

Small Talk – July 28 2021
By Michael Small

There is an educational program called *Living the Question*. I have always like that title. Rather than trying to live the answer, life is about living the question. Life is about an attitude of welcome to that new thing, to knowledge and wisdom bubbling up and unfolding around us. Living the question means that we stay flexible, willing to learn new dance moves. Living the question means discarding those old well worn axioms that no longer make any sense.

Jim Burklo¹ in his *Musings* recently wrote *Good Questions (can change the world)*.

The Quakers are small in number. There are but a few hundred thousand of them in the United States. Worshipping in silence goes a long way toward maintaining their low profile in the public eye.

Early in their history, the Quakers chose to ask questions instead of making grand pronouncements. They called them “queries.” Their regional assemblies would carefully refine these queries and pose them to the membership of their local Meeting Houses. They would keep asking themselves these queries until, by consensus, they determined that it was time to ask different questions. The queries addressed topics of personal spiritual practice, the conduct of silent Meetings, and social and moral issues. The queries lit a fire in the consciences of individual Quakers and of the Society of Friends as a whole.

What would happen if other faithful people began to ask questions instead of arguing with answers they don't like? What would happen if we followed St. Paul's advice and stopped returning evil for evil? What would happen if we asked serious questions instead of behaving defensively in response to religious or political bombast?

I believe that asking good questions can change the world. In my role as a university chaplain, I've led many field trips and events that put students in contact with policy makers and officials. Their sincere, intelligent questions often embarrassed people in power, challenging them to rise to a new level of accountability. When students ask questions, instead of making proclamations, people in positions of power take them seriously, and are sometimes disturbed enough by the questions to seek new perspectives. I took a group of USC students to meet the notorious Joe Arpaio, who at the time was the sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona. He claimed to be the toughest cop in America, threatening undocumented immigrants, running a jail with a tent compound outdoors in 120 degree heat, issuing pink underwear to prisoners, and feeding them green bologna for lunch. My students very respectfully asked him questions, and he, seemingly flattered by the attention he was getting, bloviated for hours. My students didn't let up. They politely asked harder and harder questions - ones that flustered him. Yet their demeanor gave him no opening to react negatively.

¹ JIM BURKLO - Senior Associate Dean, Office of Religious Life, 1University of Southern California

Who knows what impact my students had on him? I told them that if anybody could have opened his heart and mind, it would have been them.

I've been asked some questions that changed my life. When my wife and I were going through a rocky patch in our marriage years ago, our therapist asked me this question: "So Jim, who are your role models?" I quickly answered with a list of my heroes, including John Woolman (a Quaker), Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. "And what were their marriages like?" the therapist asked, staring me straight in the eye. I was busted. Noble as my role models were in the public sphere, not a one of them was an exemplary husband. Our therapist didn't give me a prescription of how to change. But his question got through to me, and set me on a new path of healing in my relationship with my wife.

I have used the "motivational interviewing" method in helping people make behavior changes. It is a way of asking a series of questions that validate the person as a choice-maker, even if their choices look problematic. The interviewer starts with this kind of question: "What are the benefits to you of using cocaine?" And after respectfully listening to the answer, asks: "And what are the downsides?" The structure of the questions is intended to create uncomfortable cognitive dissonance that moves the person to exercise his or her choice-making power to resolve.

How can we use the same approach to ask questions in the realm of public policy? What questions could change the world for the better? Which ones transform bitter division into shared inquiry with those who take the "other side" on important issues? What kinds of questions invite the calmest, most constructive conversations?

Let us continue to ask the questions welcoming the new thing that will emerge!

In the spirit and agape love of Jesus, Michael

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