

# Curiosity, Empathy, and Social Justice: *A Data Story*





**We are in the  
curiosity  
business,  
right?**



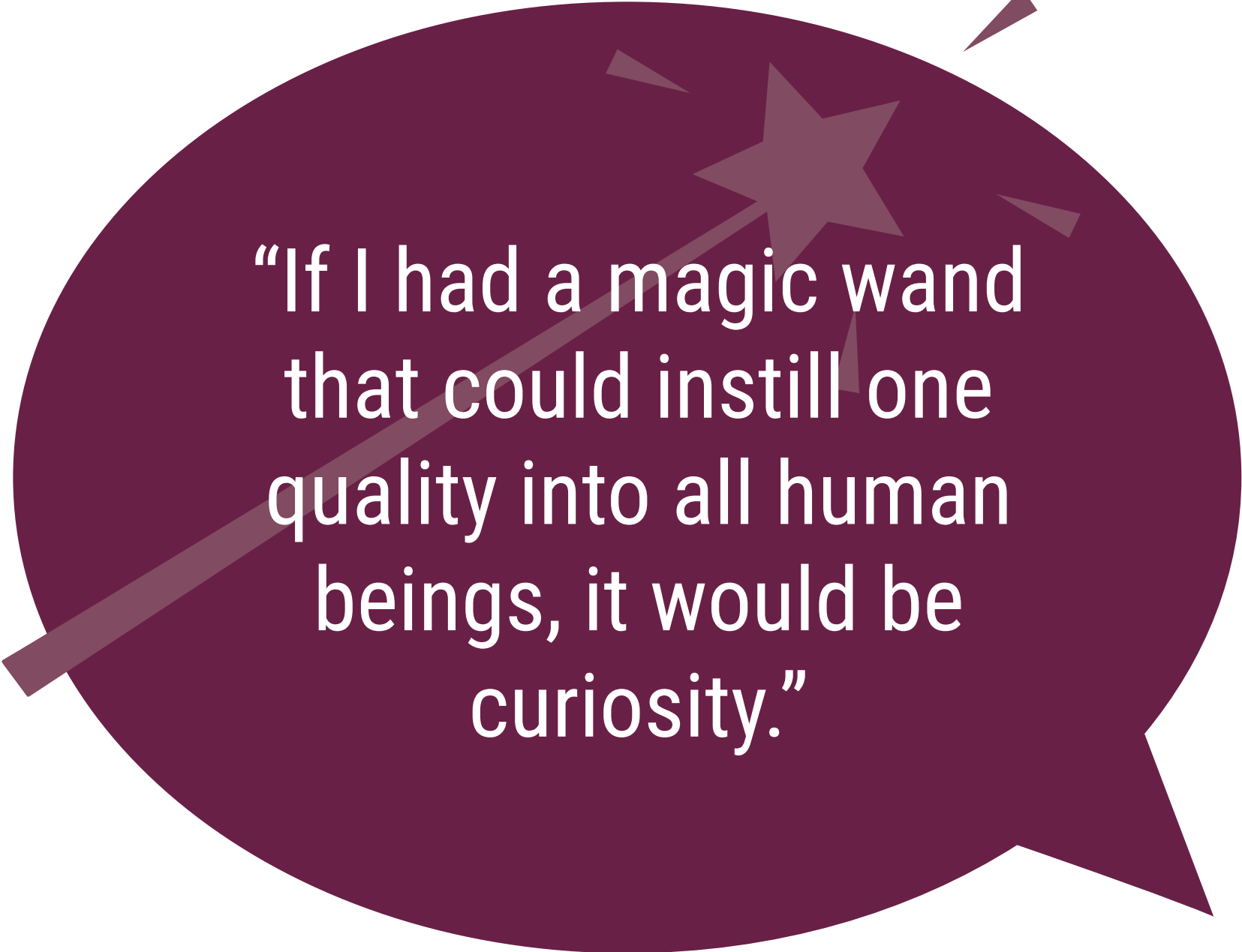
*After all, visiting a museum is a key way  
Lifelong Learners feed their curiosity.*

**But why does curiosity matter?**

**Why does it matter to our (curious) museum-goers?**

**And why does it matter to society?**

..... *First, let's see what museum-goers\* say about curiosity.*



“If I had a magic wand  
that could instill one  
quality into all human  
beings, it would be  
curiosity.”

For most museum-goers, curiosity is primarily a desire to learn new things. This includes learning how things work, why things are a certain way, filling information gaps, and having new experiences.



“If I don't know an answer to something or realize I don't have in-depth knowledge about a subject, I would rather learn more than continue to be aware of that gap.”

This curiosity isn't rooted in a sense of novelty for novelty's sake, but a desire for depth and breadth of knowledge, mental stimulation, and a broader understanding of the world.

Because Lifelong Learners love to learn! They use emotive language that reflects that love of learning. For some, it feels like a visceral need ... a part of their very identity.



“My nickname is ‘the machine gun questioner.’”

“I am insanely curious about everything!”

“I thirst for knowledge.”

