

**Question Marks: *people are indelibly marked when spiritual leaders ask the right questions.*** (Gordon MacDonald)

In his book *Odyssey*, John Sculley describes how Stephen Jobs (founder of Apple Computer) repeatedly sought to recruit him from his position at Pepsi-Cola to become president of Apple. Each time Sculley declined. But Jobs, Sculley says, would not give up. Then came a night when the two men were on the balcony of a New York City condo, and Jobs again asked, "Are you going to come to Apple?" Sculley writes that he told Jobs that he couldn't because the financial package wasn't right. Jobs countered that more money would not be a problem. Sculley remained unconvinced. Then Jobs, obviously exasperated, fired a laser-like question: "John, do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?" Sculley comments: "It was as if someone reached up and delivered a stiff blow to my stomach. The question was a monstrous one; one for which I had no answer. It simply knocked the wind out of me." Soon after, he was packing his bags and making the move west. It wasn't the first time that a string of words with a question mark at the end has changed everything for somebody. That is the power of the interrogative sentence. A good one, a real good one, alters things. It ignites thought; it can demand commitment, reveal depth or shallowness in a person's soul, disclose hidden agendas. In this case a question rearranged priorities. And that's just the beginning. Consider others: "Cain, why are you angry?" "What

is that in your hand, Moses?" "What must I do to be saved?" Maybe the most powerful of all: "Why have you forsaken me?" Stephen Jobs got his man with one good question. The money, in comparison, was virtually irrelevant. As I write this essay, my wife, Gail, and I are vacationing on the shore of a Northern New Hampshire lake. Out on the water, this very minute, a man fishes from a small canoe. He is no novice. This is evident as he repeatedly casts his lure a considerable distance to a spot where he suspects a lurking trout. I see myself reflected in his efforts when I am living out my call as a pastor. Just as he tries to drop his lure on the right spot catch a fish, so I am often conscious of trying to drop an appropriate question on the right spot in someone's mind or heart to elicit a response that will offer us both insight.

**Good question!** Some people are paid to ask good questions.

Journalists, lawyers, and therapists come to mind. Recently I listened as a doctor asked questions of someone I love very much in the pursuit of a diagnosis. I noticed how he kept circling back to certain themes to make sure he didn't overlook anything. There was precision in his assembly of questions. As I listened, I became convinced all over again that a key to spiritual leadership is the ability to ask powerful questions that diagnose the state of the soul. Good question asking, in my opinion, is something to be learned, mostly through experience. A modern Jewish writer recounting his mother's role in his education recalls that when he arrived

home from school each day she always inquired, "What questions did you ask today?" His friend's mothers, he observed, simply wanted to know what the teacher had asked. Questions have always romanced me. As a teen, I was entranced by the sharp-edged cross-examinations of TV's Perry Mason. In the 56th minute of every drama, he would unleash the perfect question, and the person in the dock would cave and admit to the crime. Remember the quirky TV detective, Colombo, who disarmed everyone with his cluelessness? Just when it seemed a suspect was off the hook, Colombo would ask one more question. "He always had one more question. "He always had one more question that occurred to him as he started to leave any given scene," Robert Waterman writes.

"Something didn't seem to fit, and the thing that made Columbo so good was that he trusted his gut enough to ask that last question." It often sounded like this, "I'm confused ... you'll have to help me here ... the other day you said ... and just now you said ..." How will I ever forget the endless and perceptive questions that my dear friend and father-figure, Vernon Grounds (Denver Seminary president emeritus), would ask me when we were together (and still does). Time and again I opened my heart to him. I told him things I would never tell another ... because he asked.

**Surgery on the soul** Through the years I learned something from the questions Jesus asked as he mentored the Twelve into apostolic maturity. He wasn't seeking information; he was performing surgery on the soul.

"Where is your faith? Why do you doubt?" "Who do men say that I am? Who do you say that I am?" "What good is it if you gain the world and lose your soul?" "What were you discussing (among yourselves while we were traveling)?" "You don't want to leave (me) too, do you?" "Do you understand what I've done for you?" "Would you really lay down your life for me?" "Could you not watch with me for one hour?" "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" "Do you love me?" (Asked of Peter three times.)

