

## Posing Questions

What is it about a good question? What happens when the question itself becomes a fascination? It may be a question that names a puzzle to be solved or a conundrum to be contemplated. It may put the finger on a piece of evidence necessary for understanding. It may point to a contradiction that problematizes or complexifies our thinking. It may challenge our fundamental assumptions. It may be a question to which there will be no certain answer. It will probably be a question that leads to other questions. But when you get a good one, it is clearly better to have a good question than an answer!

A rabbinic story is told about a distraught man in a rural community who ran desperately through the town in the middle of the night screaming, "I have to find an answer to my question, 'What is the meaning of life?'" After considerable disturbance of the peace from the incessant repetition of his question, someone suggested he wake the Rabbi and ask him. He went to the Rabbi's home, pounding on the door and calling out, "I have to find an answer to my question!" The Rabbi came to the door and invited him into his study and asked him what was his question. He said, "What is the meaning of life? Tell me!" The rabbi replied, "I can't help you. I won't help you." Why?" the man answered, "I am desperate to know." "Because," the Rabbi said firmly, "You have a great question, and I refuse to ruin it with an answer!"

Joseph Sittler, a wonderfully creative theologian who was part of my own Lutheran tradition, recounted to me an event that happened years ago when he was invited to preach at Yale University Divinity School. He preached on that difficult parable about an unjust steward. He reflected on the contours of the parable: when a steward was dismissed for treating clients unjustly, he compounded his immoral activity by going around and making friends with the clients by lowering their obligations to his master so as to assure favors for himself after he left his position. Sittler then observed that Jesus told the parable as a model for behavior. Without further explanation, he posed this question: "Now what was it that our Lord found so commendable about this crook?" With that, he said "Amen!" and ended the sermon!

The faculty and students held a forum with Sittler after the service. At that forum, one of the Yale professors played the devil's advocate and said, "I did not hear a sermon today. There was no discussion of the human condition. There was no gospel announcement. There was no application of the text to our time." This was followed by a long silence. Finally a woman in the back raised her hand and said, "You may be right, but I can't get that question out of my mind!"

Now there was a question! There was a question that named an enigma, that opened up the text to multiple explorations, that had no definitive answer, that surely would lead to other questions, and that, perhaps most important of all, stuck in the craw! It just makes you want to go back and reread that parable and turn it over in your mind and find out what others think and try out some ideas. The discussion might change your view of the parable. The exploration of the question might change your way of reading all the parables. It might even change your view of Jesus. What a great question to start a discussion. And what a wonderful way to evoke curiosity!

It is astounding how little curiosity we humans tend to have. It is also astounding how much we tend to accept things without questioning them. This is the dilemma I faced from my first year of teaching. Students showed little initiative in asking about something, even when they were invited to do so. Why this was so I do not know. It could be because of a lack of interest or because they were satisfied with a surface explanation or maybe even because it might involve more effort. Students would just wait for me to explain things. It is not just young students who have this malady. Older students and graduate students have difficulty posing constructive

questions, questions that would clearly advance their learning as well as that of the whole class, including mine!

Asking questions is related to an innate sense of curiosity. It demonstrates the desire to probe into the meaning and dynamics of something. It signals an appetite for learning, a love of adventure and exploration. It marks a tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, a trait that is the basis for creativity. Curiosity is the beginning of wisdom. Learning begins with a question. But how do you teach curiosity? Perhaps curiosity is a character trait that cannot be taught. But maybe it can be picked up by example or contagion or osmosis. You see someone who is fascinated with things and loves to investigate them, and you are just drawn to imitate that person.

That possibility may be reason enough for a teacher to model curiosity and the practice of asking questions. When I was a student, I always wished the lecturers would share the questions that got them into their discipline or that lay behind their ideas. They just gave the statement of the problem, the evidence, and the outcomes, but not the driving passions that drove them to investigate a problem in the first place. Now, as a teacher, if I want students to ask provocative questions, even questions that challenge my own views, I have to pose provocative questions as well. And I have to show a willingness to challenge my own views.

When I first started teaching, most of my questions were a cat and mouse game of “Guess what’s in my mind.” I had the answer, and I was trying to get them to come up with the same thing I was thinking. Nobody wins this game. I noted that the students were often frustrated by this, but I did not know what to do—until I read *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Postman and Weingarten. They argued that teachers should never ask a question to which they already had the answer! Of course, this limits the types of question. It may be a factual question of uncertainty to which there were several answers possible. Or it may be a question for which the teacher surely does not have an answer, such as, “What do you (students) think about this?” Or the question might be an opinion question to which the teacher also had an opinion but not an answer. And the teacher should avoid offering their own opinion except as one point of view in a class discussion. I have sought to follow this advice and have found that this approach indeed does focus more on fascination and exploration than on answers. Hence, it tends to engender curiosity.

