

“The Art of Asking Spiritual Questions: Noticing the Duck”

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I have a friend, Paul, who would go once a month to his spiritual mentor’s office for a conversation. After almost a year of these monthly hour-long visits, Paul noticed a beautiful wooden duck sitting on the bottom shelf of his mentor’s book case. The book case and the shelf with the duck on it were in plain view, directly behind where his mentor always sat. Paul said, “Oh, I see you have a wooden duck on your book shelf! Is it new? It looks so real.” His mentor replied, “No, it’s always been there. I received it several years ago as a gift.” Paul couldn’t believe that he hadn’t noticed it before.

He came to think of the duck as a metaphor for the task of spiritual direction. The task is to “notice the duck.” God’s activity in our lives is often masked by our busyness and non-reflective life style. The spiritual mentor, friend, director is looking over the book shelves of someone’s life searching for the duck. One of the ways to find the duck is to ask questions. Questions are a tool for helping people notice what is sometimes overlooked. However, asking spiritual questions is not always easy to do. Good questions are rare. Many questions are leading, dead-end, abrupt, intrusive, or poorly asked. So, if a spiritual mentor or director is looking for the duck, what types of questions might be asked, and is there an etiquette to the practice of asking them?

The purpose of this article is to explore the art of asking spiritual questions. It is an art because listening to a person speak while also seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit requires a creative attentiveness to the process. As directors we have no expectations, beyond believing that God is present and loves. The questions themselves are *spiritual*, because we are not doing therapy or discipling individuals towards a church’s particular understanding of the spiritual life.¹ We ask questions to discover where God is moving in someone’s life. We are looking for the duck.

Spiritual direction or spiritual mentoring is a relationship between a person seeking a more Christ-like life and another who serves as guide to the process.² It is fundamentally

the art of listening to the soul journey of another. Some schools believe that the guide should not give any “direction” or input such as asking questions. Rather a director’s responsibility is to create a space for grace so that in the experience of sharing a person finds his or her own truth. Generally, this is the case. Having a safe, grace-filled environment in which to give voice to the inner stirrings and doubts of one’s soul is profound. At the same time, we are infinitely able to hide from ourselves and deceive ourselves into accepting some truth which might not lead to a more Christ-like life. Therefore, questions can sometimes nudge a person towards more awareness, or even open her or him to an avenue of thought not previously considered. Jesus himself asked lots of questions and serves as a model for the usefulness of questions during spiritual conversations.

Jesus: Master of the Questions

Jesus understood the power of the question to get beneath the surface and reveal the primary issues. The Gospels are replete with questions that people asked Jesus and vice versa. He would often ask a question before acting or respond to a question with a question. Jesus used two basic types: rhetorical questions and information questions. Rhetorical questions are those for which no answer is expected. The answer would be obvious and thus remain unspoken. In the Gospels the correct answer to Jesus’ rhetorical questions often exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. An example is found in Luke 14:3-6.³

³ And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" ⁴ But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵ Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" ⁶ And they could not reply to this.

The second type, information questions, Jesus would ask to probe motives or invite a person to speak his or her desire. This type illustrates the potential questions have for

uncovering what is less obvious or what needs to be given voice. The story of the lawyer in Luke 10:25-28 illustrates this type of question.

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Instead of answering the lawyer's question, Jesus asked him a question. He turned the focus back on the lawyer effectively defusing his attempt to trap Jesus. Then Jesus used the lawyer's answer as his own. Sometimes in spiritual direction directees ask questions in order to keep the attention focused on the director and not on them. They are nervous, want to be polite, or are avoiding the conversation. On these occasions it is the director's role to flip the question back rather than answering. It is a gift of hospitality. The time is returned to the directee.

Another example of an information question is found in Luke 9:18-20 when Jesus asked the disciples about his identity. He asked the easier question first and followed with a harder one.

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" ¹⁹ They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen."