### **And curiosity feels good!**

When curious people have their curiosity fed, and when they make unexpected connections, it causes their bodies to release a surge of dopamine.

Thus, it isn't surprising that they use words like “fun” and “enriching,” and even “euphoria.”

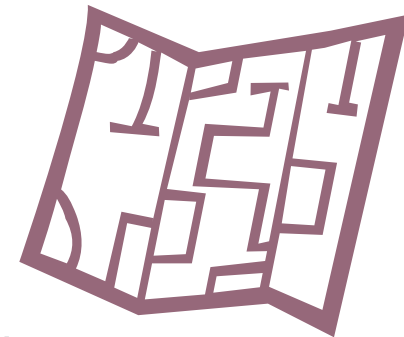
“Learning new things is always a brain blast.”

There are two types of curiosity that museum-goers talk about, and the differences between them may matter.

## CURIOSITY TYPE #1: Hedonic curiosity

Think of hedonic curiosity as the pursuing of interests and information gaps ... the finding of answers

We all experience hedonic curiosity. It is a bit like clickbait.



! It is that transient curiosity that comes from immediate stimulation.  
We need to know an answer, and typically that curiosity leads to a certain ending.



Hedonic curiosity is generally a good thing as those who respond to it gain new information.

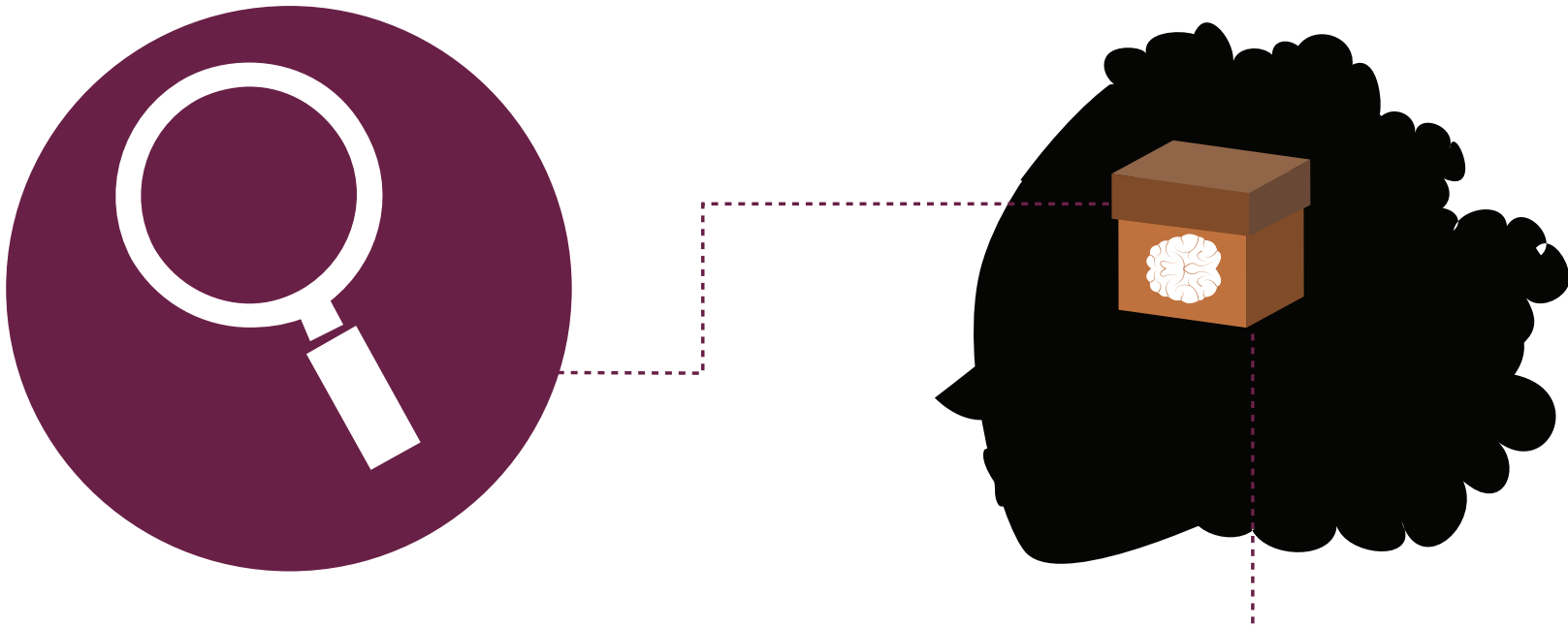
Such as: “Who won the election?”

Or: “What was that loud noise?”

But when only hedonic curiosity comes into play, its search for answers can also reinforce existing assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Thus, when someone says they are “always looking for info and answers,” that *may* imply limited searches for certainty that fit into their worldview.

That’s because finding answers doesn’t necessarily mean the opening of people’s minds to new ideas or perspectives.

