

Chapter 28: Deeply Grounded Questions, And Just Listening

In chapter 27, I foreshadowed that I would use this chapter to introduce three appreciative questions, each one designed to take our conversations in deep and important directions. All three are variations on a deceptively simple and profound question: “Is there anything you would like to add?” I’ll introduce the questions in the order in which I encountered them. See if any of them resonate with you. Then I’ll ponder whether we could be better listeners by just listening.

The first question couldn’t be simpler or more elegant: “Anything else?” George Kinder used that question in demonstrating empathic listening during his two-day Seven Stages of Money Maturity™ workshop, which I took in July 1999. Subsequently, he and Susan Galvan made “Anything else?” the touchstone question in the Kinder Institute for Life Planning’s training for financial life planners. I have come to know this question well, in experiencing that training and subsequently becoming a trainer and mentor in the Institute. We train planners to listen spaciously to responses to questions such as “Why are you here today?” and “What would you like to be saying about our work together, in twelve months?” By repeating “Anything else?” until the client indicates “No, that’s all,” what transpires is akin to peeling an onion: more and more is revealed. In asking this question, less is more. Nothing needs to be added. And when asked with heartfelt intentionality, it never sounds contrived. I’ve increased my use of “Anything else?” lately, and I am always struck by its economy and its power. Thank you, George.

The second question—“Is there anything else you would like to tell me?”—is used by Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, when she teaches medical students and residents. By learning to ask that question calmly, while being fully attentive to the patient, and without reaching for the door or the prescription pad, the physician allows the patient to explore and reveal signs, symptoms, hopes, despair, and anything else that’s in there. Her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, is a compassionate

and moving account of what it means to be a physician, a patient, a person. So, too, is its sequel, *My Grandfather's Blessings*.

The third question, and the one I've encountered most recently, is rather similar to Dr. Remen's question, "Is there anything else you would like to tell me?" However, it has a subtle difference that worked beautifully when I heard it. The question is, "Is there anything that I haven't asked you ... that you would like to say?" Jody, my part-time consulting partner and full-time wife, recently asked this question of her client after they had fully discussed several major aims of the project on which Jody subsequently delivered breakthrough results. The answer to that question came swiftly, pointing her in a direction that planted itself firmly in her mind, and which served as a beacon for the ensuing work. My wife treasures clarity, and she asks, "Is there anything that I haven't asked you ... that you would like to say?"—among other questions—to help clients and herself gain clarity.

Each of these three great questions is commendably simple and brief. Each only works its magic, however, if the listener can convey that (a) she really wants to know the answer, and (b) she doesn't have anywhere else to be.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that with deeply grounded listening, less is more. After writing that chapter, I revisited *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and opened the book at random to a brief chapter called "Just Listen." Dr. Remen's words are eloquent and powerful. I invite you just to listen.

Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention ... [T]here's no need to do anything but receive them ... Listen to what they're saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it ... It has taken me a long time to believe in the power of simply saying, "I'm so sorry," when someone is in pain. And meaning it.

Dr. Rumen cautions us to let the person tell her story without interruption, without sharing your own story, and without trying to produce a wise response. She then gives us a profound maxim about just listening. "A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well intentioned words."

Whenever I read her writing, I feel a calm spaciousness come over me. At the same time, I am seized with the mad desire to rush out and find someone who wants to talk, and listen the heck out of them—to just listen. The quoted passage has deeply grounded me so that I can more effectively carry out the sacred job of listening.

PRACTICE

1. Reflect on these questions:
 - How comfortable are you just listening? What happens, within you and in the situation, when you just listen? Conversely, what happens when you don't?
 - Who do you know who is good at just listening? What happens when the person has listened to you in that way? What lessons can you draw from this, for your own listening practice?
2. This week, practice just listening without the intention to (a) fix the person or the situation, (b) make the person feel better, or (c) dispel your own discomfort with what is being said. Observe what happens.
3. Consider the three questions introduced in this chapter:
 - Anything else?
 - Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
 - Is there anything I haven't asked you ... that you would like to say?

This week, be alert to opportunities to experiment with asking one or more of these questions, or any variations that seem fitting. See where it leads.