

Curiosity: a blessing, or a curse?

The paradoxical nature of this trait was personified for the ancient Greeks in the mythical figure of Pandora. According to legend, she was the first mortal woman, whose blazing curiosity set a chain of earth-shattering events in motion. Pandora was breathed into being by Hephaestus, God of fire, who enlisted the help of his divine companions to make her extraordinary.

From Aphrodite she received the capacity for deep emotion; from Hermes she gained mastery over language. Athena gave the gift of fine craftsmanship and attention to detail, and Hermes gave her her name. Finally, Zeus bestowed two gifts on Pandora. The first was the trait of curiosity, which settled in her spirit and sent her eagerly out into the world.

The second was a heavy box, ornately curved, heavy to hold – and screwed tightly shut. But the contents, Zeus told her, were not for mortal eyes. She was not to open the box under any circumstance. On earth, Pandora met and fell in love with Epimetheus, a talented titan who had been given the task of designing the natural world by Zeus. He had worked alongside his brother Prometheus, who created the first humans but was eternally punished for giving them fire.

Epimetheus missed his brother desperately, but in Pandora he found another fiery-hearted soul for companionship. Pandora brimmed with excitement at life on earth. She was also easily distracted and could be impatient, given her thirst for knowledge and desire to question her surroundings. Often, her mind wandered to the contents of the sealed box.

What treasure was so great it could never be seen by human eyes, and why was it in her care? Her fingers itched to pry it open. Sometimes she was convinced she heard voices whispering and the contents rattling around inside, as if straining to be free. Its enigma became maddening. Over time, Pandora became more and more obsessed with the box.

It seemed there was a force beyond her control that drew her to the contents, which echoed her name louder and louder. One day she could bear it no longer. Stealing away from Epimetheus, she stared at the mystifying box. She'd take one glance inside, then be able to rid her mind of it forever... But at the first crack of the lid, the box burst open.

Monstrous creatures and horrendous sounds rushed out in a cloud of smoke and swirled around her, screeching and cackling. Filled with terror, Pandora clawed desperately at the air to direct them back into their prison. But the creatures surged out in a gruesome cloud. She felt a wave of foreboding as they billowed away. Zeus had used the box as a vessel for all the forces of evil and suffering he'd created – and once released, they were uncontainable.

As she wept, Pandora became aware of a sound echoing from within the box. This was not the eerie whispering of demons, but a light tinkling that seemed to ease her anguish. When she once again lifted the lid and peered in, a warm beam of light rose out and fluttered away.

As she watched it flickering in the wake of the evil she'd unleashed, Pandora's pain was eased. She knew that opening the box was irreversible – but alongside the strife, she'd set hope forth to temper its effects. Today, Pandora's Box suggests the extreme consequences of tampering with the unknown – but Pandora's burning curiosity also suggests the duality that lies at the heart of human inquiry.

Are we bound to investigate everything we don't know, to mine the earth for more – or are there some mysteries that are better left unsolved?