At the same time, I am convinced that question-asking is a skill that can be learned. You may need innate or acquired curiosity to make use of this skill. But if you have curiosity, you also need skills to investigate and explore something. Maybe students naturally have questions and our approach to teaching stifles or discourages them. Even when students have curiosity, the failure to ask questions is, in part, related to fear. This anxiety has to be addressed before students will feel free to exercise their curiosity. After all, “curiosity killed the cat”—so what might it do to a student in a classroom. If I were a student, I might ask a question and get a response from the teacher that would make me feel like “I thought I would die!” This is understandable. The whole idea of a question is that it exposes our ignorance. We do not know something, and so we ask about it. But what if everyone else already knows the answer? What if the teacher will make it appear foolish that I asked about this? At all costs, as a student, I will not do anything to embarrass myself in front of my fellow students. Perhaps a student has had a bad experience in the past where a teacher ridiculed a question or where students resented you for taking up the class time or for asking a “dumb question.” So, the student is saying: “I’ll be *very* careful about asking a question. I’ll think it through carefully and be sure it will be a safe question.”

It has always been strange to me how students will skirt some of the most important questions, because they just do not ask them about the teacher, her views of things, why she thinks this or that, what drives her. Sometimes when I give a guest appearance in another class, those students will be emboldened to ask me a lot about my personal view of things. Maybe it is because I am novel to them or because they will not be graded by me. I do not know. But I wish that students were more proactive in this regard. It is amazing what I do not share with a class because they do not ask. It is also amazing how students who are asking questions out of a great desire to know “what I know” and “what I think about things” are able to draw things out of me I did not even know were in there! I wish that the question time were more like that, not only in terms of their questions of me (and their questioning me) but also in terms of my questions of them.

So, how can we create a hospitable atmosphere in which question-asking is an integral and valued part of the classroom experience for students and teachers alike? Maybe we need to be absolutely clear that we actually, really, honestly do want questions! To try and generate an atmosphere hospitable for questions, I have sometimes said, “You may have had a bad experience in the past asking questions in class. But I want you to know I welcome them. I know you may feel they expose what you do not know. But that is the whole point of learning. I hope we can work together in the learning process for you to clarify to me what I need to explain or explore better. I am depending on that. I am counting on you to ask for clarification and to explore what you are learning. Questions will enable us all to learn better.”

Then we need to act in such a way as to foster and maintain that atmosphere. So how can we create an atmosphere of curiosity and at the same time teach question-asking skills? How can we get students to care enough about the subject matter or curious enough about it to want to ask questions? Here are a few strategies I have learned the hard way as I have struggled to avoid things that hinder questions and tried to do things that foster questions.

*1. Do not belittle the question or the person asking it.* This seems pretty obvious. First, if someone asks a question, I can in no way put down the question. I have to honor the question, no matter what it is. Besides, it represents where the student is at—this is crucial to respect, and this is where teaching/learning begins.

If I give any indication that I think the question is stupid or inappropriate, then not just this student but the whole class is doomed. If I indicate a question is dumb, then I am suggesting the student is not too smart or should have understood or was not listening. I was aware of this when I first started teaching, but I felt as a teacher that I had to correct students at every point. So I would try to be subtle and rephrase the question or suggest that a different question would be more appropriate. Then, several times when this approach resulted in a non-responsive class, I found myself apologizing. And it would not work to apologize privately to the student that I had “put down their question.” I needed to apologize before the whole class, because it was a public “put down” I had done and because the whole class had been affected by it.

What I did not realize at first was the impact my words had on other students who did not ask the question. By putting a student down, I may *think* I have encouraged other students to ask smart questions. No. All I have done is to lead every other student to say to themselves: “If you think I’m going to ask a question like he did and risk looking like an ass in front of the teacher and my classmates, you’re nuts. And even if I did ask a question and the teacher praised it, I would still look like an ass to my classmates. I’m not saying anything.” We only need to make one mistake, one time we get frustrated or blow up or act indignant at a question, and it can poison the atmosphere for that semester. It helps to remember that if a student asks a question,

there is a ninety-percent likelihood that other students have the same question—however obvious or simple it is. So if that is the case, then more than one student is feeling stupid and humiliated.

