

ARIA EVANS: Hi, I'm Aria Evans , the artistic director of Political Movement, a dance theatre company that makes work from a social and political lens. And this is The 'D' Word. I am back for season three, and we have some incredible guests lined up to talk about this year's theme: science and the mind. How do ideas like curiosity, embodied physics, and shifting trauma through movement, influence or interact with the work of dance artists? Well, we're going to dive into those conversations right now. This episode, Dani S. Bassett and Perry Zurn are calling in. Dani and Perry are the authors of the book *Curious Minds: The Power of Connection*, published in 2022 by MIT Press. Dani is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, with appointments in the department's of bioengineering, electrical and systems engineering, physics and astronomy, neurology, and psychiatry. Perry is an associate professor in American University's department of Philosophy and Religion, and affiliate faculty in the department of critical race, gender and culture studies. Fun fact, they're also identical twins. In their book, they outline three styles of curiosity, including the busybody, the hunter, and the dancer. They've also identified 18 more models of curiosity. Today, they are here to talk about curiosity, and what their research can mean for dance artists. Dani and Perry, welcome to the show. We're so happy to have you both here.

PERRY ZURN: Thanks for having us.

DANI S. BASSETT: Thanks.

ARIA EVANS: To start us off, can you briefly describe your book to our listeners?

PERRY ZURN: Sure, *Curious Minds: The Power of Connection*. This is our first book together, Dani and I had a unique opportunity to write and we hope we get to write more in the future. But we came together from really disparate fields. Dani works primarily in neuroscience, and I work primarily in philosophy. But we are both studying issues of "What is curiosity?" And "What does it mean to learn? What does it mean to question? What does it mean to imagine?" And we thought, you know, it would be really powerful if we could get the resources of both of our fields together on the page and see what happened. So that is, in fact, what *Curious Minds* does. It tries to understand curiosity, and all of our curious minds from a new

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perspective and a new vantage point. And that is through this power of connection. Most of the time, curiosity is understood as a capacity to acquire new information, right? You google something, you get an answer. But we really think that at the bottom of curiosity is a capacity to make connections. Connections between ourselves, between ideas, between ourselves and our world, and societies across nations. This curiosity is the capacity to build connections, and that's the idea we want to propose with the book.

ARIA EVANS: And what a beautiful way to bring like two versions of the ideas behind curiosity together. That's such an incredible way to think about co-authoring a book. I know that you two grew up together, [laughs], and I'm wondering, from your own disciplines, what led you to both being curious about curiosity from your different perspectives?

DANI S. BASSETT: Yeah, I think that in part, we were driven by shared experiences as kids growing up homeschooled by our mom. She provided us with this learning experience where we played a really key role in determining what it was that we wanted to learn. And then she would develop curriculum around our interests. And so I think we grew up valuing, and searching for the freedom to ask the questions that we wanted to ask. So curiosity was kind of built into the way that we lived our lives, I think. And so I think that, in part, that certainly drove us to continue to ask questions throughout our lives about how it is that humans more generally are curious, and how we are curious together with one another.

ARIA EVANS: Did you ever sense the parallels and the differences between how you were curious in your upbringing?

PERRY ZURN: I think there were certainly some similarities, some parallels. I think that we're both pretty nerdy [laughs], and have been for most of our lives. And that showed up in all kinds of ways, right? We were really the rabbit hole kids. I mean, that is the case. And often we would go down such rabbit holes that we knew not everyone would be interested in what we had to say. But the other one probably would, right? So, and we still do this today, when we come up with something in our research that's just sort of off the beaten track, and you know, the people we collaborate with, or our friends, or our

partners, we're like, 'I don't know how much they'll care about this', but we'll shoot each other an email or a text, and we know that it'll light up the other person's face.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, sounds like there's a nice kind of synergy between the two of you, which is beautiful to witness also, in your writing. In this book, you identify three styles of curiosity: the busybody, the hunter and the dancer. Can you walk me through these styles starting with the busybody?

