

Chapel Talk
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A couple of days ago, my son Christopher and I were drawing together in one of his coloring books. The afternoon found us hard at work at his play table on some animals at the zoo.

Christopher, in the normal dictatorial way of a three-year old, was telling me which colors to use on the elephant's leg, while he concentrated on the big floppy ears. My blue was evenly spreading to the boundary of the legs; when I glanced over at the wild red dashes Christopher was making without any regard to the limitations of the elephant's ears, he looked back at me, crayon fisted in amazement, and asked; "Da, why can't you draw over the edges?"

Christopher wanted to know why I was bounded by my line, why my blue crayola was imprisoned compared to his spontaneous and free red streaks. This was not the first time a question had forced me to think and re-evaluate, nor was it a novel occurrence for a three year old to challenge me. All parents here and in your homes can tell you about that dreaded three-letter word which incessantly comes out of a child's mouth: "Why?" Sometimes it comes repeatedly to every explanation you give, like a dive bombing mosquito on a summer night.

"Christopher, we can't go outside now."

"Why?"

"Because it's raining."

"Why?"

--Long non-dramatic pause as the brain frantically tries to create something.

"Because you'll get wet."

--Notice how all parents dodge the real question of "Why is it raining?" with a feeble retort about rules. Notice also the absurdity of telling him he can't get wet when that's exactly what he wants to do.

"Why?"

"Because -" now I'm trying to control my anger born of frustration as well as control the urge to laugh at how stupid I'm being in front of this wise child who has already seen through my ridiculous logic.

"Because we don't want to ruin your sneakers."

"Why can't we wear my yellow boots?" he concludes patronizingly.

Christopher knows the power of questions, the revolutions and re-examinations they create. His questions reveal both his unbridled curiosity and his vigorous insistence on challenging every boundary he confronts. Questions are scary. Questions expose us, stripping away facades of pre-conceptions, assumptions, stereotypes, fears.

The VI Form knows the questions that Shakespeare's Hamlet asks and is forced to confront about his life, his family, his world. The play itself begins with a question, and scene after scene teems with question after question. There is much that Hamlet learns he doesn't know, yet he does have the courage and strength to wrestle with those doubts, those abysses which now appear on what was once his smooth path of life. When my grandfather, who was a minister for sixty years in Baltimore, moved into a retirement home at the age of 85, he was asked to teach a Bible course; at the same time I was beginning my teaching career at St. Andrew's. I recently re-read a letter he wrote me then:

I'm going into the teaching business. I'm going to have a Bible class on the gospel according to Mark. It is just for Lent. I wish you were here to help. I'm nervous about all the questions I can't answer.

My grandfather, who had memorized most of the Bible, and was probably the most spiritually good person I've ever known, was "nervous about all the questions" he might not be able to answer. This patriarch had spent his life in the Bible, in his belief; here he was soliciting my help. For me to read this confession as I began my teaching career was profoundly unsettling. I thought by being a teacher I now got to ask the questions--but how little I knew about teaching, or about life.

What I've found since my grandfather's letter is that questions obviously don't go away, and that questions are more significant and revealing than answers. These recent insights came to me when I was most comfortable in my supposed role as teacher and adult, roles which I thought gave me the answers, gave me the authority and safety to be the questioner. During the last few years, two unlikely yet unique individuals have questioned me and my assumptions, have suddenly and unexpectedly provoked me, surprised me, scared me, taught me. These insights also revealed the

two dimensions of a question--how it can open up a whole new exciting vision of the world, or how it can just as quickly expose emptiness with an insight that compels us to re-examine all we ever thought we knew.

Years ago, one of the accountants in the business office here saw my long distance phone bill and asked, "Well, why don't you just marry her?" I'm not sure if that question caused a wedding, but the question was disturbingly sensible, and at the risk of being a Hallmark card, so was the answer. My paramount teacher here, however, has been that three and a half year old, Christopher, whose questions over the last two years have taught me more, even as they exhaust me, than I ever anticipated. Christopher's questions--and I use him as the epitome of all children who have the energy and innate curiosity to discover and explore their huge and unknown world--Christopher's questions challenge. They challenge our sill assumptions: "Why can't I have Spaghetti-O's for breakfast?" They confront customs that need a fresh examination: "Why can't I sleep in your bed?" Or they can send your imagination on a journey, as did the question he asked me this morning: "What does the sun have for breakfast?" And Christopher's queries necessitate a philosophical exploration: "Why do we have Joshua?"

This last question is neither the question all parents duck--"How did Joshua get in mommy's tummy?"--nor is it asking "Why is my whiney little brother here and ruining my once perfect world?" Rather, "Why do we have Joshua?" asks me to tell him about families, about how families and siblings grow, work and live together. Christopher wants to understand about the meaning of birth, not the basics of birds and bees. His question illuminates more of his character and vision than my stumbling response informs him. Christopher's questions similarly force me to examine what I haven't explored recently.

