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The **Death** of
Why?

The Decline
of Questioning
and the Future
of Democracy

An Excerpt From

***The Death of 'Why?':
The Decline of Questioning and the Future of Democracy***

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Questions and Power

WHY?

Why is the first question most children ask. With this question we express, to the delight and the chagrin of our parents, our power.

In my life, questions have always been power. Asking them enabled me to overcome the challenges I faced as a young woman sitting at tables where I didn't automatically belong.

The link between questions and power in our democracy is at the heart of this book. As the market reaches ever deeper into every aspect of our lives, as consumerism grows and as globalization shrinks the distance between countries and people, where will our power as citizens in a democracy come from?

I think it will come from our ability and willingness to ask *why*. To question our government, our schools, our communities, and ourselves. Inquiry is more than asking simple questions that come with yes or no answers. It is a process of discovery, asking, re-asking, synthesizing, and evaluating until we can get close to something that approximates truth.

Inquiry is more than an act; it is a value deeply embedded in our notions of democracy. Democracy — which in this book I use to mean not only our representational form of government but also a system that values equality, justice, and the idea that each member of the group has something worthy to offer the whole — requires citizens who pay attention, who synthesize and analyze, who evaluate the information they

have uncovered, and who are discerning about its source. Democracy needs citizens who can inquire.

When I look at contemporary culture, however, I see an obsession with answers, not questions. I see an environment that prizes projections of certainty over the wisdom gained from questioning, and questioning again. I see us asking our media, our politicians, our self-help gurus for the answer, any answer, to help us understand the world around us. We live in a country where *The Secret*, a self-help phenomenon, was on the *Publishers Weekly* best-seller list for one hundred weeks.¹ We want the answer to making money, the answer to the proper way to raise our children, the answer to understanding in simple terms this complicated world of ours.

The Internet makes our addiction to answers even easier; all we have to do is plug a few words into the search engine and, like Columbus, discover what was already out there and pretend that it is ours. Our very definitions of curiosity are changing as Google becomes the lightning-speed mediator of our inquiries. We are less concerned with interpreting what we find online because we believe that the Internet understands what we want and will deliver it to us. We are less committed to discovering truths than to locating them.

Our schools send the message to children that the answer is all that counts. We test students to death, conveying the idea that correctly filling in the bubbles is the same as learning. Our classrooms become dedicated to the cause of test preparation, as science and its guiding philosophy—that we must discover, ask questions, accumulate evidence, make determinations—become optional. Although we proclaim ourselves a model of democracy, justifying our international aggression, we do not trust that young people can question the way their communities work, so we underinvest in civics. Instead, we look to financial literacy education and teach our children to navigate the market, not to question it—so that

they will choose better, not so that they will participate in the creation of those choices.

This addiction to answers affects our democracy, too. We have the mistaken belief that even the most pressing challenges facing our country—climate change, globalization, health care, poverty—are problems to be “fixed” once and for all, if only we can find the right solution and the right person to implement them.

What we need to acknowledge, now more than ever, is that we do not know everything. We cannot know everything. Knowledge changes. Absorbing and acting on today’s answers is simply not enough. The future is a moving target, and the ground beneath us will never be still. The only thing we can count on to see us through an uncertain future is our ability to ask questions.

I’ll admit right now that I spend my days trying to change the world and have been doing so since I was a young person, when I represented the voice of over a million of my fellow students on New York City’s Board of Education. I have come to understand, however, that no matter how hard I try, I cannot fix things today for forever. We cannot “solve” the debate between globalization and national interest. We cannot “solve” the debate over the appropriate role of government. There is no one answer to settle the ongoing conversation about the social contract that each generation has had with its successors since the beginning of our nation. No matter how hard I try, I cannot fix any of those things so that my grandchildren won’t have to. What I can do is ensure that the generations to come are prepared to ask the questions that will force the constant reexamination that is at the heart of America’s democracy.

