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“It Doesn’t Hurt to Ask”
October 6, 2016

You wake up in the morning. You know where you are going. You know what you are going to do. And you know how to do it. You wake up the next morning. You know where you are going. You know what you are going to do. And you know how to do it. Sound exciting? Perhaps in some seasons of our lives a little predictability and routine might be appealing, but I think most of us sooner or later would begin to go stir crazy if all our days were like that. Do we really want to wake up every morning with no problems to solve? With no questions to ask?

I’m quite convinced that a stagnant life is one in which we stop asking good questions. Status quo reigns and apathy and half-hearted effort take over. Ask a good question, however, and everything changes. It stirs our imagination, reminds us of what’s important, and helps us grow. What question do you need to ask right now? Do you know?

David Sturt, in his book *Great Work* tells this story:

It was 1944. The Land family was on vacation in New Mexico, hitting some sights and snapping photos. Three-year-old Jennifer had a question that was really bothering her. As described by her father, Edwin, “I recall a sunny day in Santa Fe, New Mexico, when my little daughter asked why she could not see at once the picture I had just taken of her.” Edwin explained to his little girl that the film had to be developed in a special place called a darkroom, and that the negatives had to be printed on special paper. Translated from the perspective of a three-year-old: blah-blah, blah-blah...

Thank goodness Jennifer was a strong-willed kid who was not satisfied with her dad’s answer. She still wanted to know, “Why can’t I see my picture right now?” And that sulky disgruntlement got Edwin to thinking: “As I walked around the charming town I undertook the task of solving the puzzle she had set me.” Three years later, the camera, the film, and the physical chemistry came together as Edwin and Polaroid introduced the concept of “instant” to the photography world...[and] the Polaroid Land Camera...The

difference Edwin made soon rippled from home life to work life in the form of ID cards, passport photos, ultrasound pictures, folk art, and police investigations, to name just a few. Even the digital camera in your cell phone, while not invented by Land, carries his fingerprint of “instant.”¹

Wind the clock back for Edwin Land. Suppose that instead of letting his daughter’s question rattle around in his mind, he had simply dismissed it by saying, “That’s just the way it is” and gone on his merry way. I have to think that the years following that question would have been far less interesting and less profitable. You see, a good question changes everything, if we are willing to pause and consider it and then hunt down its answer.

In the early 1970s, Marty Cooper was an electrical engineer for Motorola. He spent much of his first 15 years developing various technologies for personal communication—pagers for doctors, crystals for wristwatches, and the first portable handheld police radios, to name a few.

By the early 1970s, Marty had risen through the ranks to assume the title of general manager of Motorola’s Communications Systems Division and was soon asked to develop the next-generation car phone. Certainly a noble task, but Marty asked “Why is it that when I want to call a person, I have to call a place like a house or an office or a car? People want to call a person not a place.”

From that question, Marty and his team spent the next few years developing the very first handheld cellular telephone, and on April 3, 1973, Marty made the world’s first mobile call from a 2 ½-pound cell phone that his team lovingly called “the brick.” It had a battery life of 20 minutes.²

When you hear stories like this, you may think to yourself, “I love Marty Cooper’s question, but I am not very good at asking questions like this. I am just not that creative.” But sometimes the important thing is not to come up with novel questions that lead you to novel ideas, but simply to ask basic questions of others and watch them go to work.

When Greg Dyke became the head of the BBC in 2000 he traveled to each major BBC location and assembled the staff. BBC staff teams had experienced leadership transitions before and they expected a long presentation on the company's mission or values. But instead of a speech, he simply sat down with each group and asked a question, "What is the one thing I should do to make things better for you?" Then he listened and followed it up with another question, "What is the one thing I should do to make things better for our viewers and listeners?"³ You can imagine how much the BBC staff loved these questions. Rather than being told how to make things better, they were asked how they would address the issues. Many of their ideas were excellent. But more than just generating excellent ideas, don't you think that on that day their work became so much more interesting and that Greg Dyke's leadership role did as well? So sometimes, what makes life more interesting is not just the questions we are willing to ask ourselves but the questions we are willing to ask others as well.