2. *Honor the question and give a good answer.* If the question is repetitious or rather inane, it may be best to give a serious straightforward answer and move on, without letting our chagrin be apparent. But most of the time, I can give an interesting or informative answer for the whole class, no matter what the question. In so answering, I may have to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but so be it. The point is this: If I give an informed answer, I make the student who asked the question look good. I may even say, "Good question" or "I'm glad you asked that question." Or "I'll bet others are wondering the same thing" or "That obviously needs to be clarified" or "That's complicated, and I'm glad you gave me the chance to repeat it." When it is an especially good question, I may say, "I never thought of that before" or "That's a challenging question, let me think now." No need to make it seem as if I am compensating for a poor question. I just need to provide a helpful answer that makes it worthwhile for the whole class that someone asked it.

3. *Do not give long answers.* One of the worst things a teacher can do is to give long answers. I will usually introduce the time after a brief lecture as time for class "discussion." Then one student asks a question and I launch into a five or ten-minute answer. In effect, I give another lecture! The students have already been listening passively to the first lecture and now they get another. By this time, they are saying to themselves, "Is this discussion time or another lecture? If he's going to take that long to answer one question, I'm not going to ask *another* one. I'm bored" So, I just answer the question as succinctly as possible and move on. That way, I give others a chance to come forward with their questions.

4. *Do not wait until the end of class to ask for questions.* Another related thing not to do is this. Don't wait until near the end of the class to invite questions. This is a no-brainer. If you wait to the end of the class to invite questions, everyone is thinking, "If nobody asks a question, maybe we'll get out early!" or "If someone asks a question, he'll probably end up going beyond the end of the class time."

5. *Do not be impatient with silence.* We usually cut off questions when we become impatient with silence. We give a lecture and ask for questions. When no one speaks up in the first eight or ten seconds, we either assume people get it and we move on to the next subject. Or we start asking our own questions and answering them. Or we just repeat what we have said and ask if they are sure they do not have any questions. Unless we are ready to give the students some time to think so as to formulate their questions, many of them will not be prepared. Unless we have the patience to wait, even if there will be a long awkward silence, the questions might not be forthcoming.

6. *Do not be defensive.* If a student asks a provocative question that challenges your lecture or your point of view, do not quickly try to defend yourself. It is the quickest way to stifle such challenges. Rather, rephrase the question so that you are sure you understand it. Ask if others are wondering in a similar way. Ask the student to unpack their point of view more fully. Maybe just say that you really need to think about that. Or suggest an answer in a way that leads to further conversation. You may want to affirm the question as expressive of another legitimate point of view, and then elaborate further support the student might have for that point of view. You can also matter-of-factly answer the question in a non-defensive way and ask if that addresses their concern. The main point is to be comfortable and stimulated with being challenged. Maybe best of all, we might say: "I don't know what I think about that." Or, "That's a great question; let me think this through aloud with you." Or simply, "I don't know."

7. *Be careful about challenging the student in return.* Finally, be cautious about asking a student a question back. This may be another thing that puts the student on the spot. Even a question back that asks the student to clarify their question or explain why they asked it can be intimidating. Maybe we could repeat the question in other words and then ask the student if you understood the question right. But even this has to be done carefully. Again, even if you are dealing with a student who can handle the challenge well, you cannot forget the fact that every other student is watching—and thinking, “If he or she is going to challenge back, I think I’ll just keep my mouth shut.” They have already exposed their ignorance. Why exacerbate their situation? The goal is to create a safe and respectful atmosphere where I am able to challenge students and they are in no way intimidated by it.

Here’s one of the ways I have tried to approach the lecture-followed-by-questions classroom pattern. First, I introduce a twenty minute lecture by saying, “I look forward to your questions at the end of this lecture. Here are the kinds of questions you might ask: questions for clarification, questions of exploration, and questions of challenge [I might even list these on the board]. As you listen to the lecture, you can be noting your questions. Then when the lecture is over, I’ll give you some time to formulate your questions. Hopefully, each of you will have at least one question in each of these categories.” Then it is up to me to give a stimulating lecture—one that presents new material or presents familiar material in a new way or that places information in a distinctive interpretive frame or that has an argumentative/ controversial edge to it.

Second, when the lecture is over, I will indeed give them time to formulate the questions. I might do this by asking them to pair off and share what they were thinking about the lecture while it was going on and then to be prepared to report their questions. Or I may ask them to pair up and repeat to another student as much of the lecture as they can in order to see if they have understood it—on the assumption that “If you can repeat it, then you get it *or* you find out what you did not understand and BINGO you have questions.” I ask the pairs to formulate their questions in the course of reflecting together on the lecture. Or I may ask students to take three minutes to reflect silently on the lecture and to formulate their questions and jot them down. Both of these steps are especially helpful to students who need time to process before they speak or, conversely, who tend say the first thing that comes into their mind.