The questions of the Savior were (to borrow a phrase) sharper than a two-edged scalpel. They forced self-discovery, priority-setting, repentance, and growth. I'd go so far as to suggest that a good question, well-placed and well-timed, is worth far more than a sermon or a book (which is painful for a preacher and author to admit). I didn't always believe this. When a young man, I talked far too much--well, far more than I talk today. I assumed that everyone was dying to know everything I was thinking. Then I married Gail, who loved me enough to relieve me of this conceit. On the ride home from a Bible study or a party, she would ask, "Didn't you hear what he was trying to say to you?" Or, "Couldn't you see that she wasn't buying what you were saying?" Or (the list grows long), "They really had something to offer, but you ..." These little chastening rebukes had their effect, and gradually I began to get the message: learn to listen; ask questions; draw people out. In other words: it's not about you. The result? Perry Mason, Columbo, Vernon Grounds,

Jesus, and Gail all conspired to convince me to become a student of questions.

We ask questions for scores of reasons. Among them: to learn from one another, to establish personal relationships based on something deeper than just name, rank, and serial number, and to let others discover something hidden deep in themselves. Questions expose hidden motives and attitudes, real feelings and deep wounds. Questions help identify dreams and disappointments, substance and hollowness. There's a lot about ourselves we will never know unless we open ourselves to the questions of those who care about us.

**Questions that probe** Not all questions are equal. There are silly questions. Stupid questions. Even insincere ones. Take the one we often ask when bumping into someone: "How are you doing?" Who really anticipates a full-blown answer? I learned this the hard way when, years ago, I tossed the "how-are-you?" question to a plain-spoken woman, who answered, "Pastor Mac, you ask how I am, but you're really too busy to stop and hear the answer." A good question has to fit the "askee." If I ask my grandson how his day has gone, he offers a one-word answer, "Good." My question is poorly constructed. I have neither engaged his imagination nor encouraged him to overcome his shyness and recount some of the interesting things he's experienced. I would have done better with "What was the best thing and most difficult thing

that happened to you today?" I love to ask people about their work ("What do you love about your job?"), about their areas of expertise ("What did it take to become so knowledgeable in that area?"), about suffering ("What do you think are the most important things you've learned as you've gone through all of this?"), and about their age bracket ("What do you think are the great themes people are wrestling with in that decade of life?"). Want to hear a show-stopper of a question? Jesus asks Saul of Tarsus in a vision on the road to Damascus: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Six or seven words that brought down Saul's carefully constructed world of hard-nosed religion. A friend, now in heaven, used to frequently call me. Each time he would initiate our conversations with "Are you filled with the Holy Spirit today?" The first time or two I was slightly irritated until it occurred to me that his might be among the best questions one friend can ask of another. From that time on, when I anticipated a call from him, I found myself examining my heart so that I could offer an honest response. Many years ago another acquaintance, perhaps sensing that I was in some kind of trouble, asked, "Gordon, are there some knots in your life today?" In that case--and I am ashamed of this--I brushed the question off. If I'd answered it, I might have saved myself an enormous amount of personal destruction. It doesn't get much better than the moment someone says, "Man, you sure ask good questions." Or, "No one has ever asked me that before." Or, "Whoa! Where did that question come from?" After such a

comment, you know you're in for a substantial conversation. Question asking is not just a form of voyeurism; it's one of the most important functions of a pastor or spiritual director: to connect with someone's mind and heart and lead them toward enlightenment about God, about themselves, about a higher view of life.

**Queries for all occasions** When I am in a first-time conversation with someone I'm hoping to know better, I have learned to ask some fun-type questions. It's hard to predict where the conversation will go, but I can be pretty confident we will not deal in trivialities. Sometimes it's important to ask permission before asking questions, maybe saying, "Would you mind if I asked four or five nosy questions? If any one of the makes you uncomfortable, just say 'pass,' and I'll back off." If Gail and I are entertaining a group of people in our home who are not well acquainted, we often seat them in a circle and ask if they would each take three minutes to answer this question: Where were you in the seventh grade? It seems such an innocuous question, but seventh grade for many is a difficult year as we transition from childhood to the teen years. Often the question triggers surprising stories of challenge and struggle. A second question: What was the warmest place or who was the warmest person in your childhood? We go around the circle hearing answers filled with nostalgia. And not a little self-revelation. If there has been sadness in one's past, you'll likely pick up hints in the answer. If there has been stability and strength, that will show too. Then a third and

final question: When in your life did you feel closest to God? Almost anyone can handle this question whether they live in or out of faith. Expect some disparate answers. We have never asked these three questions and been disappointed with the results. Almost always everyone ends the evening speaking appreciatively of the conversation.

