

GIVING UP THE WRONG QUESTION

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When I was in the fourth grade, my parents signed me up for weekly accordion lessons. They did this without asking if I had the slightest interest in, what was to me, such an old fashioned, silly instrument. They saw this as a wonderful opportunity to have a musical son in the tradition of their idol, Lawrence Welk. Six months later, I went to the last lesson and without realizing it put the thing on upside down! The poor instructor almost passed out and could hardly contain his frustration. Perhaps this is how passive aggressive behavior is born, as little acts of rebellion from an unrecognized soul.

By the time I got to the sixth grade music began to interest me. I wanted to learn how to play the guitar. My idols were Elvis, Ricky Nelson, Chuck Berry, and Jerry Lee Lewis. In response, my father purchased a trumpet. It was made very clear that the purchase was a sacrifice so I had better appreciate it. In order to not disappoint them, I hid my displeasure. And I tried to want to learn to play. I wasn't much better at the trumpet than the accordion.

My parents and I were simply out of step. They tried. I tried. But the only time we were in step was when I was not myself. It was not that they didn't care. It was that we were not well synchronized or resonant; as in a trumpet instead of a guitar. They lived their lives doing a minuet. I was born looking for some sort of sacred tribal dance. There is nothing wrong with either. It is just that they are very different. And in my family, great energy went into squelching any deviation from the expected norm.

Love is often a confusing experience when it is combined with lack of resonance. This occurs when parents love their children without understanding or accepting the child's unique purpose in life. For example, in my family I was often told, "You are wonderful.... We love you." And in fact, my parents did love me from the depths of their own wounded hearts. But because of those wounds, they also communicated another set of messages: "Be a good boy.... Make us proud of you... Don't be nasty..." My father had two, often repeated, mottoes: "Big boys don't cry," and "Only dogs get mad." It was clear that the only crowd I was supposed to follow was them! When I behaved as required there was harmony in the house and everyone was happy. However, when the real me showed up, when I peeked

out from inside the 'good little boy', I was often shamed and encouraged to go back into hiding.

A similar process is played out in virtually every family. It is at the core of problems with self-esteem. From a very early age children make a decision to be at peace with the environment and in conflict with the True Self or more accurately the Soul. Children sacrifice their emerging self-understanding to gain acceptance from the environment. They give up who they are and become who the environment wants them to be. The ability to listen externally to what the environment wants becomes a priority while listening to one's own inner wisdom becomes secondary.

An inner conflict is substituted for an external one. This inner conflict has a dual nature. First, the person tries to be who others want him or her to be. And second, the person ignores who he or she truly is. Low self-esteem is the acceptance of the environment's view of the Self rather than one's own. Conflict with the environment is avoided as individuals try to conform by bending twisting and altering original gifts into the ones that parenting persons accept. As a result, the individual is faced with the lingering question, "What is wrong with me?"

When families are out of step, a lack of empathy for who the child truly is as a unique, separate human being prevails. Too often, parents operate primarily from a basis of their own plans, dreams, needs or expectations. Getting 'in step' for families requires that parents let go of their fantasies for their child and learn to resonate with the child's soul so that the child can live his or her own dreams. A parent's role is less about shaping children's behavior, character or moral values and more about discovering who a particular child is and supporting the expression of his or her particular gifts and qualities. The role of a parent is enabling a child to listen to his or her own unique inner callings. When I speak to parent groups about child raising I stress that parents need to "Love the child you have not the one you want. Love the piano player you have not the baseball player of your dreams."

I grew up with a sense that these parents loved me but they did not want me to be me. I wondered, "What is wrong with me?" Two basic thoughts arose from this. First, "Every time I want something, I don't quite get it. So I guess I want the wrong things. What is wrong with me?" And secondly, "When I act the way I want to act rather than the way they want me to act, they become upset. What is wrong with me?" I did not want my parents upset and unhappy so whenever

possible I acted as they required. I felt I had better parents than most of my friends. But when I was me in front of them, I got emotionally swatted. As a child, it simply did not occur to me that the problem was in the environment or that I needed to listen to myself as much as to them. To preserve peace in the family and assure myself of their love, I tried to become what they wanted me to be. Often unable to do that very well, I wondered, “What is wrong with me?”

