

The Questions Not Asked

By Mel Schwartz

Answers are exceptionally valued in our culture. We place far more emphasis on answers than we do upon questions. This theme is at the core of our educational system. If we can provide correct answers with sufficient consistency, we go to the top of the class and perhaps ultimately toward the pinnacle of our careers. The expertise that we summon, the physicians, the therapists, the varied experts that are emblazoned on the television screen are all there to provide answers. But answers to what? Scant attention is being paid to the questions that we ask. How rare it might be to actually hear someone ask, why did you ask that question? Questions tend to be routinely accepted as the focus shifts toward the answer. This orientation toward the intrinsic value of the correct answer sets up a problem. Our focus is on the answer, but not equivalently upon the questions being asked.

The question being asked really reveals the operating assumptions of the questioner. A common question these days is, how do we defeat terrorism? How different might the ensuing discussion be if we asked, why is there terrorism, or why is there terrorism now? The answers to those questions would likely open us to seeing our participation in the problem. Similarly, in the war on cancer the emphasis is around how to defeat cancer and the answers tend in that direction. Imagine if we truly began to ask why there is now an epidemic of cancer, or depression, etc. Both disorders have multiplied at unimaginable rates. Shouldn't we be asking why? If we inquired as to why the rates of depression have doubled in a generation we would expand our field of inquiry. We might look at how we are living in our culture or we might explore the penchant toward diagnosis and the powerful influence of the pharmaceutical industry. Or any other host of possibilities.

Questions that pose the problem as being out there, separate and distinct from us, tend to delude us into illusions of separation. Questions should open up larger and more evolving fields of inquiry. Our questions tend to narrow what we look at and set up predictable answers. Not only does that system play it safe, it deprives us of our fuller participation.

The question being asked actually dictates where the attention is being paid. Questions are powerful as they direct what we look at and have the ability to mesmerize. They limit the potential field of awareness and tend to focus on very singular realities. The problem with answers is that they are often singular, as if there is only one correct answer. In classical scientific terms, this may be known as reductive thinking. At times, it becomes too narrow and limiting. In my therapy practice I've become quite fond of saying that one truth doesn't preclude another. In other words, there may be multiple answers, all true and hence all contributing toward our perception. Many events and many circumstances co-create our realities. When stuck inside a paradigm of linear and objective thinking, this might look like a paradox, but it ultimately expands our thinking.

Imagine an educational system that on occasion graded students on the quality and innovativeness of their questions. Remarkable questions lead to great insights and help us break free from habitual thinking that leaves us stuck in the old groove. Insight typically

is catalyzed by asking a new question, not just searching for new answers. A profoundly new question paints a new landscape to look at and may lead to constructing new realities. Our participation in the universe and in our personal lives is more dynamic and fully alive when we shift the framework from which we ask our questions. If the questions are formatted into a particular framework, the answers will conform to that structure and our thinking and lives are thus patterned. If our questions are more imaginative and evoke curiosity and wonder, we are living a more participatory life.

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