

CHAPTER THREE

Loving the Questions: *Relationship With Our Minds*

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Once you have learned how to ask questions—relevant and appropriate and substantial questions—you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.

-Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969, p. 23)

Introduction

Imagine yourself as a teacher whose primary goal is to foster the intellectual development of young peoples' minds. You understand "intellectual development" to mean the capacity of the mind to identify, distinguish, correlate, synthesize, compare, persist, define, reflect, reason, and more. You are committed to fostering this family of intellectual capacities in ways that engender in your students a genuine passion for learning. This is a reasonable vision, is it not? What educator wouldn't want this?

But now consider the *status quo* pedagogy employed in schools to foster intellectual development:

- Students spend much of their day indoors and seated in rows.
- They listen while a teacher offers instruction or they work individually on tasks derived from standardized textbooks—e.g., answering questions on worksheets provided by educational publishing houses. Sometimes they use internet-based sources to ferret out information and on occasion they may participate in a special project or *enrichment* activity to add spice to the entrenched routine.

- Finally, rounding out this instructional formula, they are routinely compelled to complete a battery of quizzes and tests.

It should be self evident (though it often goes unnoticed) that there is a clear disconnect in this scenario between ends and means. To be more explicit, the end—fostering intellectual development—is not likely to be achieved using standardized approaches of mass education.

What has become evident in recent years is that as young people progress in their schooling, their curiosity is often tamed and their questioning nature subdued. To the extent that this happens, there is a danger that they will become docile, refraining from seeking answers to the raw questions that bubble up from deep inside. This is illustrated in the following story told by Juanita Brown:

I am seven-years-old, in the second grade at Orchard Villa Elementary school in Miami, Florida. Mrs. Johnson is my teacher. She is very religious, in the Southern tradition. I am a small child for my age—skinny, lively, inquisitive. I want to know everything about everything.

Mrs. Johnson holds prayers in the classroom each morning. One day, while everyone is praying to God, I start to wonder what God actually looks like. As soon as the class prayers are over I raise my hand and pipe up in my squeaky little voice, “What color is God, Mrs. Johnson?” Mrs. Johnson turns beet red. She is extremely upset. I don’t understand why she’s so angry. She grabs my arm and hisses, “Young lady, you are going right to the principal’s office and we’re calling your mother.” She marches me to the principal’s office, and they call my mother. I sit in there, terrified, until my mother arrives.

There we are—the principal shuffling her papers, Mrs. Johnson, still looking outraged, and me, getting smaller and more petrified by the minute. My mother comes into the room and sits down quietly next to me while Mrs. Johnson recounts the sin I have committed in asking the

obviously impudent question, “What color is God?” during school prayers.

My mother listens in silence. She looks at the principal behind her big wooden desk, then moves her gaze to Mrs. Johnson, sitting primly next to the principal. Then she looks down at me, cowering in my seat. She puts her arm around me warmly, smiles, looks up at my teacher again and asks, “And what color is God, Mrs. Johnson?”

I was deeply grateful and relieved that day in the principal’s office. Had that day turned out differently, perhaps my question asking days would have been over (Brown, 2001, pp. 134-135).

Thankfully, one little girl’s curiosity—her relationship with her mind—was safeguarded that day. Averted was a mind growing sluggish, sheepish, or sour because of submission to someone else’s agenda, someone else’s questions.

And what about you, dear reader? What has been your school experience around questions? Can you readily call to mind times when your questions, curiosities, and interests were honored in school? If you have trouble locating such instances, you are not alone. Many teachers we talk with confess that they spent much of their time as students studying the “correct” answers to questions posed in a preset curriculum, and then taking tests to demonstrate their proficiency, but, more often than not, soon forgetting what they had “learned.” Curiosity—the life of the mind—forthrightly pursuing one’s own questions was really not the point.

This is troubling especially in so far as there is a strong tendency for teachers to reproduce in their own classrooms the same behaviors and pedagogies that they were subjected to as students. In this chapter we explore how we as teachers might discover anew the opportunities for genuine learning to be found by cultivating our curiosity and reclaiming our questioning nature.

A Fear of Questions

When I ask the students in my freshmen seminar at Penn State to say the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the word “question,” they respond with words like “hard,” “test,” “wrong,” “help.” Strikingly, the word “question” for these eighteen-year-olds is seldom

associated with words like “open,” “curious,” “discover,” or “delight.” This is to say that their associations with questions and questioning tend to be negative and tainted with fear. I understand where my students are coming from.

- Flashback 1: *I am 10-years-old. There is a test on fractions today. I look at the test sheet and panic. What if I don't know the right answers. What if I fail?*
- Flashback 2: *I am 12 and a policeman knocks at my front door. My Mom answers. “Is Chris Uhl your son?” he asks. Mom nods and I step forward. The policemen looks down at me and says “I have some questions for you young man.” I swallow hard. I know I am in trouble.*
- Flashback 3: *I am 29 and today is the oral examination for my PhD. The examining committee can ask any question spanning science and philosophy. For over a year I have been preparing. Will I have the “right” answers? Will I pass? I am nauseous.*

Early life experiences akin to these led us to have negative associations with questions, even to fear them as a means of entrapment and humiliation. And, yet, as a beginning teacher I confess to using questions in just this way. For instance, when I suspected students hadn't completed a particular reading assignment, I would ask questions. My questions in these instances were contrivances intended to either humiliate my students or, in the event that they said what I wanted to hear, to give me the assurance that my students were following *my* rules.

Now, after decades of teaching, I have come to see that both in our schools and our nation, the power of questions is grossly underestimated to the point of trivialization. Consider: In our schools we are generally taught to believe that questions only have one right answer which, we later discover, is often not the case. Meanwhile, the media shapes our attitudes toward questions. For example, radio talk shows are filled with flippant repartee, rarely offering engaging, probing questions, thereby foreclosing opportunities for honest and thoughtful civic dialogue. It is the same for television. The shows where questions play a prominent part are police dramas, courtroom investigations, talk shows, and the like. In these contexts, questions are often confrontational—e.g., interrogations filled with innuendo that evoke blame and/or shame—or utterly trivial—e.g., superficial inquiries into the lives of screen stars. Add to this the fact that the responses to questions on these shows are often marked by defensiveness, evasiveness, and/or superficiality. Such a diet of banal questions and shallow responses leaves viewers blind to the power of questions to leverage learning and insight.

With a bit of reflection it is possible to trace each of our individual attitudes around questions back in time to our childhood. For example, if, as a child your questions were ignored, or worse, ridiculed, today you may tend to avoid asking questions altogether. Or, if as a child, you experienced humiliation when attempting to respond to adult's questions, today you may become tense, fearful, and/or inarticulate in the face of questions. Indeed, most of us have been socialized, to varying degrees, to view questions *not* as helpers, pointing us toward understanding and insight, but as hindrances that can trip us up and cause humiliation. We have learned, in effect, that questions are to be avoided or side skirted and when we have to face them, it is best to simply finesse our way through them; and if this means B-Sing a bit or even lying, so be it.

Teachers Modeling Courageous Questioning

As teachers we have opportunities to model for students what it is like to courageously question popular assumptions and beliefs. For example, imagine have the courage to examine widely accepted beliefs about the institution of compulsory schooling by asking:

--Can it be true that children best flourish spending six hours a day, five days a week, nine months a year for twelve consecutive years confined to classrooms?

--Can it be true that sitting with 30 other kids their own age all day, every day is a healthy way for children to grow up?

--Can it be true that constant monitoring, obsessive examinations and marking, punitive relationships with authority, and national standards, develop confident and capable learners?

(Hern, 2003; pp. 12-13).

The fact that, as a nation, we are not grappling with these kinds of fundamental questions is, I believe, another indicator of how contemporary education has dulled curiosity, critical thinking and civic engagement.

There are very few adults, and this includes teachers, parents and public leaders, who are fearless questioners—using inquiry to uncover truth. Leaders, like the rest of us, have been socialized to believe that having an answer—even an absurd answer—is what is important. Meanwhile, parents, given the demands of contemporary living, rarely have the time, patience, or energy to attend to the onslaught of questions issuing from their children. As for teachers, we often remain hidden behind our masks of control and certitude. Our masks hide a number of

prevailing fears as made evident in this personal reflection on classroom teaching from Columbia Professor Jane Tompkins:

What I was actually concerned with and focused on most of the time were three things: a) to show the students how smart I was, b) to show them how knowledgeable I was, and c) to show them how well-prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me. I think that this essentially, and more than anything else, is what we teach our students: how to perform within an institutional academic setting in such a way that they will be thought highly of by their colleagues and instructors... (1990, p. 654).