Good educators understand the limits of absolute knowledge; they don’t try to teach everything there is to know. The best they can do for their students is to teach them how to

inquire so they can navigate whatever course they encounter throughout their lives. Yes, young Americans must know the difference between fact and fiction, between what is real and what is unreal. But the best way for them to learn and internalize these distinctions is by discovering them for themselves. We can cultivate in them the habits of mind of inquiring, critical thinkers. They won't get critical thinking skills through memorization, ideology, or groupthink, no matter how Web savvy they are. They won't get there if we send them the message that the answer is out there and Google has it. Answers cannot simply be retrieved; they must be constructed.

Are we teaching our children to question? Are they growing up believing that inquiry should be valued?

I don't know the answer definitively. Nor can I offer a how-to for emphasizing inquiry where it currently goes undervalued, for encouraging questions where intellectual and technological shortcuts prevail. In fact, to do so would be contrary to the values that have driven my investigation. This book is not an answer; it is my question.

It seems fitting, therefore, that questions would guide the exploration in *The Death of “Why?”*. In part I, I ask, Does our society value questions or answers? I discover that all too often the latter takes precedence, and I offer quick snapshots of the ways in which our obsession with answers manifests itself in contemporary culture. Our increased ideological rigidity, reflected even in Americans' growing preference for living only among those with whom they agree, offers protection from the risks of inquiry, disguised in a collective cloak of self-righteousness. Why question when you just know — and everyone in your town, everyone in your social network, really knows — that something is true? We encourage the media to do more opining and less reporting because we want to be told how to interpret events as they unfold — preferably if that interpretation squares with our political ideology.

The Internet is as much a part of our culture as it is a tool. More than a medium such as television or radio, the Internet is a place where young people live. It may seem strange to wonder whether the Internet, where so much knowledge resides, encourages inquiry. It may seem counterintuitive to wonder whether the Internet, where we can become “friends” with someone on another continent, leads young people to ask more questions about their world.

Yet these are questions that we must ask, because what I have heard, read, and observed challenges conventional wisdom. Young people are substituting search engines for an inquiry process. They plug in their terms and press Enter, print the first three articles that come up, rinse, and repeat. This automated search cycle is not inquiry. They do not think carefully about the question they are asking; they do not refine that question based on preliminary exploration; they do not consider the credibility of the sources they encounter; they do not synthesize what they read. The coping mechanism for unlimited information is superficial exploration and expedited searches for certainty.

If Google took the day off, would we have any idea how to find information? It is a profound irony that, just when so much information is available to us, we are raising children who are so poorly equipped to critically engage with it. If they only learn to retrieve, and not to interpret, when and where will they think new thoughts?

It is in our schools, however, that the lack of questioning should trigger the greatest alarms about the future of our democracy, and this is where I spend the most time in this book. In part II, I ask, Are our schools aspiring to prepare citizens or consumers? I argue that the focus on answers rather than questions demonstrates a changing understanding of the purpose of the public school system, that schools have moved from preparing young people who can question

their democracy to preparing workers for our economy. The spokespeople for the latter approach say that it is in our nation's best interest. The evidence suggests otherwise.

America's employers aren't interested in test scores; they are interested in people who can think, question, adapt, and perform. On these scores, in survey after survey, employers register disappointment with the talent pool. We have created an educational environment devoid of curiosity, creativity, and inquiry, all in the name of coping with changed times that, in actuality, would be best served by graduates with those criteria in abundance.

Finally, in part III, I ask, When it comes to our political process, are we teaching our young people to be connected or engaged? I explore whether young people are learning enough about the world around to them to participate effectively in their democracy. They are constantly connected to one another and to the latest breaking news, but they do not read the newspaper. The youth who seek out the news online are snackers, grazers. They skim headlines on online news sites or get updates via text message. They are constantly in the know, but they are not more aware. They zero in on the news that already interests them.

As is true of the American appetite, excess does not mean fulfillment. Technology has certainly allowed young people to tell their own stories as a way of challenging the limitations of our corporatized and consolidated mainstream media. But without a shared knowledge about current affairs, without rigorous attention to the credibility of our sources, without the ability to read for meaning and not just consumption, how can we ask the questions that form the basis of collective decision making for our democracy?