This lack of resonance is not only present in the family. School was impossible for me and drastically complicated the problem. The best teachers thought of me as polite but dull. The rest thought of me as passive and dumb. I had a learning disability and was probably dyslexic. In the 1950's the term dyslexia was unheard of, so students were labeled as ‘thick,’ ‘dense,’ ‘absent minded,’ or ‘day dreamer.’ On those rare occasions when my parents met with school officials they often left wondering what was wrong with them since they could not make me concentrate, focus and behave according to expectations. I was regularly yelled at, cajoled and hounded both at home and school for not paying attention. It did not work very well. I kept wondering, “What is wrong with me?”

By the first or second grade I was no longer aware of what I was hiding but I was very sure what I was hiding from. I was a ‘day

dreamer' who much preferred my own fantasy life to the scribbling on a distant blackboard of a teacher whom I neither liked nor trusted.

Fortunately, there are also experiences in life in which gifts can be rediscovered. For me, this occurred through Boy Scouts and then a church youth group. From the ages of eleven to seventeen I was involved in Boy Scouting. I received feed back from other kids and adults who seemed to appreciate me. Over the course of my involvement, several adult leaders contributed greatly to my growth and the reemergence of my talents. Scouting was a pastime that my parents completely supported and did everything in their power to facilitate. Fortunately, we were in step on this one. Our troop camped the third weekend of every month for over five years. It is no accident that I thrived in a group in which the natural world played such a prominent role.

As I reluctantly out grew Boy Scouts, I became involved in a church youth group. Again I was appreciated and affirmed so that talents, passions and callings could emerge. While there was a great deal of religion and little spirituality here, it is also no accident that this time I thrived in a group that was focused on the search for meaning and the experience of the Eternal in life.

These experiences pointed me back to my Soul. Souls come into the world with unique gifts and purposes. And when the environment responds positively, the Soul can be released from the need to hide quite so deeply and be pointed toward expression of its true nature.

Continuing on this path, I majored in religion in college and attended seminary. The seminary experience and then a brief time as an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church was initially a great adventure which later turned into a disaster. This choice was a socially acceptable way to continue to explore my uniqueness, purpose and interest in spiritual matters. What is important about this is that it was an 'approximation' of my long hidden, gradually emerging, gifts for spirituality. It was an attempt to recover my gifts and express them in a socially acceptable way.

It was a disaster because although I loved the study of religion I was ill prepared to be a clergyman. I was politically inept, naïve and inexperienced. It was a repetition of being totally out of step.

Many people find a socially acceptable approximation of what their Soul wants them to do in life. The Soul keeps pushing us to recover our uniqueness while our need for social acceptance keeps

us settling for approximations. Blending what the Soul calls us to with what is acceptable to the environment, we often arrive at a compromise. Some of these compromises work well over a lifetime and others collapse. When a compromise collapses there can be great emotional turmoil. But even when this occurs there is great worth in these compromises and approximations. They keep us headed in the right direction. But over time they often aren't enough.

In summary, I could go on with similar stories that illustrate the many ways I learned to ask the question, "What is wrong with me?" These stories are meant to give flesh to principles that can be generalized. Each infant, born in the image of God, is born with its own unique talents, gifts and qualities. Infants, born in the image of God, are so perfect when they are born that it is impossible to love one as much as it deserves to be loved. Consequently, people become parents without having been loved as much as they deserve. They have their own wounds, which make them non-resonant or out of step with their own children. Children universally blame themselves for the non-resonance. They give up their uniqueness to appease their parents, establish harmony and gain acceptance. Non-resonance raises the virtually universal question, "What is wrong with me?" When a child's soul has a purpose in this incarnation that is in

conflict with parental experience, expectations and abilities the non-resonance dominates the child's experience. Self-esteem issues typical of average families like my own are magnified exponentially when physical violence, sexual abuse and malevolence play a role in the family. When the broader environment is non-resonant, a child not only hides gifts but also can lose sight of them. However, when the environment does resonate gifts can be rediscovered. The Soul keeps leading the person back to his or her gifts and purpose in life. Sometimes a person tries to find a way to express this purpose but ends up with only a compromise that may or may not last.