In effect, Tompkins is positing that teachers, in so far as we fail to be authentic, teach our students that being an adult is to be a pretender. School, in this view, is rendered as a place where students learn the game of “Let’s pretend.”

Fostering an Appetite for Questions

Schools do not lack answers, they lack depth. Depth is associated more with asking good questions than with having all the answers. -Tobin Hart (2003, p. 94)

Parents and teachers, either knowingly or unknowingly, play a key role in shaping their children’s attitudes toward questions. For example, imagine a child riding along in the car with her Mom. Looking out the window, the child spots a machine in a hay field and says, “Mommy, what’s that big thing over there in the field?” The mother, regarding her child’s question as an annoyance, says, “I dunno,” in a tone of irritation. Now, replay the scenario this time with a mother who sees her child’s question as a gift. When asked about the big thing in the field, this mother responds, “Hmmm, let’s see.... What’s growing in that field, honey?” to which the child responds, “Looks like hay to me.” Mom then follows with, “So, what’s hay used for?” “It’s used to feed animals,” comes the response. This leads the Mom to ask about the kinds of animals that eat hay (e.g., horses) and the places where these animals live (e.g., barns) and, then, to pose a question about how hay gets from field to barn (it’s cut and baled). Eventually the mother guides

her daughter back to the original question, asking: “Now, sweetie, having figured out that hay was growing in that field, and knowing what hay is used for and how it is collected, what do you suppose that machine back there was used for?” The child comes up with the answer and in the process learns that her questions matter and that she has the power to think her way clear through to answers! The first mother annihilates curiosity and creates fear around questions, the second mother nurtures curiosity, engendering an appetite for questions (Thanks to Derrick Jensen for providing the framework of this story).

Loving children’s questions is a way of loving children, both in the home and in school. For both parents and teachers this means, not only being open to children’s questions, but being filled with questions and curiosity ourselves. It means recovering our innate curiosity and playfulness. For example, imagine a Dad who suddenly pretends that he is a visitor to Earth from another planet. Enacting the part, Dad makes his head go a little cockeyed and asks his kids for some help in understanding this strange place called “Earth”. Then, looking up to the sky the Dad asks:

“What are those things floating up there?”

“Clouds!” the kids respond triumphantly.

“Hmm, What’s in them?” Dad (the alien) asks.

“Water!” comes the response in unison.

“Hmm... How did water get way up there?”

And before the kids can formulate a response, dad follows with more questions:

“Hey why are those clouds moving?”

“And wait a minute, how come that cloud over there is changing shape?”

This was the game Greg Levoy was treated to growing up with his Dad. As Levoy recalls it: “Entire afternoons could go by and we pondered the mysteries of water and wind and how it is possible that we can know so much and understand so little, that we can live with something everyday of our lives and still never come to know it” (Levoy, 1997, p. 144).

Fast forward: Young Levoy, brimming with curiosity and filled with questions, is going to school for the first time. He is walking there with his Dad and on the way the boy finds a beautiful rock and puts it in his pocket. When he gets to school he proudly presents the rock to his new teacher and she responds, “A rock! Please put that away. We don’t bring rocks to school.” In effect, the teacher says: “Your rock is not part of today’s plan; I am in charge here; I

decide what is worthy of attention.” Meanwhile, the messages to the boy include: I have done something wrong; cool stuff (like rocks) doesn’t belong in school; it is best for me to lie low and avoid any more scoldings.

Now, let’s run this scenario again, this time with a different teacher. Arriving to school, young Levoy proudly presents his rock to his teacher. She stops what she is doing and really looks at the rock, fully aware of both the boy—his curiosity—and the rock—its mystery. As she allows the boy’s curiosity to touch her, she, herself, becomes excited and this causes children nearby to gather around to see what’s going on. She then invites the kids to observe this rock—its color, its shape (e.g., the curves and jagged parts). In a manner similar to young Levoy’s Dad, the teacher then begins to ask questions: Where did this rock come from? Who made it? Why are rocks so hard? What causes their color? How come there are so many different kinds of rocks? More children gather around. A whole hour is spent observing this rock, asking questions. As a result young Levoy learns that both rocks and his curiosity are welcome in school and Levoy’s classmates learn about the central role of questions in catalyzing learning.

Indeed, often more important than an immediate answer to a question is the message that the question is being taken seriously. In this vein, imagine a teacher who responds to a student’s question with: “That’s a darn good question—so good that I want to really think about it for a minute before attempting an answer.” Or: “I could give you my standard answer to that question but that answer no longer satisfies me; my thinking has changed and here is why....” Or: “I sense an edge of frustration in your question. Before answering, I want to get a better sense of your personal concern for this issue so that I can really speak to you directly.” Or: “I don’t know. What do you think?” Such responses share three things in common: 1) they take the question seriously, 2) they extend respect to the person asking the question, and 3) they are grounded in the belief that new understanding emerges when we take questions seriously.

Asking Questions and The Experience of Being Seen

In his book, From Information to Transformation, Tobin Hart tells the story of a boy named “Gunner,” growing up in the fifties in New Jersey. As a bright, but “underachieving” high school student, Gunner was sometimes taken by bus to Princeton University along with other students to attend presentations by the distinguished physicists of the day, including Albert Einstein. On one such occasion, in the midst of a particularly dry lecture, one of Gunner’s

classmates asked the assembled scientists what they thought about ghosts? Two physicists quickly dismissed this possibility on the grounds that there was no hard evidence. That seemed to be the end of it, but, then, Robert Oppenheimer, famous for his role in developing the atomic bomb, offered a different view, saying “That’s a fascinating question. I accept the possibility of all things.” Oppenheimer went on to say “it is necessary to find one’s own required evidence” before accepting, or rejecting a possibility. In recounting this event Hart (2007, p. 131) writes “For Gunner, this was a revelation. Instead of closing down and accepting the world as prepackaged, Oppenheimer’s perspective opened it back up to mystery, to the possibility of all things, and to one’s responsibility to discover it for oneself. Gunner’s way of being began to shift as he came to define himself from the center of his own direct experience.” Gunner went on to become a college professor.

The story of “Gunner” (Box) reminds us to see young people’s questions as invitations to dialogue rather than as opportunities to demonstrate our intelligence or as threats to our authority. The truth is that embedded in most questions is a whole world of ideas; and when we offer tidy answers to questions, we flatten the world rather than allowing young people to ride their questions and to see where it might take them (Hart, 2004).

Pause now to imagine how it would be if the vector of teaching and learning in your school was determined by the interests and burning questions of your students and if your job as teacher was primarily to create a curricula that grew out of the questions arising in the learners who joined you each day. This would mean according agency to your students and seeing their innate interests and passions as generative—i.e., as germs for discovery and genuine learning—and as avenues for deeper relationship to their minds. This would be truly subversive because, rather than students being obedient to their teacher’s demands, teachers would be in the service of their students’ curiosity.

And what would it take for teachers to adopt this view of how teaching and learning best occur? Mostly, it would take cultivating a deep trust in children and young people:

- Trust that to be human is to have natural curiosity and to possess an innate desire to learn.
- Trust that students’ curiosity is a much better foundation for a curriculum than something imposed from outside.

- Trust that by slowly giving up control we will create the conditions for genuine learning in our classrooms.

Trusting the Children—Question-Centered Learning at Byrd Elementary. Imagine that you are a fifth-grade teacher in a Chicago neighborhood rife with street violence, drugs, and gang activity. It is winter and the temperature of your school is down around 60 degrees. Many of the kids don hats and coats in the classroom, some wear mittens. The windows in your classroom are filthy and pocked with bullet holes. Your school has no lunchroom, no auditorium. The bathrooms are unsightly with sinks and toilets that work intermittently, if at all. This was the situation in Room 405, Byrd Elementary, when Brian Schultz signed on to teach fifth grade.

Schultz began his job with the question: What knowledge is worthwhile for 10-12 year olds who are street savvy but have little book learning? In this vein, he wondered if centering the curriculum on vital issues that students cared about could bring excitement and meaningful learning to his classroom?

He started by asking his fifth graders: “What are the problems in this school and in your community?” In no time the kids were shouting out things like no heat in the classrooms, clogged toilets, drugs, trash everywhere. In an hour the students came up with 89 distinct problems. Then, a girl, Dyneisha, observed that almost everything on their list had to do with the awful condition of their school. She was right.

