

Learning to Ask the Right Questions on the Journey of Life

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“The questions you ask will determine the answers you get.” It’s a truism which applies to all areas of life. Questions have the power to unlock whole new areas of life and learning. But asking the wrong question can also lead to putting a block in the way of learning.

Here’s an example. Two people fail at a task. The first person asks, “Why can I never do anything right?” That would have been me about 23 years ago before I fell into a clinical depression which I almost didn’t survive. This question assumes that I automatically suck. It led me into a dark void with critical voices which limited me, demoralized me, and assured me that I was useless.

The second person asks, “What am I doing wrong here, and how can I use that knowledge to do better next time?” That would be me after years of learning to treat myself more gently. This way of asking the question still acknowledges that I’ve done something wrong, but now it opens up the possibility of learning, the option to change and grow, the chance that next time I can do better.

Learning to ask the right question is critical. It either shuts down the world, or it opens it up. The right question allows me to persevere instead of giving up.

I have always believed that the same thing is true of faith. For me, Christian faith is not so much about finding the right answer. It’s about learning to ask the right questions.

People of faith are seekers and searchers. We are on a pilgrimage, a life-long journey, seeking to grow into people of compassion and hope.

When we go on a journey, we are concerned with two things. Firstly, where are we going? What is our destination?

Sometimes, the destination is easy to define. When we go on a trip to Vancouver, for example, we get out the map, plot our course, and begin driving until we get there. The road signs along the way help us see how close we’re getting to our destination.

Other times, the destination is not so easy to define. For example, what is the destination for a person of faith? For me, the goal is to become a person whose life is marked by compassion and faithfulness, hope and peace. Above all, it is a life marked by love. But the precise shape of that life remains unclear. In fact, the goal towards which we are heading is itself shaped by how we make the journey.

The second thing we are concerned with is how we make the journey. To use the same example, we could rush to Vancouver as quickly as possible and miss everything in between in our urgency to get there. If we’re lucky, we won’t be fined for speeding. The other option is to take a little longer on the trip, enjoy the sights, make sure we eat well, and arrive a little less tired and stressed out.

If that’s important on a road trip, it is even more so in our journey through life. We journey with others in this life, people of other outlooks and faiths, people who live in different communities. Our pilgrimage through life, it seems to me, ought to be marked by compassion and hope, gentleness, and tolerance. Flexibility and tolerance are strong virtues for me.

Some people will respond that they couldn’t possibly bend on issues of principle. For them, principle is much more important than relationships. For example, some Christian parents have disowned their LGBTQ children.

However, I want to say that flexibility and tolerance are great virtues. Trees look strong compared with the wild reeds in the field. But when the storm comes, trees are uprooted while the wild reeds remain rooted and stand up again after the storm has passed.

If we cling to our own positions and are not willing to let our hearts be moved back and forth a little by the ideas or actions of others, we may easily be broken. Being like wild reeds does not mean being wishy-washy. It means moving a little with the winds of the time while remaining solidly anchored in the ground.

That applies to all areas of life. I am deeply rooted in my Christian faith. I have learned to trust that rootedness. But that does not therefore lead me to believe that my way is the only way. I know God to be much larger than what I or any other human being can conceive. I believe that God chooses to reveal Godself in any number of ways. The wonder is that I can learn from all those other ways of understanding God.

When people asked Harvard theologian Wilfred Cantwell Smith if he were a Christian, he would answer, "Ask my neighbour." This profound answer points to how we can live the journey of life. Our neighbours include those who understand God in diverse ways. I want to live peacefully, compassionately, and tolerantly with people of other faiths. I want to live compassionately with other Christians, who interpret the story of Jesus in ways differently than I do.

In some ways, it's much harder to live that way. Some people have real problems with how I live out my Christian faith. They have been harshly critical of me and my columns. Even though it's difficult, I've tried to listen to them and understand their position and engage in dialogue with them. My hope is that we learn to ask the right questions together.

God knows, the world is in a sorry state. So many things keep us apart. So many groups are hostile to other groups. Surely, it's time to journey together in grace and hope, so that in our common humanity, the world and all people can be loved. That's the journey I want to make.