PERRY ZURN: Sure, the busybody is someone who is interested in all kinds of things. And it could be that any one of us is a busybody most of the time, but it could also be that each of us is a busybody sometimes, right? When we're interested in all kinds of things, we have a bunch of tabs open on our computers or phones, or something like this. Or we're asking a lot of questions of all the people we meet. Whereas the hunter is someone who's much more focused and tends to really zero in on one thing they'd like to know a lot about. You know, they might be very dedicated to expertise in their specific area, and they don't really like to try new things or branch out beyond that. And then there's the dancer, yes, the dancer! [Laughs]. And this is someone who really needs to be creative in their curiosity. So this person, when they're asking questions they want to be making at the same time. They want to be imagining at the same time. So, what if I put two and two together? What happens? What if I understand this from this perspective, and bring in this resource, or this concept, or this thing I heard, or this idea that's just flashed into my mind, or this piece of poetry I read last night? There's no relation, right? What if I throw that in here? What does it look like then? You know, can I get somewhere new in my idea space that way? So the dancer has to be creative in and through their curiosity.

ARIA EVANS: It's so interesting to hear you talk about making and imagining at the same time. I mean, being a dancer myself, being somebody who innately approaches the world from that perspective, it's beautiful to see it actually so clearly articulated. But then to also understand that curiosity draws from all of the different curiosity styles, that we don't necessarily have just one way of going, but to put language to something is such a useful skill for us. I wasn't

actually anticipating asking this question, but is there a style of curiosity that the two of you resonate with, from all of the ones that you've sort of articulated, determined, deciphered?

DANI S. BASSETT: I think that it's interesting to think about what kinds of curiosity we have, what kinds of curiosity we encourage in ourselves, and what kind of curiosity has been encouraged in us by the particular training that we have pursued in our scholarly disciplines. And I think in the context of science, and physics, specifically, which is where my training is, I think that the hunter-like curiosity is the most valued of the three. And so I do feel like that is a very key streak [laughs], in myself, in part because it is heavily trained. I also, however, think that the other two kinds of curiosity are present in my life in other places. So when I read books for pleasure, I am much more of a busybody. I go from philosophy, to nature writing, to poetry, to queer theory, to whatever it is that I'm excited about, on that day or week. And the dancer-like curiosity, I think is something that also comes out at different points, particularly when I am trying to close up a research project and understand how what I've discovered, or what my students have discovered, can impact and change other fields around me. So I think that that's something that comes in and out too at different points. Perry?

PERRY ZURN: Yeah, I would say, both of us, I think, do have this busybody tendency in that we're really interdisciplinary. We're not very good at staying in our lane, with respect to our research, but really, with respect to anything. So I think we're improvisational in relationship to our methods too. The kinds of methods we're supposed to use in our fields aren't the ones we limit ourselves to. We tend to sort of try a lot of other stuff out that we see, that we hear, from other places. So a busybody, certainly. Hunter, yeah. I think scholars are well trained to focus and to perform expertise around a very small area of knowledge. But then the dancer, for me, I love writing. For me, writing is absolutely a creative space. And for me, the page, the blank page, is a place where I get to ask questions creatively, where I get to create by inquiring, and that relationship between curiosity and creativity for me is always there in the moment of writing.

DANI S. BASSETT: I also wonder if it's kind of interesting to think about our mom

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actually, in the context of these three styles, too. When she went to college, she was on a dance scholarship. So, dance was something that was one of her key loves. And I think thinking about that, in the context of the kind of education that she provided us, I think that she created a space for us, she created a kind of education by reading very eclectically, more like a busybody, around educational practices and pedagogies. And then, hunting down particular kinds of literature for us to read, or resources for us to engage with. And by doing so, she offered or created this educational experience that was really unique. It's interesting to think both about her physical movements, and what she did in creating the educational space for us.

ARIA EVANS: It segues perfectly into my next curiosity, which is how the dancer style was modeled after the sort of relationship that you have to the artistic form. And hearing that there is such a personal relationship to movement and dance in your household is so fascinating.

PERRY ZURN: Yeah, and the term dancer as the term for this third style of curiosity really came from, well, all the styles came from, just looking back at thousands of years of history of people describing curious people. How do curious people behave? What do they look like? What do they do? And a lot of times, they'll use the language of dance, as if this is someone who dances on the page, this is someone who dances with ideas, this is someone, you know, that dances in the mind. Sometimes you'll see curiosity with respect to actual dancers. [Laughs]. But it's a broader term and metaphor. And so the language of dance comes up, and especially the language of leaping. So the word leap was really important for this particular archive of descriptions. And I thought, well, you know, 'who leaps?'. You know, with imagination, I couldn't actually think of people other than dancers, who leap with imagination. So that was another valence that was important for the characterization.