Finally, when we return to the full group discussion, I ask for questions. I can let the conversation flow. This puts a value on the questions themselves apart from answers. If there is a lull in conversation, I then feel free to say to one pair or another, “So what questions did you come up with?” Since they have had time to formulate their questions, I will not be putting them on the spot. I can even call on students to report the questions from their dyad conversation; and they are willing to respond because it is somewhat anonymous. And I can safely call on students who do not usually say much. In this plenary, I might even ask for a whole lot of questions out on the table at once, without giving any responses until many questions have been posed. I might divide the discussion into the types of questions. “OK Let’s hear all your questions for clarification.” Then I might want to hear all the questions first before I answer, commenting here and there on how helpful or insightful one question or another might be. I might take notes and then answer the questions all at once (briefly!) and move on to the next type of questions—for exploration and then for challenge. A few times, I have had a student put questions on board, while I sit in the back and ask questions together with the students.

When students get comfortable asking questions, I might ask a student in return, “What led you to ask that question?” or “How would you answer that question?” or “What do

you think about this subject?” In this way students can develop some critical thinking around a subject. Once students get into it, often with each other, I back off and see where the student discussion is going. It is important to note that different questions will lead to different kinds of conversation. The response to questions for clarification may be straight forward. You may give an answer and the conversation goes no further. On the other hand, questions for exploration and challenge may require a different response, such as, “Now there’s a question that has no definite answer. It depends on what we think. Here’s my idea, and I am also interested in how you would answer it?” If it goes well, such responses will lead to conversation and the reward for having asked the question will be self evident. I look for these opportunities and try to make the most of them.

Once you do all these things in an explicit and structured way, they just become an integral part of the class process. They become natural and no longer feel contrived. Trust becomes an important part of the atmosphere. In this regard, the question time is an opportunity to deepen the conversation. It is a chance to be honest and face difficulties. It is a chance to entertain conflicting points of view. It may be a time to be vulnerable and personal.

These kinds of exercises in question-asking are crucial to the learning process for a number of reasons. They enable us to see if students understand what we are teaching and are able to talk knowledgeably about it. One slogan I use is this: I do not teach subjects, I teach people. And if people are not getting it, then I am not succeeding in teaching.” I could teach a subject to a wall, but obviously learning doesn’t happen. Both teaching and learning must take place in order for teaching to take place. It is a relational interaction. Hence, questions become the medium to see where they are. Questions represent the collaborative aspects of the learning process. We could do it with tests, but that is much too impersonal for my blood. Let’s find out while the lecture is still hot. If they do not get it at the time of the lecture, then why would we think they would get it later? Besides, talking about it may help retention as well as understanding.

But we can go even further to develop the skill of asking questions in structured and rigorous ways. When I first started teaching 18 year-old, first-year undergraduates, I became so frustrated with the students’ inability or unwillingness to ask probing questions that I began my New Testament Introduction classes with a two-week “Question-Asking Workshop” That was the announced subject (it was really my section on method, but they would not see that until later). The whole strategy was to focus on the questions themselves. “Let’s see if we can come up with interesting questions.” So, the motto was: *Questions only! No answers!*

I would start out sharing with them some opinion pieces from the newspaper or a news magazine, say about the economy or abortion. This was not sacrosanct like scripture and it was controversial. Questions abounded. Then I would move to a strictly “objective” report about something that still had an author’s opinion—like a report on fashion or film. In small groups or pairs, they were to come up with good questions. I would say: “A good question is better than a pat answer. What can you come up with?” At first, they had a tendency to give answers or present their point of view in the way they posed the questions. But after some practice, they could ask genuinely interesting question.

Then I would take a story from the Gospel of Mark to see what questions they would have. Here there usually came a breakthrough. Initially, they would ask only questions about meaning—over and over. What does the word “leper” denote? Who were the Pharisees? What does Jesus mean when he says told people it was legal to do good on the Sabbath day? I could not seem to break them of this habit. At one point, I explained this dilemma to Lloyd Melis, the

chairman of the Education Department. He suggested I back up, develop an analogy, and ask for twenty uses of a brick. So I did. At first they would say, “to make a school,” “to build a house,” “to erect a church,” and so on. Then I would point out that these are all the same type of answers, like the similarity of questions about meaning they were asking about Mark. Could they think of anything different? Imaginative? So they came up with such ideas to use a brick as a door stopper, water saving toilet device, paper weight, constructing a book case, breaking windows, and so on. Then I would return to the story about Mark and ask them to think of different kinds of questions than just questions of meaning. This seemed to get them unstuck.

