

Asking: The Most Important Questions to Keep the World Turning

In his famous, endearing story, “The Emperor’s Three Questions”, Leo Tolstoy brought a poignant teaching about the most important questions to ask for effectively engaging in any situation. These questions were: “What is the best time to do each thing?” 2) “Who are the most important people to work with?” and 3) “What is the most important thing to do at all times?” After receiving a variety of unsatisfying answers, the Emperor goes on a quest to speak with an enlightened hermit. The story unfolds through their dialogue (the answers appear at the end of this writing).

Finding Your Questions

For now, rather than looking at his answers, we can focus on: what are the most important questions to have at our fingertips as we traverse our everyday life? What questions can guide us? We all likely have differing conclusions. Let’s look deeply for the two questions that might be most essential for our shared world to keep turning and our lives to prosper in meaningful ways. How would you answer?

Some might think of ecological issues like climate change and preserving the planet. Without our precious planet, we would certainly perish. For example, “How can I save the planet and how can I engage others in this mission?” might, with good reason, be their most important questions.

Some might think of the social issues that plague us and wonder, “How can I stand for social justice and help others to create a just world?” Again, this is a worthy place to focus one’s life energy.

Another thoughtful person might focus on the fundamental capacity for love that human beings share as the essence of our purpose in life and ask, “How can I love more and help others to love?”

Still another caring person who values the unique individuality of each human soul might center their life on the questions, “how can I bring my unique gifts to fruition in the world and help others to do the same?”

Each one of these questions is worthy as a guiding principle. Still, in my proposed thought experiment, none of these questions is the *most* important; rather they are *derived* from the most important. So what, in my opinion, are the two most important questions?

Question 1 - “How Can I Help?”

The first, which can appear in a rich variety of forms, is “How can I help?” This is the essence of: “what is needed right now?”, “what is troubling you?”, “how can I serve” or, as in the famous German Grail story, *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach, “what ails thee?”.

Parzival tells of a chivalrous quest, a hero’s journey, emphasizing humility, compassion and serving a larger purpose. A key part of the story is the encounter between the young knight Parzival and the king Amfortas. The king is dying, in terrible pain and, as his light is extinguishing, so is the light in his mystical kingdom. The secret for his healing and the healing of his world is for the innocent Parzival, to ask the question, “What ails thee?” The young knight had been taught that it is not polite to ask personal questions so he never asks (how many of us fall into this quandary?). As the story unfolds, Parzival goes on a harrowing spiritual quest seeking his true life’s purpose. In the denouement, Parzival returns to the castle and this time asks the question, “What ails thee?”, the king is miraculously healed and the kingdom saved.

Healing comes from asking the question! To my mind, this is the purpose of the story, to invite us, no, to implore us, to ask this question in whatever form accurately fits our situation, “how can I be helpful here?” or “what is needed to support life in this moment?” In some situations, it is not appropriate to ask the question verbally, still circulating internally in our hearts can be: “What ails thee?”

Our Ever-Widening Circle of Care

The world turns on the human impulse to care for others. The evolving of consciousness IS the evolving of the human heart toward Love. Our ever-widening circle of care defines this capacity until ALL life is included. Just as we are currently deeply caring toward a few special people, places and/or animals, our collective direction is to feel this way toward all beings.

Surprisingly, for “what ails thee?” to be truly whole and life-giving, it must include asking our own inner world, “What is needed?” Ignoring one’s own needs in the service of others is not healthy or sustainable. People who adopt this strategy often burn out, become resentful and, in the end, life is not served. The impossible calculus of any moment is the attempt to surmise “how can I serve life most effectively in this situation?” In this equation, the needs of all, including the one asking, must be included. Growing the self-reflective capacity to sense within oneself, “*in there*”, is essential for life to flow forward in healthy ways. The pattern of attending to others at the expense of one’s own life-force can be balanced by the second question.

Question 2 - “Would You Help Me, Please?”