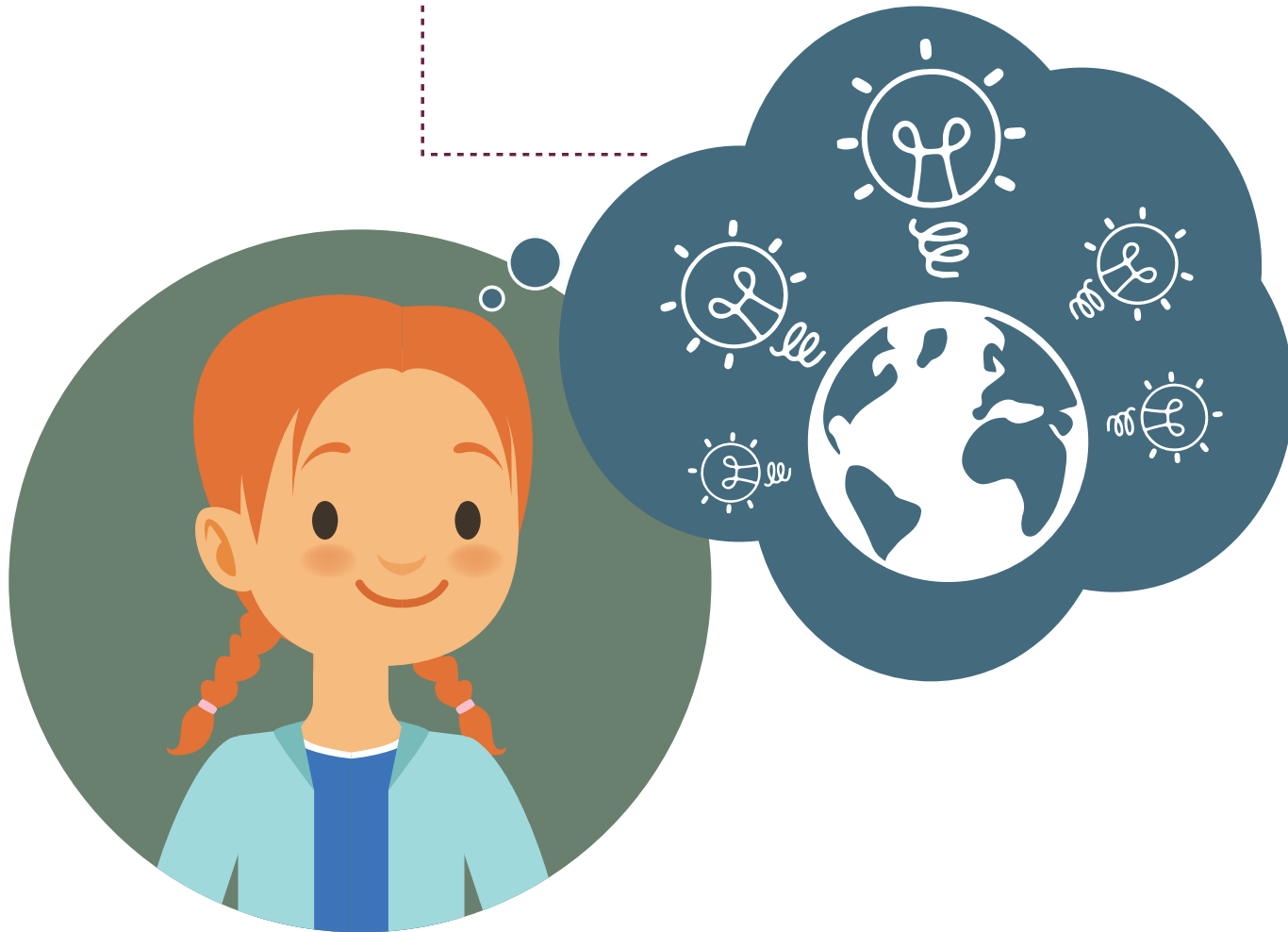


And for some curiosity scholars, the search for answers and certainty is actually considered the opposite of pure curiosity.<sup>1</sup>

So is hedonic curiosity really curiosity?

Yes, but it is kind of like thinking inside the box.

Many times, that's fine ... but there is a rich and interesting world outside the box.





Which brings us to:

## CURIOSITY TYPE #2: Eudaemonic curiosity





Think of Eudaemonic Curiosity as the sustained pursuit of new questions.



“The thing that really makes me think I'm curious is how willing I am to go down rabbit holes ...”

When people pursue new questions, that takes them outside the metaphorical box.

----- It yields broader knowledge from which to draw, including:

-  **Expanded world views**
-  **Greater cultural understanding**
-  **More compassionate perspective taking**
-  **Comfort with conflicting truths**

It appears that those who practice Eudaemonic Curiosity regularly also have better personal outcomes, including:

### **Stronger social support**

“My life has been so enriched by sharing my learning experiences with others -- friends, family ... Learning new things together is a wonderful bonding experience.”