Years earlier this inner-city neighborhood had been promised a new school and, though a nearby parcel of land had been cleared, no action had been taken. Schultz saw in the heartfelt responses of these fifth graders an opportunity to address an intriguing academic question: Could he share authority with his students to solve an authentic community problem in the context of a traditional classroom? Stated differently: Could he and his students co-create a genuinely democratic classroom? It was worth a try.

As the school year unfolded, Room 405 became the hub of “Project Citizen”—a comprehensive effort to educate the public about the deplorable conditions at Byrd Elementary and to build support for the construction of a new school. In co-creating their curriculum with Schultz, the first question the students faced was, How do we begin? After deliberation, they decided to start by carefully documenting the condition of their school. They did this through

photographs, video footage, expository writing, surveys, and the construction of a website (www.projectcitizen405.com/).

Next, these fifth graders faced the twin questions: Who do we tell about this problem and how do we tell them? In response they defined their public as the citizens of Chicago—especially members of the school board and city officials—as well as national leaders. They used a variety of techniques to reach their audience, including letters, press releases, invitations, interviews, and petitions.

As Project Citizen gained momentum, Room 405 became a combination “think tank” and campaign office. No longer was the school day divided into separate periods. Instead reading, writing, math, and social studies all blended together as students worked earnestly to solve a vital life problem. Day-by-day, they engaged in reading (e.g., studying Jonathan Kozal’s Savage Inequalities to gain a perspective on their own situation), writing (e.g., composing letters, press releases, and emails to educate the public), and math (tallying responses from surveys to buttress their arguments). In the end, these students, with Schultz’s mentoring, created a curriculum based on their needs and desires—a democratic curriculum *of, for, and by* the students (Schultz, 2007).

And what was the upshot of all this? First, some local officials took the students seriously and visited their school and over time the physical infrastructure at Byrd did improve. Perhaps more importantly, going to school, for the first time, became relevant for these kids. As one said, “This ain’t school, this is important.” As a testimony to this shift, the collective attendance for Schultz’s class rose to 98%, and it was not uncommon for students to arrive early, stay late, and even work on days off to, as one student put it, “get the job done.” Meanwhile, though Schultz made no effort to “teach to the test,” the standardized tests scores of most students improved over the course of Project Citizen.

The Power of Questions

If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I knew the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes. –Albert Einstein

Einstein reminds us that a well-framed question can unlock mysteries. Indeed, his Theory of Relativity sprang from a novel question—namely: “What would the universe look like if I were riding on the end of a light beam at the speed of light?” (Vogt et al., 2003). In a similar vein, it was only when Ray Kroc asked the question, “Where can I get a good hamburger on the road?” that the concept of fast-food restaurants and McDonalds, in particular, was born. Essentially everything we know today arose because people in the past were curious. They formulated questions and this galvanized their interest and determination to find answers.

The power of questions as an educational tool goes far back into history. The great Greek thinker and teacher, Socrates, taught by asking questions; he didn’t give lectures or write books. Socrates’ questions were crafted to challenge his students to think about their beliefs and, specifically, to consider the assumptions underlying—as well as the ramifications of—their beliefs. In other words, for Socrates, it was his *students’ thought* that was the subject matter—*how*, more than, *what* they thought. Socrates’ questions revealed ways in which his students’ thinking was dogmatic, contradictory, or erroneous. His approach—to guide students to think about their thinking—was regarded as subversive by the governing elites of his time. Accused of corrupting the minds of young men, Socrates was sentenced to death (Phillips, 2001).

When we encounter students who are dubious about the power of questions to lead to insight, we invite them into a question-based conversation. It is easy to do. Simply find a colleague and have a conversation in which you explore a topic, going back and forth, only using questions. Let’s say the topic is “joy.” The conversation might go something like this:

You: *What brings you joy?*

Colleague: *Hmmm, what do you mean by “joy”?*

You: *Is the best way to know the meaning of joy to think about joyful moments in our lives?*

Colleague: *Is there a difference—a distinction—I wonder, between joyful moments and happy moments?*

You: *Hmmm ... Can two words, like “joy” and “happiness,” possibly mean exactly the same thing?*

Colleague: *Could it be that joy and happiness mean the same thing for one person but different things for another person?*

You: *Is it possible to communicate what one means by “joy” without using words?*

As this example illustrates, restricting a conversation to questions, paradoxically, offers an opportunity to expand and deepen the exchange, rather than to limit it. By sticking to questions participants in a conversation can't help but become increasingly open, playful and curious. By contrast, when the emphasis is on answers to questions, participants often get bogged down in opinions and judgments as they seek to defend and justify their views.

What Makes a Good Question? If questions are so gosh-darn important, then one would expect that we, as teachers, would have a sophisticated understanding of what makes a good one, as well as a proficiency in crafting powerful questions. As part of her Ph.D. research Juanita Brown asked people what they considered to be the characteristics of a good question. Culling the responses, Brown concluded that:

A good question is a question that matters; it is an attractor for energy and it generates energy; it opens up possibilities... It invites deeper exploration... It has some personal connection... It invites a variety of voices... It creates a certain tension, a certain dissonance between [one's] current understanding and something bigger... [And finally] A good question has to be able to travel well (Brown, 2001, pp. 153-154).

As a way of exploring the relative power of questions, consider the following queries:

- 1-Do you like small towns better than big cities?
- 2-Who is your favorite actor?
- 3-What's the most difficult thing you have had to do in your life?
- 5-Why is there so much killing in the name of religion?

Now, imagine that you are an Olympic judge and it is your job to rate these five questions, on a scale of 1→10, in terms of their power to engage the human mind. How would you rate them?

For most people, Questions 1 and 2 score low, Question 3 scores intermediate, while Question 4 is judged as the most thought provoking, intriguing, and challenging (Vogt et al., 2003).

The way a question is constructed—e.g., is it a “yes/no” question (1 above), a “what” question (3 above), a “why” question (4 above)—goes a long way to determining its power. Vogt et al. (2003, p. 4) illustrate this when they ask their readers to place the following words in a pyramid from lower to higher power: WHO WHAT WHEN WHERE WHICH WHY HOW. Most people rank these words from more powerful to less powerful as follows:

MORE POWERFUL

Why

What, How

When, Who, Where

Which (i.e., yes/no questions)

LESS POWERFUL

To make this relationship between question construction and power more concrete, imagine a teacher who is vexed because one of her students, Dave, repeatedly fails to do his homework assignments. In considering how she might broach this subject with Dave, the teacher comes up with four possible questions in accord with the above “pyramid”:

- (1) *Why:* Dave, why do you suppose homework has become such an issue for us?
- (2) *What:* Dave, what is it about doing homework that is difficult for you?
- (3) *When:* Dave, when was the last time you completed a homework assignment?
- (4) *Yes-No:* Dave, did you complete last night’s homework?

Moving up the pyramid from the “yes/no” (Q-4) through the “when” and “what” (Q-3 & 2) to the “why” question at the top, there is a growing opportunity for reflection and genuine conversation. Indeed, with the “why” question, Dave’s teacher is not blaming, but instead seeking understanding; she wants to help Dave dig below the surface, down to what is true for him. In so doing she takes a situation that normally would be aggravating and perhaps even humiliating for a student and turns it into an opportunity for reflection—learning.

Question-Centered Learning

In most schools today teaching is organized around disciplines (e.g., Algebra I, English Composition, American History) and teachers instruct students in specific aspects of these disciplines during specified periods each day. This approach is limited, first, because subject separations are arbitrary and, second, because the chosen subjects often lack direct relevance to the daily lives of students. But as Donald Finkel points out in Teaching With Your Mouth Shut:

An entirely different approach is possible... Teachers can organize their teaching around inquiry rather than the separate disconnected abstractions called “history”, “math”, or “literature.” An inquiry-centered course focuses not on traditional subject matter but on a problem or questions. The subject matter is learned as a tool for working on the problem. [For example,] if we wish to understand why advertising dominates our landscape, we will need to learn some social and economic history... [In inquiry-based courses] students learn those parts of traditional subjects they can use to tackle the problem, and no more... Such a shift changes everything.... (2000, pp. 54-55)

For decades, a cadre of progressive educators, like Finkel, have been experimenting with inquiry-based learning where the role of the teacher is more like that of a midwife—someone who creates the conditions for the birthing of understanding from within students. Such teachers spend much of their time asking questions and listening very carefully *to* students instead of talking *at* them. And, rather than prioritizing teacher-student interactions, they seek to encourage student-student question-based problem solving.