ARIA EVANS: In the interviews that you've done for your book, you've talked about being raised with an interdisciplinary approach to learning that has been integrated into your research and writing. And for me, this also taps into the creative process of dance, and the interdisciplinary tools that we use to make connections between things for audiences, this idea of leaping. And I'm curious about

why you believe that interdisciplinary models are important for curiosity?

DANI S. BASSETT: Maybe I can speak from the science perspective, and then maybe Perry, if you have additional things to add from your world. But I think that interdisciplinarity in science is so generative. It is a place, or a pattern, or practice of moving in conceptual spaces, that allows for us to connect really disparate pieces of information, or to look at the same kind of data, but from a different perspective, or with a different methodology. It's that viewing of data from different perspectives that is allowed by interdisciplinarity, is something that we're even training artificial agents to do. So for example, there are techniques that are called multi-view learning, which is where you look at an object, a complex system, a data set, from multiple different views, and then you combine those together, you connect them up together in a way that allows us to understand the system more thoroughly, and also, more deeply. And, in a way that is more interpretable to humans. And I think if we take that idea into our broader experience, you know, when we have an interdisciplinary perspective on understanding one another, right, where we're not engaging with one another simply from our own histories, or simply from what we know about psychology or cognitive science, or simply what we know about experience, or simply what we know about the skills that each of us has, then we are able to engage with one another in a way that honors the complexity of each human and allows us to produce these deeper understandings of each other in a way that can, I think, not only be satisfying for each of us, but also build the meshes of a social connection that can produce change in our world.

PERRY ZURN: Yeah, and for me, and this is true across our disciplines, but also certainly into practices like dance, I think that humans can get stuck. When we sort of have a specific thing that we do in a specific way over and over again, and this is the tradition or this is the practice, or this is the habit, whatever it is, it not only become stuck, but it can become, you know, we use kind of the language of policing, but it can be limiting. And sometimes people who try to get beyond that thing are sort of punished or denigrated or not treated as doing the serious work of whatever it is, philosophy, or science, or dance, you know. And so interdisciplinarity, for me, is just one of

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the practices that allows us to experiment with the limits, the boundaries of whatever our practices are in our fields, and say, "Hey, maybe we can try a different form, we can try a different shape, we can try a different practice, we can try a different affect", whatever it is. And in that way we keep the thing alive, really. I think the more that people kind of zero in on "No, this is what we do, and this is how we do it", it kills it, eventually. [Laughs]. So the living, breathing, human enterprises, try new things. And interdisciplinarity is just one way to try new things for each of the fields, I think.

ARIA EVANS: It's so interesting to hear you both talk about the ideas of humanity getting stuck inside of things, or like as individuals we get caught up and it's hard to find a way forward. And you've both, in a way, talked about the idea of change, or the idea of hope, or the idea of moving forward. And I may be projecting, but was that one of the desires in writing this book to communicate with audiences?

PERRY ZURN: Yeah, what is our dedication? You have it on the tip of your tongue, I'm sure.

DANI S. BASSETT: "To all the children who have questioned whether it needs to be this way."

PERRY ZURN: Yeah. So for us I think that's really personal. I think that we were in a place of stuckness, and in a place of pretty dramatic restriction at points in our lives, based on our social context. And curiosity is one of the kernels of hope, one of the kernels of change that I think we held on to, and that led to more open spaces for us, where we could breathe a little bit more deeply. And so I do think that there is something really deep about the message of the book for us. Not that we came up with "curiosity can do this", but that it matters to us that curiosity can do this. And we want to talk to other people about that.

ARIA EVANS: From that place of curiosity being a kernel for change, do you think curiosity as a trait, can be honed?

DANI S. BASSETT: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the way that we think about curiosity is not something that is innate in each of us, or at a particular level, or even that we can quantify the amount of curiosity in a person in a

really meaningful way, instead, we think about curiosity as a practice. It is something that we can consciously engage in, throughout the day, or over different time periods, weeks, months, years. And we can ask ourselves, 'How do we practice curiosity? How do we learn to practice curiosity differently? How do we notice the kind of curiosity that's present in our friend or in our child or in a mentor?' And as we noticed those different kinds of curiosity, we can ask ourselves, 'What parts of that practice that we observe in them do we want to take in to become part of our practice?' And so that's something that I think allows us to think about curiosity as something that can not only grow, but also change in its nature, as we think more about the practices that we have.