A seemingly absurd question such as Tell me your whole life story in four minutes always brings a startled reaction: "Four minutes? That's impossible!" But almost everyone is willing to try. And you're likely to hear important things that become grist for good conversation.

It may be the first time someone has tried to reconstruct their personal history through a process that identifies only the most important events. You listen for what is included and what is left out. There will be hints about the health of one's family background, about life-shaping struggles and tragedies, about convictions that have guided one's journey, and major defeats and successes that may have a lot to do with where one is today. My follow-up question to this four-minute review might be, "What does it do to a person when their mother dies at such a young age?" Note the way the question, posed in the third-person, gives the person a chance to speak from the heart without feeling on the spot if this is too sensitive a subject. Usually the responder will begin by answering in the third person, "Well, he/she is likely to ..." But soon they switch over to the first person as they feel safer to speak of their



own experience. Another conversation-starting question might be even more direct: "Every time I've been with you lately, I've seen fatigue (or sadness, or frustration, or loneliness) in your eyes." Or "I was listening carefully to what you said the other night, and I got this impression. Tell me if I'm anywhere near close." There are countless variations: \* "I would think that a moment like that would be very painful for you. Am I wrong?" \* "What does it do to a person when ...?" \* "It hits me that if I were going through what you've been facing, I'd be struggling with some doubt ..."

When someone offers me details of their story, I want to help them identify their true feelings. Because men often have difficulty overcoming their pride and their need to project an image of strength, I will usually offer them multiple-choice questions: "Most guys going through what you're living with would either be scared or mad as anything. Where do you think you are?" Or, "What feelings surge through you when that happens?" Sooner or later I'll likely get to a question like "Where do you think God is in the middle of all of this? Any idea of what he might be saying?"

**Questions for confrontation** From time to time, I find myself having to confront someone who is angry with me, angry with something going on in the church, or just simply carrying on in ways injurious to the life of good people. Sometimes it's a conflict in a person's marriage or a friendship. Frankly, confrontation was never my strongest gift, and in my earlier life I often avoided such people with the hope that time would

heal things. But as I grew up, I got a bit wiser. I began to lose some of my fear of people and bought into Paul's advice to Timothy: that a good rebuke (best formed as a question), humbly, compassionately delivered, cleanses things. I recall a copy of some correspondence I read between two rather well-known Christian personalities whose names, if I gave them, every reader would recognize. The first of the two had written a letter (unwisely making it public) to the second in which he accused him of some doctrinal flaws. I would have expected the second person to have gulped down a testosterone pill and written a scorching letter back. But he didn't. Instead he wrote what I thought was a rather courteous but nevertheless candid response in which he said, "A long time ago I learned that before accusing anyone of anything, I should always ask them clarifying questions." I thought the response a noble one, and I learned much from it. Over and over this principle--ask before accusing--has rescued me from making a fool of myself. So in conflictive moments I've learned to use questions like these: \* I need to tell you about an impression I have and ask you if it's accurate. \* I want to play back to you what I thought you said the other day and ask if my perception is correct. \* What message were you hoping I'd get when you ... \* Would you be open to some thoughts from someone who really cares about you? \* Have you reflected at all how you're coming across in this situation? \* What if the choices you've been making are not only going to hurt you but some other people you say you care about? If I am

in the middle of a conversation about a conflict between two or more people, I like to ask the person I'm with this question: "Let's pretend for a minute that you are \_\_\_\_\_ (the "enemy"). What would he or she say about you if he were here right now? What do you think their case might sound like?" The question forces thought and reflection and often takes the heat out of the issue.

