

The Beauty of Questions

by Karen Horneffer-Ginter

□ I love the idea of loving questions -- seeing the potential beauty that they contain. I don't think we always give questions the time and attention they deserve, often mistaking them as being mere stepping stones to an answer. We also abuse questions in our everyday way of relating to them, presenting words under the guise of an inquiry when in fact we're only trying to make a point. I know I'm guilty of this in my own home -- asking my children if they've brushed their teeth or finished their homework or eaten all their dinner before moving on to dessert. Asking the dog if he shredded the paper towel in hopes that he'll admit his guilt. All these moments of undercover policing... But who am I really kidding?

□ When used properly, questions have the potential to connect us to the world of another. A heartfelt "How are you?" or "How was your day?" can become the bridge that keeps us in relationship to the lives of those we love. Sometimes, too, questions create a bridge within ourselves, allowing us to hear what's going on at a deeper level. We know when we've encountered a question that has this potential because it stays with us -- maybe for the day, maybe for our whole lives. It taps us on the shoulder to wake us up, or it wiggles its way in more deeply, opening us up to seeing things in a new way.

□ I still recall first encountering Judith Duerk's chorus of questions about how my life might have been different if there had been a sacred circle to step into. Mary Oliver asking me about my plans for this one wild and precious life, Oriah Mountain Dreamer wanting to know what I ache for and if I dare to dream of meeting my heart's longing, and Angeles Arrien reminding me of the questions asked in some indigenous cultures: When did you stop singing? When did you stop dancing? I think of my friend Ming, asking me at lunch one day if I thought writing was my fullest and truest expression. All these questions have remained close companions across the years.

□ When I was in graduate school, I had the good fortune of being invited to roll around in the world of questions. We would inspect them from various angles, almost like a statue on a gallery pedestal, being apprenticed to recognize their power -- to see how the words we choose or don't choose guide research projects and treatment outcomes. How we should think carefully about whether or not we want to ask people what's wrong with their lives or what's right, about their flaws or their strengths or both -- if we were planning to study pathology or resiliency, knowing that in reality, the answers we find are often based on the questions we ask.

□ Of course the same is true in everyday life. Waking up and asking ourselves, "What do I have to do today?" is different than asking, "What do I get to do today?" or "What do I want to do today?" Given that questions have the capacity to open or close possibilities, it's worth thinking about what questions we want to ponder and which ones

we're tired of asking ourselves. For many of us, there comes a time when we're ready to retire the "what if" and "why" questions that have haunted us.

□ Other questions, however, are worth keeping around -- worthy of holding close and not replacing with an answer too quickly. Just as the expression goes, "only speak if you can improve on the silence" -- maybe, too, we should be taught to offer an answer only if it improves on the question. Of course, such encouragement flies in the face of how we're often taught as students and professionals to move down the limbs of various decision trees. It flies in the face of our human tendency to want to feel the senses of intelligence and rightness that often accompany certainty.

□ Maybe, too, it's fair to say that we need to find our way to a certain number of answers before we can feel comfortable spending time in the somewhat groundless world of questions. We need to feel some certainty before we can appreciate that it's this realm of questions that can pull us into places of greater truth -- allowing us to see that seemingly contradictory ideas can both be right: that light is both wave and particular, that from an aerial perspective, various religious traditions all contain truth. I often encourage my children to stay with these sorts of questions because I don't think it always serves them to land on final answers at such a young age. I'm not really sure they should be answering "Who is God?" or "What political party do I agree with?" I sense that they're sometimes best off, in this life stage, merely gathering information with an open mind. I remind them, too, that there are some answers our human minds can never fully grasp -- and that there may be times when claiming an answer actually moves us further from the truth.

□ I've noticed that such reflections have left me qualifying many of my hopes and requests and prayers, often including an "if it's meant to be" or "if it's in the highest good." Such language feels humbling in moments and liberating in others. More and more, though, I've come to see that often we're best off keeping some space for question marks to be inserted, and possibly to remain -- especially with the really juicy questions that, over time, begin to guide our way.