²⁰ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

The art of asking spiritual questions is often precisely this, going from one question to another like stepping stones, allowing the Holy Spirit to uncover the movements of God.

The ease with which Jesus engaged persons with questions bears witness to the clarity of his calling. Hostility did not distract him or lead him to self-doubt. If the disciples or

crowd were confused, he did not try to pacify them. He didn't need to prove himself worthy of their devotion. Neither was he afraid. Jesus brought his full attention to the concerns and needs of those before him. As spiritual directors we have the same responsibility to bring our full attention to those before us without internal distractions. Being able to ask good questions requires attentiveness to our own spiritual state and a security about our own identity and calling.

Barriers to Asking Spirit-led Questions

The spiritual process in spiritual direction moves both ways. As directors and mentors we are mindful of our own inner state. When we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, while hosting the journey-telling of another soul, we become either a door or a barrier to the process. We are a door, when we stay in a listening-hosting posture, paying attention to our inner world but not being absorbed by it. We are a barrier when we become distracted by what is going on inside of us. Paying attention to our own internal activity as directors is necessary. Monitoring our own thoughts and emotions, while listening to the individual and the Holy Spirit requires a great deal of focus and self-awareness. Without it, the duck is rarely seen.

Three attitudes frequently get in the way. They are:

- Arrogance
- Fear
- Impatience

Arrogance is evident, whenever while listening to the story of another, we are already thinking about our response. We assume we know what is going on in them. We've had a similar experience, and we have a Bible verse or a teaching to share. Arrogance believes it knows. There is no listening. In arrogance sometimes leading questions are asked in order to get a person right where we want them. We do not listen because we have

already drawn our conclusion. Such thoughts act as a barrier to the Holy Spirit and to the person discovering his or her own truth. But keep in mind, there is a difference between an arrogant knowing and a word of truth from the Holy Spirit which is discerned by testing our own spirit. The test is this: if there is a feeling of pride, rightness, or hurry, it is arrogance. If there is no personal feeling of pride or hurry, the door remains open for the movement of God. If we are absorbed in our own thoughts and how they might be framed, that is arrogance. Instead if we listen to the Holy Spirit, rather than jump to familiar assumptions, a question might arise rather than an answer.

Fear is the opposite of arrogance. Instead of rushing forward with knowledge, we rush away internally with anxiety. This happens when a person tells us something that overwhelms us; we feel “out of our league,” so to speak. I have almost heard it all, and I have discovered that as soon as I get anxious about what to say or do next, I’ve shut the door to the Holy Spirit and the person in front of me. One of the primary disciplines of a spiritual mentor is to stay centered in Christ and focused on the person. If we cannot, it is rarely possible to listen for the questions. As soon as we focus on our own fears, we lose connection with the Holy Spirit. When this happens, the spiritual director needs to return his or her focus back to the individual. Then in attentive listening sometimes a question comes.

The third less common attitude is impatience. Sometimes we wish people would just get to the point. It’s so obvious to us, why don’t they figure it out or get over it. It’s strange how often Jesus simply let people be where they were. He didn’t warn them that they were going to hell, or that they were completely off-base, or to hurry and get it together. He let them be responsible for their own journey. Our responsibility is to give a person space to settle into his or her soul. A question can stimulate reflection, but feeling hurried shuts people down.

Being self-aware while simultaneously remaining attentive to the other allows us to be in the optimal space for when and how to ask questions. Even though I will suggest different types of questions, it's still necessary to stay tuned to the Holy Spirit for what might be the best ones or even different ones to ask. And to discern whether it is even a time for asking questions.

Types of Questions

A family story is told of a conversation between my grandson, Kai, who was 6 at the time, and his Dad, Matt. Kai was walking home with his dad who had Kai's little 2-year old brother sitting on his shoulders and slumped over his dad's head fast asleep. Matt was holding onto Martin's feet trying to keep him securely on his shoulders while holding onto the hand of Kai. The three of them came to a busy street that they needed to cross, but Matt was having difficulty getting a clear view of the road. So he asked Kai, "Do you see any cars coming?"

