Being a Noticer

"How?" is about performance; "Why?" about purpose.

One spring, I taped a small index card next to my ten-year-old son's bed that said simply, "Be a Noticer." I wanted to tie into our study of the "Beattitudes" in the Gospel of Matthew but with a scientific twist. Another word for noticing is observing. Observing is the step where doing science actually begins. But observing is more than just seeing; it is seeing on steroids. To observe is to look with keen interest and an inquiring mind. Seeing only regards what is. But observing (a.k.a. noticing) wonders "Why?" or "How?" and quickly expands into hypothetical reasons and answers. Since what God created does not come with instruction books, the only way to find the answer is by controlled experiments. So science is the logical result of being a noticer.

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At bedtime that evening, I suggested to my son that the next day, he should do more than see the reawakening world of flowers and trees, birds and frogs, sun and clouds. He could notice something he thought was interesting and we would wonder together about why or how it was so.

I would *like* to report that we subsequently asked why leaves are arranged on branches as they are or how tadpoles quickly appear in a pond of rainwater, and that this led to some simple experiments that helped us appreciate God's flexible, but deliberate, design for life. But that would be fiction. He was not enthused about his new assignment and simply ignored it.

So I thought to offer the challenge to you to become a noticer and not just a see-er of the world. To start out, consider an observation from our yard: that older, more established oak trees deploy their spring leaves several weeks earlier than do younger saplings. Why would the sapling give away weeks of sunlight to its older relative when it needs this energy to drive its root growth through hard soil? What controls the timing of leaf growth in younger versus older oaks? Does it have to do with day length or daytime versus nighttime temperature or soil nutrients? What about latitude? Do all species of oak everywhere exhibit this same pattern? How might a late spring frost affect the two oaks? And, well...you get the idea. But be aware, the search for answers might lead you to dust off old encyclopedias or do some Google searches, depending on your age, and even do an experiment or two.

Being a noticer is not exclusive to biology. You notice a friend is unusually sad and so strike up a conversation to bring calm or comfort. You notice that people who pray, read the Bible, and talk about Jesus seem to be happy people, even if they have far less money than most people, and you wonder why. How can they be happy even when they are poor or struggle with cancer? How can they be joyful through the sadness at the funeral of a loved one? These are great questions. Now, go find the answers.

—Michael G. Windheuser, Ph.D.