In many ways the adult's journey throughout life is in the recovery of gifts abandoned in childhood. As gifts are rediscovered and accepted as real, one begins to stop asking, "What is wrong with me?"

Giving up the question can be a surprisingly difficult task. Change, even positive change, upsets the balance of life. The following strategies can be helpful in this process.

First, one has to give up the often deeply cherished fantasy that eventually acceptance will be found. The fantasy is that someone, preferably a parenting figure, will answer the question and true approval will at last be granted. Having been given the answer, we

will finally understand what is wrong and change ourselves. No matter how critical or damning the answer, many people would welcome it, if it lead to fulfilling the fantasy.

“Well, Son, the problem is your attitude. You need to be more optimistic and friendly. Who wants to be with an old sour puss like you?” “It is your style. You need to match your colors better.” “Have you ever thought of plastic surgery?” The problem is that it never happens. The fantasy is never fulfilled. When one demand is met, others emerge. “The plastic surgery helped but now you need to learn better English.” Each person needs to grieve the death of this fantasy. The grief is, at times, deep and painful. It can often feel like the ‘dark night of the soul’ when illusions of the past are faced and surrendered.

Second, the individual needs to begin to focus inwardly, listening for the whisperings of the Soul as it quietly reminds the person of who he or she truly is. Especially initially, this is easier said than done. After a lifetime of being ignored or only partially listened to, the inner voice reemerges tentatively. There is often a period of time when it seems as though there is nothing coming. Consequently there is a need to embrace the unknown until clarity emerges. People can feel like they are wandering in a fog or that there is no meaning in

their lives. A combination of patience and experimenting with a variety of new activities is necessary. Some sort of meditation training is usually very helpful at this point. The experience of hearing the faint whisperings of the Soul is the best healing for the grief that arises when one lets go of the false dream.

Third, as one listens carefully, one learns to answer the question "What is wrong with me?" with one word, "*Nothing.*" The important insight develops that there is a great deal of difference between being different and being wrong. This can bring great freedom from inner bondage created by the question. Exploring one's inner purposes and callings is a positive experience but others may react negatively. The conflict does not mean anything is wrong.

Fourth, a person has to learn to accept the accompanying joy and struggle. The joy arises as one begins to live in concord with one's inner self. Sometimes old passions are rediscovered and taken up again with new motivation and enthusiasm. Many adults rediscover music, writing or painting that they had briefly loved and then abandoned in childhood. Struggles emerge because this often involves disruptions in long held patterns, activities and relationships. Sometimes divorces occur, vocations change or friendships wane.

Major disruptions are not always necessary but when they occur they are often painful.

Finally, it is important to find some sort of a spiritual community within which one can find support. We can't do it alone. It helps to have a group that respects both the minute and tribal dance. Often, spiritual groups contain many people who are equally out of step with the rest of the world but who honor individual uniqueness.

A concluding story illustrates the process of listening to one's inner voice. I was feeling particularly joyful one evening while driving home from a gathering of a spiritual community. I put a collection of my favorite spiritual music in the tape player and began singing energetically with the music. As is common on this particular road, the traffic slowed to a crawl. I realized that anyone watching me from another car would think me quite strange. I immediately silenced myself and turned the music down. In effect I was saying, "Ah yes, harmony with the world. I don't want to be thought strange. Hide before they see you." As I reached to shut the tape off I caught myself. Quickly recovering, I turned the tape back up and returned to singing, in harmony with my Soul though not at all with the music.