The questions began to flow. Who translated this? What was the language? How do we know these are words of Jesus? Are there really such things as demons? Where did this author get his information? When was this written? How long after the days of Jesus? Was the author biased? Who copied it? Were they accurate? We would list these questions on the chalk board, maybe 50 or more. A student would copy them and give me the list after class. The next day, I would come with the list reorganized under the categories of methods scholars used to study and analyze the Bible: textual criticism, source criticism, form/genre criticism, historical criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism, social science criticism, rhetorical criticism, and so on. This way, I could show them that the critical study of the Bible came about as ways to address genuine questions people had, just like theirs. If I had taught them the methods first, it would have been academically boring. But now they came up with the key questions on their own and understood that the criticisms were not just there to tear down the Bible but were methods used to solve some real posers.

Then I got interdisciplinary with them in another way. I would take a healing story from Luke. I would divide the class up in groups that correlated with the departments in the school: English literature, physics, biology, geography, psychology, history, political science, cultural anthropology, speech and theater, and so forth. They could volunteer for what group they wanted to be in. Each group was to come up with the questions they would ask from the point of view of that discipline. If you graduated and became a specialist in one of these fields, what questions would you ask of this healing story? You can imagine the great questions they raised: How can someone chemically/ biologically be healed by touch or by a word? Did Jesus heal by psychology? What really happened? Why the emphasis on the sickness as unclean and impure? Did they know anything about diseases? What social class did this healed person come from? What political message was Jesus giving by healing? Why did the Pharisees reject him? What was the health care system then? Why is there so much word for word repetition in the story? Was this story told by word of mouth? This approach proved to be very lively and gave further support for their understanding of the methods used to study the Bible. I could point out to them that most innovations in biblical studies came from posing fresh questions to the text that had not been explored before. Often these questions came from secular disciplines and were adapted to the study of ancient biblical times.

Finally, I would encourage them to ask questions about themselves. Here I had more difficulty getting them to realize how much their own point of view shaped how they read. I gave them a sheet listing areas of social identification and personal experience, such as race, ethnic group, class, gender, education, health, religion, and formative experiences. After they detailed these identifications about themselves, I asked which ones shaped their reading. Then they could ask: Why do I read the Bible? How does my gender shape how I read the Bible? What am I looking for? How am I similar to or different from the people in the story? These and other questions enabled me to talk further about liberation theology and feminist/ womanist readings.

When all this was done, I would give them a test. The test would be on a passage we had not worked with before in class. Actually, it was a passage on the baptism of Jesus from the Gospel of Peter, but they did not know this. Most students thought it came from one of the four Gospels. I told them to imagine they had found this fragment in the Judean desert. Now what questions would they have about it? The entire test consisted of the questions they would ask. They were graded on the range of questions, the extent of questions, and the interest of the questions.

Now after those two weeks, the students had had their introduction to method, and they were ready to study the New Testament. After they had dealt with “How to ask a question,” they moved on to other three parts of the course: “How to read a story” (the Gospels), “How to read a letter.” (Pauline epistles), and “How to reconstruct history” (historical Jesus). In each section, I suggested to them a set of questions and procedure to follow for investigating narrative rhetoric and history. It made for a pretty good introduction to the liberal arts in a religion class no less. At some point, I would sometimes model the whole process by thinking aloud with a passage with which I was unfamiliar.

The payoffs for all this were many. The students were awash in curiosity. That was the whole focus. Hopefully they learned the importance of questions and the value of lingering with questions without jumping so quickly to answers. They also learned skills of question-asking—how to pose questions, how to pose different questions, and how to organize them into a systematic procedure for exploring a biblical passage. In so doing, they also learned the methods scholars use to study the Bible. Perhaps the greatest payoff was the realization that there was so much to explore in a single story. Each passage was rich with dimensions, dynamics, and layers of possibility. My hope was this: Once they had seen the depth to one passage, they could never read another passage the same again. They might not study it so thoroughly, but they would know that there was much more to it than the surface one-look meaning they were used to.

This all seems like way too much to say about the simple act of asking questions. But there it is. Undergraduates struggled and needed help. Graduates do much better but still need to become self-aware and intentional. And we teachers could surely do more to evoke curiosity and model asking question. Anyhow, that’s my story. Maybe there is something worthy of adoption or adaptation here. I hope so.