### **Improved educational and career outcomes**

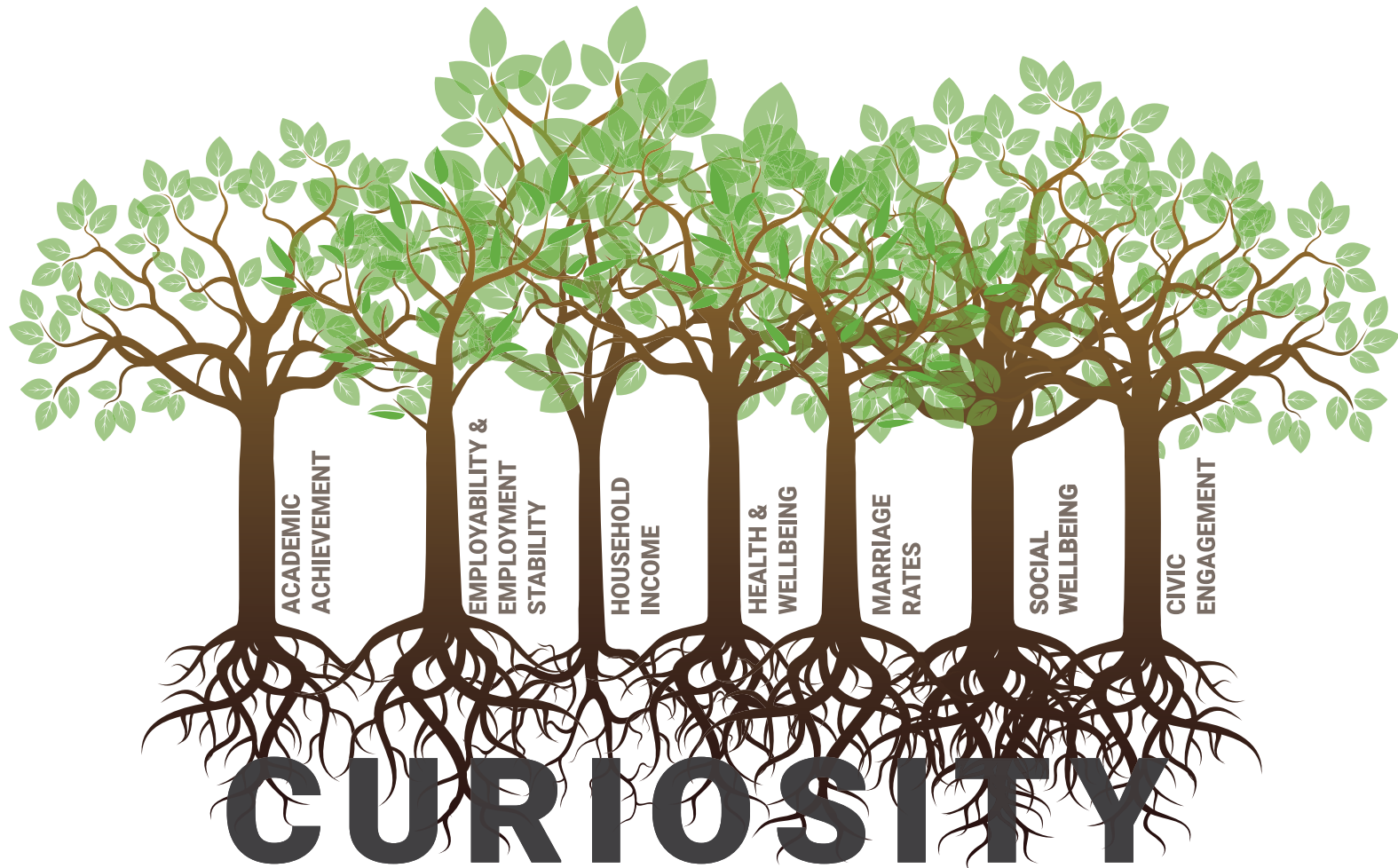
“Informal learning has fueled both my academic and career achievement because nurturing my curiosity informally led me to seek more education and a career that relies on critical thinking, creativity and the integration of many sources of knowledge.”

### **A greater sense of well-being**

“Without my level of curiosity ... my overall well-being would have been stunted.”

At least, that's what museum-goers say. But it turns out, they are on the right track. Social science research also indicates that there are many benefits of curiosity.<sup>2</sup>

Yet curiosity has a visibility problem. Eudaemonic curiosity in particular provides vital nourishment that supports and benefits all of us, but because no one is paying attention to it, no one sees it. It is hidden beneath the ground, supporting us from our roots ... and not receiving credit for the flourishing forest of outcomes it helps provide.



And those outcomes matter, because they turn into behaviors that set curious people apart. Indeed, curious people are more likely to:



There's one outcome that's particularly interesting when it comes to social justice. That curious people:



**Have greater  
compassion,  
understanding,  
empathy**

**Why? Because:**

"The more I know about things, the less I am fearful/distrustful. It gives me tolerance and respect for 'different' people/places/things."