Kai replied, "Dad, you should say look both ways to see if any cars are coming."

"You're right, Kai. Look both ways. Do you see any cars coming?"

"Dad, you should say do you see any trucks coming too?"

Kai instinctively understood the importance of asking the right question. In spiritual mentoring questions clarify the journey and present a way to explore an individual's spiritual house. The following list of question types begins with easy ones used for introductions and ends with others used only when trust and rapport are fully established. Then the director or mentor can explore various rooms in the soul which might have previously been closed.

1. Beginnings: Getting to know you questions

Beginning questions are usually easy for people to answer. People are not anxious or confused by them. For directors these questions give us a starting point for knowing the person and his or her spirituality. Beginning questions are not leading questions. Leading questions are asked when someone wants a particular answer. These

questions, on the other hand, have no right answers. A person may respond in any manner they wish without any internal fear of judgment. Some examples include:

- Who is the first person who created a memory of God for you?
- What is your earliest experience of God?
- Who is your spiritual hero-role model?⁴
- What is a story from your life that represents the essence of who you are?
- What is a story that represents your current need?
- When you think of God, what picture comes to mind?

2. Ready to go: Classic questions

Questions from Ignatian spirituality explore the current movements within a person either towards God, called consolations, or movements away from God, called desolations.⁵ However for those not trained in Ignatian spirituality, simply asking the following questions accomplishes, in a general way, the same outcomes. They are not sophisticated, but they help describe the current spiritual reality of a directee or mentee. They are open questions, so the directee brings whatever level of intensity or investment he or she desires.

- What is your desire for God?
- What is God's desire for you?
- What are the hindrances?

2. Going Deeper: Specific questions

Once a person feels comfortable with a spiritual director or mentor, the mentor can invite the person to share more: how do they usually experience God, what are their specific feelings right now, and what have they done to nurture a relationship with

God. At this point in the relationship, the mentor begins exploring the spiritual house, becoming familiar with its habits, pitfalls, graces, and struggles.

- Tell the story of your spiritual journey from childhood to today. Include the history of your family and your growing up experiences.
- What has been happening in your prayer life?
- What are your predominate feelings about your relationship with God?
- Do you have any internal movements (calls, inclinations, intuitions, initiatives)?
- Are there specific blocks or temptations in your spiritual life?
- What are your patterns-habits for sustaining your relationship to God?
- Who are your friends and closest relationships, and how are they sustaining you in your spiritual walk?
- How are you growing/developing spiritually in your work/ministry?
- How do you discern the presence of God in your life?

3. Going still deeper: Probing questions

When a deeper trust is established, a spiritual director or mentor can begin to gently guide a directee into interior areas he or she might normally avoid. These are areas where a person feels unfree and internally bound. These are places where she or he feels confused, ashamed, or frightened. Sometimes individuals will tell a story that has intense meaning for them, but they don't know why. They have very strong feelings of hurt, betrayal, confusion or anger. They wonder about God in the story. On these occasions a spiritual director might ask "why?" several times. This is not the "why" which looks for reasons to explain *why* something happened or *why* someone did something. Instead it is a "why" that explores underlying feelings and thoughts. These "whys" can lead to insights about what is fundamentally troubling an

individual about an experience they had. The questions create potential for the Holy Spirit to bring new awareness.

This type of questioning is utilized less often, yet I have found it to be one of the most effective. Therefore, I want to go deeper into its meaning. This method is sometimes called the “Five Whys.”⁶ After each explanation given, the director responds with another “why” again: Why do you think such and such?; Why do you feel such and such? or; Why does that bother you? The whys are continually asked until the directee arrives at the core insight. The whys are always asked with gentleness and humility. If at any point the directee begins to show signs of distress, the questioning stops.

