

# How to Maintain Your Curiosity and Brilliance in These Challenging Times

By Alan Gregerman

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to disrupt the very nature of life and business, it becomes even more important to maintain our sense of curiosity and brilliance. We still have customers to serve, team members to engage and inspire, new relationships to start and build, communities with even greater needs, and a changing world that requires all of us to be even more agile, tech-savvy, innovative, and connected while apart.

There are definitely encouraging signs that the new year will be better, especially when it comes to the roll out of vaccines that should enable us to begin to reengage with family, friends, and colleagues outside our “bubbles” and virtual lives. But the world that we reenter will be different ...and so will the opportunities and challenges ahead.

*So how do we keep up our mojo and put ourselves and our organizations in the best and most creative position to succeed when things settle into the next “new normal?”* It is a question that almost every one of our customers continues to ask as 2021 begins.

**The key is to continue to place priority on exploring, connecting, learning, testing, and innovating.** We can do this by encouraging ourselves and our colleagues to take the time each week to search for new ideas and possibilities, develop new skills, reach out to new people, ask important questions, and pilot new ways to deliver greater value to those we have the privilege to serve. And a useful starting point is the encouraging words (slightly enhanced) of the renowned (and sexist) inventor Thomas Edison who once said:

*“Everything comes to him (or her) who hustles while he (or she) waits.” (“her” added)*

Only today, our “hustling” is primarily online.

If you have read my book [The Necessity of Strangers](#), you know that 99% of all new ideas are

based on other peoples' thinking or the remarkable genius of something found in nature. For example, a 2,000-year-old toy called the Chinese Top, coupled with sketches by a somewhat clever guy named Leonardo da Vinci, helped to spark the invention of the modern helicopter. A dog covered with burs from a hike in the Alps led to the discovery of Velcro. The Sony Walkman (or *Walkperson*), a marvel of modern technology in 1979, inspired the first Apple iPod in 2004. It was inspired by the transistor radio. And the revolution in fast and fresh food that was led by our friends at Chipotle could trace its origins in part to the “eat fresh” sandwiches of Subway as well as several thousand years of human beings creating, serving, and eating food. In fact, a recent archaeological discovery suggests that there were “street food” stands in Pompeo at the time when Mount Vesuvius decided to have a particularly bad day. Definitely something worth digging in to.

**It turns out that the people who spend the most time paying attention to all of the cool and uncool things around them are the ones who are most likely to find new possibilities and solve important problems.** Given this, the easiest way to unlock your curiosity and the genius of those around you is to get up, get out, and explore. We can still do this, both virtually and literally with a bit of caution. And here's how...

### **1. TAKE A FIELD TRIP...**

When it comes to exploring, let purpose and serendipity be your guides. You can start by making a list of businesses and organizations that you admire because of what they sell, how they sell it, their remarkable value propositions, their unique business models, social media strategies, or the simple reality that they have quickly taken the world by storm. Then plan a visit, online or in person, to discover the real secrets to their success. You can start by visiting their websites, listening to podcasts and reading articles about them, checking out customer-generated videos on YouTube, and even reading reviews. Then, when you are experiencing a bit of cabin fever, have received your vaccine, and/or have mastered the art of safely navigating in a virus-filled world, you can head out for some in person visits.

While I will assume that everyone reading this article is well-informed, highly intelligent, and determined to be a valued contributor to the health and safety of others, I'll quickly restate the non-political “basics” of field exploration during a pandemic as shared by non-political scientists at the CDC and the health ministries of over 200 other countries. (A) Avoid crowded places. (B) Wear a face mask that expresses your innate creativity and might spur a thoughtful conversation. (C) Keep your distance—which I view as at least twelve feet from anyone who is breathing. (D) Wash your hands twice as often as a dental hygienist. (E) Surrender to the allure of every bottle of

hand sanitizer that crosses your path. (F) Avoid crowded places.

Now where should I go?

I'll leave it up to you, but if you are stuck for ideas here are a few suggestions...

**IKEA**—where they have turned affordable design, self-service, a noteworthy or cringeworthy in-store journey, and the mystique of Sweden into a global home furnishing phenomenon. (Editorial note: the mystique of Sweden has taken a bit of a hit as a result of the pandemic and the country's commitment to personal freedom and herd immunity (or simply thinning the herd.))

**The Apple Store**—where personal technology, world-class design, and a commitment to making customers smarter offers a canvas for personal and business creativity and possibilities.

**Lush Cosmetics**—one of my favorite examples of a purpose-driven company. It's a place where soap looks like cheese and avocados, products are eagerly demo-ed but never tested on animals, everyone has a voice, and employees are simply rabid about their role in saving the planet.