ARIA EVANS: Because the dance work that I make is often socially and politically engaged, I'm interested in how you see the relationship between social awareness and curiosity, and the values that we can implement into exploring curiosity. I'm curious if you have made links between social awareness and curiosity in your research?

PERRY ZURN: We do some of this work in our book, but I certainly did more of it in my previous book, which was called Curiosity and Power. And in that book, one of the things that I try to explore is what is curiosity's role in political resistance movements at all. So a lot of the ways in which political resistance movements have been understood is as offering answers, "Hey, you're doing it wrong, do it this way", you know. But I try to make the case that, no, political resistance movements, especially for marginalized communities, are deeply curious enterprises. They're constantly trying to say, "What really is wrong?" And "How would we fix it?" And "What does it mean to relate to each other differently without whatever these structures of racism and sexism and ableism, and classism are?" Right? What does that even look like? We have to explore that, we have to ask those questions together. Because we haven't had a whole lot of help otherwise [laughs]. So curiosity is fundamental to these movements for social change, and social justice, but I also spend some time right at the end of the book, thinking about what does that mean for how curiosity might happen differently? So curiosity, sometimes, has been the desire for new information, where you simply just sort of get the new information from whoever it is that has it, you don't really think about the relationship that you have to

that person, or to that place or to that culture, or whatever. I'm interested in changing what curiosity looks like, and how we practice it. And one of those ways is deeply embedding curiosity in relationship. Admitting that we are always in a relationship with what we want to know about, and who we want to know about, and who we want to know with. So then, how does that re-characterize what curiosity looks like? How we actually ask the question? And what questions we actually ask, or which questions we let stand. And we say, "You know what, I don't need to know everything." And it's in this context that I talked a little bit about opacity and ambiguity. What does it mean to embrace a curiosity that allows for ambiguity? That says, I don't have to sort it out and make sure I know exactly what box to put you in, or to put this piece of information in. Or a curiosity that's comfortable with opacity. You know what, the thing I want to know, or the person I want to know, doesn't want to be known. Okay. [Laughs]. Just okay. You know, those are some of the things that I tried to work out in the earlier book.

ARIA EVANS: I'm curious, because you have a parent who has a relationship to dance, and most of our viewership have some relationship to dance, whether they are dancers themselves, or dance is a big part of their life, if you were to give this book to them, what would you hope that they would receive from it?

DANI S. BASSETT: I think I would love for them to come away from reading the book feeling that the sort of freedom and fluidity and structure of their body movements is also present in their mind, and to sort of be able to to feel their mind moving in ways that are reminiscent of how it feels when they move their body. So I would hope that they could get this sense, or be sensitized, to what mental movements feel like.

PERRY ZURN: Yeah, I would just underscore, I would love dancers to help us think about the dance that happens in our minds, the way we move with, and between, and among concepts, and together with other beings who have concepts of their own. There's something happening there that's not simply building blocks, right? Or plugging holes of, like, "This is the information we need, here". It's something so much more dynamic. And I think dance is one of the few movements that

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we've turned to that really help illuminate that space. And we need y'all's help, actually.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs]. I'm glad there's reciprocity. Perry, where can people find you on the internet if they want to know more about your work?

PERRY ZURN: My website is www.perryzurn.com. And I'm also on Twitter @perryzurn.

ARIA EVANS: And what about you, Dani?

DANI S. BASSETT: My website is www.danisbassett.com. And I'm also on Twitter @DaniSBassett.

ARIA EVANS: That's our show. The 'D' Word is presented by dance: made in canada, a contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists who possess unique artistic visions and come from all cultural backgrounds. This year, dance: made in canada presents in person programming featuring artists from across Canada in our mainstage, WYSIWYG, dance on film and video, installation and photography exhibition at the Betty Oliphant Theatre in Toronto from August 16th-August 20th. Dance: made in canada's co-festival directors are Janelle Rainville, and Jeff Morris. Yvonne Ng is the artistic director and also co-festival director. The 'D' Word is produced by Grace Elliott with Taylor Young. Our editor and composer is Jamar Powell, our sound engineer is Chris Dupuis at 1990 Studios. And I'm your host, Aria Evans. Thank you to Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and Toronto Arts Council for making The 'D' Word possible. Find us wherever you get your podcasts and don't forget to rate and review. Talk to you soon. Bye.

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