



Don't Stop Asking Questions

Spring Convocation

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Little children are full of questions—questions that are frequently difficult for their parents or teachers to answer. How is a rainbow made? Where do babies come from? Why is the sky blue?

A recent survey in Britain confirmed that many parents have interesting ways of responding—usually not very directly.

- 30% of parents tell their children to ask the other parent;
- 20% of parents tell their child that they will answer later;
- This is an indictment of many males—9% of fathers would rather invent the answer to a question than to admit that they don't know what it is all about
- Mothers don't do much better, 14% say they will respond later, hoping that the child will forget about it

There are other interesting questions, even if not profound. Why did the earliest moon walkers find it necessary to take a small car with them? Jerry Seinfeld's answer may not be accurate - the first moon missions were planned and executed by men, and men always want to have a car just in case they decide to do some cruising!

The sad reality is that far too often, somewhere along the educational path, we have a tendency to lose our sense of curiosity about the world around us. Education becomes a process of regurgitation of facts and figures, recalling material for a quiz or test, rather than an opportunity to continue asking questions.

I suspect that we hesitate to ask questions for a variety of reasons. Perhaps we think we should know the answer and are afraid to expose our ignorance. Some of our questions may sound less than erudite from another person's perspective. Of course we've all heard a classmate or peer ask a question in such a manner as to make it clear

that he/she was actually attempting to convey their incomparable knowledge. It can be intimidating to hear a question that I can't even understand, much less the answer.

All of us recall, usually in vivid detail, a question we asked that resulted in deep embarrassment. For me, it is more often that I am embarrassed by the question I failed to ask.

As a pastor I regularly visited parishioners who were terminally ill. One member of our congregation had been fighting cancer for several months. Her daughter's family was providing a place to live so they could care for her. They put a hospital bed in their living room and twice a week I stopped by to visit and pray with her.

I was in a breakfast meeting when Pat reached me with the message that the member was dying and that I should get to the house as soon as possible. I drove several miles, walked into the house, knelt beside her bed, took her hand, and prayed for her. As I stood up, her daughter was at the foot of the bed with a slight grin on her face. Her words were something like, "Thanks for the prayer, but she's already dead." Sometime in the short minutes between the phone call and my arrival she had passed away. A very simple question from me to the daughter when I arrived, something like "how is she doing?" would have been appropriate in the context. And I would have saved myself a moment of awkwardness. Of course, I'd have had one less story to tell, and I have many about death and dying.

Ironically, the daughter and her husband later became pastors and we've since laughed together about that incident. I suppose it's even possible that she decided at that point that if he can be a pastor and live through such embarrassment, perhaps she could survive in the profession, too.

I've also learned from personal experience that not listening carefully to a question can create a confusing situation. I once went for a full physical exam with a rather extensive cardiac workup. As my family doc was going over the results, which were generally positive, he asked me, "How many glasses of wine are you drinking every day?" I thought he asked, "How many glasses of water are you drinking?"

At the time I was a regular jogger and I said, "Well, I know the standard recommendation is around 8 glasses a day. Since I'm running fairly regularly I should probably be drinking a few more but I think I'm averaging about 6 or 7." The look on his face was priceless.

To be sure, there are reasons ad infinitum for not asking questions. May I suggest that the mark of a wise and educated person is the capacity to never stop asking questions.

In the Luke 20 text read for us a few minutes ago, the chief priests and teachers of the law approach Jesus and they confront him with a statement followed by a question. "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?" They were referring to him having just driven merchants out of the

temple. If we could hear a recording of this exchange, the tone is surely accusatory. “Who do you think you are?”

In typical Jesus style he chooses not to give a direct answer. (Keep this in mind when faculty members respond to a question with another question—they are just taking their cues from the Master Teacher!) “I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John’s baptism—was it from heaven or from humankind?” So, they went into a huddle and soon realized that no matter how they answered they were in trouble. It’s a little like answering the question, “Have you stopped beating your spouse?” A simple yes or no doesn’t quite settle the matter!

Jesus had this nasty habit of asking a lot of questions. In this particular interaction, he not only responded to a question with a question, but when they were stumped he had the audacity to leave them hanging, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” It was a pedagogical technique that served him well in teaching the disciples.

Last week Pat and I heard a lecture from Dr. Shirley Tilghman, president of Princeton University, a molecular biologist by academic discipline. Her topic was, “The Future of Science Education in the Liberal Arts College.” She began by suggesting that the best way to get students interested in a particular academic discipline is to formulate a big question that is of interest to them, and then to set them on the path to researching the answers to that question.

President Tilghman went on to make the case that small liberal arts colleges, like EMU, produce a disproportionate percentage of high achieving scientists, and she gave three reasons for why that is the case.

- The preponderance of small class sizes
- Highly motivated faculty members
- Cross-training in the humanities

With respect to the notion of cross-training she noted that at Princeton they now have a laptop orchestra, a creation of computer science and music students working together. She acknowledged that she doesn’t much like the quality of music that is produced, but that it has been an effective learning experience for students to work together on a creative project—students from disciplines that would normally not connect.

Dr. Tilghman highlighted the fact that American students are generally falling behind students from many parts of the world in knowledge of science and math. Frankly, I’m not concerned about that reality as a matter of national competitiveness—as though we think Americans should be embarrassed that students in other countries are outperforming us. I’d rather that we who are American would be willing to learn from those of you who represent other countries and cultures, and that together we would achieve in science and math as a path to greater quality of life for all of God’s people.

The big questions of life are larger than any one nation can hope to answer in isolation from the global community. Our vision at EMU is to prepare graduates to serve and lead in a global context. That vision takes root in a variety of ways, most obviously by the requirement to experience a culture other than one's own.

Nearly three years ago Bill Gates was the Commencement speaker at Harvard University. Gates has surely been a very successful person financially, perhaps the most successful college dropout ever. He told the Harvard graduates of 2007 that his experience at Harvard had largely been a positive one. He did share one critique that is particularly disturbing:

I left Harvard with no real [awareness of the awful inequities in the world](#) – the appalling disparities of health, and wealth, and opportunity that condemn millions of people to lives of despair.

He went on to say in that address to the Harvard graduates:

I learned a lot here at Harvard about new ideas in economics and politics. I got great exposure to the advances being made in the sciences.

But humanity's greatest advances are not in its discoveries - but in how those discoveries are applied to reduce inequity. Whether through democracy, strong public education, quality health care, or broad economic opportunity – reducing inequity is the highest human achievement.

I left campus knowing little about the millions of young people cheated out of educational opportunities here in this country. And I knew nothing about the millions of people living in unspeakable poverty and disease in developing countries. It took me decades to find out.

There are questions, big questions, that simply were not on the minds of Bill Gates and his fellow students as undergraduates at Harvard University. I hope and pray that no graduate of Eastern Mennonite University will ever be able to say that they were not confronted by complex questions of life.

I do realize all too keenly that encouraging all of us to never stop asking questions is rather risky. It makes a lot of folks uncomfortable, particularly in the context of a faith-based university. We ask questions, because it is a most human activity, and because we seek to discover truth. It is our desire to better understand our world and our Creator.

Albert Einstein, a relatively (pun intended) intelligent person put it this way: The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.

I close with a question—one that is hardly the most important one we should be asking today but perhaps one that we collectively share—Who will we cheer for tonight? Go Royals!