**Warby Parker**—a fun and decidedly focused store where they have reinvented the business of selling eyeglasses. It is a great place to think about the power and necessity of creating new business models in a time of rapid change in technology and customer preferences.

**REI**—my favorite indoor place for almost everything that has to do with being outdoors. It's a place where they love what they do and are continually inspired to enable you to get the most out of your hiking, biking, climbing, paddling, walking, running, jumping, and snow time adventures. Ten minutes in one of their awesome stores will turn almost anyone into an explorer or, at least, an amateur naturalist.

Now serendipity...

There is a lot to be gained by simply heading out in your city or town and seeing what strikes your imagination without any planned destination. In fact, I have taken leadership teams, innovation teams, sales and marketing teams, and other groups of high potential weirdos on explorations in twenty-two different cities in the U.S. and around the world—all with the simple goal of trying to unlock their collective genius by discovering things that are “remarkable” in some important way. These journeys have led us to find bustling neighborhoods, intriguing people, hip new businesses in dozens of industries, hidden parks and gardens, energized playgrounds and soccer (i.e., football to 90 percent of the planet) fields, world-class museums and trendy galleries. They've also led us

to experience remarkable street performers and performances, amazing local festivals, captivating urban art, optical illusions, countless free samples, innovations in mobility, protests, tributes, and the answers to age-old secrets (but you'll have to explore to find those out).

And in the process, we have stretched our thinking about what it means to be **REMARKABLE, INSPIRING, PASSIONATE, ENTHUSIASTIC, COMPELLING, USEFUL, HELPFUL, EASIER, FASTER, ENERGIZED, ENGAGING, ENGAGED, SUSTAINABLE, SEAMLESS, HEALTHIER, HAPPIER, LESS EXPENSIVE, MORE EXPENSIVE, MORE IMPACTFUL**, or anything else that really matters to your customers and employees. All possible starting points for reaching your full potential.

Still concerned about venturing out? You can take virtual tours of many of the [world's finest museums](#) and [cities](#)...all of which are simply a Google search away.

## **2. LEARN NEW THINGS...**

This is also a great (and essential) time to learn new things. After all, who wants to look in the post-Covid-19 mirror only to realize that they have gained too much weight and become a slightly irrelevant one trick pony? You can begin or continue learning by following the latest trends in your industry and line of work. But don't stop there because learning about other industries and other lines of work is an easy and fun way to broaden your thinking and generate a garden of new possibilities. In other words, read everything you can, including things that do not seem particularly valuable to the things that are currently on your plate. Remember, your plate is likely to look a whole lot different by design and necessity when we all emerge from captivity.

Also, continue to attend webinars and classes where you can grow current skills and learn new ones. The act of learning something new and different is one of the best ways to keep your mind alive and growing. I've used the pandemic to learn a bunch of new stuff that includes building my understanding of data science and AI, basic bicycle mechanics, learning to saw and split wood (not the smartest idea at a time when hospital emergency rooms are sadly way too crowded), and baking a perfectly moist and indescribably delicious carrot cake from scratch. I realize for some of you this is a really low bar, but we've all got to start somewhere and, truth be told, it seems that: (A) every company has become obsessed with the value and hype of data analytics; (B) riding a well-tuned bicycle is an easy and healthy way to battle climate change; and (C) every member of our family likes to sit by the fire, listen to the crackling sound of freshly split wood, and enjoy a rich cup of hot chocolate with a slice of moist and perfect carrot cake. So there!

Needless to say, there are close to a zillion things you can learn and a zillion places to learn them including podcasts, blogs, magazines, YouTube, NPR, Wikipedia, and even the Encyclopedia Britannica which probably never envisioned when it was started in 1768 that it would one day become a strictly online source of information and news. Some will make you and your company or organization more successful while others will only make you a more capable and interesting human being. If you would like a few suggestions I might start with [Freakonomics Radio](#), the [Business Model Sandbox](#), [Wired](#), [Fast Company](#), [AFAR](#), [Popular Science](#), and the resources that are now being made available by leading universities including the [Wharton School of Business](#).

### **3. MAKE NEW CONNECTIONS...**

There has never been a better time to connect with strangers. It is a brilliant way to learn new things, stay relevant, brainstorm, and expand your thinking and network. It turns out that amid all of the Zoom fatigue and other constraints of the pandemic, thoughtful people are still eager to stay connected as a key to their own learning, growing, and moving forward.

