



THE BLOG 09/14/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated Nov 17, 2011

The 60 Questions of Our Life



By Marty Kaplan

“Curiosity: The Questions of Our Life” is the name of a new 60-episode five-year “landmark” series just announced with much fanfare by the Discovery Channel.

So what are those 60 “fundamental questions and underlying mysteries of our time”? They’re looking for nominations.

Princeton, Georgetown and Syracuse are among the universities who’ve delightedly signed on to come up with them. Discovery has primed the pump with examples like these: What is consciousness? What will our understanding of genomics mean for future generations? Where are the aliens? Where will artificial intelligence lead? What is our universe made of - and why?

All good questions. They’re the kind of subjects that public television series like *Nova*, *The Living Planet*, *The Elegant Universe* and a host of other noncommercial programs have been exploring for years, and if the Discovery Channel is going to pour new money into making documentaries, more power to ‘em, even if they break for Lexus and Olive Garden ads every few minutes.

But I have a hunch that none of the 60 questions will address mysteries like, How can anyone stomach Glenn Beck?, or, When did Rahm Emanuel become such a wuss? or, Is anyone in Washington *not* owned by the drug companies?

I suppose some Princeton professor might say that questions like those aren’t fundamental enough - they’re too topical, too shallow, too close to the Andy Rooney end of the pool.

But if Discovery is going to produce an hour of television that answers, What is a virus, and how can it become a pandemic?, then why can’t they look into, What is judicial activism, and how can we stop Chief Justice John “I Heart Precedents” Roberts from plaguing American politics with corporate money?

I’m willing to concede that, say, What’s up with Venus Williams? doesn’t belong on the big 60 list, mainly because it isn’t much of a mystery. But if Discovery could get a neuroscientist to identify the part of the brain that thinks tax cuts

for the rich are the solution to every problem, they'd be doing a real service to democracy.

How many people can our planet support? - another subject Discovery is mulling - is definitely worth a program. But what about, How many Goldman Sachs alumni can our Treasury Department support?

A Discovery executive says that their Curiosity series will speak "to the millions of students each day raising their hands in class and asking questions." That would be great, especially for the students in Texas wondering why the State Board of Education review committee drafted American history standards requiring students to be able "to identify significant conservative advocacy organizations and individuals, such as Newt Gingrich, Phyllis Schlafly and the Moral Majority," but nothing about liberals, a list to which some of the ten Republicans on the 15-member Board want to add Mike Huckabee, the National Rifle Association, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh.

Are we alone in the universe? is another topic Discovery is floating. That one I can totally get behind, if by "we" they mean us lonely people who think that waving signs saying "Bury ObamaCare with Kennedy" is sick, and that bringing an assault rifle to an Obama speech is scary, and that Sarah Palin and Joe Wilson and Dick Armey are even more dangerous than Father Coughlin and Joe McCarthy and Lyndon LaRouche.

How will nanotechnology affect the future? I can see how that's worth some of Discovery's Curiosity. But so is, How will a quagmire in Afghanistan affect the future? Or an Iranian nuke, or a failed-state Pakistan, or a China that holds all the economic cards?

Discovery promises that the series will be "a feast for the mind and the soul." It's the soul part that particularly interests me. I want to watch scientists who say that consciousness is just a bundle of neurons and philosophers who say that consciousness is just an illusion do battle with meditating Buddhists and clicking dolphins and Mozart's piano concertos. I want to find out if the computer programmers writing artificial intelligence code and the molecular biologists recombining genomes still believe what Darwin did, that evolution has no upward direction. From the astronomers who believe there are aliens out there, I want to learn what it will mean to our souls to make contact with them. From the cosmologists studying the origin of the universe, I'd love to hear not only why all of us are made up of stardust from the Big Bang, but also why the Big Bang happened at all.

I'm glad that Discovery didn't subtitle their Curiosity series, "The 60 Questions to Ask Before You Die." Bookstore shelves are already groaning with plenty of books like *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*, *1001 Things You Should Know Before You Die*, *101 Things to Do Before You Die* and (really) *50 Fish to Catch Before You Die*. But it's hard to read an illustrative list of "The Questions of Our Life" without wondering why "What happens after you die?" didn't make the cut. Now there's an underlying mystery that would really be a feast for the soul.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director