I look at our presidential debates, powerful vehicles that are so important to our decision making but that are too scripted to demonstrate any kind of genuine questioning. I worry about the message that these closed, elite, and heavily

negotiated sessions send to our young people. The current structure of our political debates doesn't give any citizen much hope that their questions remain central to our politics.

In some places across our country, such as in Hampton, Virginia, we see the promise of engaging young people in local politics. With the support of adults who realize that their best hope for a healthy community is the involvement of young people in deciding their own fate, Hampton's young people learn to ask questions. They have a role in the decision-making processes of their town. They experience the relationship between smart questions and effective public policy, and as they experiment with democracy, their community becomes a better place for everyone to live.

Hampton is not the only positive note. Much in *The Death of "Why?"* inspires even this naturally cynical New Yorker, such as the community discussion and decision making facilitated by *AmericaSpeaks*, or New York City's School for Democracy and Leadership, where every student is required to participate in a "change project" in their local community and where over 90 percent of the senior class graduates.

When I encounter college students who proclaim themselves activists despite only a vague awareness of what is going on in the world, I ask them, How can you change the world when what you know of it comes from content provided in text messages, headlines skimmed on the Internet, and updates to Facebook pages? I teach them how to read the newspaper critically, how to ask questions about what they read, and how to identify and locate the information that would enable them to act. I see them awaken and transform. They have the potential for effective citizenship, a characteristic that places them ahead of the one out of three of their peers who have no connection with the news on any given day. And they have fun in the process. I know, because I have seen it firsthand.

Unfortunately, however, these examples are exceptions.

Abundant in our culture, intrinsic to our education policy, predominant on the Internet, are incentives, expectations, and penalties that favor answers, not questioning.

One note to guide the reader: The research on “inquiry” as such is limited. Therefore, this book offers few psychological or educational theories about inquiry or how it is developed. In addition, although there is contemporary research on the effects of civics education, there are few definitive reviews of its role in history. Neutral, nonindustry research on financial literacy is limited as well. When there was no formal research, I interviewed practitioners and psychologists. I visited schools and talked to educators. I did my best to synthesize the available research on a topic that is remarkably unexplored—but perhaps that is precisely the point.

Fundamentally, this book tells stories about how current conditions do or do not inspire children to learn the value of asking questions. Naturally, I hope that these stories will inspire further questions.

Societies rightly fear that inquiry challenges the established order of things. Questions beget change. And despite its political utility during election years, change is a scary idea. I see a country mitigating the risk of inquiry. We numb inquisitiveness with consumerism. We fool ourselves into devaluing it in our public schools. We escape it through technology. Questions are a risky business. There’s a reason Socrates was sentenced to death, after all.

A colleague of mine asked why I would write a book about inquiry and children. Why not write about one of the issues on which I’ve focused directly in my work—urban policy, the economic health of the current and aspiring middle class, education, or the preservation of access to the courts so that regular Americans may hold corporations accountable?

Yes, those are all issues that intrigue me. Addressing them has motivated my work, from my beginnings as a student activist, to directing a campaign to engage college students

in the conversation about Social Security reform, to working as an education policy analyst for a New York City public official and mayoral candidate, to my current position as the executive director of the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy (DMI), a progressive think tank, where I've been since 2002.

But the issue that is the focus of this book underlies them all. If we do not have a populace prepared to question, a populace that is engaged through the very process of questioning, the issues that concern me have no future. How easy will it be to concretize legal obstacles that tilt the scales of justice in favor of corporations if no one is asking questions? What kinds of public schools will we have if the vast majority of Americans are disconnected and disengaged from their local institutions?

Whether young people are prepared to question events as they unfold, to question their democracy and the status quo—all of the issues I care about depend on this.

I've read countless books that claim to know the right answer or to explain how other people got the wrong answer; to demonstrate why some people don't get the right answer, no matter how hard we try to convince them, or how we used to get the answer right but now don't because of where we live, who we are, what we eat, who we love; to tell me which words are used to describe the answer, which impulses these words trigger, and whether we vote with this answer in mind. Underlying the "correct answer" approach is the mistaken idea that the health of our democracy depends on our ability to know the answers and to act on those answers, rather than on our ability to ask questions.