Got Questions? Many people come to believe, as a result of their schooling, that they really don't hold within them any interesting questions. Think about it. How many times throughout your schooling were you asked (along with your classmates): “Does anybody have any questions?” In most cases, we learned that “No” was the correct response to this query. And with time, it is likely that we actually came to believe that we had no questions worth asking. Of course, the truth is that we are all filled with questions—questions worthy of attention.

In my first year seminar course, I ask students to think about questions that they would like answers to—questions that are really important to them. In making this request, I assert that they are holding within them important questions—questions worth asking—questions worthy of answers.

To add a touch of intrigue to my request, I hold up a large black suitcase, explaining that it contains an extraordinary computer that is able to answer any question they might have (this idea is inspired by Postman and Weingartner, 1969). I then carefully rest the suitcase on a table, while challenging students to fill up an entire page with their burning questions. They set to work, some of them glancing up at the black suitcase from time to time.

Students produce several pages questions. Some of their questions are specifically designed to test the powers of my pretend super-computer—What’s my mom’s maiden name? What did I have for breakfast today? I explain that the cost of operating this one-of-a-kind computer is much too high to waste on questions like these, questions that already have a known answer. Then I ask each student to put one of their tough (computer-worthy) questions up on the blackboard. Here is a sampling:

- What’s the most important thing to learn while in college?
- What causes love to die?
- Is it good that people are living longer today than in the past?
- Is war a part of human nature?
- What’s the fastest and easiest way to make a lot of money?
- Am I crazy?

Next, I explain that our super-duper computer has trouble answering questions that are imprecise and/or weighted with assumptions. In effect, the computer needs to know exactly what is meant by the words employed in each question. For example, for the question, “What causes love to die?” the computer needs to know what the questioner means by “love”—e.g., What type of love is being conjured? Similarly, what is meant by the word, “die?” As worded, the question assumes that love can be extinguished. But maybe that’s not true? And what about the word “cause?” Asking “what *causes love to die*,” (rather than “what *are* the causes...”) implies that there is just one cause. Further, the very word “cause” assumes causality—i.e., assumes that we

live in a world where effects are invariably the result of causes. But is this the way the world works or simply a reflection of how we have been conditioned to see the world?

In response to these kinds of prompts, students come to see that a culturally conditioned way of seeing the world is reflected in the construction of this question. Specifically, “What causes love to die?” reflects a conception of reality based on singularities—one form of love, one form of death, one cause, one effect.

As students delve deeper into this question, they are set free to expand their thinking and understanding of love, causality, and death. One student comments, “If it is genuine love, it won’t die. In fact, for love to die is a contradiction in terms, because if love dies, it wasn’t really love in the first place.” This prompts another student to observe that in her experience, “Love can die. It dies if I fail to nurture it. It’s like a pansy,” she explains, “The pansy is love. If I fail to water it, to care for it, the pansy will die. That’s the way it is with me and love.”

The woman next to her challenges, “You are speaking metaphorically. I get your point but I am not sure I agree because, though pansies and love may share some things in common, they are not the same.” This leads to a short digression on metaphors—What are they and how they can be helpful, but also misleading in clarifying thought.

Returning to the central question, a woman in her fifties says, in a quivering voice, “My take is different. I had imagined that if someone I loved died, my love would die, but when my mother died, my love did not waiver or diminish. In some ways I am even more intimate with my mother now than when she was alive.”

After a long silence, a young man speaks of the death of his love for his ex-girlfriend who left him for another guy. He is unequivocal, “It was *love* and it did *die* and it was my girlfriend’s leaving that *caused* it to die. Here is a concrete story—something that most class members can relate to and want to explore further. Questions pop out: Tell me about this love you had for your girlfriend? What was it exactly? How did it leave you feeling about yourself? How did your girlfriend experience your love? How was she changed by your love? What exactly is it that has now died in you?

As class members sink deeper and deeper into the topic of love, they forget about the imaginary computer in the black suitcase. They forget they are in school. They have stepped into relationship with themselves, their own minds and hearts, and with each other.

Through an emphasis on question-centered learning, students, in my experience, come to realize that they are not simply empty containers waiting for their teachers to fill them up with information. To the contrary, their own questions and passions form a foundation from which they can extend and expand their knowledge through questioning, observing, reevaluating and reflecting. Of course, this is not easy but it is worth it.

Cultivating A Love of Questions: 7 Explorations

Humans have been blessed with a curious nature and placed in a world full of wonderful stuff. Our challenge is not to spoil it all by force-feeding artificial, contrived information into delicate hearts and minds.

-Lynn Stoddard, 2004, p. 76

Almost a half century ago Postman and Weingartner (1969. p. 23) observed: “It is staggering... [that] the most potent intellectual tool that man has yet developed—the art and science of asking questions—is not taught in school!” What at follows are some approaches—think of them as “explorations”—that teachers can use to help ourselves and our students become more skilled in the art and science of asking questions while, at the same time, experiencing the delight that open, creative, question-based learning can offer. These explorations can be modified in innumerable ways to fit most any learning context.

Exploration #1: Questions to Create Community. It is the first day of class. You watch as students file into the room. Some know each other, but most are strangers. As you look from face to face, you are curious to know something about these people and you want to create a classroom atmosphere that will allow them to begin to know each other. So it is that you pass out slips of paper and invite each person to create a question for the class by completing the open-ended sentence: *How many of you* _____? When they are done, students fold up their papers and drop them into a hat (inspired by Jensen, 2004). Then, the hat goes around

and each person picks a slip and reads the question on it. The questions might sound something like this:

- *How many of you are working while you are in school?*
- *How many of you have doubts about your major?*
- *How many of you are in an intimate (sexual) relationship?*
- *How many of you have doubts about this class and are considering dropping it?*
- *How many of you are vegetarians?*
- *How many of you have taken a dump in the woods?*
- *How many of you like to go out drinking?*
- *How many of you don't watch television?*
- *How many of you have parents who are divorced?*
- *How many of you have had a close friend die?*
- *How many of you think the world will be a better place in 50 years?*

Students indicate “yes” to a question by raising their hands. The teacher may chime in with follow-up questions. For example, observing that more than half of the class raises their hands in response to the first question (“How many of you are working while you’re at school?”), the teacher might ask: “How many resent the fact that you have to work?” or “How many feel that the work you are doing is making the world a better place?” Following the teacher’s example, students often begin asking their own follow-up questions.

When I begin a course in this way, it is usually the case that everyone is paying attention and participating. Why? Because it is their questions that are receiving attention and the responses are teaching them things about the other people in the room.

Exploration #2: A Transformative Question—What’s Alive For You? Most people are disinclined to ask questions of strangers. If we dare do it, our questions seldom go much beyond requesting directions or asking for the time. So it is that we often sit mum—on buses, in concert halls, standing in line at the grocery store, riding the elevator, waiting in the dentist’s office—more present to our social discomfort, it seems, than to the opportunity for connection with each other. But imagine how it would be if we gave ourselves permission, in these

instances, to offer each other questions. And, imagine if we were to see our questions as gifts that we extend to one another, rather than intrusions?

The question need not be clever or brilliant, just generous. For example, once at a party I looked across the room and was astonished to see my son Jake, who was eight at the time, talking in animated fashion with a stranger. Later, I asked the man “What was it that you asked my son?” His response: “I just asked him what he liked to do.” Could it be that simple?

On another occasion, when walking up to a bus stop, I nodded to a stranger who was waiting there. We both stood in silence for a few minutes and then the man turned to me and asked, “What’s alive for you?” His question surprised me. I could see that he was serious and this prompted me to take this stranger’s question seriously. “Hmmm, What’s was alive for me?” In that moment, what was alive was that I was feeling awkward and confused by the stranger’s question and, yet, at the same time, I was both drawn in and intrigued by this question. After a long pause, I realized that “what was alive for me” was that I had just moved to Seattle for a year’s sabbatical and I was experiencing each day as if I were a kid in summer—filled with energy, curiosity, and wonder. This question allowed me to connect with myself and, in some measure to the stranger.

Are There Such Things as Strangers?

One of the nice things about being a teacher is that, on occasion, one of my old students gets in touch with me. For example, recently I received an email from Tressa. After living in Russia and Mongolia for a year, Tressa was returning to Penn State for a day and we arranged to meet. During our conversation I asked Tressa, “Do you see the US differently now that you are back?” Tressa’s immediate response was that Americans don’t talk to each other. For example, when she landed in Philadelphia, after a year away, she was stunned to see that almost all of the people waiting for planes were seated far apart from each other. She was also surprised by the quiet; none of these human beings were talking to each other.

