

Discovering the Power of Questions

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It was only when Ray Krock 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. Indeed, questions have always been the principal catalysts for discovery and new knowledge. In this vein, Einstein once quipped: “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 know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”

The power of questions as a learning tool goes far back into history. The great Greek teacher, Socrates, taught by asking questions; he didn’t give lectures or write books. Socrates’ questions revealed the ways in which his student’s thinking was dogmatic, stifled and in error. Socrates’ approach was regarded as subversive by the governing elites of the time, and eventually he was accused of corrupting the minds of young men and sentenced to death.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in their book, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, cogently observe: “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.” With this in mind, I find it more than a little peculiar that the most potent intellectual tool that humankind has thus far developed—the art and science of asking questions—is not taught in our public schools!”

Sadly, precisely because of our schooling, many of us are question-shy. Think about it. How many times throughout your schooling were you asked (along with your classmates): “Are there questions?” Even when you might have had a question, chances are you laid low, reluctant to call attention to yourself—i.e., you learned that “No” was the correct response to the query, “Are there any questions?” And with time we may have actually come to believe that we have no questions worth asking. Of course, the truth is that we are filled with questions—questions worthy of our attention. All humans are!

In this vein, imagine how it would be if the vector of teaching/learning in our schools was determined by our young people’s interests—their burning questions. This would be “subversive”; it would shift the focus from teacher to learner. Suddenly the student would be seen as having agency. What the student wants to know would be recognized as generative, the germ for discovery and the flowering of knowledge.

To explore the generative power of questions, Michael Geldman in his book, Discover Your Genius, invites readers to engage in an exercise he dubs “100 questions.” The instructions are simple: “In your notebook, make a list of a hundred questions that are important to you. Your list can include any kind of question as long as it’s something you deem significant: anything from ‘How can I save money?’ or ‘How can I have more fun?’ to ‘What is the meaning and purpose of my existence?’” Just write down whatever comes to mind. Geldman recommends completing your full list in one sitting, writing quickly, without judging your questions. As you proceed, important themes will emerge and as you approach 100 questions you will likely be discovering questions that are both unexpected and profound. Engaging in this exercise, is a first step toward discovering one’s own questions and taking one’s life seriously.

A second step, if we dare, would be to invite each other into conversations centered on questions that our discouraged in our culture. Here are two examples: 1) What does our government do, or not do, that is inconsistent with who we know ourselves to be as a people?

2) What hopes or visions for our children are we failing to realize and what might we do about this? Consider the insights and discoveries that we might realize if, as a people, we were to fearlessly engage questions such as these.