Inquiry is natural for us; infants inquire even before they have language. But they will only engage in it if they have the safety of attachment to at least one person. A child's explorations are cued by this person. Approving looks mean "explore more," whereas disapproving looks mean "danger." Children

trust their caregivers unconditionally and, as a result, they feel safe to begin a life of inquiry. Trust and inquiry go hand in hand.

If we want our children to grow up inquiring, we will need to restore trust in one another and in the institutions of our democracy. It is surreal to live in a time when citizens who question their democracy are considered unpatriotic, whereas those who wish to slowly unravel the civic purpose of our public institutions in favor of the commercial purposes of our private institutions are said to have our best interests in mind. It stretches the imagination that teachers who encourage young people to question their local institutions would be attacked on editorial pages as propagandists, even while we trust commercial search engines to understand and deliver what we want to know.

Our democracy can handle inquiry. It can handle a citizenry asking complicated questions. In fact, such questioning is essential. It is entrenched power, feeding off ignorance and resignation, that our democracy cannot abide.

My question is not, Do we inquire more or less than we used to? The question I ask is, Are we teaching our children to inquire as much as the times demand?

Part I

Culture: Questions or Answers?

“Stop searching. Start questioning.”

GEERT LOVINK¹

It was October 2008 and the stock market was crashing. I sat on the New York subway, immersed in my newspaper. Capitol Hill was contemplating a historic bailout, something to the tune of \$700 billion. Companies whose Manhattan headquarters I had walked by just a few days before were now out of existence. People were comparing the coming crisis to the Great Depression.

As New Yorkers often do, I looked over my shoulder to catch a peek at what my neighbor was reading. It looked like a script: double-spaced, bound on the left side, a clear front cover. My eyes were drawn in to these words on the page:

To attract money, you must focus on wealth. It is impossible to bring more money into your life when you are noticing you do not have enough, because that means you are thinking *thoughts* that you do not have enough . . .

The only reason any person does not have enough money is because they are *blocking* money from coming to them with their thoughts . . . If you do not have enough, it is because you are stopping the flow of money coming to you, and you are doing that with your thoughts.²

I looked at the title in the page footer: *The Secret*. Having sold almost 4 million copies in the United States alone,³ *The Secret* is a self-help phenomenon, but until then I'd never seen it in

the flesh (well, a bootlegged version of the flesh). Its basic premise is that what you visualize—including money—shall be yours, a result of what it calls the Law of Attraction. The book is a dressed-up how-to, one that appeals deeply to our desire to “know” the formula for achieving all that we believe the American Dream can offer.

How seductive, on a day such as that one, with a looming economic crisis throwing our collective fiscal futures into chaos, to seek solace in a book that offers some certainty. How comforting to not wonder about what the impending collapse would mean to regular people like the two of us sitting on that train. To not focus on the causes of this crisis or whether a bailout of such epic proportions was the right medicine for the disease. To not wonder about what it means to the American Dream that home ownership had become such a toxic pill, or how our economy, so heavily dependent on Wall Street, could ever recover.

Questions. Questions. Questions. Isn't it easier to find solace in the answer?

Maybe on the train ride that day. But for how long?

There are as many definitions of culture as there are people to define it; as a “sphere,” it is both nebulous and ubiquitous. American culture shapes and is shaped by the books we read, the television we watch, the food we eat, the jobs we work, the way we raise our children, the way we think about our country, the way we define success, and a thousand other things. Fundamentally, culture describes the choices we make and the values we hold that influence those choices.

Society offers rewards and incentives, and in today's culture we reward and encourage the sound bite, the high test score, the confidence and volume with which opinion—however ungrounded—is delivered.

Our national obsession with answers is reflected everywhere in our culture. We value solutions and being “right” over thoughtful inquiry; we value outcome over process,

and the speed by which those outcomes can be produced. We make decisions, therefore, based on the desire to move as quickly and efficiently as possible toward a quick fix or the “absolute” or “the answer” — even if none of these things exist.