Thus, it appears curiosity increases prosocial outcomes including:

- ✓ ..... **Understanding**
- 👉 ..... **Tolerance**
- ☂️ ..... **Empathy**
- 🌈 ..... **Compassion**
- 🌸 ..... **Desire for inclusion**

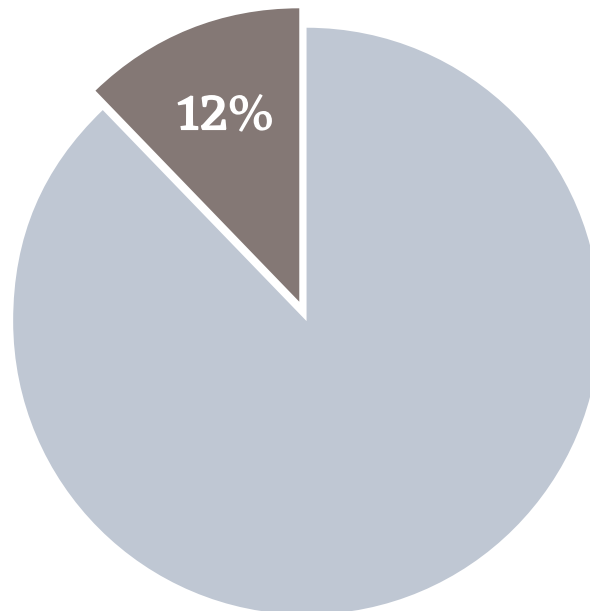
This suggests there is a linear model for empathy and prosocial outcomes in our society that is rooted in curiosity.



So, what do museum-goers say the role of museums is in cultivating these same things?



Nearly 2/3 of museum-goers say that museums have “very much” affected these prosocial outcomes.



**And only 12% think prosocial outcomes are not important for museums.**

## How do they think museums do this?

It's all about exposure. Exposure to different cultures, people, and points of view.

**"It has impacted my learning and understanding by teaching me different cultures and ways of life of others from past to present. The more knowledge you attain the more understanding you become."**

**"The displays and knowledge exhibited by museums isn't written just to fit my personal view or to match what I think things are like, so they force me out of my 'bubble' and to think of things from a different perspective ..."**

And that through museums, horizons have been broadened, minds opened, and new perspectives taken on.



That ultimately makes curiosity crucial for three huge things:

 **Practical life outcomes**

 **Self-actualization**

 **Prosocial outcomes**

And since curious people are significantly more likely to care about the challenges our planet and society are facing, we need more curious people!



So then how do we, as museums, nurture curiosity so that our impact on society is greater?

# Childhood.







As with so many things, for most people it starts in childhood.

Curious museum-goers overwhelmingly shared how important their childhood experiences were for developing a curious and open mindset.

“My father was a very curious person and his amazement at new and interesting things was infectious.”

**We could even say that, generationally, curiosity is hereditary, with parents passing it down to their children. They do this by:**

-  **Modeling curiosity behaviors**
-  **Encouraging inquiry**
-  **Providing resources to nurture curiosity**
-  **Emotionally supporting their children’s curiosity confidence**

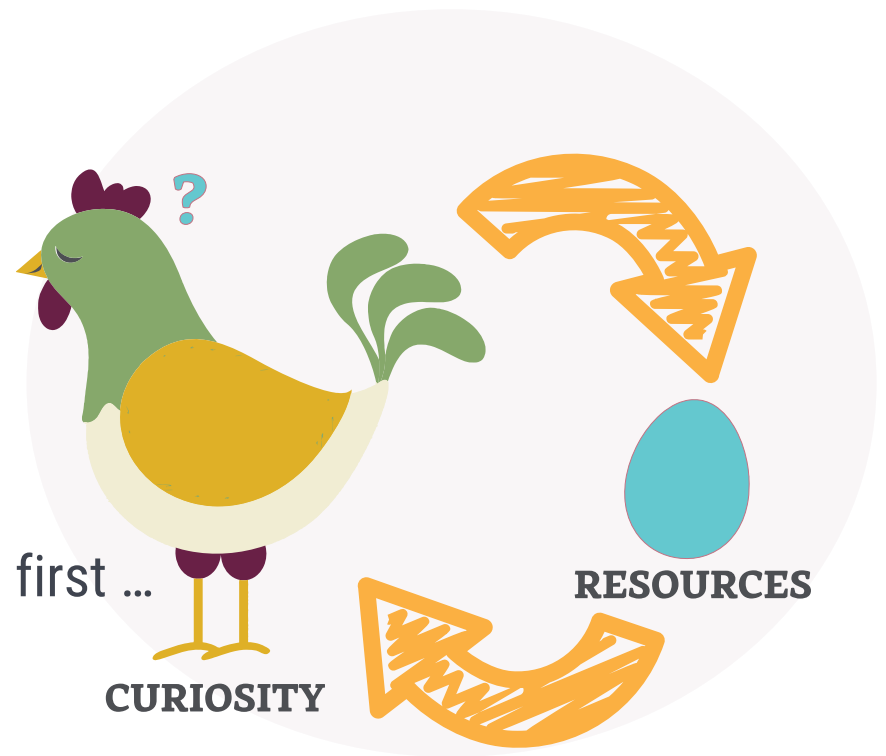
“My parents definitely fostered it. Letting me explore the answers to my own questions, rather than giving me the answer outright; putting me in contexts where open exploration led me to question and experiment with the world around me.”