To give an example, I used this line of questioning with a directee who was a pastor.⁷ He shared that he was feeling unmotivated and tired. He didn’t like going to his church office because someone might need to talk with him, and he just didn’t have anything more to give.

I asked him if I could explore this with him, and when he said yes, I said, “*Why* do you think you are so unmotivated and tired right now?”

“I don’t know for sure. Maybe I just need a vacation or a sabbatical. I’ve been doing this for 12 years, and I’m not getting anywhere with this church.”

“*Why* does it matter to you to get somewhere with this church?”

“Well, we’re supposed to bear fruit and grow, right? I feel pressure during the monthly gatherings with other area pastors. They ask me about my church. What do I say? We aren’t growing. We’re actually declining. We’re going nowhere.”

“*Why* do you feel pressure from the pastors?”

“I feel pressure to succeed. And I’m not. I feel like a complete failure. This just wears me down.”

“*Why* do you feel like a complete failure?”

“When I accepted God’s call to pastor, I thought if I prayed and followed Jesus as faithfully as I could, and loved the people in the church, that God would bless my work, and it hasn’t happened.”

“*Why* does it matter to you that God bless your work?”

“It’s a sign of God’s favor, right? If you’re following God and doing everything you’re supposed to do, then people will come to church and they will grow in faith.”

“*Why* do you need a sign of God’s favor?”

“Because when you get one, then you know you matter to God. I feel abandoned and unimportant to God. I feel like God has dumped me here in this town and left me to struggle.”

By asking a series of “why” questions the pastor went from tiredness and frustration about his church to an awareness that he felt abandoned by God, because he hadn’t experienced any signs of God’s blessing. At this point there are various options I could choose from that require other kinds of questions. For instance, is the pastor burnt out because of an unhealthy lifestyle and unbalanced ministry expectations, so it appears that God isn’t present? Or is God leading him to a new understanding of faith and a deeper awareness of his own inner needs. Can he love God when God seems absent? Regardless of which avenue of questions I might pursue next, the important point is that the directee opened the door to something previously kept vague and unspoken. Used with the Holy Spirit, “why” questions help people discover the underlying issue in a difficult situation.

- The Five Whys: Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

4. *Discerning the deeply stuck places: Unpacking questions*

Usually when people share the stories of their lives and spiritual journeys there are one or two events that connect deeply to what is going on with their relationship with God. These stories open up places in their lives that have large spiritual implications.

These stories can be as insignificant as a small boy breaking a rule or as huge as a car accident in which someone died. They are difficult to discern on our own effort, but with the input of the Holy Spirit it is possible to hear something we might normally miss. I listen very carefully to the whole story, and I listen for the event that seems to bear more weight than others. It is a catalytic moment in their lives. When I hear one of those I will often ask the directee to go back and “tell me more” about what happened. This can be an event of grace or one of darkness.

Once a directee began by telling me she had never experienced God in her entire life. So, I asked her to tell me her life story. While telling the story, she briefly shared a strange experience she had as a small girl at the age of 7 or 8 while observing a flower in a meadow. When she finished, I asked her to go back and tell me more about that experience. We spent ten minutes or more on a story she had previously mentioned in a few seconds. I kept asking her questions about it until it became real to her again, rather than a half-forgotten moment in her past. She had had, in fact, a mystical experience of God’s glory. And as a little girl she had understood that it was a very personal revelation of God to her. But it was buried in the present difficulties of her adult life. Rediscovering that story, led her to other stories of times when she experienced God through people and through God’s unusual provision.

These are unpacking types of questions. The director or mentor brings to life something tucked away and forgotten. These questions are like circling the scent of the Spirit and looking for a way to let in Christ’s light or let out darkness. Sometimes, this type of focused questioning on an event can lead to inner healing prayer or a profound awareness.

