

conversations, especially among those under thirty, though it is certainly not confined to Millennials.

Some traditional grammarians may lament the spread of this particular question, complaining perhaps about the seeming superfluity of “wait.” Others might go further and point to it as just more proof of the degradation of the English language and the decline of civilization. But haters are going to hate, as they say, and in this case the skeptics are wrong, because “Wait, what?” is a truly great question. Indeed, this deceptively simple question is essential, if not profound, once you fully appreciate how it can be used.

To begin, “Wait, what?” is remarkably flexible, which might explain some of its popularity. The question can be asked in a variety of ways, depending on what the occasion demands. A plain-spoken “Wait, what?” for example, can simply be a way to ask a person to repeat what she said and to elaborate a bit, because the assertion or suggestion was surprising and slightly hard to believe. An elongated “wait” followed by a short but emphasized “what” is a good way to indicate genuine incredulity. It’s a bit like asking, politely, “Did you really just say that?” or “Are you *kidding*?” The reverse formulation, featuring a

short “wait” followed by an elongated “what” can be used when someone has asked you to do something, and it can effectively convey suspicion and skepticism about the motives behind the request or downright opposition to what is being asked of you.

The last formulation is the way my kids most often pose the question in our conversations. Typically, they ask this question when I get to the point in a conversation where I’m suggesting that they do a chore or two. From their perspective, they hear me saying something like, “Blah, blah, blah, and then I’d like you to clean your room.” And at that precise moment, the question inevitably comes: “Wait, whaaat? Did you say clean? Our rooms?”

“Wait, what?” is first on my list of essential questions because it is an effective way of asking for clarification, and clarification is the first step toward truly understanding something—whether it is an idea, an opinion, a belief, or a business proposal. (It’s probably not a good idea to ask this question in response to a marriage proposal. Just saying.)

The “wait” that precedes the “what” could be seen as just a useless rhetorical tic. But I think it’s crucial because it reminds you (and others) to slow down to make sure you truly understand. Too often

we fail to pause for clarification, thinking that we understand something before we do. In doing so, we miss the opportunity to grasp the full significance of an idea, an assertion, or an event. Asking “Wait, what?” is a good way to capture, rather than miss, those opportunities.

To give an example, years ago Katie and I, along with a couple of friends, traveled to Norway to hike and kayak. While there, we met up with another old friend who was working as a bush pilot, taking passengers on sightseeing trips and to remote camping areas. When he heard we were planning to hike near a particular fjord the next day, he asked if we could take one of his clients with us, a nineteen-year old Japanese guy, who wanted to see this particular fjord. We agreed and picked him up the next day.

His English was a little spotty and our Japanese was nonexistent, so it was a fairly quiet ride. When we arrived at the fjord, our new friend immediately jumped out of the car and took an album cover out of his backpack. He then began running around to different spots, stopping occasionally to hold up the album cover and look up the fjord to a large mountain in the distance. Then he would scramble to a different spot and pause again. We all glanced at

canal, covered in green slime, checking for injuries and looking around to see if anyone had noticed. I pulled myself out of the canal, nothing injured but my pride, as several witnesses called out some words in Dutch, which roughly translated to, “That was hilarious. You ran straight into the canal!” I then had to run several miles to get home, all the while looking like Sigmund the Sea Monster, the star of a great 1970s Saturday-morning television show.

Which leads me to the second essential question: “I wonder . . . ?” Before you object, I recognize that this is, technically, not a complete question. It is instead the first half of a series of questions. “I wonder” can be paired, at the very least, with both “why” and “if.” This chapter is about these two variations on a single theme, namely the questions “I wonder why?” and “I wonder if?”

Asking “I wonder why?” allows you to remain curious about the world, which would have come in handy on my run in the Netherlands. Asking “I wonder if?” allows you to remain engaged with the world and is a way to prompt yourself to try something new. It is also the way to begin thinking about how you might improve the world, or at least your corner of it. Though distinct, these questions are also

related. It is hard to ask “I wonder why?” for example, without also eventually asking, “I wonder if?” If this all seems a little mysterious, stay tuned.

Albert Einstein, in a classic humble brag, once remarked: “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.” The first half of that statement was surely false, while the second half was undoubtedly true. Einstein was passionately curious about the world around him, both seen and unseen. “The important thing,” he observed, “is to not stop questioning. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

Curiosity begins with asking “I wonder why?” When children first encounter the world, this is the question foremost on their minds. “Why?” is their go-to question and makes up an inordinate part of their daily conversations. For whatever reason, most people, I have noticed, tend to become less curious about the world as they age. It may be that their curiosity was not sufficiently encouraged by parents or teachers, who can become weary of the “why” question. The logistics of life can also crowd out curiosity, as simply getting through the day presents its own challenges for adults. Regardless of the reason, it is the exceptional adult who has retained a child’s innate curiosity about the world around her.