**The unasked question** Avoiding confrontation, not asking the important and timely question can sometimes bring great harm. I think I could write a small book about the times I sought the safety of silence and compounded a problem. A man in our church once came to talk about his daughter who was involved in a messy divorce. The marriage had been contentious from its beginning, and he felt deep remorse. "I will never forget my last moments with her on the night before the wedding," he told me. "We sat together on our front porch. We talked about everything in the world except the wedding. We were avoiding the subject. I knew she was making a mistake, but I didn't have the nerve to say anything. "Finally, she got up, gave me a kiss, and headed inside and upstairs to her bedroom. I remember that she walked slowly, that she lingered at the door in a way that made me feel she didn't want to go in. "I wanted so badly to ask her, 'Are you really sure you're doing the right thing?' But I didn't, and she finally went in. For 15 years now, I've been kicking myself because I never asked that question. It might have changed everything." A week after that visit, I had a chance to meet with

the daughter. As we discussed her marriage, I asked, "What were some of the earliest indications that the relationship wasn't working?" She answered: "Truthfully? I think I knew it probably wasn't going to work before we got married. But there was a stubbornness in me. I felt my parent's disapproval, and I couldn't stand to admit that they were right." "Do you remember being with your father the night before the wedding?" I asked. "Remember? I'll never forget it. We sat on the porch making small talk. I kept wondering if he'd get around to telling me his real feelings about the wedding. But he never raised the subject." "Finally, I told him I had to get upstairs to bed. I remember going inside, hoping that he'd call me back and ask me one more time if I was sure that I knew what I was doing. One question from him might have been all I needed to face my doubts and fear and to have, at least, postponed the wedding." For the want of one well-asked question from a father to a daughter ... There are risks in asking questions--but also great rewards. Every once in a while you come up with one that fits the moment. And a life is changed. Ask John Sculley if this isn't true.

**[RELATED ARTICLE: Good Questions For first meetings and deep conversations.** The key to heart-to-heart conversations is first opening the heart. When I have the go-ahead, I start with a few, simple questions. Here are some of my ice-breakers: \*\* What are one or two things that are most important to you? \*\* What's a great day at your job look like? \*\* Tell me about your family. \*\* How did you meet your

spouse? \*\* Who are your heroes? \*\* What kind of a child were you? \*\*  
Have any dreams about life ten years from now? \*\* How does God  
figure into the way you live? \*\* What makes you a genuinely happy  
person? \*\* What kinds of lessons have you learned the hard way?

**Queries to get elderly people talking.** I love asking questions of senior people. Left to themselves, more than a few seniors will begin to dote on just a few subjects: their health, their bewilderment over a world that is changing too fast for their comfort, their loneliness over a lost loved one, and the fact that no one seems to remember the life-time contributions they made. Questions like these can open the heart of a senior person: \*\*  
What are your recollections of life during the Depression? \*\* What person taught you the most about Jesus? \*\* What made you fall in love with your spouse? \*\* What's your greatest memory of your work? \*\*  
What are the most important principles by which you guided your life?  
\*\* Do you ever get afraid? \*\* Who are the people you miss the most? \*\*  
What do you wish younger people would ask you?

**Questions leading to Jesus.** In college, my early training in evangelism centered on a kind of direct-sales approach ("I've got this booklet I'd like you to look through"). But the pastor in me shifted to the question format because I'm convinced that my job is simply to help a person

disassemble the obstacles and discover Jesus and his saving work for themselves. A series of questions like these often get us started: \*\* How did God seem to you when you were a child? \*\* When in your life did you ever feel God's presence? \*\* Ever meet a person who impressed you by the way they lived for God? \*\* Know much about Jesus? \*\* What if God had purposes for your life that would make everything fresh and new in your journey? \*\* What if it could be shown that God is in the fresh-start business? \*\* Could you conceive of working on an experiment for the next few months? Then I might tell them, "I'm going to suggest that you try walking in Jesus' steps for the next 120 days and in tandem with some people who are trying to do the same thing."--GM

Gordon MacDonald is editor at large of LEADERSHIP and chair of World Relief and lives in New Hampshire.

Christianity Today, Inc. 22-SEP-COPYRIGHT 2006