Asking each other the right questions

By Ryan Dueck
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There's a scene in David Adams Richards's novel *Principles to Live By* where John Delano, a washed-up police officer trying to get back in the game, is asked by a colleague why he doesn't have much use for school. Delano responds thus:

> Oh, I don't know—let's just say that those who know all the answers are often the ones never able to ask the right questions.

A simple enough statement, right? But a profound and instructive one. At least so it seems to me. As someone who has spent nearly ten years blogging and interacting online with people on both ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum, as someone who has been a pastor for nearly eight years and regularly finds himself in dialogue with people holding views that cross the theological spectrum, this statement rings true.

Fundamentalisms come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, don't they? The content of the answers that are "known" obviously differs, often profoundly. But the tenacity with which they are held is the same, as is the fierce resistance to one's ideological enemies. Both sides imagine that they alone see clearly. Both imagine that they alone have truth and justice and morality on their side. And both, as David Adams Richards's character says, are often unable to ask the kinds of questions that might steer things into more productive terrain.

There are many reasons that we often don't ask the right questions. The echo chamber of the Internet makes it increasingly easy to simply self-select our sources and turn our social media feeds or daily news browsing into little more than a steady parade of voices that reinforce what we already think or are favorably disposed toward. Living online was supposed to broaden our perspectives with all the easily accessible information out there. But it hasn't really worked that way. We can't cope with the sheer volume of content out there, so we just stick to familiar pastures for our online grazing.

We don’t ask the right questions because it’s destabilizing to think that we might not be right about all the things that we think we’re right about. Human psychology cannot tolerate all that much ambiguity. We like to have some things settled, particularly things we think are important—things like what life means and how we are supposed to live and what we can hope for. And our identities are inextricably linked with and propped up by our ideas about the world. If you pulled out the “Christian” part of who I understand myself to be, what would be left? What would ground my ethics? What community would I look to in order to explain my history or my imagined future? We are, in many ways, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

We don’t ask the right questions because the right questions are hard to ask. It’s far easier to trade in the binary simplicities of darkness/light, good/evil, black/white than it is to try to actually understand those who don’t share our views and whose views we find repellent. Simple categories provide (mostly imagined) security. They provide ongoing fortification for our own identities and beliefs, and they have the happy consequence of consigning our enemies to the outer darkness. They don’t agree with us, after all. They *must* be stupid, evil, disordered, ____phobic, indoctrinated, radicalized. Or, even worse, intolerant! These epithets give us convenient ways to write people off and to separate ourselves from them.

For these reasons and others, knowing it all is far easier and far safer. Anyone can retreat behind a wall of illusory certainty and lob bombs at their enemies. Asking good questions, trying to understand why people believe what they do, trying to get behind the values and concerns that motivate people’s embrace of answers that don’t look like my own, trying to always remind myself that human beings are far more complex and beautiful than the ideas they espouse or (sometimes) hide behind—these are far harder things to do. And far more necessary,

What might some of these “right questions” be? Well, for starters, we might ask two crucial questions when it comes to any contested issue:

- What is it in your own position that gives you trouble?
- What is it in the position of the other that you are attracted to?

These two questions sound really simple, but they’re actually remarkably difficult. They ask us to simultaneously separate ourselves from our own views a bit and enter into the experience and self-understanding of people we may not like and

whose views we don’t admire. But imagine if both sides of any polarizing conflict were to actually do this. American freedom fighter/Islamic jihadi; pro-choice advocate/pro-life defender; Republican/Democrat; Israeli/Palestinian; gay-rights activist/defender of traditional sexuality; Calvinist/Anabaptist; Wall Street banker/ socialist… What possibilities might be opened up if people on either side of these often ferocious debates were to actually, seriously ask the two questions above?

There is no shortage of arenas within which to ask the right questions. And these questions wouldn’t in and of themselves resolve any of these conflicts. But maybe, at the very least, they could start us on a path toward being more determined to look at and speak to one another not as generic representatives of “the other side” or “wrong thinkers” but as human beings with hopes and fears and anxieties and insecurities and longings that are not so very different from our own.

Asking the right questions will never be easy. But I’m hopeful that if we stubbornly keep asking them, they will—gradually, fitfully, even painfully—come to be something like habitual. As with muscle memory, we will begin to instinctively resist barricading ourselves behind our rightness and open ourselves to the experiences and understandings of the other, even when we are convinced the other is wrong. It sounds possible, at any rate. And if we are to live peacefully together in midst of difference—as our 21st-century globalized world increasingly demands that we must—we have to try.

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