This desire is evident in our approach to public schooling, in the shallowness of our political discourse, and in the increasingly narrow role our media play in informing us. It is evident in America’s addiction to self-help, an \$11 billion industry, up from \$9.73 billion just two years ago. In 2007, Americans generated \$1.52 billion in retail sales after watching self-improvement infomercials. They spent \$2.45 billion on self-help audio-books. They spent over \$1 billion on motivational speakers.⁴ To put this into perspective, \$11 billion is how much Americans spent in one year to drink bottled water.⁵

Although I applaud the instinct to better ourselves, I don’t believe that true and lasting change will come about by plugging billions of dollars into an industry that has no real incentive to actually solve its target market’s problems (who, then, would buy such books?).

We look for answers in ideology, whether religious, political, or cultural. In fact, Americans have become more fervent and more polarized in our ideologies, and this polarization is determining where we pray, for whom we vote, and even where we live. In ideology, we find refuge. Ideological solutions offer the comfort of uniform, predictable answers. And now, as our nation faces incredible challenges domestically and abroad, who wouldn’t want a little bit of comfort and predictability? From that perspective, it makes perfect sense to read *The Secret* on the very day that the next Great Depression is forecast.

But our democracy pays a price for this comfort. Despite being citizens of the same nation, we operate increasingly within echo chambers, bubbles of thought and belief that are protected by virtual and geographic gates. In an echo chamber,

we hear the same message bouncing back and forth, amplifying its supposed certainty. We spend hours online every day, among people with whom we agree. We listen to the news station that tells the story just as we want it to be told. We retire to homes near neighbors who will not question us, either. By click or by clique, we avoid questioning ourselves, each other, and our democracy.

Traditionally, we have looked to our media to ask questions, especially of the powerful, but today's press increasingly deals us answers and opinions. Media business models are changing, forcing media outlets to work cheaper and faster, an embodiment of the conflict between consumerism and inquiry in our culture. Our appetites are changing as well. We consume opinion; we are addicted to those who give it to us. Investigative journalists are still out there on their beats, trying to uncover what Richard Tofel, general manager of independent newsroom ProPublica, described to me as "stories of moral force," but the role that media plays in our country is changing to resemble the role of entertainment.

Our obsession with answers—and its partner in crime, instant gratification—is perhaps nowhere better evidenced than by the monumental role that Google plays in our daily lives and common culture. The Internet's blessing and curse is the information it puts at our fingertips. The way we interact with that information reveals the priority we place on trivia over investigation, consumption over exploration, speed over reflection.

Yes, the Internet offers abundance. But it also limits our ability to engage with that abundance. In other words, it is not just what we do to the medium; it is what the medium does to us. We must consider the notion that the Internet changes those who read and think within its borders, like children who grow up near power plants and wind up asthmatic. The Internet changes how we read, think, and breathe in other aspects of our lives as well. And the Internet is changing us

in ways that profoundly—and, I believe, negatively—affect our ability to ask questions about and participate in our democracy.

Democracy requires us to ask thoughtful questions whose answers must be constructed, not simply retrieved.

We are born curious; we ask questions with our hands before we can speak. But there is no guarantee that our childhood curiosity will turn into a lifelong commitment to asking questions. We have to send the message that this journey—this journey of asking questions, of exploration—is as important as where we end up. The journey is a risk that our children, and our country, must be willing to take.

1: Inquiry Is Risky, Resilience Is the Reward, and Other Lessons from Childhood

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO TEACH BABIES TO ASK QUESTIONS,” Dr. Gwenden Dueker told me. “If they could ask *why* at birth, they probably would—and once they can say *why*, they say it all the time. They are constantly exploring and picking up information.”

Dueker studies infants and how they learn to categorize the things they encounter. From her post in Grand Valley State University’s psychology department, she spends much of her time observing babies and the ways that parents interact with them. When I interviewed her on the telephone, I could hear her eleven-month-old baby in the background. I wondered what it was like to have a newborn when your business is studying newborns. Talk about pressure.

We are naturally inquisitive at birth—this everyone knows—but we don’t automatically stay that way. In a safe environment, children are instinctively inclined to explore and inquire. “It’s not something that you have to teach children to do,” she explained, “but it is something you can prohibit children from doing.”

