



TREE TALK: ABOUT CURIOSITY David Wheelwright, P'33 November 2004

Stop and Think is a very famous slogan. For Pasquaney campers, young and old, it is more than a slogan. It is something that is lived. For both new and old campers, the Pasquaney experience and the value codes learned give us the tools to use at decision making times. But what triggers the need to stop and think in the first place? To help make decisions in a timely fashion, you must be keenly aware of all the things around you.

What does it take to develop this awareness? A major input is persistent curiosity . It's a trigger that can be developed to such a fine point that it becomes second nature and almost instantaneous. Curiosity sharpens the learning process and produces a whole lot of new horizons never before seen.

Maybe you will remember Rudyard Kipling's story, How the Elephant Got His Trunk. The baby elephant asked his Aunt the Baboon, and a slug of other relatives, some very personal questions; and they all spanked him for his curiosity. The spanking hurt, but the elephant's curiosity went on unabated. Finally, he sidled up to the crocodile and asked more questions. With that, the crocodile said, "Come a little closer" , and then sank his teeth into the elephant's nose and wouldn't let go. The elephant tried to pull away, and his nose began to stretch. So that's how it happened. We all know that the trunk became very useful indeed. That's the new horizon.

But there are real life stories that are a great deal more illustrative. I turn now to an episode in the life of Richard P. Feynman as told in a book called Tuva or Bust<sup>1</sup> by his close friend and companion, Ralph Leighton<sup>1</sup>.

Feynman invented the detonator of the WWII, atomic bomb. This and other notable achievements in the field of physics led to the award of a Noble Laureate. But he was also a mathematician, and a professor. He loved music and beating on drums. He was a practical joker. His curiosity lead him to many experiences and adventures that would have otherwise escaped him. Let me quote extensively from the first chapter of Tuva or Bust.

".....Math is okay," I said [Ralph Leighton speaking], 'but what I really like is geography. If I had a geography class I would bring in my shortwave radio and tune in BBC or Radio Nederland. We'd play geography games like I did with my brother: he and I would go through every independent country of the world. You know, the last letter of Liechtenstein determines the first letter of the next country - Nepal, for example.'

'Or Nigeria, Niger, or Nicaragua,' said Carl [Leighton's junior high school son] with a hint of his mother's Yorkshire accent.

'And after exhausting the independent countries,' I continued, 'we would move on to the provinces. Did you know there is a province called Amazonas in three different countries?'

'Let's see,' said Carl, 'How about Brazil, Colombia, and Peru?'

'Not bad,' I replied. 'The third country is Venezuela, although Peru does have more of the Amazon in it than Venezuela does.'

‘So you think you know every country in the world?’ interjected Richard [Feynman] in a familiar, mischievous voice that usually signaled impending doom for its target.

‘.....Uh, sure,’ I said ...

‘Okay, then whatever happened to Tannu Tuva?’

‘Tannu what?’ I said, ‘I never heard of it.’

‘When I was a kid,’ Richard continued, ‘I used to collect stamps. There were some wonderful triangular and diamond shaped stamps that came from a place called “Tannu Tuva.” ‘

I became suspicious. My brother Alan, a stamp collector, had made a fool out of me dozens of times when we played “Islands of the World.” He would rattle off some exotic sounding name like “Aitutaki” and when I challenged him on it he would pull out his stamp catalog and show me a few stamps from the place. So I stopped challenging him, and he grew bolder and bolder, winning game after game. Finally I caught him on “Aknaki,” supposedly part of a tiny atoll in the South Pacific, after dimly recalling that the week before he had claimed it was a river in Mauritania. So I straightened up in my chair a bit and said, “Sir, there is no such country.’

‘Sure there is,’ said Richard. ‘In the 1930s it was a purple splotch on the map near Outer Mongolia, and I have never heard anything about it ever since.’

Had I stopped and thought a moment, I would have realized that Richard’s favorite trick was to say something unbelievable that turns out to be true. Instead, I tightened the noose that I had just placed around my neck: ‘The only countries near Outer Mongolia are China and the Soviet Union,’ I said, boldly, ‘I can show you on the map.’

.... ‘See?’ I said. ‘There’s nothing here but the USSR, Mongolia, and China... This “Tannu Tuva” must have been somewhere else.’

‘Oh look!’ said Carl. ‘Tuvinskaya ASSR. It’s bordered on the south by the Tannu-Ola Mountains.’

Sure enough, occupying a notch northwest of Mongolia was a territory that could well once have had the name Tannu Tuva. I thought, I’ve been had by a stamp collector again!

‘Look at this,’ remarked Richard ‘The capital is spelled K-Y-Z-Y-L.’

‘That’s crazy,’ I said. ‘There’s not a legitimate vowel anywhere!’

‘We must go there.’ said Gweneth [Richard’s wife].

‘Yeah!’ exclaimed Richard. ‘A place that’s spelled K-Y-Z-Y-L has got to be interesting.’

Richard and I looked at each other and shook hands.

... I thought of the classic question, “Why are you climbing that mountain?” [Mt Everest] Our “mountain” had no particular physical challenge to it, but reaching a place controlled by the USSR in the deepest interior of Asia was sure to be difficult. And our reason for undertaking this challenge was downright profound compared to the

classic answer: “Because it’s spelled K-Y-Z-Y-L!”

We discussed how we might reach our goal. Of course Richard could give a series of physics lectures in Moscow, and we could all go to Kyzyl afterwards. (Actually, anyone traveling under such circumstances should insist on going to Tuva first, in case some sort of “difficulty” arose after the lectures.) But reaching Tuva that way would be like riding in a helicopter to the summit.

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... He [Richard] pulled out an old, slim book, and opened it. It was an Atlas from 1943. And there, on the map of Asia, next to Outer Mongolia, was that purple splotch called Tannu Tuva.”

You will find it instructive to analyze what took place: First, Feynman picked up this geography oddity [the Principality of Tannu Tuva in the midst of Soviet Russia] and kept in mind the fact that it did indeed exist in 1930; second, his curiosity was re-awakened by conversational circumstance; third, he created a challenge and accepted it, and all this led to a new horizon. The horizon is that Feynman was not only able to introduce Tanna Tuva to the American world, but, if memory serves, he was able to translate, for the first time, a most difficult foreign language into English. He was more than just a scientist?