Listening to Tressa, I realized that I was no different from the Americans Tressa was talking about. When in an airport, I, too, tend to isolate myself. When sitting on a plane, next to a stranger, more often than not, I bury my nose in a book, in effect, communicating the belief that the book has more to offer me than the stranger next to me. What would happen, though, if all of us understood fellow passengers as fellow Americans, fellow human beings, fellow life

sojourners with similar hopes, fears, and loves of our own? What if we turned to the *stranger* and simply asked, “What’s alive for you?”

Schools are fertile ground for introducing the question, “What’s alive for you?” into American culture. A while back when I asked a group of students to respond to this question, the first five people answered by talking about something in the future—e.g., the upcoming Steelers game, the trip home they had planned for the coming weekend. It seemed as if they didn’t properly hear my question and were, instead, responding to the question “What are you looking forward to?” So I repeated the question with a new emphasis: “What’s alive for you **RIGHT NOW, in this moment?**”

To my surprise, my reformulation had no effect. One by one, each and every person spoke about what they were looking forward to in the coming days. So here were 25 people who had taken the trouble to come to class. Each was alive, each was breathing, each had a pulsating heart and, yet, each was somewhere else, wishing for some future moment, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the present moment is the only moment there ever is—i.e., that the future doesn’t exist, except as a concept.

Upon further reflection, these students’ responses were not really so surprising. Asking them “What’s alive for you?” was like speaking in a foreign tongue. These young people were probably not feeling particularly alive or enlivened in that moment, in my classroom. Groping to understand and wishing to please, they transformed the question to “What are you looking forward to?” and responded accordingly. As the semester progressed we returned to the question, “What’s alive for you?” and slowly they learned to pause and *check in* with themselves to see how they were feeling, and to consider what was true for them—in their head, their body, their heart—in that very moment. Slowly, they began to trust in themselves, to trust in each other, and to trust in me.

Imagine what would happen over time if it became common practice for teachers to begin and end each school day by gathering in a circle and reflecting, in turn, on the question, “What’s alive for you?” Perhaps, with practice, this question would be received with gratitude, rather than trepidation, both inside the classroom and in our culture at large. And, perhaps, as a result, we would become more alive, more aware of our aliveness, and more aware of what brings us alive, too!

Exploration #3: Observation as the Foundation for Questions. Each Fall I teach a field-ecology course for 15-20 upper-class science majors. When I first offered this course, I imagined that the students would be skilled observers and that they would understand how it is that questions invariably have their origins in observations. But I have noted, year-after-year, that very few of my students have ever been invited to actually take the time to quiet themselves and to patiently observe their surroundings.

Here is a true story that underscores the critical link between questions and observation. The year is 1859 and Louis Agassiz is a professor at Harvard where a student named Nathaniel Shaler asks if he might study under Agassiz. To gauge both the depth and breath of the young man's knowledge, Agassiz first peppers Shaler with questions. Then, satisfied, Agassiz places a preserved fish in front of Shaler and instructs him to learn all that he can without, in any way, damaging the fish. Shaler sets to work observing, assuming that the professor will soon return to quiz him. But Agassiz does not return that day, nor the next. It isn't until a week later that the professor finally approaches Shaler to ask what he has learned. Based on his observation of the specimen's shape, mouth and teeth design, scales, fin structure, etc., Shaler shares both his conclusions and his hypotheses. When he is finished, Agassiz says, "That is not right," and walks away. Undaunted, Shaler goes back to work and to his astonishment, he finds that the deeper and more attentive he becomes, the more questions arise and the more he discovers, until in his words, he is learning "a hundred times as much as seemed possible at the start." Such is the power—largely forgotten in contemporary schooling—of sustained observation and questioning.

In the spirit of this story, I give students an assignment focusing on observing and questioning. The exercise is called "50 Questions" and bears resemblance to an activity I, myself, engaged in as a fledgling scientist. The first instruction is simple: Go somewhere! In a sociology course the destination might be a social setting, like a shopping mall or sporting event; in a business course, the target could be a factory or a corporate headquarters.

50 Questions is a Teacher Preparation Course

In a teacher preparation course, the setting for 50 Questions could be an inner-city school. In this case, upon arriving to the school grounds, students could be asked to pay attention to how they are feeling—e.g., calm, open, excited, nervous, tense, on guard? Then, they could be given a

half hour to simply explore the school grounds and the exterior of the building, noting down their observations and the questions that arise from each observation. Next, they could be invited to go inside and, in so doing, to carefully observe the doors of the school, the lobby and hallways, the windows and the walls, the offices, cafeteria, and bathrooms—reflecting, in each case, on what was being communicated to students? Finally, in groups of 2-3, they could be invited to spend an hour in one of the school’s classrooms observing both the teacher and the students, again noting down any questions that arose from their observations. Afterwards, in a debriefing, these prospective teachers could first present questions elicited by their observations and then explore the implications, assumptions, and revelations associated with their questions.

In my ecology course at Penn State, I introduce my students to 50 Questions by taking them to a natural setting consisting of forest and fields. Upon arrival I say:

Simply walk about with no particular agenda until you find a place where you feel comfortable and then sit down. Once you are settled, look around and observe your immediate surroundings very carefully. For example, if you find that your attention is drawn to a leaf on a plant, observe that leaf as if you have never seen one before, engaging all your senses. As you observe, questions will arise. In the case of the leaf, your questions might sound like this: Why is this leaf shaped the way it is? Why are the margins of this leaf jagged? What’s inside this leaf? Why is the leaf green? What is “green”? When I crush this leaf, what causes that strong smell? And if it happens that while observing the leaf your attention is drawn to a tiny insect on the leaf’s underside, observe the insect, again noting down the questions that arise from your observations. Continue in this fashion, closely observing those things that capture your attention.

The idea of this exercise is for each student to write down all the questions that emerge from their present-moment observations, without judging or excluding any questions. As students do this, they realize that they have the potential to generate lots of questions. Indeed, this exercise is a way of inviting us back to our essential nature which is to be open and curious.

In 30 minutes of observation, my students easily generate fifty questions. I next prompt them to examine their questions with an eye to spotting trends. For example, some students are surprised to discover that almost all their questions are focused on plants; others observe that it was only their sense of vision that triggered their questions (e.g., they have no questions prompted by something that they smelled, heard, tasted or touched). Still others note that the great majority of their questions begin with the word “what,” and that they have very few “how” or “why” questions.

After making these observations, I ask students to share what they regard as their best question. Then, as a group, we critique each question for its clarity and crispness and, as necessary, we modify questions so that they are free of ambiguity. Once students have produced some examples of clear questions, they consider how their questions could be answered.

At the end of the semester these students often observe that this Field Ecology course is one of the very best courses they have taken at Penn State. At first, this surprised me—after all, I wasn’t doing much *teaching*, in the traditional sense, at all! Indeed, rather than talking *at* my students, telling them what I thought they *should* know and *should* do, I simply took them to the field and invited them to look around, all the while trusting that they possess the capacity (with a bit of coaching) to make careful observations, ask good questions, and carry out well-designed research. Indeed, they do! What’s more, their understanding of the practice of science and their ability and confidence to do science soared. All this, by employing a pedagogy focusing on observations and questions.

Exploration #4: The Power of Why. There is arguably no more powerful question than “Why?” In fact, the freedom to ask “Why?” may be essential to our common humanity. This is illustrated in the story about Primo Levi, a Jewish man who was forced to endure a long journey in a cattle car on his way to a concentration camp during World War II. Levi was hungry and very thirsty. Deep into the journey, the train stopped, and, spotting an icicle, Levi reached out to break it off. Before he could bring the icicle to his lips, a hulking guard grabbed his arm and snatched the icicle away. Levi looked at the guard and asked, "Warum" (“Why [have you done this]”?). The guard responded with, "Hier ist kein warum" ("There is no 'Why' here"). Reflecting on this incident, Fritz Stern wrote: "This 'Hier ist kein warum' stands against everything that is human and constitutes a form of verbal annihilation" (Stern, 2000; Uhl, 2004).

The question “Why?” sources itself to our innate compulsion to understand, to reason, to exercise our intellect. “Why?” enables our minds to extend out into the world, to grasp and then, to enter into relationship. This question also enables us to improve our surroundings by pooling our individual and collective intelligence. This is true, for instance, in the corporate world. Toyota—the world’s largest automobile manufacturer—gives credit for its high productivity and quality control to the question, “Why?” Every worker on the Toyota assembly line is taught to analyze problems by asking this question over and over again. “This bolt fell off.” “Why?” “Because the thread is stripped.” “Why?” “Because it was misaligned with the screw.” “Why?” And so on. It turns out that almost every design problem encountered at Toyota can be solved with five “whys” or less (Beck, 2001, p. 162).