Through your virtual and physical exploring, think of all the people you have “met” and learned about who you would like to connect with. Then, as the marketing department at Nike has advised us, “**JUST DO IT!**” You can begin by doing some homework and then sending a thoughtful email about why they and their ideas, work, or company inspire you. You can also suggest how they might benefit from knowing you. Then, once connected, you can arrange a virtual coffee to learn about their interests, share ideas and other connections. I’ve used this approach to build new relationships with many remarkable people around the corner and halfway around the world.

### **4. ASK INTERESTING QUESTIONS...**

You can also spark the genius in yourself and your colleagues by asking important and interesting questions. Use some of your virtual gatherings to energize thinking and enhance collaboration by focusing on questions like the following:

- *What do our customers really care about now and in the future?*
- *What would the perfect new product, solution, or experience look and feel like?*
- *How can we make our customers and employees as smart and capable as possible?*
- *What would be the most amazing “no touch” customer service in our industry?*

## 5. INSPIRATION FROM COMPANIES THAT HAVE PIVOTED DUE TO COVID-19...

I'd be remiss if I didn't share a few examples of companies and organizations that have pivoted in meaningful, instructive, and fun ways as a result of the pandemic. Each seems to offer a valuable lesson for all of us that is likely to endure when we arrive at the next normal...

**Frame Fitness**, based in London, has created an online fitness club that enables its members to maintain their routines, stay fit, and “train together” in their own homes. Using their example, think about how you and your organization might create a “club” or some exclusive membership that enables your customers to stay engaged and make real progress in whatever matters to them.

**Kaiser Permanente**, and almost every other leading healthcare company, has doubled down on telemedicine—moving a large share of its patient encounters online while maintaining a high level of quality and connection. Think about how you and your company can handle the routine parts of your work and customer support in ways that are more engaging, helpful, and reassuring.

**Denizens Brewery** in Silver Spring, Maryland, started delivering “no touch” beer within days of us being confined to our homes. Not surprisingly, beer consumption has gone up significantly during the pandemic. Think of what your organization can “deliver”—literally and figuratively to your customers and prospects.

**Artists** from around the globe began offering performances. One of my favorites has been [Simon Gronowski](#), a Holocaust survivor who moved his electric piano to his apartment window and played jazz for his neighbors during lockdown in Brussels. Think of what you and your colleagues can do to bring kindness, joy, and light to others in your community now and after the pandemic.

**Sweet Farm**, an organic farm and animal sanctuary in northern California, figured out a way to make your online experiences more enjoyable through their “Goat-to-Meeting” service in which you can pay a modest fee to have a goat or llama attend your group Zoom meeting. It's a fun way to keep people smiling and paying attention.

And many **educational institutions** and **consulting** firms are providing free access to their content and expertise. Here in our firm we are continuing our tradition of providing 20% of our time at no cost to small nonprofits working to improve the lives of people in need. To see if we can be helpful to an organization that you are passionate about simply check out the “20% for Good” page on our website ([www.venture-works.com](http://www.venture-works.com)).

## FINAL NOTE IN THE FORM OF A VERY SHORT STORY...

A few years ago as I was racing to a meeting in Delhi, India, I jumped into the first taxicab I could find, not noticing that it had no side or rearview mirrors. But as soon as we got into traffic and Ashok, my overly enthusiastic driver, began hurtling toward my destination, the lack of these automotive appendages became abundantly clear.

*“What’s the story with your mirrors?”* I asked, slightly more curious than petrified.

*“Oh, those...”* he replied pointing to where they could have been.

*“Unnecessary.”* he replied with a slightly alarming sense of confidence and assurance.

*“And,”* he continued, *“having mirrors adds to the congestion in a city as congested as Delhi.”*

Both fascinating answers.

*“Tell me more,”* I inquired.

*“I am trying to get you and all of my customers to their destinations as fast as possible,”* he replied. *“That way you are on time, which is not so common here, and I make more money. So I need to be the first to get to and through every intersection along the way. That means always looking ahead! There’s no time to look behind. And besides, the cars behind me and on the sides are of little or no consequence! It is really all about being faster and a bit more courageous!”*

*‘Somewhat convincing’* I thought to myself and surprisingly logical by his definition of logic.

*“But less congestion?”* I wondered.

*“Definitely. If no cars had side mirrors we could get another lane of traffic on the busiest roads!”*

I often think about Ashok and this 20-minute journey. And I can’t help but think that the real key to personal and business success in challenging circumstances is to maintain our curiosity and brilliance no matter what. To always keep our eyes on the destination and to look ahead as we fight the urge to look back.

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