Exploration and discovery, the first steps in an inquiry process, are natural behaviors for infants, but the next steps are not guaranteed, because infants intuitively understand what many adults suppress or only recognize subconsciously: that inquiry is risky. Exploration of the unknown is risky. What will happen if I touch this object I’m unfamiliar with, the infant asks when she looks up to her mother, awaiting the

sign that it is okay to proceed. The adult asks, What will happen if I challenge this long-held assumption, this way of life that I've always believed to be right and true — although as we grow older there often is no one to signal that it is okay, or even desirable, to proceed. Inquiry can open us up, broaden our understanding of the world. Inquiry can lead to change. But it is and will always be a frightening concept.

If we avoid the risk of inquiry, however, we undermine our ability to build the resilience necessary to face future challenges. It is enjoyment of the *process* of exploring the unknown, of asking questions, that we want to instill in our infants. I believe it is also what we want to instill in our society.

Wisdom from the Crib

We can encourage inquiry through the environments that we create for our children. First, to feel safe to explore and tackle the unknown, infants need a secure connection to at least one caregiver. The research shows that securely attached children are “more persistent, cooperative, enthusiastic, and effective at solving problems than are insecurely attached kids.”¹ This attachment must be physical; it cannot be replaced by technology. This physicality is important to bear in mind as so many of us are working longer and harder, responding to the realities of an increasingly unforgiving economy, and as our young children spend more time alone in front of television shows and video games than they do around family dinner tables.

Second, research shows that inquiry in infants is catalyzed by external contact. “Inquiry is mostly fostered in interaction with other people,” Dueker told me. This requirement for interaction has implications for how we raise our children but also for how we think of one another. We cannot be physically isolated from those with whom we disagree, from those

who are different from us, because it is these disagreements and differences that could lead us to ask questions. We need to bump up against the unknown in order to question it.

However, even if the unknown is there, ready to be bumped up against, not all children have the motivation to do so as they get older. Just as we can foster inquiry through the environments that we create, so too can we inhibit it. In this country, we care a lot about the self-esteem of young people. We believe that adolescents with higher self-esteem are likely to be more ambitious and more successful, and so we think that if we praise our children for their inherent intelligence and ability we are giving them the confidence to face new challenges. But as Stanford psychology professor Dr. Carol Dweck discovered, there's praise that leads to inquiry and praise that does not, and we have to be careful about which approach we choose to take.

I've heard immigrants to this country remark on the strange parenting behaviors of Americans obsessed with building up the self-esteem of children. It is literally foreign to these immigrants to see children praised so effusively and regularly. Although such praise is intended to give children the confidence to succeed, it can in fact also inhibit the intellectual risk-taking that leads to greater achievement.

Dweck is an expert in the relationship between praise, motivation, and achievement. She has worked for four decades with people of all ages in the United States and abroad, to understand what makes people ambitious. General opinion holds that ambition stems from self-confidence in one's intrinsic talent and intelligence. However, the results of Dweck's studies of young people go against the conventional wisdom and indicate that, rather than inspiring young people by telling them how smart or talented or perfect they are, we would be wise to praise instead their effort.

A 1998 study by Dweck demonstrates the power of praise to affect resilience and achievement.² Teaching assistants

hired by Dweck offered several hundred fifth graders, divided into two groups, a three-round, nonverbal IQ test. The first round comprised relatively easy questions, and the children did well. In response, they were given two kinds of praise. Group A was told, “Wow, that’s a really good score. You must be smart at this.” Group B was told, “Wow, that’s a really good score. You must have worked very hard.”

For the next round of the exam, the children were given a choice: either stay at the same level of difficulty or increase it. Group A, praised for its intelligence, opted for the same level of difficulty. Group B, praised for its effort, opted for a harder exam. The children who were praised for being smart did not want to take a risk that they would fail. When faced with a challenge, they were more worried about losing their standing as “smart” than interested in what they could learn from the exercise to make them even smarter. They wanted to get the answer right. The children praised for their effort, however, looked forward to the challenge. In their view, the process of learning was what counted, and the challenge of learning brought them reward.