Of course, it isn't only parents. Other adults can be influential in children's lives. But the vast majority of the time it is parents who wield the most influence.

Which leads us to a challenge.  
You see, museum-goers are outliers when it comes to curiosity. They are hyper-curious and they also tend to have the resources to feed that curiosity.

It makes you wonder a bit which comes first ...



But for many, curiosity (particularly the eudaemonic kind) fades away by adulthood ... and it struggles to exist in a vacuum.



"I believe that the vast majority of children are creative and inquisitive. Unfortunately, it seems that many lose that spirit over time, for reasons I can't quite pinpoint ..."

## So how do curious Lifelong Learners nurture their curiosity as adults?

Well, they participate in informal learning activities ... a lot. The average regular museum-goer participates in over **4 times** as many informal learning activities than non-visitors.



That amounts to a lot of new exposures, knowledge, and internal resources developed!

And they also create curiosity bubbles, surrounding themselves with curious individuals who mutually support one another, such as:

### Partners and spouses

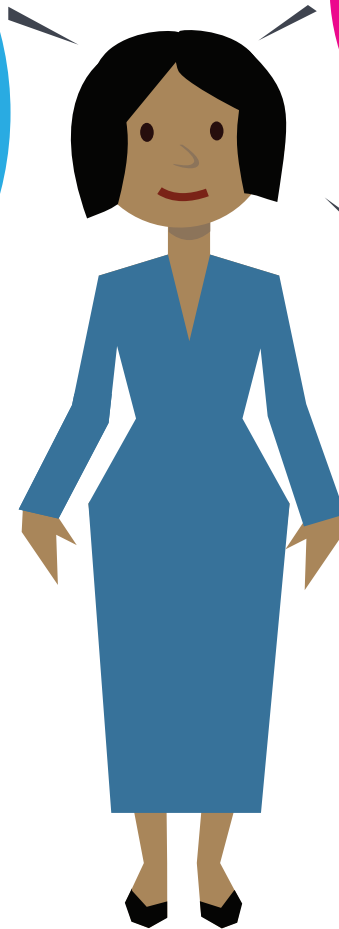
“... a spouse who encouraged my growth and development and has been my life-long partner in pursuing informal learning. We do so much together.”

### Friends

“My friends are also curious learners.”

### Children

“[Without curiosity] my children and grandchildren would not have the world views and love of learning they have. They might also be more threatened by differences instead of curious.”



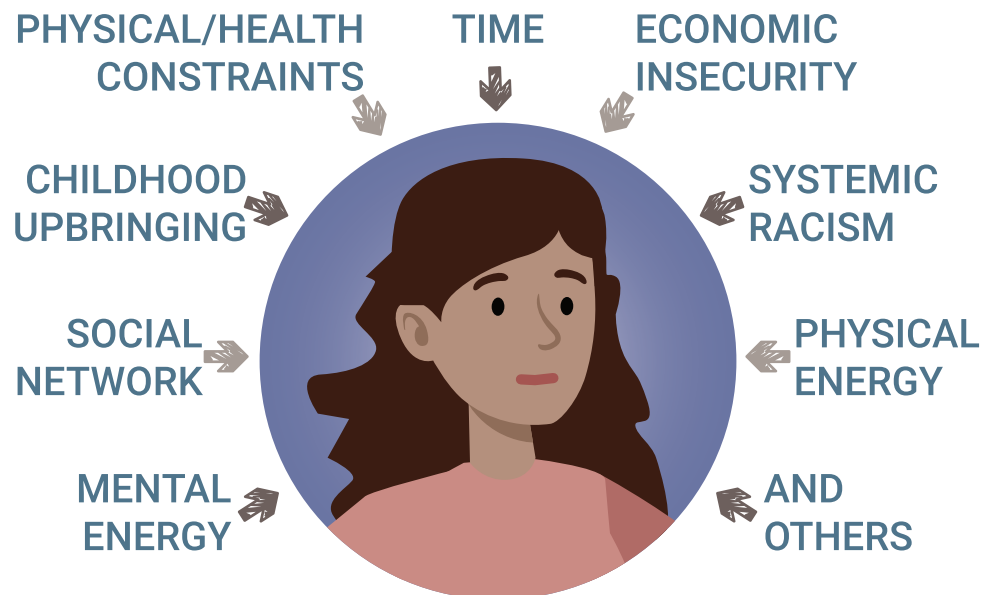
Which creates a Curiosity Spiral of growth and benefits.



But bubbles also insulate us from the broader world and from seeing how hard curiosity is for others to pursue ... making it harder for those born outside of the bubble to break in.

This brings us to the second social justice issue around curiosity: it isn't equitable.

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That's because there are many barriers to pursuing curiosity. External barriers that are largely rooted in social structures that make it harder for children and adults to feed their curiosity over their lifetimes.



