

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

A raised eyebrow? A quizzical expression? This is my favorite hypothesis for the shape of a question mark. Whether true or not, it's intriguing. I would have proposed the shape of the ear in a theory that would have involved listening as integral to asking a question, but I couldn't find support for the idea. A week of questions and moments of a profound lack of questions led me to this research. It began with children, as good thinking often does.

• Questions Help Us Think Deeper, Broader, Wider

During a brief visit to her early childhood classroom, Holly Murdoch talked about the children and the work they do together. "I love it how we can push children's thinking here. We do it by asking questions." There were children engaged in building a block castle nearby, so I asked Holly for examples: "I might ask, 'What else might be in the castle?' 'How would people get from this tower to that room?' 'How would the people who live in the castle get their food?' 'Why do you think that?'" These questions help children consider their ideas and go deeper in their thinking.

• Questions Enable Us to Reveal Ourselves and Connect with Others in Profound Ways

An orange hat filled with questions awaited us at a business dinner. Mike Brown of The Brainzooming Group had planned this experience to help a group of almost strangers get to know each other in a deeper way.

His favorite questions (because they are things he would want to know about other people) were these:

- If you could share one thing with your 20-year-old self, what would it be?
- What is the best word of encouragement you ever received and who was it from?
- What has led you to be sitting at this table tonight?
- When did you realize in life that you would be doing what you're doing right now?
- What is the life lesson you've learned that you most frequently pass along to others?

Mike shared: "While some questions might generate shorter answers, I wanted even the short answers to provide a rich opportunity for self-revelation. Ultimately, we try to design Brainzooming questions that are open (they give people room to express ideas), neutral (they don't pre-suppose answers), and lean (they are brief and clear)."

These questions turned strangers into a supportive, intentional, committed, connected team of people before dinner. The questions were well-chosen and created the opportunity for responses that were offered with great authenticity and vulnerability. Everything changed.

• Questions Open Pathways to Discovery

And then I was sitting on the airplane, window seat (mistake) next to a couple slogging through a quagmire of discontent. Their conversation, which I could not help but hear, was filled with statements, rather than questions, and they circled around each other sucking me into their unhappiness:

"You always talk about me being happy, but your unhappiness shows."

"If I asked you, you wouldn't say."

"I can't see why... "

"If I were you, this is what I would do."

See, no questions. Deadends. Periods. Some thoughts about questions, but not the opportunity for learning that a question presents. And then they kissed, so perhaps there was more to their communication than my eavesdropping could discern!

• Questions Require Presence and Rhythm

In the airport restaurant, the waiter greeted each new customer:

"Hi, my name is Ernie. I'll take care of you today. Have you been here before?" This flow was exactly the same for each diner in

this very small space, so the value of a question was lost in its repetition. Even a loop of maybe seven questions would have humanized the patter. There was no investment in responding, because there was no pause for a response and no perceived interest.

There is a beauty to the shape of the question mark, just as there is an art to framing great questions. Good questions come from focused listening, from being present. A good question moves thinking and understanding. A good question creates intimacy. Each person, each situation requires focus and intent for the questions to bubble up.

- **The Answers to Good Questions Cannot Be Predicted**

Outdoors at the school, the children were planting seeds, lots of them. There were many opened packets and quite a bit of enthusiasm for making use of the sunny winter day. I watched with delight as children chose packets or seeds sprinkled on the table and carefully planted them in the box nearby. We asked the children and each other, “What will happen to the seed you have planted?” “What kind of seed was that, anyway?” And the best part was that there is a mystery to this question. Many ideas, but no real answers. We must wait, take care, and see.

- **Finally**

Here’s the closer, a most excellent question, from Jonah (age 6):

“Gramby, do you think three carrots is enough for the Easter Bunny?”



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