Dweck believes that there are two mind-sets when it comes to intelligence. Those with a fixed mind-set (an outgrowth of the messages children are sent about their value) “shun effort in the belief that having to work hard means they are dumb.” Those with a growth mind-set, on the other hand, believe that one can work hard and get smarter. They enjoy challenges. According to Dweck’s studies, students with a growth mind-set are those most likely to succeed.

Simply by signaling what we think is most important, therefore, we can change a person’s motivation. Our children can be *intrinsically* motivated to take action that is rewarding in itself—such as thinking critically about a new and harder task. But our answer-obsessed society is organized to cultivate *extrinsic* motivation—rewards, such as the praise earned from getting the right answer, even on a simpler question.³

When we send children the message that they should enjoy the very process of learning, we cultivate in them the kind of motivation that will serve them as they confront the obstacles that are inevitable in life. When we praise their effort, we cultivate in them resilience that leads to achievement.

I believe there is a cautionary note in this for those who lead our nation. Our nation must be resilient if we are to confront the challenges ahead. To create this resilience, our leaders would be wise to worry less about reinforcing our national status — as the smartest, as the best — and more about cultivating in our citizenry the desire to learn, to question, and to confront the unknown.

Inquiry Builds Resilience

Unknowingly, and despite their stated preferences, the students of both group A and group B in Dweck's study were then given the same exam, a harder one. The "smart" group quickly became discouraged, doubting their ability. They "assumed their failure was evidence that they weren't really smart at all," Dweck writes. The hard-working group, on the other hand, remained confident in the face of the harder questions, and their performance improved significantly on subsequent, easier problems. They became more involved, "willing to try every solution to the puzzles . . . Many of them remarked, unprovoked, 'This is my favorite test.'"⁴

A final round of easy tests showed that "[students] who had been praised for their effort significantly improved on their first score — by about 30 percent. Those who'd been told they were smart did worse than they had at the very beginning — by about 20 percent."⁵ Enjoyment of the process led to resilience, and resilience led to achievement.

Practitioners that I spoke with across the country echoed this view, without even knowing of Dweck's experiments.

They all linked the cultivation of a love of inquiry in young people to the cultivation of a strong spirit and persistence.

“As individuals, we learn better when we are curious and interested,” Lynn Rankin of the Institute for Inquiry at San Francisco’s Exploratorium told me. “That self-motivation of wanting to know something and struggling because you’re so passionate you want to understand it, it allows you to persevere and cross a lot of barriers.” Driven by questions rather than the need to have the right answer, and supported in environments that reward effort rather than status, these young people are better equipped to confront the unknown and the difficult. They are committed not just to the outcome but also to the process.

Our National Motivations Matter

I can’t help seeing a parallel between these children who are praised out of their will to question and our own nation. We are a unique nation in our insistence that we are number one. I do believe strongly that we are a special nation. Although our nation has faced monumental challenges from the moment of our founding to today, we have overcome them faster than any other. To paraphrase the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the arc of history is long but it bends toward justice, and I believe that our nation’s arc is shorter than any other.

But we are also a prideful nation, more so than most. (One study places us in a tie with Venezuela for first place, based on two measures of national pride,⁶ a comparison that has very interesting implications.) Our national self-esteem is intimately connected to our perception of America’s status in the world. The risk of this association is that, like the students praised for being smart, we are less willing to engage in the collective risk of questioning ourselves or the world around us.

As Dweck's and Dueker's work shows, the willingness of young people to question depends on the messages we send them. What about our national ethos? Do we cultivate in our citizenry the belief that it is okay to question our country, and that doing so is the way that it can become a better, stronger, fairer nation? Does this rule apply during presidential campaigns, during wars, during times of economic crisis? Do we believe, as a nation, that the exploration of the unknown is a worthwhile process in and of itself, or do we attach to that kind of questioning a value that makes it too risky a proposition for the average citizen to undertake?

Ultimately, our resilience as a nation will depend on our success in struggling with what we don't know, not on our success in maintaining our image to the world. But to struggle with what we don't know, we must first encounter it — and as more Americans sequester themselves in bubbles of sameness and ideological homogeneity, we're giving ourselves fewer and fewer opportunities to do so.

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