

# KILROY CAFÉ

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©2010, Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173  
glenn@kilroycafe.com www.KilroyCafe.com



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# CURIOSITY

## *The Hallmark of Intellect*

By GLENN CAMPBELL

Curiosity seems pretty simple. When something unusual happens in your environment, you check it out. Children do it all the time. If they are walking in the woods and encounter a strange-looking mushroom, they'll examine it, poke at it and eventually submit it to destructive testing to see what's inside. It's bad for the mushroom but good for the child, who learns about the world through aggressive investigation.

Adults, as a rule, are not curious. They may turn their head in response to a novel stimulus, but they won't go over and check it out. They passively observe but won't actively investigate. Most adults are curious only within the bounds of the field they have chosen to be curious in: Naturalists may be sensitive to novelties of nature but not those of the human world. Adults, it seems, have a comfort zone and are loath to leave it unless forced to.

So what happened between childhood and adulthood? And what is curiosity anyway?

Curiosity is the impulse, when a novelty is detected in ones environment, to actively explore it until it is understood.

Relatively few animals exhibit curiosity. It is generally limited to the mammals and the young ones more than the old. Reptiles aren't curious, except as related to immediate food or threat. If something unusual appears in their path, they'll simply walk around it. Monkeys, on the other hand, are quickly attracted to changes in their cages and will investigate like human children do, even if they don't expect reward from it.

The benefits of curiosity are far-sighted and intellectual. It is the first step in learning. When something is novel, it means that we don't yet have a model for it in our head, so it makes sense to explore it in case this knowledge might be useful in the future. We don't need to know exactly how it will be useful; we only need to know that exploration, as a whole, is beneficial to our survival.

Curiosity can be dangerous. We know it killed the cat! Whenever you poke something, there is a risk it will bite you back. The compensation, however, is higher adaptability. Curiosity is one reason our species has come to dominate the planet. At least a few members of our clan have been drawn to things they don't understand, which has ultimately given us our technology and science.

But curiosity is also dangerous in a personal sense, especially to adults. Most adults have already committed themselves to personal and emotional investments based on certain assumptions about life, and unfettered curiosity runs the risk of disrupting those assumptions. That's why they don't dare explore.

For example, if you are committed to a certain career and have already invested 20 years of your life in it, you will resist any form of curiosity that might suggest that a different path would have been wiser. Curiosity is tolerated only to point where it generates anxiety, then it is turned off. The more boxed in you are by your past decisions, the less curiosity you can afford without triggering that most powerful of human emotions: regret.

There are four steps in the process of curiosity: Orientation, Exploration,

Integration and Release.

Orientation is turning ones attention toward a novel stimulus. Almost everyone will do that: turn their eyes and head toward anything out of the ordinary. Most drivers will notice an oddity along the side of the road. Only a few, however, will stop the car.

Exploration is the next step. You actively investigate and experiment with this novel thing—poking, prodding.

Integration is when you absorb this new phenomenon into your internal theories, so it no longer seems unusual. This may take minutes, weeks or years, but eventually the novelty becomes routine and uninteresting because it is understood.

Release is when you let go of the previously novel object and move on. This step is very important because it leaves you free to be actively curious about something else.

Even if they get to the Exploration phase, adults often get stuck on the Release phase. If something is initially intriguing to them, they often try to own it and never give it up. All sorts of old novelties clutter up our lives like this, preventing new novelties from getting in.

An active and dynamic intellect dances continuously with curiosity. To be able to truly grow, you need to be uncommitted enough to allow random exploration and also be willing to let go of whatever you find.

Most minds just can't do it. They get trapped at one stage of development and curiosity dies shortly thereafter.

If the opportunity of a lifetime sat down beside them, they wouldn't know what to do. They would ask no questions, and the moment would pass.

—G.C.

[www.Glenn-Campbell.com](http://www.Glenn-Campbell.com)