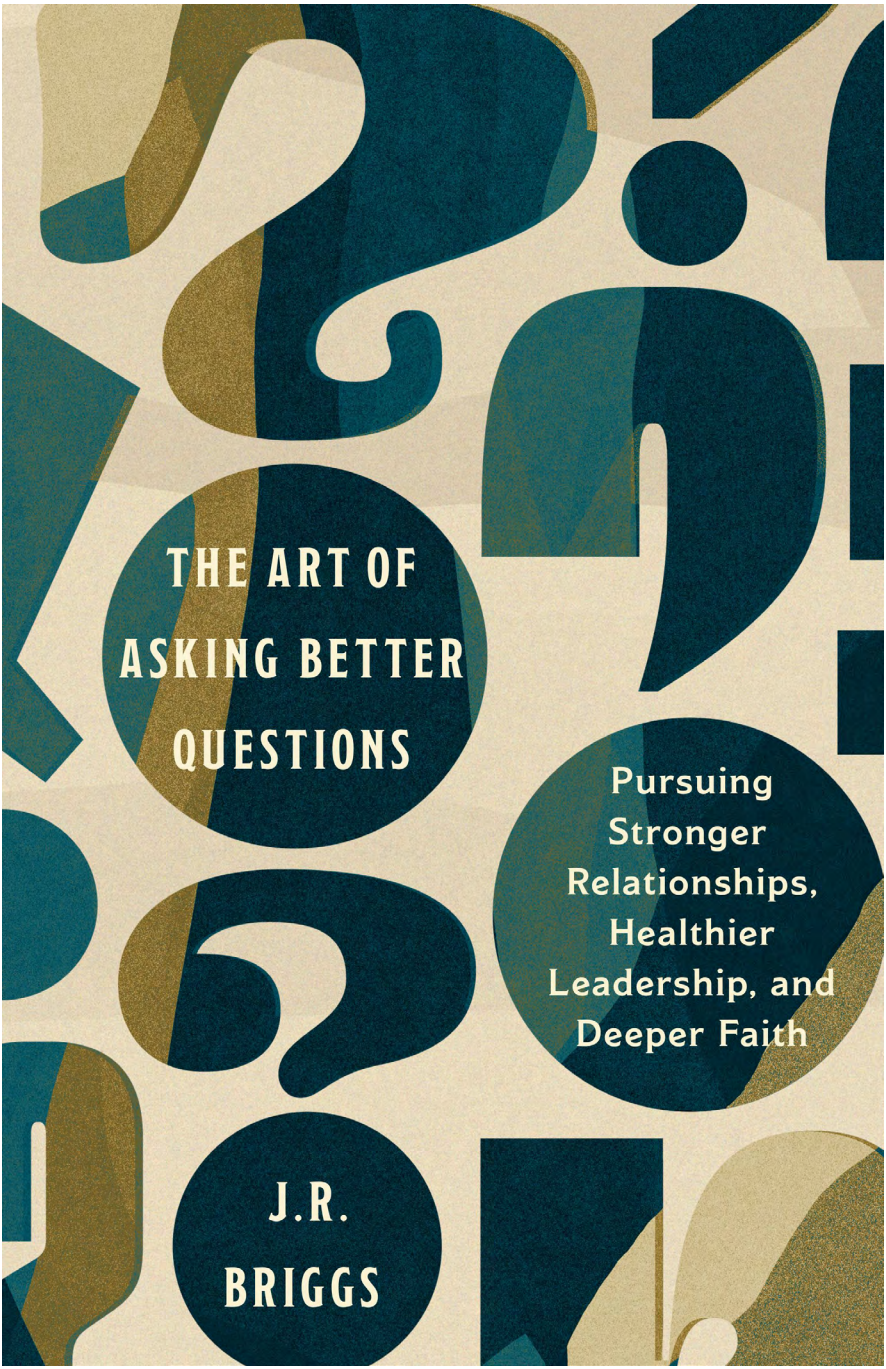

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TOO MANY ANSWERS

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WHY OUR APPROACH TO QUESTIONS NEEDS TO CHANGE

What keeps us from asking questions?

