the real conversations we shared about *Onward, Curiously*.

Pam Sandy

for reading so carefully, loving so generously, and for being a friend to the core—through life, loss, laughter, and everything in between. You’ve known me long enough to recognize not only what I do, but something of who I am underneath it.

Don Iannone

for your remarkable ability to synthesize ideas and offer clarity with such thoughtful brevity.

Marissa Wilk

for your wisdom, patience, and generous conversations that helped refine these ideas.

Colin Smith

for your incredibly thoughtful feedback and for answering every question with generosity and care.

JenLyn Ford

for your extraordinary capacity to bring love and energy wherever you go. It is difficult to describe but impossible not to feel.

Amy Gallie

for helping me see that curiosity is rarely a solo activity.

Mike Ferkovic

for the way you live your principles and values—and for the humility with which you continue to examine them. You’ve influenced my own thinking more than you may know. You’ve reminded me that creativity takes many forms, and that conviction and curiosity can live side by side. Beneath the numbers, finance, and leadership, I’ve always seen the creator in you—someone who builds, imagines, and remains open to what might still be possible. I’m grateful for all I’ve learned simply by walking alongside you.

Kevin Dilley

for the miles we walked together and the conversations that helped many of these ideas find their footing.

Jennifer Fiedler

for your gift of saying things in a way that sticks and for helping bring the “lens” concept to life.

Dr. Melissa Hughes

for your intelligent encouragement and contagious enthusiasm.

Goldie Haren

for your friendship and for truly being with me through the loss of my mom. Your curious version of love has stayed with me.

Dr. Tony McCaffrey

for the way my thinking always seems to expand when we talk. You have a gift for inviting me deeper than I might go on my own—into questions about creativity, the human mind, technology, and what else might be possible. Our conversations about functional fixedness are just one example: a reminder that what we already “know” something *is* can sometimes make it harder to see what else it might be. I’m grateful for the places our conversations continue to take me.

Scott Woodbridge

for more than thirty years of friendship that began through work and became something far deeper. Some of my earliest memories of us are walking laps around the office building, thinking out loud together. You have an unusual ability to move across subjects, grasp what matters, and somehow make things make sense—including my own thoughts when you play them back to me more clearly than I offered them in the first place. You’ve challenged and supported me, often at the same time. And to you and Joann, thank you for the deep and caring friendship you’ve shared with Sue and me through so much of our adult lives. At some of the hardest moments, you were simply there for us, in the way true and loving friends are. I’m deeply grateful for all the miles we’ve walked together—both around that building and since.

Mark and Marissa Maslar

for the creative energy and conversations we've shared since our Community of Minds days in the early 2000s. Somehow, there has always been another idea to explore, something to investigate, or something new to wonder about together. Thank you for all the years of expanding one another's thinking—and for the friendship that has traveled alongside it.

Tony Houston

for reminding me that wondering can become doing. You have a way of asking, *"But what can we do?"*—then picking a date, making the commitment, and doing something meaningful. Thank you for showing me that curiosity and caring need not remain ideas. Sometimes we choose something that matters, put it on the calendar, and make it happen.

Marcus Schaller

for turning what began as an invitation to be a guest on your podcast into something that felt like a genuine gift. Your curiosity has never felt extractive; it comes with real interest, respect, and grace. You ask without interrogating, listen without rushing, and somehow leave room for the conversation to keep expanding. I'm grateful that our paths have continued to cross through periodic conversations—and for the kindness, generosity, and encouragement you continue to bring to them.

Leo Zimmerman

for your enduring friendship, wisdom, thoughtful questions, and the many conversations that have helped shape my own curious journey. You have a gift for seeing another layer in an idea—and for helping me see it too. Thank you, especially, for reminding me that scaffolding isn't the structure. Eventually it comes down, and what we've built remains.

Greg Wooldridge

for helping me realize that *Glad to Be Here* is about far more than accountability. It is also about taking a curious look at ourselves.

Steve Rucinski

for nearly thirty years of friendship, for always recognizing the “pixie dust,” and for introducing me to the metaphor of the juggler.

