

## Living By Questions by Jane Hirshfield

Here's a story: A man has a burning question. He decides to seek out a famous Hasidic teacher, a man everyone says is the wisest person of his era. For a long time he walks by foot, carrying his question. He gets rained on; he gets hungry. He keeps walking. Finally, he arrives in the village where the teacher lives. The students, though, won't let him into the study house. How can this man's question be serious, when he has just arrived? They've been working for years to be found worthy of the teacher's attention. Finally, the man's question is stronger than his politeness. He breaks in, corners the teacher and asks, "What is the essence of truth?" The teacher studies him for a moment, slaps him hard and returns to his book. The stunned man goes to a tavern across the road, complaining loudly about his mistreatment. Finally, one of the teacher's disciples takes pity on him, and explains: "The teacher slapped you out of great kindness. He was saying, 'Never surrender a good question for a mere answer.'"

I have loved questions all my life, in different ways. I've loved them out of curiosity and I've loved them out of the hunger for good conversations and I've loved them out of desperation. I've turned to questions the way a cliff climber turns to the next, almost invisible hand-hold and toe-hold on a sheer cliff face. When heartbroken by love's failures, when bewildered and shocked by the world's violence, what comes to me are two things: First, the deep well of tears. But next, the need to understand. What happened? How? What was my part in it? What must I now do? What can I?

All my life, I've wanted more closeness to my own experience, to be able to whisper, "Yes, I'm right here," to even the things that seem hardest. Cultivating the spirit of questioning helps me to do that, to recognize that difficulty, darkness, times of seemingly unclimbable steepness, are also a part of my own true life.

To ask a good question is a way to carabiner yourself to intimacy, a doorknob that turns only one direction, toward open. A good question can send you on a long journey in rain and cold. It can terrify, bringing you straight into your own fears, whether of heights or of loss or of all the mysteries that never go away—our own vulnerability, the heart's utter exposure, the capriciousness and fragility of events, of relationships, of existence.

In times of darkness and direness, a good question can become a safety rope between you and your own sense of selfhood: A person who asks a question is not wholly undone by events. She is there to face them, to meet them. If you're asking a question, you still believe in a future. And in times that are placid and easy, a good question is a preventive against sleepwalking, a way to keep present the awakening question that's under all other questions: "What else, what more?"

The spirit of questioning can also work on your life and mind the way WD-40 works on a sticking hinge. We all have stories that bring us some sense of comfort. "I am this way because in my childhood this thing happened to me." "I am this way because in my grandparents' childhood, that thing happened to them." But those stories, while bringing the relief of understanding and explanation, can also harden into a self-definition that prevents a person (and also a community, a country, a culture) from moving into a new and changed life, a new and changed self.

One question I've found most helpful in undoing such rusted-shut thoughts and feelings is among the simplest: "Is that so?" Asked tenderly, softly, without aggression, it can be turned in every direction—toward your own reactions, toward what others say to you, toward every form of outside authority, toward even your own most basic experience. Asked gently but with persistence, "Is that so?" can surprise you with where it may lead. It takes us past our own fixations, past the easy ideas the Hasidic teacher called "a mere answer." Just to ask "Is that so?" makes something within me happy. A living fish doesn't want to be hooked, it wants to keep swimming into new waters. "Is that so?" slips you into a world you can't foresee or predict. This may sacrifice familiar comforts—but it leaves you also opened, astonished.

Another question I've found especially useful is this: "Can this situation be seen a different way?" If someone cuts in front of me frighteningly on the freeway, instead of staying upset for miles down the road, I might instead turn toward a question: "Is it possible they're going to the airport, trying to get home while their mother is still alive?" I can't know, but I've had my own reasons for driving quickly—once, a dog in the back seat, having seizures while I raced to the vet.

So much of the time, in any day we're guessing why other people act as they act or feel as they feel. This quiet, continuous guessing is what we humans do, a necessary part of our shared communal lives. It's the mind's way to figure things out and chew things over even when we're alone. But why not at least admit to ourselves that that's what we're doing, and, when we can't know another person's motivation, at least try to invent one that raises in us a sense of compassion? This can help in our interactions with strangers on a freeway, and it can help when we find ourselves hurt or angered by someone we love. Is it possible the person we're having difficulty with just understands things differently than we do? To ask that question is already to soften whatever has hardened between you.

I like also to consider changing the question I'm asking, to find one that lets me look from a new angle. A geologist friend has many scientific tools and ways of measuring—and empathy isn't usually taught as a way to do science—but sometimes, he studies a landscape by imagining himself inside it, feeling its changes over 10,000 years. Doing this, he says, lets a mountain's ways of shifting come into view. I've taken up his shift-of-view question in my own way. Now, if I am in grief, or anxiety or anger, I sometimes ask, "What would this experience feel like if I entered it with the perspective of 10,000 years?" My grief is no less real, but it becomes less solitary and more shared if I ask myself what it is like to be grieving not only in this single moment, but in the larger embrace of all people's suffering, all history's sorrow.

When I think of the largest human questions, the unanswerable ones that come to us in the darkest hours, when we might doubt if our lives have any meaning or purpose at all, I sometimes remember a Tahitian painting by Paul Gauguin, one of his last. In its upper left corner, three questions appear: "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"

The painting, read right to left, shows the passage from birth through love and adulthood, and on into age and oncoming death, all taking place in the presence of animals, ripe fruit, the natural world's fullness. The figure of a deity deep in the background shows that other realms and mysteries also surround us. The boy picking fruit at the center shows this moment's touchable sweetness. Every part of existence, wanted and unwanted, the chosen and choiceless, is there.

In a letter, Gauguin described the three phrases he placed on the painting as not a title but a signature. A signature—the unique and attesting gesture of one person's hand—usually means, "I made this, I stand by it, I live by what I have said here." In place of such statements and certainty, Gauguin gave us three questions, too vast to be answered, questions that are windows into everything we care about most. They summon our ages-long connection to others before us, ask what we do with our brief time alive on this earth, peer toward an unknowable future. They stop our hurrying, counter despair and urge us to contemplate the larger arcs of a life. They remind us that moving forward is our inevitable, profoundly lucky human fate. To replace your signature with a question, to bring such a permeable spirit into examining the full risk and full range of our lives...to do that, for me, is one sign of a life being lived on a path of awareness, lived in both the quest for honesty and the sweetness of opening ever more deeply into whatever this very moment might bring.