It is easier to judge the mind of a man by his questions rather than by his answers.

Pierre-Marc-Gaston de Lévis

Once you have learned how to ask questions—relevant and appropriate and substantial questions—you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

Daryl Davis has one of the most unique collections you'll ever come across: he owns more than two hundred Ku Klux Klan (KKK) robes and hoods. What makes his collection even more unique is that Davis is African American.

An accomplished jazz and blues musician, he has met with and befriended countless members of the KKK over the past thirty years. Many of them had never met or interacted with a Black man until they met Daryl. Through Davis's proactive and compassionate pursuit of

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friendship, he's helped many leave the Klan altogether. Each robe and hood he owns was given to him as a gift by each of his new friends when they decided to leave the group for good. His dream is to open a museum one day and put them on public display.

What spawns these unlikely friendships? During his first meeting with a Klansman, Davis asks numerous questions and listens patiently. But there's one he always utilizes: "Why do you hate me when you know nothing about me?" That simple yet piercing question greases the skids for deeper understanding—and helps add more robes to his collection. *What if a question is nothing more than an invitation to think?*

But if questions are so forceful, capable of changing even the perspectives and convictions of scores of KKK members to leave for good, why don't we ask more of them? Questions, it seems, aren't very sexy. At times, they can imply weakness, ignorance, insecurity, even disrespect or rebellion. They can easily be misunderstood. They can seem inefficient—an interruption, distraction, or detour from the task at hand.

In our world, which elevates accomplishing tasks over deepening relationships, it makes sense that questions aren't held in high esteem. We value pragmatism, individualism, and efficiency. Certainly, there are times we need to tell to be helpful. But if we're honest with ourselves, sometimes we just want to win an argument or gain control of a situation, conversation, or person. Other times we want to portray our intelligence. Telling is often much more efficient, and our brains like certainty.

With the omnipresence of smartphones and the immense growth of artificial intelligence, the availability of information is, quite literally, at our fingertips. And with the advancement of modern technology, we don't even need our fingers now. With a quick voice command, we're capable of retrieving information faster and more easily than at any time in human history. The deck seems to be stacked against questions. And yet, *if we are looking for better answers, should we not start by asking better questions?*

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WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A QUESTION?

What is a question? In its simplest form, it is communication that desires a response. It is the salt of communication, seasoning everyday conversations and interactions. Without salt, the food of our conversation would provide sustenance, but it would create a bland and largely transactional—and forgettable—experience. Think about how different the world would be if language was composed only of declarative statements, commands, and assertions. There would be no way to engage with another person other than to talk *at* them. Heather Holleman, professor at Penn State University and author of *The Six Conversations,* has spent years researching and speaking about what happens when we connect with others in a conversation and the common barriers that keep us from connecting. When I asked her what a question's purpose is, she offered these two clear responses: *clarity* and *engagement*.

Stories play a central role in our lives. They shape how we see the world and ourselves. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue,* wrote, "I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Questions remind us that we are in a story and that we have a part to play in it.

Recently, I was heating up some leftovers for lunch in the microwave at my coworking space. I saw a colleague I hadn't talked to in a while sitting at the table eating by himself. I was tempted to say, "What's up?" or "How ya doing?" but decided to be a bit more intentional.

"Hey, Trevor. What's giving you joy these days?" I asked.

Normally he's a light and warm guy, but he seemed heavyhearted, his gaze downcast.

"Not much actually. I've just lost two family members in the past month. It's been hard to find joy lately . . . ya know?"