If you commit to asking “I wonder why?” you can prod yourself to remain curious. Even if others get tired of hearing it or cannot answer the question, you should never stop posing it to yourself. I don’t mean that you should give up your job or spend all of your time daydreaming. I am only suggesting that you take the time to look around you—whether at the people near you or your physical surroundings—and remember to ask “I wonder why?”

This single question is the key that can unlock a wealth of stories and solve a host of mysteries, large and small. This is the question that launches discoveries and leads to remarkable insights. It is the question that scientists, from Marie Curie to Stephen Hawking, have asked about the world around them. It is the question great artists and writers have asked for centuries. To scientists and artists, not to mention great teachers and entrepreneurs, the world is filled with puzzles waiting to be solved.

You do not need to be a world-class scientist or artist to appreciate that the world contains mysteries and puzzles, or even to solve some of them. You just need to look around and ask questions. Too often, we see the world as static, failing to appreciate that what we see in front of us is the product of the past—of

least talk it through, and talk about what it would mean for our family?" So we talked it through, and then talked some more. And just two short years later, I finally came around. A bit more than nine months after that, Phebe came around as well. Katie was right. I couldn't imagine our family without Phebe. It was indeed incomplete without her.

Like the second essential question, "Couldn't we at least . . . ?" forms the core of a series of questions rather than one specific and complete question. Regardless of the variety of ways this question can be posed, at its core, asking "Couldn't we at least . . . ?" is a good way to get unstuck. It is a way to get past disagreement to form some consensus, as in, "Couldn't we at least agree?" It's also a way to get started even when you're not entirely sure where you will finish, as in: "Couldn't we at least begin?" No matter its specific form, asking questions that begin with "Couldn't we at least . . . ?" is the way to make progress.

To begin, asking "Couldn't we at least agree?" is a way to find common ground. The key to maintaining healthy and productive relationships is consensus—whether in politics, business, marriage, or friendship. Asking "Couldn't we at least agree?" especially in the midst of an argument, is a good

way to pause, step back, and look for some areas of agreement. After taking a step back and finding some consensus, you might have just what you need to take two steps forward, which is just how progress often works: one step back, two steps forward.

Seeking common ground is especially important today. The explosion of information fueled by the internet and social media should in theory help bring us into contact and engagement with ideas, facts, and beliefs that challenge our own, which in turn should help us moderate our views and keep an open mind. In reality, the opposite is happening.

Studies of social media, Facebook in particular, show that we are creating virtual gated communities, where those with like-minded views only share information that confirms their beliefs. Traditional media, meanwhile, increasingly cater to segments of the population. Conservatives watch Fox News; liberals watch MSNBC. Both groups find confirmation for their existing opinions. Our virtual worlds are becoming so segmented that we can even choose from different broadcasts of the same sporting event—one that favors the home team or one that favors the visiting team. More and more, we can choose to see only what we want to see.

This is unfortunate, and dangerous, because of a phenomenon social scientists call “group polarization.” When like-minded individuals get together, online or in real life, they tend to reinforce each other’s views. They not only increase the strength of each other’s convictions, but they often lead each other, intentionally or not, to take even more extreme positions. If you dislike the New York Yankees, for example, and you only hang around with others who are equally misguided, you are likely to become even more convinced that the Yankees are a bad and morally corrupt team. In fact, you are likely to take it a step further and begin to believe that the Yankees are an evil blight on the national pastime. I have seen this happen at Fenway Park in Boston, and, as a Yankees fan, I can tell you it’s not pretty.

Asking “Couldn’t we at least agree?” is a way to push back against polarization and extremism, because it is an invitation to find some areas of consensus. If you can find some common ground with others, especially those with different views, you are likely to see the world as a more nuanced place. At the very least, you are less likely to demonize those with whom you disagree. Take the Red Sox and Yankees again. Derek Jeter recently retired from the

the world where you believe you are the expert who can swoop in to save others. It is a lopsided approach to helping, in which the helper believes she has all of the answers, knows just what to do, and that the person or group in need has been waiting for a savior to come along.

While this is a genuine problem, we should not let the real pitfalls of the savior complex extinguish one of the most humane instincts there is—the instinct to lend a hand. The trick is to help others without believing yourself to be, or acting like you are, their savior.

All of which is to say that *how* you help matters just as much as that you *do* help, which is why it is essential to begin by asking, “How can I help?” If you start with this question, you are asking, with humility, for direction. You are recognizing that others are experts in their own lives, and you are affording them the opportunity to remain in charge, even if you are providing some help.

