

10 Questions That Have No Right to Go Away

The thought-provoking poet David Whyte considers what we should be asking ourselves—especially when we least want to confront our own answers.

By David Whyte



The marvelous thing about a good question is that it shapes our identity as much by the asking as it does by the answering. Nine years ago, I wrote a poem called "Sometimes" in which I talked about the "questions that can make or unmake a life ... questions that have no right to go away."

I still work with this idea. Questions that have no right to go away are those that have to do with the person we are about to become; they are conversations that will happen with or without our conscious participation. They almost always have something to do with how we might be more generous, more courageous, more present, more dedicated, and they also have something to do with timing: when we might step through the doorway into something bigger, better—both beyond ourselves and yet more of ourselves at the same time.

If we are sincere in asking, the eventual answer will give us both a sense of coming home to something we already know as well a sense of surprise—not unlike returning from a long journey to find an old

friend sitting unexpectedly on the front step, as if she'd known, without ever being told, not only the exact time and date of your arrival but also your need to be welcomed back.

Here are my 10 Questions That Have No Right to Go Away.

1) Do I know how to have real conversation?

A real conversation always contains an invitation. You are inviting another person to reveal herself or himself to you, to tell you who they are or what they want. To do this requires vulnerability. Now we tend to think that vulnerability is associated with weakness, but there's a kind of robust vulnerability that can create a certain form of strength and presence too.

There are many tough conversations, but one of the most difficult is between a parent and an adolescent daughter, partly because as a parent we are almost always attempting to relate to someone who is no longer there. The parent therefore usually tries to start the conversation by offering a perspective that the daughter finds not only out of date but also unhelpful; the daughter then replies by way of defense with something just a shade more unhelpful, and so the process continues. A year or so ago, I found myself in exactly this dynamic, my daughter's bedroom door slamming shut just as I was just about to say that last, deeply satisfying unhelpful thing.

But I caught myself and said, "David, this isn't a real conversation. How do you make this a real conversation?" I gave it the old 10-minute cooldown time, walked into the kitchen, made tea and put out a tray, and on the tray: a plate of cookies, a milk pitcher, a cup and a saucer. Then I knocked on her door and said in a very different, more invitational voice, "Come on, Charlotte, I've made tea. Let's go and have a talk."

As soon as I put the tray down and we had sat next to each other, almost by accident I happened to say exactly the right thing—I said, "Charlotte, tell me one thing you'd like me to stop doing as a father. And tell me one thing you'd like me to do more of." She suddenly gazed up at me with a lovely look in her eyes, one I knew from her very early infancy. She was engaged again because at last I was really inviting her to tell me who she had become—not who she had been or who I wanted her to be—but who she was *now*.

2) What can I be wholehearted about?

So many of us aren't sure what we're meant to do. We wonder if we're simply doing what others are doing because we feel we don't have enough ideas or even enough strength of our own.

There was a time, many years ago, working at a nonprofit organization, trying to fix the world and finding the world didn't want to be fixed as quickly as I'd like, that I found myself exhausted, stressed and finally, after one particularly hard day, at the end of my tether, I went home and saw a bottle of fine red wine I had left out on the table that morning before I left. No, I did not drink it immediately, though

I was tempted, but it reminded me that I was to have a very special guest that evening.

That guest was an Austrian friend, a Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, the nearest thing I had to a really wise person in my life at that time or at any time since. We would read German poetry together—he would translate the original text, I read the translations, all the while drinking the red wine. But I had my day on my mind, and the mind-numbing tiredness I was experiencing at work. I said suddenly, out of nowhere, almost beseechingly, "Brother David, speak to me of exhaustion. Tell me about exhaustion."

And then he said a life-changing thing. "You know," he said, "the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest."

"What is it then?"

"The antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness. You're so exhausted because you can't be wholehearted at what you're doing...because your real conversation with life is through poetry."