The moment we ask for help or even are receptive to help from others, we are acknowledging our interconnectivity. In the Eastern traditions, this is the function of begging. When human beings find the humility to acknowledge our needs and ask for support, we are also offering a

fundamental gift to the world. Giving others the opportunity to take care of us balances the fundamental equation of life in which all of us are giving and receiving to the best of our ability.

Giving and Receiving

When one “giver” dominates any relationship, the power imbalance thwarts the development of both people as well as the relationship itself. The willingness to both give and receive is the lifeblood of human relatedness. In a mysterious way, it is a spiritual transgression when one rejects the care that this offered by others. Many of us are so afraid of being perceived as needy that we will not ask. We cultivate a false identity based around not having needs. Having needs, which all humans do, and being needy, are not the same. Of course, some people have developed a life strategy of helplessness and foregoing self-responsibility. I am not encouraging this kind of “neediness”.

One of the fundamental errors on a path of Awakening is to be trapped in the illusion of a separate self, a false sense of independence that belies the reality of our lives as interdependent beings. Just as we are dependent on the air, water and food of the planet, we are also sustained by the goodness and efforts of others. To deny this or push it away is a profound error and often has unfortunate consequences.

Let me repeat - asking for help and being receptive acknowledges that we can not live this life, we can not survive, without the help of others. Stepping out of the narcissistic illusion that “I can do it myself, I don’t need help from anyone” implicitly places us back in the stream of giving and receiving that sustains life. Humility softens the heart and creates an atmosphere of mutuality. This breaks down the oppressive illusions of savior and victim, of superiority and inferiority. So often “good” people become the helpers, the saviors and unintentionally infantilize and thwart the development of the people they are supposedly helping. This kind of helping is not helpful.

Asking and Vulnerability

Over many years of teaching, I have heard from people, usually women, about how they feel shutout by their mate’s unwillingness to allow the vulnerability of asking for help. This inauthentic masculinity is a major obstacle to intimacy. As a man, I was raised to place a great value on self-sufficiency and learned to ask others only when desperate. I still need to remind myself to allow others to take care of me and to feel good about it. Much of my gratitude each day now comes from asking for and welcoming the support of others.

In addition to asking for help from other people, we can also ask for help from the transcendent. By this, I mean whatever is the highest and deepest from one’s point of view. Some people can easily ask G-d for help in the form of prayer. Even those who are atheists have some way of opening to and speaking to something larger than “I”. When something wonderful happens and we spontaneously say “thank you”, who or what are we addressing?. Whether we call it: Life, G-d, All, Self, Spiritual world, Great Being or Source, we are opening to that which is larger than both the separate self and other people. Every day, after my morning meditation, I ask for

guidance to live this day guided by love and clarity. I sense deeply in my bones that this prayer, this intention, is heard; yet I do not know how or carry any image of whom I am asking.

When we can say from our hearts, "I feel lost, please show me the way, please help me", we enter the realm of prayer. Even the non-religious can feel drawn toward the unnamable when feeling overwhelmed by life. This basic impulse lives in the heart of human beings and invites intimate connection to the transcendent. Asking for help implicitly means that somehow, we KNOW that we are not alone. This is healing in itself. We do not need to know WHOM we are asking, the act of asking itself, connects us back into the river of life. The key ingredient is the sense of asking for help from something larger.

When we take care of life through the question: "what is needed from me at this moment?" we become an instrument of love, justice and healing for the world. When we practice the humility of asking for and opening to support, we complete the equation of human inter-being that allows life to flow and the world to blossom. I sometimes forget both of these questions and when I can remember them, Life invariably flows in more fulfilling ways. I invite you to reflect on these questions AND on what are your most important questions for living this life?

And, now, back to the Emperor's three questions presented by Tolstoy

"What is the best time to do each thing?"

"Remember that there is only one important time and that is NOW".

"Who are the most important people to work with?"

"The most important person or people are those with you right now, the one who is right before you."

"What is the most important thing to do at all times?"

"The most important pursuit is to help make the person standing in front of you happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life."

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY HOLIDAYS

BLESS US ALL

LOVE.....RUSSELL