

You Don't Ride to Stay Safe

Curiosity, Faith, and the Courage to Live Fully



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As I drive my Nissan 350Z, now sitting at 106,924 miles and hopefully still willing to cooperate after a long stretch off the road, I make my way toward Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport in the quiet of early morning. The sun has not yet risen, but it is getting ready. There is that subtle shift in the sky, that hint of light that says something new is about to begin. I am headed to Washington, D.C. to spend time with an old Army buddy, and then on to Pennsylvania to speak at a medical conference. It is the kind of trip that carries both anticipation and reflection, and somewhere in the middle of that drive, a single word comes to mind. Curiosity. It is such a beautiful word. It feels alive, open, expansive.

In Internal Family Systems, curiosity is one of the eight Cs, the qualities of the Self that signal we are grounded, centered, and present. Of all of them, curiosity has always been my favorite. To be a good therapist, you have to be curious. You have to be willing to lean in, to explore, to gently ask what is happening beneath the surface rather than rushing to label or fix. Curiosity says tell me more. Curiosity is not threatened by what it does not understand. It is drawn to it. And yet I find myself wondering this morning why curiosity feels so rare right now. Why are

people not more curious.

The answer that comes to me is another word. Safety. Everyone wants safety. Of course we do. We are wired for it. Our nervous systems are built to scan for threat, to protect, to preserve. Safety is not the enemy. But what happens when safety becomes the ruler of our lives. What happens when the pursuit of safety quietly suffocates curiosity. That is not a vibrant life. That is a controlled life. Predictable, managed, careful, and if I am honest, a bit boring.

I have never been particularly drawn to that way of living. I have always been curious. I have always leaned toward the edge. Maybe that is why I love motorcycles.

Not just the edge of it, but the experience of it. Riding engages everything at once. The sound of the engine, the feel of the road, the wind against your body, the subtle shifts in balance, the constant awareness of your surroundings. It wakes you up. It pulls you fully into the present moment. There is a thrill in it, not reckless, but alive. The thrill of the ride, the thrill of discovering a new road, a new place, a new line through a turn. It is curiosity in motion. The machine becomes a kind of partner in that experience, taking you somewhere you have not been before, not just physically, but internally as well. You do not ride a motorcycle to stay safe. You ride it to feel alive.

The same is true in therapy. If you want superficial change, you can play it safe. You can stay on the surface. You can talk about symptoms and coping strategies and keep everything neat and contained. But that is not where healing lives. Healing lives in curiosity. It takes a different kind of courage to sit with someone and be genuinely curious about their pain, to go beneath the narrative, to ask what is really there, to explore the roots of trauma, not just the branches, to enter into what feels dangerous, dark, and unresolved. That is not casual work. It requires what Brennan Manning called ruthless trust. Ruthless trust that truth, even when painful, leads somewhere redemptive. Ruthless trust that if we are willing to go there, something meaningful will be uncovered. Ruthless trust that we are not alone in the process.

There is even something happening in the nervous system when we talk about safety and curiosity. When we feel safe, the autonomic nervous system settles into what we would call a ventral vagal state, grounded, connected, and regulated. That is a good and necessary place. But we are not meant to remain in a completely still or static version of safety. When curiosity comes online, something shifts. We move into a state that still holds safety, but now with energy and engagement. There is a gentle activation, a sense of interest, movement, even play. It is not a departure from safety so much as an expansion of it. Curiosity becomes a kind of intelligent play, rooted in safety but not confined by it. This is not recklessness. It is grounded exploration.

Sadly, in our culture, we often move toward one extreme or the other. We either cling too tightly to safety and avoid exploration altogether, or we chase stimulation and novelty without any grounding. Both come at a cost. One constricts the system, the other dysregulates it. What

is often missing is this integrated state, where safety and curiosity work together. In that space, the nervous system is no longer just staying safe, it is stepping into life.

When I look back on my own life, it is striking how often curiosity, not safety, has been the guiding force. When I was accepted into graduate school, I did not have funding. I could have played it safe and followed the familiar path, taking on piles of government loans and calling that security. Instead, I got curious. That curiosity led me into the Army, which opened doors I could not have planned. I was accepted into programs in California and one in Arkansas. California may have made more sense on paper, but curiosity pulled me toward Arkansas. As I explored it, I found a strong clinical program, and something in me wanted to experience life in the South.

That decision became a grounding chapter in our marriage. We were exposed to a different culture, a different pace, a different expression of faith that was deeply rooted and authentic. It shaped us in ways I could not have anticipated.

Later, curiosity pulled again. I had lived in Switzerland as a child, and I found myself wondering what it would be like to live in Europe as an adult. So we went, with a newborn, and lived in Germany, not once but twice. Those years introduced us to some of the best people we have ever known. We formed friendships that have endured to this day. That did not come from playing it safe. That came from curiosity.

The same pattern continued. Curiosity led me back into the Army. It led to years at Madigan, to teaching, to being on faculty, to leadership roles that stretched and formed me. And when it was time to move on, curiosity led us again, this time to Arizona, stepping into a clinical director role and new terrain. And now, even this season of speaking, writing, and publishing, it all traces back to that same thread.

I am not claiming to be anything extraordinary. I am not a towering intellect. I can hold my own. But if there is something that has defined my life, it is a kind of relentless curiosity. A willingness to try, to explore, to step into the unknown.

Even the ancient philosopher Socrates understood something essential about this. He built his life on questioning, on examining, on refusing to settle too quickly into certainty. His famous line was that the unexamined life is not worth living. I find myself thinking about that differently this morning. Maybe it is not just examination that gives life depth, but curiosity itself. Not a harsh or critical examining, but a genuine openness, a willingness to explore what is true without needing immediate answers. A life without curiosity begins to close in on itself. A life with curiosity stays alive.

So as I make my way toward the airport this morning, preparing to speak and reconnect and continue the journey, I find myself reflecting on that. Not landing on safety as the ultimate goal, but holding curiosity as a guiding principle. Yes, we all need a foundation of safety. But if safety

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becomes the destination, something in us stops living.

Why do we hold back. What are we so afraid of.

Without curiosity, you do not live fully. You do not expand. You do not grow.

And even as I think about the arc of a life, I find something else rising in me. Not fear of what is ahead, but curiosity. A genuine curiosity about what lies on the other side of this life. Not anxiety, not dread, but wonder.

Curiosity.

I think of Evel Knievel, who came to faith later in life, speaking about that final jump. Not with fear, but with a kind of anticipation. A curiosity about what comes next.

Maybe that is the invitation.

To live curiously now.

To trust deeply.

To step out when it would be easier to stay contained.

Maybe curiosity is not the opposite of safety after all. Maybe it is what becomes possible when we are rooted deeply enough that we no longer need to cling to safety at all costs. And maybe the real question is not how do we stay safe, but how do we become grounded enough to stay curious.