

Pandora's Box: An Invitation to Mischief

Curiosity and Method, Princeton University, April 9, 2011

"After all, I am not quite sure that the box was not a blessing to her in its way. It supplied her with such a variety of ideas to think of, and to talk about, whenever she had anybody to listen! When she was in good-humor, she could admire the bright polish of its sides, and the rich border of beautiful faces and foliage that ran all around it. Or, if she chanced to be ill-tempered, she could give it a push, or kick it with her naughty little foot. And many a kick did the box -- (but it was a mischievous box, as we shall see, and deserved all it got) -- many a kick did it receive. But, certain it is, if it had not been for the box, our active-minded little Pandora would not have known half so well how to spend her time as she now did. For it was really an endless employment to guess what was inside. What could it be, indeed?"

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's retelling of the Pandora story (1851), Pandora is a child, an obsessively curious one. In her house there's a box, and the box occupies her mind irresistibly, simply because she can't see inside. Playfully rounding on the traditional tale of calamity, Hawthorne's version winks at the idea that curiosity is, first and foremost, an animating force -- a vitalizing presence, a goad to the imagination, the key to "active-minded" living.

But that's not all, of course. Ever since Hesiod, Pandora and her box have served as a monitory tale of the perils of the curious. The management of curiosity -- its method, if you like -- is everything.

To activate this paradox, and to stimulate our thinking at *Curiosity and Method*, we've invited the artist Sal Randolph to serve as our symposium Pandora. She'll be with us through the day, and she'll be the keeper of our own little casket of trouble -- part comment box, part time-capsule, part cache, part provocation. Over the course of the day we'll fill this Pandora's box with vexations -- mysteries, puzzles, curiosities, questions.

Sal will circulate with her box at our breaks, and she'll be around if you want to stuff something -- a quote, a gift, a question, a reminder -- inside. Something to hide? Something to store? Something to think on (or, perhaps better, something *not* to think on...)

So please bring with you to the symposium any of the following: small objects of unknown purpose and unguessable origins, puzzles, paradoxes, tricks, untamable propositions, questions which needle and sting. Things you'd be willing to deposit in our box.

Sal will present this little trunk of difficulties to Sina Najafi (*Cabinet's* founder and editor in chief) at the end of the day. Will he open it? He probably shouldn't! Probably better to take back to Brooklyn unopened -- as a troublesome little mystery-gift for the editorial office. At any rate, it will be up to him...