

SOME NOTES TO START THE YEAR 2018-2019

ON CURIOSITY: Curiosity requires willingness to risk; risk uncertainty, risk failure, risk looking “dumb.” Without that willingness, however, you risk actually becoming “dumb.” Take the risk. Curiosity and knowledge grow together.

ON STORY: Story defines humanity. We neurologically NEED to tell and hear stories. Sometimes we so badly want to find a pattern in our lives that we make data fit a story we want rather than a story supported by facts. We tell ourselves stories that fit what we believe, rather than risk a challenge. That is called confabulation – avoid it. Check yourself! Here’s one way how. In any given situation, ask yourself these three questions recommended by noted social worker and researcher Brené Brown in her 2017 book *Rising Strong*:

1. What more do I need to learn and understand about the situation?
2. What more do I need to learn and understand about the other people in the story?
3. What more do I need to learn and understand about myself?

Also from *Rising Strong*:

In the absence of data, we will always make up stories. It’s how we are wired. In fact, the need to make up a story, especially when we are hurt, is part of our most primitive survival wiring. Meaning making is in our biology, and our default is often to come up with a story that makes sense, feels familiar, and offers us insight into how to best self-protect.

Robert Burton, a neurologist and novelist, explains that our brains reward us with dopamine when we recognize and complete patterns. Stories are patterns. The brain recognizes the familiar beginning-middle-end structure of a story and rewards us for clearing up the ambiguity. Unfortunately, we don’t need to be accurate, just certain.

You know that wonderful sensation we experience when we connect the dots or something finally makes sense for the first time? The “aha” moment as Oprah calls it? Burton uses that as an example of how we might experience our brain’s pattern-recognition reward. The tricky part is that the promise of that sensation can seduce us into shutting down the uncertainty and vulnerability that are often necessary for getting to the truth.

Burton writes, “Because we are compelled to make stories, we are often compelled to take incomplete stories and run with them.” He goes on to say that even with a half story in our minds, “we earn a dopamine ‘reward’ every time it helps us understand something in our world – even that explanation is incomplete or wrong.” (79-80)