I recently heard a great story on *The Moth*, which underscored the importance of asking *how* you can help. *The Moth* is a radio program and podcast that features true stories, told live by people from around the world. The stories are riveting, including a recent

one from a woman in her eighties, who explained how she valued her independence. She loved the fact that she had always taken care of herself and that she could still do so into her ninth decade. And then she had a stroke.

While she was in the hospital, her neighbors in her New York City apartment building made some minor renovations to her apartment to make it easier for her to live there with a walker, which she would need after her stroke. At first she was taken aback, as she was cordial but not good friends with her neighbors. But their gesture of goodwill inspired her to recognize that some dependence on others could actually enrich her life, especially if she reciprocated. So she hung a sign on her apartment door welcoming her neighbors to come in for a chat. She then recounted how her neighbors often came by to talk and emphasized with gratitude that, when they offered to help, they always asked *how* they could help. By asking her how they could help, she explained, they were allowing her to retain her independence and dignity.

In addition to showing respect, asking how you can help is also—not surprisingly—likely to make your assistance more effective. My wife, Katie, asks

lunch for his afternoon ski lesson. I made suggestion after suggestion—tighten your boots, pull on your mittens, wear your goggles, put on your scarf. With each suggestion, he became more disagreeable, until completely exasperated, I finally asked, “Okay, this isn’t working, so maybe you can tell me how I can help you?”

To my surprise, that question made him pause. He looked around, and then he very quietly said, “I’m still hungry.” I made him another PB&J sandwich and sat with him while he ate. He was definitely hungry, but I also think he needed a mental health break. I didn’t anticipate it at the time, but by asking him to tell me what he needed, I shifted the burden to him to identify and begin to address what, exactly, was bothering him.

I have found this question very effective as a parent and when working with struggling or unhappy students. As parents (and teachers), you try to help solve problems, both big and small. Very often, you think you know what the solution is, so you offer your idea—or a whole slew of ideas. Yet sometimes offering solutions simply fuels the anxiety or stubbornness that your kids or students are feeling, just as occurred with the boy in ski school. If you

problem and letting them know you are available to help, if need be. You are showing both sympathy and empathy, which is sometimes all someone needs. Put differently, in asking how you can help, sometimes you already have.

Finally, if you ask *how* you can help, you are entering a conversation and a relationship on more equal footing. You are likely to be open, as you should be, to the possibility that the person you are offering to help will likely have something to offer you in return. After all, you are inviting them to teach you enough about their situation or their lives to enable you to help them. In this way, asking how you can help is an invitation to begin a genuine relationship, one based on the notion of reciprocity.

I came to appreciate this point when I worked as a volunteer for a few months in rural Kentucky, right after I finished at the ski school in Colorado and just before I started law school. I worked with a Catholic volunteer organization, and I thought I would be going door-to-door in Appalachia, offering whatever assistance I could. I can't completely remember what compelled me to volunteer, but I'm sure a touch of the savior complex motivated me. It's embarrassing to recollect, but I expect I believed that

he cared about, even when they were obscure—like the Takings Clause of the Constitution, which Doug considered hugely important, even though you have probably never heard of it. Doug was never worried about seeming naïve, nor was he shy about expressing his genuine curiosity. He was never afraid, in other words, to ask “I wonder why?”

Doug died of colon cancer in 2016, at the age of fifty-one. On the back of the program for his memorial service was a poem by Raymond Carver, entitled “Late Fragment.” The poem begins with what I am calling the bonus question, which is likely the most important question any of us will ever face:

*“And did you get what you wanted from this life,  
even so?”*

The “even so” at the end of the question, to me, perfectly captures the reality that pain and disappointment are inevitably a part of a full life, but also the hope that life, *even so*, offers the possibility of joy and contentment. I suspect Carver, who was dying of cancer when he wrote the poem, was thinking of his own life, which had been filled with love and heartache, failure and redemption. For Doug’s memorial service, the question reflected the bittersweet fact

that Doug had lived a remarkable and wonderful life but had died far too young.

I cannot guarantee, of course, that if you simply ask the five essential questions in this book that you will be able to answer “I did” to the bonus question. But I do think the questions will help get you there, if you ask them regularly, because they can serve as a very useful guide to living a fulfilling life. After all, the questions cover a lot of important territory:

“Wait, what?” is at the root of all understanding.

“I wonder . . . ?” is at the heart of all curiosity.

“Couldn’t we at least . . . ?” is the beginning of all progress.

“How can I help?” is at the base of all good relationships.

And “What truly matters?” helps get you to the heart of life.

If you live a life fueled by the ying and yang of curiosity and understanding; if you remain willing to try new things and to help and learn from others; and if you stay focused on what truly matters to you, I do believe you will be in a good position to say “I did” when it comes time to ask yourself the bonus question.