

Chapel Talk  
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One day about ten years 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 pictures of 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: "Dad, 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. Here's another exchange I remember; and listen to how inept my replies are to his searing questions:

"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.

Children know the power of questions, the revolutions and re-examinations they create. Their questions reveal both their unbridled curiosity and their vigorous insistence on challenging every boundary they confront. Think of all the questions young Bridgett Hyde will soon be asking; imagine the envelopes she will push, the boundaries she will explore, to her exhausted parents' delight and amazement. Questions are scary. Questions expose us, stripping away facades of pre-conceptions, assumptions, stereotypes, fears.

Many of you know 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 possesses 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 way back in 1979:

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. Questions can open up a whole new exciting vision of the world, or it can just as quickly expose emptiness with an insight that compels us to reexamine all we ever thought we knew.

The great facet about children is that they ask questions uninhibitedly, because for them the world is so new, so strange, so possible. Over the years I've kept a book in my kitchen to record the insights of my children, because I was so struck by the energy and freshness of their sight and insight. Here are a few of their questions, questions which reveal how animated their minds are:

“How does God make clouds?”

“Why did God have to invent mosquitoes?”

“Is it true that if Adam and Eve hadn't eaten the apple, we wouldn't have homework?”

“Dad, how do birds get married?”

“Why can't Superman now fly in his wheelchair?”

“How does fire begin?”

“Why do people leave the poor people the way they are?”

“Why do you always get me white socks? Don't you know I'm not a 'White Sox' fan?”

“Do angels got babies?”

“Dad, when you were a baby, who was my daddy?”

“Dad, did they have trash cans when you were a boy?”

These questions 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 Janie and Tea Cake's relationship 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 which 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 which asks difficult questions, questions which have complex and sometimes unpleasant answers, questions which sometimes come with no answers, only knottier questions. Such works include Hamlet, King Lear, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Genesis, Beloved, Waiting for Godot, "Master Harold" ...and the boys, Oedipus and especially Job, which Mr. Kunz read from tonight, 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 twenty two 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. Twelve 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 remembered King Lear's cry as he held Cordelia's dead body in his arms: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, /And thou no breath at all?" I tried to imagine what my grandfather 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 I believe we should be more intrigued by someone'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 strive to listen to you. We all spend so much time together—in classrooms, on corridors, at meals, in vans, at practices and meetings, in common places. Each one of these endeavors starts with a question: what does this problem mean? How can we make the situation better? How can we solve this weakness? Why can't it—whatever "it" happens to be—be this way? Changes will not always occur, but there will be increased understanding.

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? What profession will make me happy and make the best use of my talents and interests in my adult life? The questions, and the growth, are endless because a question engenders communication and faith--faith which builds bridges across those chasms, faith which 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 classroom. My son Carter is named after her, even though she died nearly thirty years ago when I was in 9th grade. 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 brightly ornamented and designed cane in wild 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, she thrust it to the Heavens above, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying; but she refused to succumb to cancer without raising up that cane, without raising up herself before Life, without heroically confronting and embracing all the hard questions and petty answers the world placed before her.

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 that chaos; questioning our suffering, battling it out with our roommate, our parents, our world, our God, our soul, is not easy, nor is it without a price--but it is a noble, heroic crusade, an experience 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, question, explore and embrace.