

Letting go of the need to know: Inquiring minds

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

If you were extremely wealthy, you could try to see everything. You could hop into a car and zoom across the United States, stopping in major cities and seeing the famous sites. You could pay a cabbie to wait for you while you hurried to the top of the Empire State Building for a quick look. Then you'd hop back in the cab and say, "To the Statue of Liberty, and step on it!"

You could bounce along the south rim of the Grand Canyon, stopping for a few moments at each viewing point before heading for Monument Valley. You could drive across the Golden Gate Bridge, snapping pictures and reading a brochure that tells you how many people have jumped off the bridge and how hard it is to keep it painted. You could move to Washington, D.C., and spend a year going through the Smithsonian Institute, taking notes and pictures of everything as you strolled through the buildings.

You could do these sorts of things for years and years, checking off each famous site in a little notebook before hopping a train to the next exciting destination. Eventually your notebook would be thick and full of notations that no one, including you, would ever read. But at some point you could proudly claim to have seen everything in the United States.

You wouldn't have seen everything, of course, but with your fat notebook and collection of snapshots, no one would dispute your right to make that claim.

And then what would you do? I guess you'd move on to Europe with a fresh notebook. (You did say you were going to try to see everything.)

You could do that, if you had the money and the time.

Or . . .

You could spend your whole life in some small part of the world. You could explore vacant lots and empty meadows. You could eat every single item on the menu of every café in town. You could look at the sky and say, “Not much rain for this time of year. We usually have eight or ten inches by now.”

You could spend hundreds of hours over many years walking throughout your small part of the world, becoming familiar with the names and peculiarities of all the plants and animals found there. Perhaps there would even be a local pond for you to plumb and explore, like Thoreau did. How well can a person know one body of water in a lifetime? You would seek the answer to that question.

In your old age, you could sit on your porch and tell fascinating and entertaining stories of local history and lore. You could say, “I know these parts like the back of my hand.” That wouldn’t be true, exactly. If you took one more walk through the woods with your eyes open, you would find plenty of new things, but no one would dispute your right to make that claim.

Admittedly, these are two extreme approaches to life, and you will probably find yourself somewhere in the middle. But you will have to make a choice. You can be a specialist or you can be a generalist. There’s not enough time to be both.

If you are a generalist, there will be things you will not see no matter how much you travel. If you are a specialist, there will be tiny secrets and truths that will elude you, no matter how carefully you look.

That means that no matter how you approach life, you are going to have to relax and let some things go. You’ll have to watch as your dream of seeing the Great Wall of China slips away from you. If not that dream, then some other. You’ll have to admit to your friends on the front porch that you never got around to exploring that gulley down by the railroad tracks. That mystery will stand. If not that mystery, then some other.

The search for knowledge, both general and specific, is a strange compulsion for us. It was, after all, the tree of knowledge that Adam and Eve saw and it was the tree’s fruit that they wanted to taste. New knowledge and new experiences feed our souls in natural ways, like food for the mind. But the search for knowledge has this danger: there is no end to it. There is no clean break, never a clear marker that says, “Enough. You’ve seen and learned as much as you can and should.”

Regardless of how much knowledge you amass in your lifetime, most of it will die with you in the end. I did tell you, didn't I, that it's unlikely that anyone will read your travel journals.

This is why the search for knowledge cannot bear the full weight of human desire, which includes the search for wisdom, serenity and meaning in life. These spiritual pursuits call us to slow down and let go, to accept the limits of our humanity with grace and dignity.

The search and desire for anything can become an unhealthy obsession unless, somewhere along the way, you learn this.

Ironic, isn't it? The human hunger to acquire knowledge is one of the things that sets us apart from other creatures on our planet. We are proud of our knowledge; it defines us in important ways. But we also need grace and wisdom and serenity if our search for knowledge is to have a satisfying ending.