It was just the beginning of a long road that was to take my real work out into the world, but it was a beginning.

What do I care most about—in my vocation, in my family life, in my heart and mind? This is a conversation that we all must have with ourselves at every stage of our lives, a conversation that we so often don't want to have. We will get to it, we say, when the kids are grown, when there is enough money in the bank, when we are retired, perhaps when we are dead; it will be easier then. But we need to ask it now: What can I be wholehearted about *now*?

3) Am I harvesting from this year's season of life?

"Youth is wasted on the young" is the old saying. But it might also be said that midlife is wasted on those in their 50s and eldership is very often wasted on the old.

Most people, I believe, are living four or five years behind the curve of their own transformation. I see it all the time, in my own life and others. The temptation is to stay in a place where we were previously comfortable, making it difficult to move to the frontier that we're actually on now.

People usually only come to this frontier when they have had a terrible loss in their life or they've been fired or some other trauma breaks open their story. Then they can't tell that story any more. But having spent so much time away from what is real, they hit present reality with such impact that they break apart on contact with the true circumstance. So the trick is to catch up with the conversation and stay with it—where am I now?—and not let ourselves become abstracted from what is actually occurring around us.

If you were a farmer, and you tried to harvest what belonged to the previous season, you'd exhaust yourself trying to bring it in when it's no longer there. Or attempting to gather fruit too early, too hard or too late and too ripe. A person must understand the conversation happening around them as early in the process as possible and then stay with it until it bears fruit.

4) Where is the temple of my adult aloneness?

In 1996, I wrote a poem called "The House of Belonging." In it, I spoke about the small, beautifully old house I came to live in after the end of my first marriage. In the poem, I wrote:

This is the temple of my adult aloneness
and I belong to that aloneness
as I belong to my life.

That temple was the house I moved into after the end of a chapter in my life. There I would live alone, but also with my son a good deal of the time. It was a new start. There was a great deal of grief in letting go of the old, but I was so very excited about my new home. I felt that even though it was such a small house and an old house, it had endless new horizons for me, as if the rest of my life was just beginning from that place. It is important to have the equivalent of this house at every crucial stage in our lives. Where do you have that feeling of home? Do you have it in your apartment? Do you have it when you walk along the lakeshore or the seashore? Where do you have that sense of spaciousness with the horizon and with your future?

Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher, said that one of the beautiful things about a home is that it is a place where you can dream about your future, and that a good home protects your dreams; it is a place where you feel sheltered enough to risk yourself in the world.

5) Can I be quiet—even inside?

All of our great traditions, religious, contemplative and artistic, say that you must learn how to be alone—and have a relationship with silence. It is difficult, but it can start with just the tiniest quiet moment.

Being quiet in the midst of a frenetic life is like picking up a new instrument. If you've never played the violin and you try to play it for the first time, every muscle in your body hurts. Your neck hurts, you don't know how to hold that awkward wavy thing called a bow, you can't get your knuckles round to touch the strings, you can't even find where the notes are, you are just trying to get your stance right. Then you come back to it again, and again, and suddenly you can make a single buzzy note. The time after that, you can make a clearer note. No one, not even you, wants to listen to you at first. But one day, there is a beautiful succession of notes and, yes, you have played a brief, gifted, much appreciated passage of music.

This is also true for the silence inside you; you may not want to confront it at first. But a long way down the road, when you inhabit a space fully, you no longer feel awkward and lonely. Silence turns, in effect, into its opposite, so it becomes not only a place to be alone but also a place that's an invitation to others to join you, to want to know who's there, in the quiet.

6) Am I too inflexible in my relationship to time?

In Ireland, where I spend a great deal of time, they say, "The thing about the past is that it isn't the past." Sometimes we forget that we don't have to choose between the past or the present or the future. We can live all of these levels at once. (In fact, we don't have a choice about the matter.)