Sadly, as you grow older, an ever-thickening layer of mustiness, unless fought against vigorously, can cover your ideas, your nerves, your existence. Sometimes I can see it happen between a student's III and VI Form years. We get settled into jobs, relationships, schools, families, beliefs without activating them through constant evaluation, without asking "Why?" These questions are not negative or doubtful:

I'm not asking "Why in God's name am I at St. Andrew's?" but instead forcing myself to define "Why am I here, what can I do, what can I accomplish, what can't I do (an equally significant question and understanding), what is worthwhile about being at this School?"

Furthermore, while these questions are not easy, they do begin a process that engenders self-knowledge and thought, both of which lead to a larger consciousness of you in relationship to your world. These are questions that disturb, which shake life into what was dormant. One of you told me recently that "sometimes I walk out of class and I just don't know; there are no specific answers to any of the questions." The question, be it about Spaghetti-O's for breakfast or your purpose at St. Andrew's, is more important than whatever answers follow because answers have the tendency to relax you, putting you back in that comfortable chair or habit. Questions, on the other hand, are those edges that Christopher urged me to draw over.

The second aspect about the nature of a question still leads to growth and understanding, but the journey is more painful, the battle more significant. I am drawn to literature that asks difficult questions, questions that have complex and sometimes unpleasant answers. Such works include Hamlet, King Lear, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Genesis, Beloved, Waiting for Godot, Death of a Salesman, "Master Harold"...and the boys, Oedipus and especially Job, where all of Job's questions to God are answered with questions back to Job. It is one of the most powerful and compelling passages in all of literature.

I have tried to ask those provocative questions to my students over the past thirteen years because I thought I really knew their value; but I never saw their power until I listened to my other grandfather on his death bed. Two years ago, as he slipped into a coma, my grandfather certainly had visions of the next life which he was unable to articulate back to me at his bedside. Ironically for a man who spent his life as the religious editor and publisher of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Alan Paton, my grandfather's final questions, sufferings and perceptions were voiced only in guttural wails and flaying hands. There was a terror before his closed eyes, a defiant unwillingness to leave in his frantic hands swirling around his face. As I sat there calming his trembling hands, I knew he saw that abyss, that immense question between life and death; and I know that despite his deep religious faith, he stood frozen, frightened, shocked at that gulf stretching before him. I tried to imagine what he saw, what he feared, what slowly he came to accept and ultimately embrace as

he finally sank into a peaceful coma. Still, this man did "not go gently" into the night. As frail as his body was, there was an extraordinary stamina to his spiritual battle.

These are monumental edges to draw over. What do they mean to us, to you, to this School? Clearly nothing happens without questions, which is ironic in a learning institution that attempts to have you know as many correct answers as possible--correct answers rewarded by high grades, correctly blackened circles on those standardized tests, correct behavior with A conduct ratings. But as a teacher, I am more intrigued by a student's question, be it about literature or school policy or the avalanche of questions produced by adolescence. I truly believe that even though we as a School want to see you succeed, we also listen to you, which is certainly behind two changes the faculty approved this fall with open School Forums on Friday nights and the Headmaster's Coffee on Wednesday evenings. Both are opportunities for students to ask questions; both are chances for the School to re-examine what it does. Changes will not always occur, but there will be increased understanding.

Secondly, we all need to ask questions to live meaningful lives--we must pose questions to ourselves and to our world: What does this friend mean to me? What is important about this team or choir or corridor? What are the ramifications of my deepening relationship with this other person? Why do I want to go to this college? Why in fact do I want to go to college? What do I want to accomplish there? What have I done recently to help someone else? Do I believe in God? Are there ways I can help the homeless, the needy, the less fortunate, those with AIDS? What profession will make me happy and make me useful in my adult life? The questions, and the growth, are endless because a question engenders communication and faith--faith that builds bridges across those chasms, faith that sustains the journey of the question. I realized writing this talk how appropriate it is that "question" and "quest" share the same root.

Let me close with a final personal reflection about the vitality of questioning rather than what my father categorized as the "placid patient acceptance of the evils that befall us." I had an aunt who was Dean of Students at a girls' school in New York; a silly plaque I gave her, engraved "The Dean," now hangs in her honor in my office. Today would have been her sixty-second birthday. Her first year at Emma Willard she had surgery for cancer and required a cane to walk. She had

painted down the length of that cane in bright psychedelic letters, "S-H-I-T." And she waved that cane at those girls, she waved it at me and my family, she waved it to the heavens above, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying; but she refused to succumb to cancer without raising up that cane, in truth, without raising up herself before Life.

In the end, questions assert our ability to wrestle with all that lies beyond the edges--unknown frontiers, confusion, pain, uncertainty, ultimately death. Questioning what we have been dealt helps us regain control over chaos; questioning our suffering, battling it out with our world, our God, is not easy, nor is it without a price--but it is a noble, heroic crusade, an adventure which defines our humanity, a journey which we begin too early to even recognize, yet a journey which we continue as long as we insist upon answering our own inherent hunger to discover, confront, understand and embrace.