Boake Sells

for paying attention to a young salesperson thirty-five years ago—and continuing to pay attention ever since. Your bold approach to life, leadership, and inquiry has made you a lifelong mentor, and I am still learning from you.

Jim Burke

for showing me what it looks like to invest deeply in understanding before trying to explain. Your curiosity elevated not only your writing, but the people you wrote about.

Cameron Orlean

for allowing me a window into your journey of growth, expansion, and curiosity—and for the trust to explore what might be possible along the way. Watching you question, build, experiment, and increasingly trust your own way of leading has reminded me of the importance of seeing the *puzzle, not simply the puzzle piece*—the larger system, the connections, and what may be taking shape. I admire your courage to say what needs to be said, your patience to let things unfold, and your unwillingness to dance around what matters. You remind me that curiosity is not simply about discovering what is already there. Sometimes it helps us see—and create—what comes next.

Jim Smith

for being a client who became a trusted friend. More importantly, you awakened my curiosity about coaching itself. That curiosity became a calling—and, ultimately, the work I now have the privilege of sharing with others.

David Orlean

for a business relationship that became a friendship, and for the many hikes and conversations that have expanded both of our thinking. And for reminding me that sometimes in business we need to helicopter up—to see the bigger picture, ask different questions, and notice possibilities that can be surprisingly easy to miss when they're right in front of us.

Kauser Razvi

for your deep friendship and your beautiful habit of sending handwritten notes. In a hurried world, your thoughtful attention reminds me that curiosity often begins by truly seeing another person.

Nick Heap

for introducing me to the wonderfully irritating idea of “adultism,” and for reminding me that curiosity is often less something we need to acquire than something we need to stop crowding out.

Carolyn Lebanowski

for the gracious way you make space for others. Your presence has a quiet way of inviting curiosity—not by demanding attention, but by offering acceptance. You remind me that one of the greatest gifts we can give another person is simply creating a place where they feel free to wonder.

Zachary Roper

for showing how quickly curiosity can turn an introduction into a meaningful conversation. Our first lunch ranged across life, history, business, and much more—and felt less like meeting a stranger than discovering a fellow traveler.

Tamsin Astor, PhD

for writing your book when we both said we would. You did. I didn't... until now.

Kevin & Sara Good

for a friendship that reaches all the way back to Brecksville High School, and for showing what love, commitment, family, and lifelong learning can look like when taken seriously—but never too seriously. You have a wonderful way of staying curious about life, about others, and perhaps most beautifully, about one another... while laughing a whole lot along the way.

Mark O'Brien

a longtime friend on the friendship bench. Years ago, I asked Mark about his writing—how he stayed with it, how he maintained the discipline. His answer was something like, “I can’t not write.” That stayed with me. Somewhere along the way, I think I began to understand what he meant.

Lena Rantsevitch

for showing me what resilience can look like when it is paired with imagination. Since we met in early 2022, I have watched you navigate extraordinary change while continuing to ask, *What's the next big story?*—and then have the courage to pursue it. You reinvent, grow, build, and innovate, somehow holding thoughtful attention to what is, while thinking exponentially about what might be. I am grateful not simply for what you have overcome, but for the way you continue to create something new from what comes next.

Brian Madden

or the abundant curiosity, relentless pursuit, and effervescent zest for life you've carried since our paths first crossed in the late 1990s. You didn't just wonder about what was next—you dove in, made things happen, and embraced leading-edge technology long before most of us knew where it might lead. Our early "Brain Trust" conversations with Scott, Steve, and Sue helped exercise my own curiosity earlier than I might have otherwise, pulling my thinking beyond the business immediately in front of me and toward what else might

Jim Tewksbury

for your friendship and for inspiring curiosity through life, movement, and music.

Andrew Bennett

for your seemingly endless curiosity about what I think—and, even more, your ability to listen in a way that makes me want to think more deeply. Thank you for reminding me what it feels like to be genuinely heard and met with genuine curiosity.

Caleb Chesnut

for being a chief noticer and for helping me notice... noticing.