Derrick Jensen (2004) provides a way of tapping into the power of *why* through a practice he dubs, “The Annoying Child” (a name that exposes our culture’s negative attitudes and beliefs around questioning). This practice is simple to do. When you hear someone express an opinion about something you ask, “Why do you think that?” When that person responds, you follow up with, “And why is that?” and on and on until the other person is stumped. This simple practice can be quite revealing. For example, imagine that you are talking to your colleague, Judith, about the *meaning of progress* and she declares, “As a society we, in America, are making progress?” Realizing that Judith has expressed an opinion disguised as a fact you ask:

“**Why** do you think we in America are making progress?”

She responds, “We are developing new technologies every day.”

You come back with, “**Why** are new technologies a sign of progress?”

After a moment’s reflection, Judith answers, “Because new technologies make life easier.”

“**Why** is an easy life a mark of progress?” you ask her.

She replies, “An easy life means more free time.”

“And **Why** do you believe that new technologies give us more free time?” you query.

“Well, I don’t know... I just think this must be true,” Judith responds.

By repeating these “Why” questions, Judith will eventually begin to uncover some of the underlying beliefs and hidden assumptions that frame her definition of progress.

The power of the question “why” to unlock and unload feelings and beliefs that separate us from our own compassionate and kind nature and then others is demonstrated by the following story. While attending a dinner party, I noticed myself becoming irritated every time a

certain guest spoke. Noting this, I decided TO engage in a brief self-inquiry reconstructed as follows:

Me: “**Why** this irritation?”

Self: “Because that guy is so dramatic and he just goes on and on?”

Me: “And **why** is this a problem?”

Self: “Because he dominates the conversation.”

Me: “And **why** do you suppose he is dominating the conversation?”

Self: “I don’t know, maybe because he feels insecure and wants attention.”

Me: “Interesting... Have you ever done what he is doing—dominate a conversation?”

Self: “Hmmm, on occasion, I have known myself to do exactly what he is doing!”

Me: “And so, again, **why** your irritation in this moment?”

Gradually, the source of my irritation became clear. I was actually seeing in “that guy” an aspect of myself that I had not yet fully accepted. Indeed, what was “out there” in the world provided a “mirror” enabling me to know myself more completely. Through this knowledge, I soon freed myself from an unquestioned judgment, engendering openness rather than irritation and rejection.

Employing the “Annoying Child” practice in the classroom, I’ve discovered that students, far from being annoyed, are actually intrigued by it. Though they may be a bit uncomfortable at first—similar to trying to bend over to touch your toes after you’ve been standing upright for a long time—with practice they discover that this mind “stretch” teaches them about themselves, about how they think, their assumptions and disabling beliefs. In effect, they surprise themselves, discovering that thinking can be enjoyable and questioning can be enlivening.

Exploration #5: Using Questions to Promote Critical Thinking. A lot of what passes for *thinking* in our culture is just mental effort expended to back up opinions that, more often than not, have been formed without much genuine *thought*. This kind of self-serving thinking is the foundation of what Edward De Bono (1994) terms, the “clash system” where two opposing views fight it out. Western civilization—in its philosophy and in its practice—is mired in the clash system as exemplified by the prevalence of argument, debate, dialectics, and adversarial thinking that pervades our politics, our courts, our business decisions and day-day living.

We seem to believe that from a *clash* of opposing views something better one will emerge. However, in practice, the clash of viewpoints—rather than serving to contribute to the evolution of thought—more often than not, only serves to harden each person’s point of view. As counterattacks and counter-defenses continue, each point of view grows ever-more rigid and unable to develop. The tragedy of the clash system is that it only minimally contributes to the advance of reasoning and understanding. That this system should exist somewhere in a culture is valuable, even if marginally. That it should dominate the culture is absurd (DeBono, 1994, pp. 85-89, paraphrased).

As an alternative to the clash system, DeBono offers a simple, question-based methodology he dubs “PMI” (where the “P” stands for “Plus,” “M” stands for “Minus,” and “I” for “Interesting”). A PMI approach can be useful anytime it’s necessary to think something through, either within a group or individually. For example, DeBono describes a time when he asked a group of boys (ages 10-11) whether they thought it would be a good idea if each of them received \$5 each week for attending school. The boys enthusiastically embraced this idea and immediately began fantasizing about what they would do with this weekly income. It was at this point that DeBono explained the PMI approach and asked the boys to work in groups to come up with the **P**lus, **M**inus and **I**nteresting points with regard to his \$5 proposal.

That the boys could generate **P**lus points was no surprise. The interesting part came when they took the time to really think about the possible **M**inus aspects to this idea of receiving \$5/week for attending school. Suddenly, many issues, initially overlooked in their zeal, turned up. For example:

- *The bigger boys would beat them up and take their money.*
- *Parents would no longer give them presents or pocket money.*
- *The school would raise its prices for meals.*
- *There would be quarrels about the money and strikes.*
- *There was no obvious source of this money.*
- *There would be less money to pay teachers.*
- *There would not be any money for the school to buy a mini-bus.*

DeBono reports, “At the end of the exercise the class was again asked if they liked the idea. Whereas thirty-out-of-thirty had previously liked the idea, it now appeared that 29 out of 30 had completely reversed their view and now disliked the idea (1994, p. 13).

DeBono is quick to point out that a PMI is not like a typical listing of pros and cons because the primary purpose of a PMI is to explore possibilities, not to argue. The “I” (Interesting) part of the PMI technique is particularly relevant in this regard. A good prompt for “I” is: It would be interesting to see _____.” So, for example, for the above idea of giving kids \$5/week to attend school—It would be interesting to see:

- If the kid’s school attendance would improve?
- If basic math skills (counting, adding, making change, etc.) would improve?
- How parents would respond to this initiative—e.g., would they let the kids keep the money?
- If kids would pool their weekly stipends in order to make large purchases that were heretofore unimaginable for them as separate individuals?

The key point here is that the PMI approach induces a shift in how intelligence is used. Instead of being employed to muster arguments to support pre-existing opinions (the adversarial/debate approach so common in our culture), intelligence in the world of PMI is used to exhaustively and creatively explore new ideas. With PMI there are not right or wrong ideas, only thoughtful responses to provocative prompts.

There is no end to the opportunities for using PMI in the classroom. For example, in a case where one student judges a second student’s idea as “stupid,” the teacher could ask that student to do a *PMI* on the very idea that he has just judged as “stupid.” Indeed, with only a modicum of effort, PMI could readily become a central part of classroom culture. Then, anytime a new idea came up—e.g., the school parking lot should be turned into a vegetable garden; students should decide what they want to study in school; homework should be eliminated—students could be invited to perform a PMI. In sum, PMI is a question-based technique which promotes the most important survival skill there is—thinking from the perspective of another!

Exploration #6: *Lectio Divina*—Using Questions in the Context of Contemplation. The ability to read is a prerequisite for functioning effectively in modern society. But is all this reading really serving us? Might it be that, in the case of reading, less is actually more?

Enter: *lectio divina*, a form of contemplative reading that originated in monastic communities in the 12th Century. Saint Benedict described *lectio divina* as the practice of

listening deeply to a text “with the ear of our hearts.” It is reading as a moral activity, as a way to expand our consciousness and to discern wisdom. This makes it a particularly appropriate for consideration by both teachers and students.

The actual practice of *lectio divina* entails sitting in contemplation, open to the possibility of being transformed by a text. This requires becoming porous, allowing the text to enter all the way to our center and, in so doing, to experience oneself as an open question, ready to receive whatever gifts a text may offer.

Bill Arney, a professor at Evergreen College, uses a secular version of *lectio divina* to help his students explore questions that can only be approached through the slow and careful contemplation of a text.

My somewhat modified version of Arney’s *lectio* format begins with the selection of a text. For example, recently in a workshop for teachers that I was leading, I choose David Orr’s text, “What’s an Education for?” which I find to be both provocative and inspiring. When the time for our gathering arrived, we all sat in a circle, holding copies of the text. Then, I invited everyone to sit in silence for several minutes so that we could all have time to reflect on the Orr text. Next, I asked each person to select a passage from this text that had moved them and to tell us why. This was followed by another period of silence to reflect on what each person had said.

