A desire to know galvanizes us to explore our world and the universe beyond. Exploration and curiosity are coupled; they interplay, amplifying one another. The reconnaissance of new studies and the procurement of new knowledge bring to the surface questions we had not yet thought of. And we wonder onward; we are curious still.

In that way, curiosity is insatiable. It is the impetus which sets us on a lifelong journey of discovery. Curiosity, however, is not unique. I am not different or special for possessing the quality. It is innate; it is a fundamental aspect of humankind.

Curiosity is found in all children; at that stage, it is most apparent, as it is most unbridled. They turn over rocks; they dig in the dirt; they pull leaves off trees. They explore their environment. They do not, rather, they cannot, resist the opportunity to pursue knowledge.

Being that curiosity is innate, why award someone for it? In the spirit of this award, let us examine this question.

These awards recognize extraordinary people – those who have a steadfast determination to improve themselves and the world around them. Someone is not extraordinary by accident. Someone does not accidentally attain a deep and complex understanding of one’s self; nor does someone accidentally become a courageous leader, nor accidently serve others. Those are highly planned efforts. Curiosity, however, is different. It is not deliberate. I did not take careful and calculated steps to become curious. My curiosity is inherent; it is the disposition of humans. We are all curious; at least, we began that way.

Curiosity can be gained just as easily as it can be lost. I attest that it is often lost, and I assert that curiosity is most frequently and critically lost in schools. Over the past year, I have communicated science to hundreds of high school students. More often than any other questions, I am asked how many AP classes I took and what my grades were; I am rarely asked from where my passions for aerospace engineering, astronomy, and cosmology came or what I hope to do with my education.

As college approaches, academic performance takes a prominent position in the foreground of students’ lives. School is no longer a place of education, but a stage for competition. Curiosity and a passion for learning are too often forgotten. Just as dangerously, grades can become intimately entangled with self-worth. Students define themselves by grades they receive.

I find it heartbreaking, especially as an aspiring science communicator, that many students forgo their pursuits of knowledge for pursuits of grades. They should become impassioned by school. But often is the case that they must become impassioned despite it.

This is gravely problematic. It is not surprising that, after twelve or more years trapped in a system which rewards memorization aptitude rather than creativity, within some students, passion and ambition and will and drive and curiosity all but vanish.

There are many influences at play when it comes to individuals’ educational enthusiasm. But as school is chiefly impactful, the faults must be confronted. It is that from which we cannot shy away; it of such stature that it cannot and should not be dismissed. The ramifications, if we lack determined efforts, are not just limited to those directly involved. Perhaps one of the students was going to be the next great intellectual, but he or she will not go on to find life on another world, nor invent technology to vastly

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change the way we live. When we fail to encourage passion within our students, we squander prospects for a better tomorrow than today.

As children, we dreamed without constraints, disregarding what is practical and feasible. It is the mode of thinking which is that of visionaries, and we employed it effortlessly, as though it were our nature – because it is. Yet, throughout the education process, students’ curiosities receive little attention and are seldom incorporated in the classroom.

By virtue of this award, curiosity is not only recognized, but its significance is underscored. Perhaps other educational establishments, witnessing Virginia Tech hold such a character trait in high regard, will become committed to fostering it within their students and to creating learning environments in which curiosity can run free.

Our advancement as a species is very much owed to our propensity to seek out knowledge. We have surveyed this world, and we now survey others. We cast our spacecraft into the cosmos, in a quest to solve the grandest mysteries. And we can look back and realize that our destiny to explore the infinite began when we were children, turning over rocks, digging in the dirt, and pulling leaves off trees.