I did a little hunting around to find some questions that might be valuable to ask, particularly in the business context. Here are some of those questions.

- What trophy do we want on our mantle? - *Marcy Massura, a digital marketer and brand strategist at MSL Group*
- Are we paying enough attention to the partners our company depends on to succeed? - *Ron Adner, author and professor at Tuck School of Business*
- What prevents me from making the changes I know will make me a more effective leader? - *Marshall Goldsmith, leadership coach and author*
- What is the smallest subset of the problem we can usefully solve? - *Paul Graham, co-founder of Y Combinator*
- Who, on the executive team or the board, has spoken to a customer recently? - *James Champy, author and management expert*
- What should we stop doing? - *Peter Drucker, management expert and author*

- What stupid rule would we most like to kill? -*Lisa Bodell, CEO, FutureThink*
- Do we have the right people on the bus? -*Jim Collins, author and management consultant*
- If our customer were my grandmother, would I tell her to buy what we're selling? -*Dan Pink, author⁴*

Good questions, aren't they? And if we are willing to pause and actually work out an answer, chances are our work will not only be more interesting, but more effective as well. In fact, David Sturt's research shows that people who are good at asking questions are nearly 3 times more likely to positively impact a company's bottom line than those who don't.⁵

Now, I don't want to leave all that I have said today just in the realm of business. Because I think every area of our lives deserves good questions. Think about a marriage that has gotten a little stagnant. How about asking the question, "What I can do to bring joy into my mate's life today?" Or maybe, a relationship with someone has become strained. Most likely your thoughts towards that person are largely full of frustration. Maybe now is the time to ask the question, "What is something in which we share a similar opinion or a similar interest and what can I do to highlight that in our relationship?" Or when life feels like a string of monotonous activities, we should ask a question like, "If I had nothing holding me back, how would I like to make a difference?" And follow that up with the question, "Now, given my constraints, what little step can I take in that direction?" I hope you see that there is a life-giving nature to questions like these. Asking good questions is not academic. In many cases it is what makes our lives truly come alive.

There is one more arena in which I want to encourage you to ask questions. It is the arena of the bigger issues of life. Questions like: What happens when we die? Is there a God? Why should I believe in one religion over another? Do science and God mix? Why is there so much suffering in the world? What is the meaning of life?

This last week I had the opportunity to visit with a young gal who is currently a nursing student. She grew up in the church and her mother and brother are ardent believers. She is not. She has questions. She

wants to know who made God. She wants to know if miracles can really be substantiated. She wants to know how we can have any confidence in what happens after this life. These are good questions. They are valid questions. They are questions that deserve a better response than: “You just need to have more faith.” I encouraged her to ask them, and I encourage you to do the same. In many ways, I think you cannot really thrive in life until you’ve done so.

To that end, I would like to finish today by offering you a chance to ask these kinds of questions. Next Thursday, you are invited back to lunch. It will be a different set up. You’ll need to sign up today or RSVP to the church office by next Tuesday. We will be ordering box lunches for \$5 and we will sit, however many of us there are, and discuss your questions from 11:45-12:45. My guess is there will be more questions than we can handle in one lunch. But it will be a beginning—a beginning I hope of you asking questions, good questions, in every area of your life.

¹ David Sturt, *Great Work: How to Make a Difference People Love* (McGraw-Hill, 2014), loc. 533. 544, Kindle.

² Adapted from Sturt, *Great Work*, loc. 688-701, Kindle.

³ Paul Sloane, “[Ask Questions: The Single Most Important Habit for Innovative Thinkers](#),” InnovationManagement.se, accessed October 4, 2016.

⁴ Leigh Buchanan “[100 Questions Business Leaders Should Ask](#),” Inc., accessed October 4, 2016.

⁵ Sturt, *Great Work*, Appendix B.