Then, I invited anyone who was so inclined to suggest a passage from the text that seemed to encompass all that had been spoken thus far. Suggestions were made by simply reading a text passage out loud with no elaboration or justification. Sometimes, after just one passage is read, there is agreement that this selection captures the group’s sentiments. On other occasions, as happened on this day, it is necessary to read several different selections—each one followed by a period of silence—until a sense of unity was achieved.

Once we had agreed on a passage, I read it aloud several times, suggesting that we all simply allow the text to brush against us like a soft breeze, paying attention to any images, feelings, emotions, symbols, shapes, tastes, movements or sounds that bubble up. The idea, I explained, is to open to how the text resonates with you (Hart, 2004).

As the silence deepened I asked the participants to reflect on the one word or phrase from the passage that was most important for them and to share this word or phrase without any elaboration. Then, the passage was read again followed by several minutes of silence during which time I asked those gathered to listen for **what the text was saying to you**. When the time

felt right, each person shared his understanding by completing the open sentence, "The text is telling me_____."

In the final stage, the passage was read once more followed by several minutes of silence during which time we listened for **what the text was inviting us to do**. Eventually, each person shared their understanding by completing the open sentence: "The text is inviting me to_____." During this final sharing I asked each person to pay particular attention to the words spoken by the person to their immediate left. Our *lectio* ended as it had begun, with several minutes of silence. During this time, as a way of nurturing respect and unity, I asked participants to return their attention to the words shared by the person to their left (Adapted from Bill Arney, <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/awareness/newlectio.htm>).

Some may worry that providing space for contemplation in the classroom is tantamount to bringing religion or spirituality into school but contemplation—sitting in silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, observing the workings of the mind—is simply a means of cultivating understanding, wisdom even.

Though I am still in the early stages of exploring *lectio divina*, I believe that this practice is a form of devotion to ourselves, to each other, and to something grander than ourselves. Here, less truly is more.

My mentor in this exploration, though she doesn't know it, is Maria Lichtmann, professor of philosophy and religion at Appalachian State. In Lichtmann's view (elaborated in her book The Teacher's Way) one of the tasks of a teacher is to "read" the "text" of her student's lives. In this vein, she asks: "What if we [teachers] were to see our students as possessing a *story* that we need to read... What if their stories were as real to us as the subjects we teach... Then our teaching would become a *lectio divina*, a sacred reading of the stories in our students" (p. 34).

In sum, the question which underlies *lectio divina* is always, "What am I to learn here?" Thus, in order to participate fully in *lectio*, one has to be ready to be changed by the text and if we, as teachers, are to take Lichtmann's words to heart, it will mean having a readiness to be changed by our students.

Exploration #7: Going Public With Questions—Strategic Questioning. Questions aren't just things to be explored within the confines of the classroom. Once teachers and students

are awakened to the art of asking questions, they can engage people in their cities and towns using an exercise called “strategic questioning.”

“Strategic questioning,” emerged in the early 1980s when Fran Peavy, then in her fifties, asked herself the question, “What might I do to foster world peace?” With time an answer came—Peavy would LISTEN! So it was that she left the U.S. and traveled around the world. Arriving in a new city, Peavy would simply sit on a park bench and post a cloth sign which read: “American Willing to Listen!” That’s all it took. A simple invitation and people came to sit and talk to her. For her part, Peavy mostly listened but she also offered questions, from time to time. With time, she discovered that certain types of questions had the power to extend and deepen her listening while, at the same time, deepening the other person’s understanding of themselves. Eventually she characterized these powerful types of questions as “strategic” (Peavy, 2002).

Strategic questions, according to Peavy, are explicitly designed to help move people away from stuck places in their lives. In other words, they are questions that create movement inside one’s heart and mind, and in so doing, usher forth new possibilities.

I was introduced to strategic questioning in a workshop that Peavy led in Seattle in 2001, a short time after the September 11th attacks. After a morning session where Peavy introduced us to the theory and practice of strategic questioning, she sent us out in pairs to a nearby shopping mall to ask strangers how their lives had changed since 9/11.

Arriving at the mall, my companion and I looked around for someone who appeared to be unoccupied. Mustering our courage, we approached a woman sitting on a bench, sipping a soft drink. We introduced ourselves, explaining that we were participants in a workshop focusing on questioning techniques and asked if she would allow us to practice our newly acquired skills with her. She agreed allowing that she was on her lunch break and would soon be returning to the beauty parlor where she worked.

In response to our questions centering on her life since 9/11, this beautician spoke of how she had become a kind of therapist in recent weeks. It appeared that the angst and fear that her clients were feeling in the aftermath of 9/11 were surfacing and gushing out in the relative safety of the beauty parlor. She confided that she enjoyed being useful in this new way. When we asked her what she was learning about herself in this time of turmoil she spoke of her desire to help others. When we inquired about the kind of service she felt most strongly called to, she became quiet. A long pause followed. After a time, she smiled sheepishly, and said that maybe she would

like to teach school—fifth grade. “I love being around kids,” she confessed. This led us to ask questions to help her explore what stood in the way of her dream.

We spoke with several other people that day at the mall and each time we were surprised by the heartfelt quality of their responses to our questions. Since that time, I have discovered that it is possible to engage in strategic questioning in any setting. For example, while I was writing this chapter, Mike, a recent Penn State graduate in biology, called me to talk about his difficulty in making a decision about how to take his biology major into the workplace.

My first thought was, “This kid should go to graduate school if he hopes to get a good job in biology” but I resisted the temptation to ask, “Have you considered graduate school?” Why? Because, with that question, I would be saying, in effect, “I, Chris, think you should go to graduate school.” I also was careful to avoid “yes-no” questions like “Did you enjoy studying genetics?” because such questions tend to narrow the latitude of response. Instead, I decided to ask Mike more general, open-ended questions like:

- What do you value most in life?
- As you consider the future, what causes your heart to contract in fear?
- What do you understand to be your deepest purpose in life?
- What is the most important thing about being you?
- In what ways, if any, does any of this relate to Biology?

Mike talked freely, welcoming these kinds of questions, and I simply listened.

The point for Mike was not to come up with complete answers to my questions—but to receive them and to listen to how both his head and heart were responding. For example, when I asked him, “What do you most value in life?” Mike became silent. I was tempted to fill in the silence by rephrasing my question, but I have learned that when a question is met with silence, it usually means that it has caused the receiver to turn inward. Though Mike had no answer in that moment, it was possible that, given enough time, this question would take on a life of its own pointing Mike toward his calling in life.

Finding a Calling in Life

Consider the possibility that each of us, whether we happen to know it or not, has a unique calling. Theologian Frederick Buechner (1993) describes our life’s calling as that place “where our deepest gladness and the world’s hunger meet.”

Here's a way to discern your life's calling based on three *strategic questions*. To begin, take a piece of paper and make three columns. Then, close your eyes and bring your attention to your heart region in your chest. Once you are feeling relaxed, ask the first question, "What are the things in my life that bring me deep joy and lasting satisfaction—things that feed my heart?" Write down whatever comes to mind in the first column.

Then, when you are ready, ask yourself the second *strategic question*: "What things occurring in my family, my community, my world, cause my heart to ache with compassion?" Allow yourself to settle into this question and as answers come, write them down in the third column.

Then, to conclude this investigation, look over your two lists and ask yourself: "Where are the places where my deepest gladness (Column 1) and the world's hunger (Column 3) meet?" Then, in the middle column, note down your responses to this question. Don't limit yourself by judging whether your responses are practical or doable. Just let your heart and imagination run free. It is in this middle column that will find your calling.

As my conversation with Mike unfolded, it was clear that he had lots of ideas about what he might do with his life. His stuck place was that he couldn't decide which path to pursue. In truth, I had no idea what was best for Mike. Only he knew that. My part was simply to trust that the answer resided in him. Thus, I endeavored to ask questions in such a way that energy and thought and creativity would emerge from him—questions such as:

- What makes this moment of indecision most difficult for you?
- What obstacles do you see?
- How is this moment similar to other moments of indecision in your life?
- What are your biggest fears about making a decision?
- What has to happen for you to move forward?
- What question, if answered, would make a difference in allowing you to move forward?

Throughout our conversation, I kept my questions simple, avoiding convoluted two- and three-part questions. The ideal question, counsels Peavy, draws no attention to itself; it is like a "diver who enters the water without making a splash." Sometimes the most "opening questions" are small follow-up prompts such as, "Why is that?" or "Can you say more?"

