

Annual Aaron Thurman, MD Lecture On Humanism in Medicine/ November 29, 2018

### ***Asking Good Questions***

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#### **Poets and their questions**

- **Mary Oliver:** *"In this universe we are given two gifts: the ability to love, and the ability to ask questions."* *Upstream*. Penguin Press; 1st edition (October 11, 2016); *"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"* (from *The Summer Day*)

#### **What's a good question?**

- **Adena Rosmarin.** *The Art of Leading a Discussion*. Memo to the Faculty, Number 38. University of Colorado at Boulder (PDF online): *"The most important thing to remember about questions, however, is this: 'A good question is never answered.' It always has offspring."*
- **Socrates:** *What is Virtue? What is Moderation? What is Justice? What is Good? What is Courage? What is Piety?*

#### **Asking good questions**

- **Friedrich Miescher** (1844-1895)
  - *"Which chemicals make up the nucleus of cell?"* Miescher, F (1871). *"Ueber die chemische Zusammensetzung der Eiterzellen"*. *Medicinischemische Untersuchungen*. 4: 441–460.
- **Albert Einstein** (1879-1955)
  - *"What would the universe look like if I were riding on the end of a light beam at the speed of light?"*
- **Michael Faraday** (1791-1867) *The Chemical History of a Candle*, 1848 (Wikipedia)
- **Direktor Grundsatzfragen:** Director of Fundamental Questions/ Brown J, Isaacs D, Vogt EE. *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action* Whole Systems Associates, CA, 2003.
  - David Cooperrider *"...organizations gravitate toward the questions they ask."* Quoted in Berger W. *A More Beautiful Question*. Bloomsbury, NY 2014.
  - Brooks A, John L. *The Surprising Power of Questions*. Harvard Business Review, May-June 2018
- **Dan Rothstein Luz Santana/Right Question Institute** ([Rightquestion.org/](http://Rightquestion.org/) 2464 Mass. Ave. Suite 314, Cambridge, Ma.)
  - *Provides educational resources (Question Formulation Technique) that make it possible for all people, whatever their level of education or income, to learn to think and act more effectively on their own behalf. Current core initiatives: Teaching and learning, Schools and families, Healthcare and mental health, Voter engagement, Microdemocracy.*

- **Clearness Committees** “... everything...is governed by one rule, a simple rule and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions.”  
**Parker Palmer**, *The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach To Discernment in Retreats*. <http://www.couragerenewal.org/clearnesscommittee>
  - The Mandarin symbol for the verb “to listen” reads: *I give you my ears, my eyes, my undivided attention and my heart.*
- **Christensen’s topology of questions**: “First, the exploratory questions: What are the ‘facts’? Then, the challenge or testing questions: Are these solutions or interpretations adequate to the problem? Next, the contextual and relational questions, the ‘weaving devices’ that at once broaden the perspective of the class and begin the process of tying things together: How is this solution like that solution?” “Then come the ‘priority’ questions: Which is the best solution? Why? Finally, the concluding and conceptualizing questions: what have we learned? What are the principles involved in the choices we made? How do they relate to choices we’ve made in previous classes? Material from **Adena Rosmarin** *The Art of Leading a Discussion*. From *On Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 1, Harvard, May 1985.
- **Characteristics of good questions**: Generates curiosity in listener, stimulates conversation, thought provoking, surfaces assumptions, invites creativity, generates energy, channels attention, focuses inquiry, stays with participants, touches a deep meaning and evokes more questions. **Brown J, Isaacs D, Vogt EE**. *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action*. Whole Systems Associates, CA, 2003.

#### **Wellspring of good questions:**

- **Isidor Issac Rabi**: Of his mother he said: “She wasn’t so much interested in what he had learned that day, but she always inquired, ‘Did you ask a good question today?’ ‘Asking good questions,’ Rabi said, ‘made me become a scientist.’” Quoted in Friedman T. *The World Is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Macmillan 2007.
- “The state of having an itchy thought that needs to be scratched.”
- **Schattner A**. Curiosity. Are you curious enough to read on? J R Soc Med. 2015 May;108(5):160-4.
  - “...highly humanistic physicians identified a genuine sense of being curious about their patients as an essential fuel sustaining their humanism...” Chou CM, Kellom K, Shea JA. *Attitudes and habits of highly humanistic physicians*. Acad Med 2014; 89:1252-8.
- **Dyche L, Epstein RM**. Curiosity and medical education. Medical Education 2011; 45: 663–668
- **Fitzgerald FT**. Curiosity. Ann Intern Med 1999; 130:70-72.

## Physicians and their questions

- **John Murtagh:** What is the most probable diagnosis? What serious disorders must not be missed? What conditions are often missed (pitfalls)? What else can look like this (mimics)? Is this patient trying to tell me something else? Murtagh J. *General Practice, 6<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition*. McGraw-Hill Australia, 2015. Also see: Raff A, Kroshinsky D. *Cellulitis, A Review*. JAMA. 2016;316(3):325-337; Stevens D, Bryant A. *Necrotizing Soft-Tissue Infections*. NEJM, December 7, 2017; 377; 23: 2253-65;  
Falagas M, Vergidis P. *Diseases That Commonly Masquerade as Infectious Cellulitis* Ann Intern Med, January 4, 2005; 142(1): 47-55;  
Kuhn H, Mennella C, Magid M, Stamu-O'Brien C, Kroumpouzou G. *Psychocutaneous disease : Clinical perspectives*. Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, Volume 76, Issue 5, 2017, 779–791;  
Cranendonk DR, Lavrijsen, Prins JM, Wiersinga WJ. *Cellulitis: current insights into pathophysiology and clinical management*. The Netherlands Journal of Medicine. November 2017, 75(9):366-378.)
- **Contextual domains: Weiner S, Schwartz A.** *Contextual Errors in Medical Decision Making: Overlooked and Understudied*. Acad Med. May 2016; 91(5):657-662.
- **John Launer, MBBS** *Good Questions*. Postgrad Med J. February 2014, Vol 90 No. 1060
- **Some useful questions:** *What work do you do? What's most challenging about it? How can we best understand what it's like to have your problem? What questions do you have for us? Before I examine you, are there other issues that you'd like to discuss?*

## The patient's question

- **Richard Selzer:** *"Rounds" in Letters to a Young Doctor*, Mariner Books; First edition (April 15, 1996).

## The philosopher-educator's questions

- **James Ryan:** *Wait, What?: And Life's Other Essential Questions*. HarperOne (April 4, 2017) Wait, what? I wonder, why/if? Couldn't we at least? How can I help? What really matters?
  - And the 'bonus question; from **Raymond Carver's** *Late Fragment: And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so? I did. And what did you want? To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.*

## The personal questions

- **Sarah Bakewell:** *A Life of Montaigne/In One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*. Other Press, NY 2010.
- **Socrates:** *"The unexamined life is not worth living."*
- *"What is it that you find most important in your life?"*
- *"What do you find most meaningful in your work?"*