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A Graduate Degree in 5 Simple Questions
May 4, 2017

It's that time of year. The time of year when you will see a lot of funny square hats. Hats with tassels soon to be thrown into the air. My third child will be throwing one as he graduates from high school in a few days. And that's a great thing.

With every graduation comes a graduation speech. They are obligatory, aren't they? The speech is usually given by someone with some sort of credentials who says something like, "Go out there and change the world." I hate to say it but many of the commencement speeches I've heard were about twice as long as they should have been, or at least twice as long as my attention span. But last year I caught wind of one graduation speech that was...well, superb.

It was given by James Ryan, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. Ryan began his most compelling remarks with these words:

There are five truly essential questions that you should regularly ask yourself and others. My claim is that, if you get in the habit of asking these questions, you have a very good chance of being both successful and happy, and you will be in a good position to answer "I did" to the bonus question at the end.¹

Of course, what's of interest to us today is just what those five questions are and just what is the bonus question.

Here's the first one: "**Wait, what?**" You've been there, haven't you? Someone is giving instructions for this task or perhaps they are explaining how this or that works. Nothing in particular stands out; you've heard it all before. Then just when you are about to tune out, you hear something that makes you say, "Wait, what?" Maybe the person says, "And we need it done by next week." Or perhaps she says, "And we believe that if we are able to accomplish this task it will reduce the necessary size of our workforce by 35%." Or maybe you hear, "And if you don't take this medicine, I'm giving you a 50% chance of living more than 2 years." You may not have been paying attention

before, but you are now. And the question, “Wait, what? is a good question in such times. It’s a question of clarification. It makes us slow down the conversation to make sure we fully understand what has been said.

Over the years, I have delegated plenty of tasks. I get a nod from whomever I handed things off to. It seemed like we were on the same page. But then when I circled back, I realized the person or group was headed off in a different direction or at different pace than I intended. Of course, this may speak to my communication skills as a leader, but it also speaks to the fundamental problem that many of us have to slow a conversation down and make sure we understand what has been communicated. And the “Wait, what?” question reminds us to do otherwise. Do we really want to miss out on the important, sometimes even critical, information shared to us by our clients, by our employer, by our spouse, by our children? If not, then we’ve got to get in the habit of asking, “Wait, what?”

The second question suggested by Ryan was **“I wonder...” followed by either “if” or “why”**. I think this is a question that as kids we couldn’t resist asking. “I wonder why this burns when I put a flame under it.” “I wonder what happens when I stick this in the outlet.” “I wonder what my parents will think if I do this?” But as we get older, it seems like the wonder is taken out of us. We bake the recipe the same way we always have. We take the same route to work. We assume that a machine only has a certain capacity or can’t be designed in another way. And once we do that, the best we can hope for is familiar, often ho-hum, results.

My second son is on the crew team for the Coast Guard Academy. They are about to race in their conference championships. Their coach, a former elite rower, has been trying different combinations rowers in the boats all year long. He has put the rowers in different positions. He has placed them in different boats with different rowers. He has constantly been asking, “I wonder if...” “I wonder if we can get a faster boat if we put this man here instead of there.” I know we don’t have time to tinker with everything in our lives, but if we are to find new and better pathways the “I wonder” question is imperative.

The third question Ryan submitted for our use is: **“Couldn’t we at least...?”** This might be the most important question when working with

others and movement seems stuck. Perhaps there is disagreement about the pathway forward. Maybe costs in HR need to be kept down and there is disagreement as to the best way to do that with minimal impact on employee benefits. But is there something that could be done that everyone agrees with it that could be done starting now? Maybe the move only reduces cost by 3% of the 10% that is needed, but why not get those savings started while wrestling through the others? Sometimes as institutions and organizations and companies we are way too slow in seeing change happen because we want the whole grand plan decided upon before we are willing to take even the smallest steps. But by the time we figure it all out (if we really do), valuable time and resources and market opportunities have been lost. Asking “Couldn’t we at least...?” helps mitigate that.

The fourth question is one I find myself asking more frequently these days. It is: **“How can I help?”** Two years ago, I shared with you research from Adam Grant’s book *Give and Take*. In the book, Grant discussed how social researchers describe people as either givers, takers, or matchers. Takers see the world as a zero-sum game. They are going to win and they don’t care how others come out. Matchers are more altruistic. They are willing to help others, but only if they get something in return. Givers, though, are willing to give regardless of whether there is clear self-benefit in the end. So who does better in the end? Who is most successful? Repeated studies show it is the givers. It is those people who are willing to help others. It is those people who are willing to humbly ask if there is anything they can do for another. Think of this question in regards to your family. What if you started asking your spouse, your children, your siblings, your parents, how can I help? It could be the question that changes family dynamics quicker than you ever thought possible.

The fifth question Ryan presented to the Harvard graduates is: **“What truly matters?”** I have become increasingly convinced that when we become frustrated or angry about our circumstances or about others it is largely because we have forgotten what truly matters. We see coaches and parents yelling at little league baseball players and umpires. Oh sure, they do so because someone did not perform as expected, but does what really matter warrant that kind of yelling? Perhaps you’ve got an employee who takes long lunches, but the work gets done and people enjoy working with him or her, perhaps in part

because of the relationships built at those lunches. But if all we can harp on is the long lunches, have we not forgotten what really matters? Or think about those times when the load gets really heavy and the list gets really long. What better time to ask the question: “What really matters?”

Five good questions. Good enough for Harvard graduate students. Questions that if we make a habit of asking have a good chance of leading us to a successful and happy life. That’s what James Ryan says, and I tend to agree with him.

Now, I told you up front that in addition to the five questions Ryan posed, he also added a bonus question. And I can’t end without sharing it with you. It’s a question that Ryan believes we can answer with the words “I did” if we are good at asking the first five questions. The bonus question comes from a poem written by Raymond Carver called “Late Fragments.” Here’s the question: **“And did you get what you wanted out of life, even so?”**

I have been reading through a book with a number of men lately, and about halfway through the book the author makes a rather bold statement. He writes, “The primary reason people struggle so much in life is because they have false ideas about reality.”² And one of the key false ideas that people have is that life is easy. It’s not easy. That is why the question I get asked more than any other is why is there so much pain and suffering in the world. And when we hold onto the false idea that life is easy or should be easy, we will rarely get what we truly want out of life. We will be in a constant state of frustration and discontent.

So the poet Carver asks, “And did you get what you wanted out of life, even so?” Even with the pain and the struggles and the disappointments, at the end of life will you still get what you wanted out of life? I think you can get there if you ask the five questions Ryan suggests. I think you can find love. I think you can find joy in relationships with others. I think you can find yourself smiling when you see a kid learning to ride a bike or when your dog chases a lizard up the fence? I think you can find strength and hope in the God who gave you life and in the things he says really matters? And if that’s the case, when things are all said and done, I think you can say “I did” to the bonus question from Carver’s poem.

Five simple questions, but by asking them we find clarity, we maintain curiosity, we are able to move forward in the midst of disagreements. We keep ourselves looking at the betterment of others. And we don't lose sight of what is really important. Perhaps these questions were given to those who now have a Harvard diploma hanging on the wall, but honestly I think these questions mean a whole lot more than that diploma ever will.

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¹ James Ryan, "[Good Questions](#)," Harvard Graduate School of Education website, May 26, 2016.

² Richard E. Simmons, *The True Measure of a Man: How Perceptions of Success, Achievement & Recognition Fail Men in Difficult Times* (Evergreen, 2011), 48.