I concluded by asking questions that helped Mike think about what he needed in order to move forward:

- What support do you need to continue to explore options?
- Who might you talk to in your quest for clarity?

Again, my intent was to unlock the energy, intelligence, and wisdom residing in Mike, thereby allowing something new to emerge from him.

Though Peavy calls this practice “strategic questioning,” to be successful it requires deep listening because a question, no matter how “strategic,” goes nowhere unless the person asking it holds no agenda save the commitment to listen with full attention and an open heart. As Peavy observes:

There are times when we truly listen, usually when we sense ourselves to be in danger. We stop in our tracks, our ears prick up and we listen as if our lives depend on it. The listening required for strategic questioning is like that: We need to listen as if someone’s life depends on it—because it may” (2002, p. 9).

Listening in this way requires that the one asking the questions has no personal agenda—no point to make; no advice to give—beyond simply helping the other person discover within him/her self a path forward.

When I lead students in strategic questioning, I choose a general theme beforehand. In an education course the goal might be to engage the public around their relationship with education; in an ecology course, their relationship with their environment; in a history course, their relationship with history. The focus is always on relationship—e.g., how people make sense and meaning of education, the environment, history, etc. in the context of their own lives.

After engaging in strategic questioning, my students usually return to the classroom filled with excitement. Often they are surprised by the openness and thoughtfulness of the strangers they’ve approached. As they reflect on this, they realize, in many cases, that their assessments of the American public are based largely on what they have absorbed through the media, especially television, and that the media does not offer a very flattering picture. So it is that by going out to meet the “stranger”—offering generous questions and listening with an open heart—students receive an unexpected gift—namely a compassionate view of their fellow Americans.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING ACTIVITY SHEET ON THE ENVIRONMENT

GETTING STARTED

- Find a partner.
- Go to a public place—e.g., library, park, coffee shop, hotel lobby, etc.
- Introduce yourself and explain that you are taking a class and that this is an assignment.
- Perhaps start with “*There has been a lot in the news lately about the environment. What are your thoughts on the condition of the environment, in general?*”
- Next, move into the Background Questions.

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

Observation questions--Examples:

- What do you read/hear in the media about the environment and what information do you trust?
- What additional information would you like to have?

Analysis questions--Examples:

- What do you think are the reasons for the current state of the environment?
- What effect is all of this having here and around the world?

Feeling questions--Examples:

- What is it about the current state of the environment that most concerns you?
- How does this concern of yours leave you feeling?

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

Vision/Change Questions--Examples:

- How would you like the condition of the environment to be addressed?
- What might it take to bring the current environmental situation towards your ideal vision?
- What forces in our society push against this ideal vision?

Support/Action Questions--Examples:

- What would it take for you to work on just one piece of your vision?
- What support would you need to take one small step toward your vision?
- What might your first step be?

-Adapted from Peavy (2001)

My own discovery—the gift I receive in placing questions and curiosity at the center of my teaching and of students’ learning—is that student’s possess, at their core, immense curiosity waiting to be unleashed. Once unleashed, this curiosity acts as a fountain of youth providing life and energy—a healing elixir—to my aging teacher soul.

Conclusion

I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. - Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Early in my teaching career, when I would pause during a class to ask students if they had any questions, I did so with ambivalence, tinged with fear. I was afraid because I believed that it was my job as teacher to have answers to all of my students’ questions, and that if I lacked answers, I would be judged as incompetent. Now, I see it differently. These days, each time I invite my students to speak their questions, I give up my need to control what will happen next, thereby, creating space for the unexpected. I understand that to embrace questions is to embrace the unknown.

Along the way I am learning that by employing explorations like those offered in this chapter, it is possible to create a classroom culture that is question-friendly. This is no small matter! Questions are the catalysts for learning; they provoke *movement*, they yield *change*.

In the end, the world that we create is determined, in no small measure, by the quality and boldness of our individual and collective questions. In this light, encouraging students to become fearless questioners means applauding them not so much for the correctness of their answers, as for the boldness audacity of their questions.

For teachers, transforming the pervasive fear of questions and preoccupation with answers that permeates contemporary classrooms to a school culture that celebrates and delights in questions is a monumental, yet utterly worthwhile task. The work begins by cultivating the belief that each student has buried, deep inside, important questions that are worthy of attention. Those questions emerge provided we create a trust-filled climate that is hospitable to questions, a climate that ultimately leads young people to “live *their* questions”!

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The questions that *we live*—that we allow to take root in our minds and hearts—can serve as seeds for transforming our relationships with ourselves, our work, and our students. Stoddard (2004, p. 107) offers three such transformative questions:

- *How can I help this [student] discover his greatness—his unique gifts, talents, and abilities—and see his amazing potential to make a difference in the world?*
- *How can I help this [student] grow in love, respect, kindness, and the power to communicate with others?*
- *How can I nurture [this student's] curiosity, hunger for knowledge, and zest for learning?*

Taking these questions to heart means cultivating the capacity to both detect and foster the unique gifts and talents and strengths that reside in each human being. This stands in stark contrast to the status quo practice of delivering a prepackaged, standard curriculum to students.

What Happens To a Nation That Fails To Ask Questions?

Like Judith (above) many people today equate ready access to new technologies (e.g., modern conveniences like flat-screen televisions, iphones, cars, computers) as a mark of progress, believing that these things save us time and contribute to our overall well-being. But is this really true? Should we assume that every new gizmo that comes down the pike represents progress? Social commentator, Jerry Mander (1991) believes that we should judge all technologies as “guilty until proven innocent.” The way to do this is to ask questions! To illustrate Mander’s point, consider this vignette from Mander’s book, *In the Absence of the Sacred*:

At the turn of the century the car was portrayed as a harbinger of personal freedom and democracy: private transportation that was fast, clean (no mud or manure), and independent. But what if the public.... had been told that the car would bring with it the modern concrete city? Or that the car would contribute to cancer-causing air pollution, to noise, to solid waste problems, and to the rapid depletion of the world’s resources? What if the public had been made aware that a nation of private car owners would require the virtual repaving of the entire landscape, at public cost, so that eventually automobile sounds would be heard even in wilderness areas? What if it had been realized that the private car would only be manufactured by a small number of giant corporations, leading to their acquiring tremendous economic and political power? That these corporations would create a new mode of mass production—the assembly line—which in turn would cause worker alienation, injury, drug abuse, and alcoholism? That these corporations might conspire to eliminate other means of popular transportation, including trains? That the automobile would facilitate suburban growth, and its impact on landscapes? What if there had been an appreciation of the psychological results of the privatization of travel and the modern experience of isolation? What if the public had been forewarned of the unprecedented need for oil that the private car would create? What if the world had known that, because of cars, horrible wars would be fought over oil supplies?

Would a public informed of these factors have decided to proceed with developing the private automobile? Would the public have thought it a good thing?...I really cannot guess whether a public so well informed, and given a chance to vote, would have voted against cars. Perhaps not. But the public was NOT so informed. There was never any vote, nor any real debate. And now, only three generations later, we live in a world utterly made over to accommodate the demands and domination of one technology (Mander, 1991, pp. 43-44).

Mander makes a good point. If we, as a people, don’t acquire the skills to intelligently and courageously question the policies and direction of our governmental institutions, educational institutions, religious institutions, corporate enterprises, and business establishments, we put ourselves, our communities, and our nation at risk.

Questioning Metaphors

Every metaphor contains its own assumptions. In America, there are a multitude of metaphors suggesting that we view life as *struggle* or *contest* or *fight*. Consider: Doctors *wage*

war against cancer, couples *fight* for the custody of their children, companies *mount campaigns* for a larger share of the market, farmers *launch attacks* on insects, communities *combat* crime, and we *battle* against other countries (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In adopting the metaphor of “life as struggle,” we have come to believe that coming out on top is all that matters in life, failing to recognize that this orientation separates us from each other.

In the realm of teaching, the metaphors we use influence the way that we teach. For example, a teacher may regard her students as *patients* to be cared for **or** *troops* to be disciplined **or** *personnel* to be trained **or** *resources* to be developed **or** *plants* to be cultivated or *intelligences* to be challenged... (Postman, paraphrased, p. 174). In a similar vein, this teacher might regard the human mind as a dark cavern needing illumination, a muscle needing exercise, a vessel needing filling, a lump of clay needing shaping, a garden needing cultivation, or a computer for processing information. Such metaphors are succinct statements of a teacher’s beliefs and attitudes and, as such, can’t help but influence, for better or worse, what happens in the classroom.