The evidence also suggests that this curiosity gap actually promotes inequality and reinforces systemic racism and other societal challenges.

### Including child development.

When public health practitioners assess if children are “flourishing,” they assess



**Curiosity**

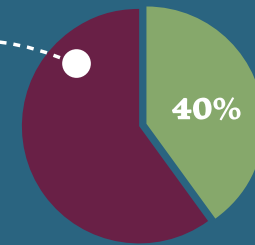


**Perseverance**



**Emotional control**

In the US, only 40% of school age children assess as flourishing.<sup>3</sup>



**REGULARLY  
CURIOUS**



**SOMETIMES  
CURIOUS**

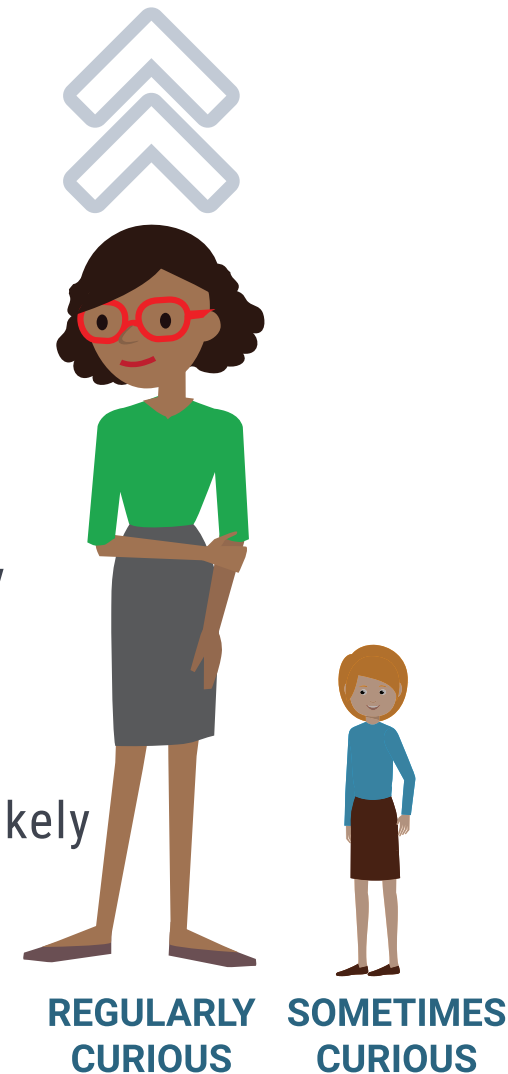


**RARELY  
CURIOUS**

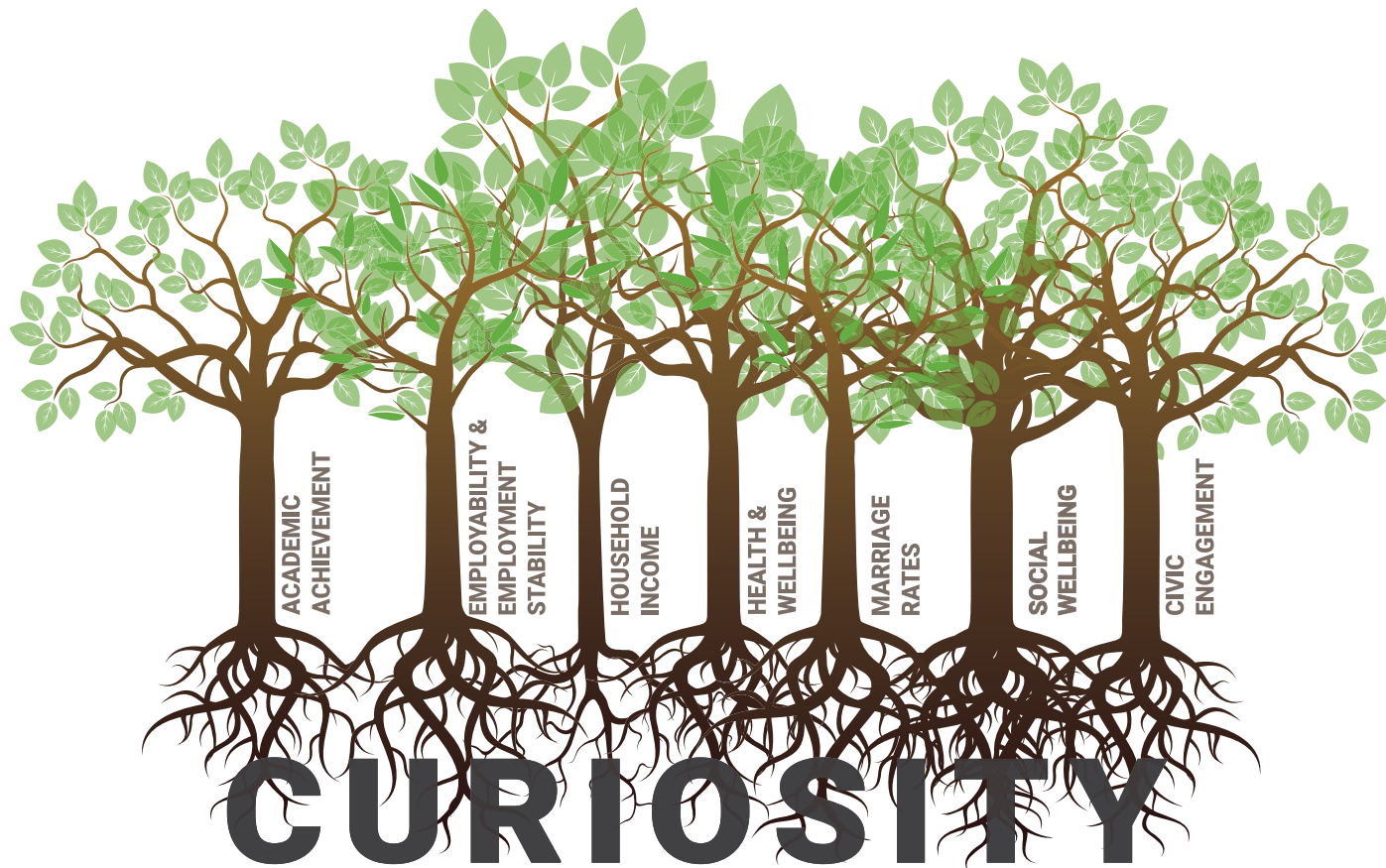
This extends to adults as well. In fact, a third of Americans say they do not participate in any informal learning activities at all ... and they also receive *none* of the benefits. **A third.**