If you've got a wonderful memory of your childhood, it should live within you. If you've got a challenging relationship with a parent, that should be there as part of your identity now, both in your strengths and weaknesses. The way we anticipate the future forms our identity now. Time taken too literally can be a tyranny. We are never one thing; we are a conversation—everything we have been, everything we are now and every possibility we could be in the future.

7) How can I know what I am actually saying?

Poetry is often the art of overhearing yourself say things you didn't know you knew. It is a learned skill to force yourself to articulate your life, your present world or your possibilities for the future. We need that same skill as an art of survival. We need to overhear the tiny but very consequential things we say that reveal ourselves to ourselves.

I have one friend who, when she is in a quandary, goes out for a drive in her car and sings. Whatever she's grappling with, she sings about it—to the windscreen, to the road, to the oncoming traffic. Then she overhears herself singing how she actually feels about something and what she should do about it.

Sometimes she pulls up to a stoplight, other people look over and she's singing, slightly crazed, into the windscreen, but that's her way of finding out.

8) How can I drink from the deep well of things as they are?

In the West of Ireland, there are very old, very sacred wells everywhere. The locals call them "blessed wells" or "holy wells." At them, you find notes to the dead, bits of ribbon, keepsakes that people have left when they've said a prayer for a child or someone who's sick. Often a local church will have a Mass out there once a year. These holy wells are everywhere, and they're part of the local imagination and have been for thousands of years.

So to me, a well, a place where the water springs eternal all year round, is a very real, blessed place to stop and think. Almost always, when I'm struggling over a particular situation, I realize that I am only looking at the surface of the problem and refusing to go for the deeper dynamic that caused all the tension in the first place.

All intimate relationships—close friendships and good marriages—are based on continued and mutual forgiveness. You will always trespass upon your friend's sensibilities at one time or another, or your spouse's. The only question is, Will you forgive the other person? And more importantly, Will you

forgive yourself? We have to deepen our understanding, make ourselves more equal to circumstances, more easy with what we have been given or not given. We must drink from the deep well of things as they are.

9) Can I live a courageous life?

If you look at the root of the word "courage," it doesn't mean running under the machine-gun bullets of the enemy, wearing a Sylvester Stallone headband, with glistening biceps and bandoliers of ammunition around one's neck. The word "courage" comes from the old French word *coeur* meaning "heart." So "courage" is the measure of your heartfelt participation in the world.

Human beings are constantly trying to take courageous paths in their lives: in their marriages, in their relationships, in their work and with themselves. But the human way is to hope that there's a way to take that courageous step—without having one's heart broken. And it's my contention that there is no sincere path a human being can take without breaking his or her heart.

There is no marriage, no matter how happy, that won't at times find you wanting and break your heart. In raising a family, there is no way to be a good mother or father without a child breaking that parental heart. In a good job, a good vocation, if we are sincere about our contribution, our work will always find us wanting at times. In an individual life, if we are sincere about examining our own integrity, we should, if we are really serious, at times, be existentially disappointed with ourselves.

So it can be a lovely, merciful thing to think, "Actually, there is no path I can take without having my heart broken, so why not get on with it and stop wanting these extra-special circumstances which stop me from doing something courageous?"

10) Can I be the blessed saint that my future happiness will always remember?

Here's the explanation for what sounds like a strange question. I have a poem called "Coleman's Bed" about a place in the West of Ireland where the Irish saint Coleman lived. The last line of that poem calls on the reader to remember "the quiet, robust and blessed saint that your future happiness will always remember."

We go to places of pilgrimage where saints have lived, or even to Graceland, where Elvis lived, because these people gave something to the rest of us—music or good works—that has carried on down the years and that was a generous gift to the future.

But that blessed saint could also be yourself—the person who, in this moment, makes a decision that can make a bold path into the years to come and whom your future happiness will always remember. What could you do now for yourself or others that your future self would look back on and congratulate you for—something it could view with real thankfulness because the decision you made opened up the

life for which it is now eternally grateful?

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