Dean Skinner

for both the encouragement and the example. As a writer, artist, designer, business executive, and continually evolving human being, you've shown me what it looks like to keep leaning into your own transformation. And early on, when I wasn't quite sure how—or even whether—to write, you kept telling me, *"Just write, Craig. Just write."* Speak it. Record it. Whatever it takes. Your encouragement carried the confidence of someone who had already done it in his own way. Thank you for the push, the permission, and the inspiration to find my way of doing it in mine.

Tom & Jenifer

for a chance meeting in a coffee shop, helping name a puppy, and reminding me that contentment is never the enemy of curiosity.

Johnny & John

for helping me explore curiosity from the other side and reminding me that even curiosity deserves curious examination.

Liz

for crossing our path when we stopped to pick up dinner one evening—and for bringing your curious spirit so naturally into the conversation. You reminded us that curiosity can show up anywhere, with anyone. I loved the way you put it: *“Curiosity is the willingness to learn something new that you never knew before. Being curious is what helps us grow.”* And when you said, “I didn’t know you were authors,” you gave us a small realization of our own: neither did we. Until we were. Thank you for being part of that moment.

Voices Along the Way

writers/books and other intellectual influences

Seth Godin

for years of inspiration through your daily practice of shipping ideas into the world.

Steven Pressfield

for writing *The War of Art*. It arrived exactly when I needed it.

Laurie Beth Jones

for inspiring the end-of-chapter reflections that became part of this Field Guide. Your work in *Jesus CEO* reminded me that a book doesn't end at the chapter—it continues in the reader.

Don Miguel Ruiz

whose *The Four Agreements* has long inspired me—not only for the wisdom of its ideas, but for the purity, love, and integrity with which they are offered. Its remarkable readability and accessibility remind me that meaningful ideas need not be made complicated to be profound.

Conversations That Feed Curiosity

podcasts

Hidden Brain

for continually expanding how I think about the human mind, human behavior, and life itself—often by offering a different lens on something I thought I already understood. Thank you, Shankar Vedantam.

Daily Creative

for your gift of storytelling and your ability to make complex ideas memorable. Thank you, Todd Henry.

No Stupid Questions

for proving that thoughtful conversations can also be playful. Thank you, Angela Duckworth, Mike Maughan, and Stephen J. Dubner for creating something genuinely special.

Words from the Trail

"Curiosity sits at the bottom of creation, that deeply human endeavor, allowing us to sit in the unknown and uncertainty so that we can create that magical next frame of the movie of our life."

– Carey Corr

Screenwriter and Director

"You think you know the meaning of Curiosity? This insightful and engaging book takes you on a curiosity journey, and if you remain on the journey, you will realise that curiosity is a way of being."

– Colin Smith

The Listener

"Onward, Curiously offers not a set of answers, but a journey into one's own curiosity—a way of meeting uncertainty with more openness, humor, humility, and life."

– Don Iannone

Writer and Editor

Curiosity is an inherent trait that you either have or you don't. If you do, it will lead you on an endless journey of exploring new ideas, new ways of thinking and doing, and constantly learning more about yourself, the world around you, and how everything is interconnected.

– Cameron Orlean

President, ABC Management • Coaching Client

"I'm a very curious person by nature. I think curiosity is one of the greatest gifts of being human. The desire to know more than we do is a primary driver of human discovery and scientific inquiry."

– Zachary Roper

Curious Observer of the Human Experience

About the Author



Craig James is endlessly curious about people, ideas, and the questions that shape lives. He is fascinated by the stories we tell, the assumptions we make, and the possibilities we overlook. Whether hiking a trail, skiing a slope, sharing a meaningful conversation, or reflecting on life, he is drawn to moments when something that seemed settled becomes worth another look.

For more than two decades, he and his partner, Sue, have built and continue to lead CatalystStrategies, better known as Cat-Strat Services, working with executives, leaders, teams, and organizations navigating strategy, leadership, change, growth, and the human complexity often beneath them. Their work has evolved from traditional business consulting toward an increasingly integrated approach to coaching, leadership development, and organizational insight.

Onward, Curiously grew from a single word that caught his attention one day: curiosity. Following it led him into questions about how we know, what we miss, what becomes possible when we look again, and when it is time to choose and move. He and Sue continue exploring those questions together.