And even for that 1/3 of the population that only *sometimes* pursues their curiosity, the benefits are far fewer. Indeed, compared to the sometimes curious, those who regularly pursue curiosity are significantly more likely to say they benefit from:\*\*

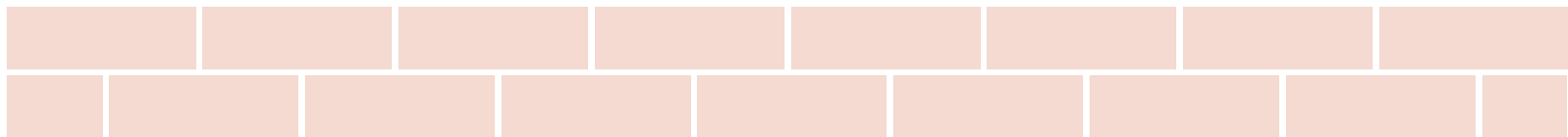
- MORE KNOWLEDGE:** 1.6x more likely
- CRITICAL THINKING:** 2.5x more likely
- CREATIVITY:** 3.1x more likely
- CULTURAL LITERACY:** 3.4x more likely
- EMPATHY/COMPASSION:** 3.6x more likely
- UNDERSTANDING/TOLERANCE:** 3.0x more likely
- CONSCIENTIOUSNESS:** 3.0x more likely
- COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:** 1.8x more likely
- STRONGER SOCIAL CONNECTIONS:** 1.6x more likely
- BETTER PARENTING:** 2.7x more likely



And those benefits are necessary to develop the practical outcomes of informal learning and the ongoing curiosity to pursue it.



**This makes overcoming those external, societal barriers all the more important.**



**Because curiosity is a birthright.**



**“That kid who's always asking, ‘Why?’ is on to something. If you foster that spirit instead of dismissing it, she just might go on to change the world.”**

**And we ALL benefit when more people can pursue a curious life.**

**Data Stories are created for *The Data Museum*, where research conducted by Wilkening Consulting is released. Sources include:**

- *Wilkening Consulting's 2017, 2018, and 2019 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers*
- *Wilkening Consulting's 2018 and 2019 Broader Population Sampling*

**All quotes: 2019 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers**

<sup>1</sup>Kashdan, Todd. Ph.D. *Curious? New York: HarperCollins, 2009*

<sup>2</sup>For sources, see [wilkeningconsulting.com/curiosity-resources](http://wilkeningconsulting.com/curiosity-resources).

<sup>3</sup>Bethell, Christina, et.al. *"Family Resilience and Connection Promote Flourishing Among US Children, Even Amid Adversity."* *Health Affairs* 38, no. 5, 2019

*\*Data Stories share research about regular museum-goers, who visit multiple museums each year and who respond to a survey about museum-goers; broader population sampling provides relevant comparison data.*

*\*\* This is an important distinction from measurable benefits from scientific studies. Perceived value is useful to help us understand what people value personally, and how museums fit within that worldview.*

*Visit The Data Museum at [wilkeningconsulting.com/datamuseum](http://wilkeningconsulting.com/datamuseum) for supporting context and data.*

*---Thank you to Rainey Tisdale for our ongoing discussions on curiosity and for being my curiosity partner with History Nebraska.---*



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ANNUAL  
SURVEY  
OF  
MUSEUM-GOERS

ANNUAL  
BROADER  
POPULATION  
SAMPLING

“MUSEUMS  
AND PUBLIC  
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(WITH  
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