- Can we go back to “such and such”? Tell me more about it. What do you see? What do you smell? What are you feeling? Where are you standing? Are you alone? What’s going through your head? Is anyone else there?

None of the above types of questions can be forced. If a person tells me, “I don’t want to talk about it,” we don’t talk about it. I waited once a whole year before a directee brought up again a particularly difficult situation. When she brought it up, she was ready to bring it into the light. So what is the etiquette for question-asking in spiritual direction?

Q-Etiquette

Etiquette is not a popular concept. In much of Western culture etiquette is often perceived as a series of rules and prescribed behaviors that stifle natural, authentic interactions between persons. However, etiquette is more than suggested guidelines for how to behave at meals. In spiritual direction, etiquette is simply the way of honoring someone by treating them with dignity and care. These are a few guidelines for question-asking etiquette for the director or mentor.

1. Ask questions that focus on the person, not your perceptions. It’s not about you. Avoid lengthy stories about yourself and avoid explanations about your views, experiences, or theology. Withhold any response or question until you have fully listened.
2. Keep the questions open, not closed. Questions that get a “yes” or “no” answer or lead the directee to a specific conclusion are closed questions. Open questions give the directee opportunities to honestly share whatever is going on within her or him.
3. Connect them to Christ, not you. Be careful to keep a neutral, grace-filled and hospitable stance. Some people with attachment disorders or victim problems will try to stay connected to you and needing you rather than focusing on their spiritual development. They may ask you questions in order to feed your ego and to make you their “rescuer and savior.”
4. Always get permission to go deeper. “Do you mind if I go a little deeper? May I ask you a follow-up question? May I push back on that a little bit?”

5. It's a stroll, not a sprint. Pace and match the person's emotional state and stamina. If the person is depressed or tired or anxious, trying to have her or him share more is not helpful. Simply be present to what they are able to bring.

Asking spiritual questions in spiritual direction honors the person we are hosting. It says that we want to know more. We care. We believe there is a rich, beautiful spiritual world in them to explore. It says that darkness isn't the end, and light can always be found. It says that we are listening, and we will go with them wherever the Holy Spirit leads.

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves ...
Don't search for the answers,
which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps then, someday far in the future,
you will gradually, without even noticing it,
live your way into the answer.
Rainer Maria Rilke⁸

¹ The focus of spiritual direction is a person's relationship to God. The focus of counseling or therapy is a person's relationship to himself-herself and to others. The focus of discipling is on a person's relationship to Christ in the context of a church's theology and spiritual traditions.

² Spiritual direction is a profession, a ministry, a calling for which people usually spend 2-3 years preparing. Well-trained directors are also supervised. Training centers for spiritual direction can be found at the Spiritual Directors International website. Spiritual mentoring, on the other hand, involves an experienced guide investing in the lives of individuals. Spiritual mentors are spiritually mature, astute, spiritually directed themselves, and committed to listening to and supporting the spiritual journey of others. Such persons as Leighton Ford and his *Spiritual Mentoring Communities* are committed to enhancing the spiritual lives of kingdom-seeking leaders through spiritual mentoring. You can find more information at <http://www.leightonfordministries.org/> accessed 03/29/08.

³ All Scripture texts are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁴ I usually tell people not to use Bible persons because they often think that there is something “holier” with using a bible personality rather than sharing someone who impacted them in their life journey.

⁵ Several good books guide the layperson in understanding Ignatian spirituality: Margaret Silf (2007), *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality*. Loyola Press, and; Joseph Tetlow (2008), *Making Choices in Christ: The Foundation of Ignatian Spirituality*. Loyola Pres.

⁶ “The Five Whys” originally from R. Ross, cited by: [P. Senge](#), 1994. Now the “Five Whys” are found on various websites without notation used as tool for self improvement or business management.

⁷ Any stories used in this article are representations of various conversations. Many, many details were changed.

⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke: Letter Four to Mr. Kappus written Worpswede, near Bremen on July 16, 1903