I sat down, expressed my sympathy, and asked him a bit more. He said attending these two funerals back to back was difficult, but he

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admitted he'd been asking questions he normally wouldn't be asking himself. *Who am I really? What am I doing with my life, and is it making a difference? Have I told my family often enough that I love them?* Funerals have a way of forcing us to ask ourselves what story we are a part of. *Clarity.*

And questions are tools for engagement. Questions help us to lean in further, move conversations forward, and cultivate deeper relationships. Questions are a significant weight-bearing beam in each one of our meaningful relationships. Asking questions also has significant implications on romantic relationships. Maybe you've heard of the research by psychologists Arthur and Elaine Aron, who wanted to see if strangers could create close bonds simply by asking a list of thirty-six questions. Some of them included *What would constitute a perfect day for you? For what in your life do you feel most grateful? When did you last cry in front of another person?* The Arons' research was popularized by a *New York Times* article by Mandy Len Catron, who went on to marry the man who participated in the experiment with her. No, it's not a surefire way to find a partner or spouse, but the Arons were on to something important. The process of asking the right kinds of questions led to cultivating connection and intimacy.

Rhetorical questions are also about engagement. They are catalysts of recalibration, forcing us to rethink our ways. They scrutinize our presuppositions and help to dismantle assumptions (and we know what assumptions can do to you and me). Oftentimes the question *is* the answer. *Wouldn't you agree?* For a time, printers used a backward question mark at the end of a sentence to indicate a rhetorical question, but the practice eventually died out in the seventeenth century. Personally, I'd love to see that practice restored. When we're asked a rhetorical question, we're forced to wrestle with a preinstalled follow-up question: *How would I respond to that? Engagement.*

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CHILDREN AND QUESTIONS

As every parent knows, children are natural question-askers. They are hardwired with an innate sense of curiosity and an insatiable desire to learn. They are experts at imagination and play, which is often prompted and sustained by questions. They feel uninhibited to ask about anything because everything is new. They, quite literally, have fresh eyes; they are the underappreciated research and development department of the human race.

The average child asks roughly forty thousand questions between the ages of two and five. During this three-year span, a shift occurs in the kinds of questions the child asks. By two and a half, they shift from asking questions about simple facts to ones that require more complex explanations. By their fourth birthday, the lion's share of the questions demonstrates a hunger for explanations, not just facts. A recent study revealed that the average four-year-old girl in the UK asked her mother 290 questions in a typical day. Yet sadly, by middle school these children had almost completely ceased asking questions. When we enter regular schooling age, the desire to inquire wanes significantly.

So what happens to children in the years between preschool and middle school? Many teachers and learning experts lament that our current educational system doesn't encourage inquiry-based learning. In some cases, questions aren't even tolerated. The primary educational emphasis in most public schools is to teach students how to sit quietly and retain information passively. *Repeat after me. Memorize the information. Regurgitate on the test.* As our sense of permission and comfort in asking questions goes down, so does our desire to ask them.

For years children take courses in math, history, and science, but how many of us have ever taken a course on how to ask questions or become active listeners? I know a few people who hold degrees in journalism and law who tell me they have, but outside of these particular fields, it's rare. We've been taught what to think, but it's much

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more difficult to find a school that teaches how to think about question formation. Our current model of test taking always reveals aptitude when requiring students to adequately provide answers to questions on the exam. Have you ever taken a test where the answers were provided for you and your grade was based primarily on the quantity and quality of thoughtful questions you generated from those answers? Yeah, you're not alone. While many teachers have appreciated questions in the classroom for a long time, almost all questions and answers have occurred between teachers and students. Seldom is permission given to encourage learning by having students ask questions of each other. *Why is this?*

Author Neil Postman, an early and vocal critic of the traditional educational approach, wrote, "Is it not curious, then, that the most significant intellectual skill available to human beings is not taught in school? I can't resist repeating that: The most significant intellectual skill available to human beings is not taught in school." Postman also stated, "This is why students enter school as questions and leave as periods." They become experts in giving answers and novices at asking questions. Similar to Postman, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that in our society, the priority should not be on the evaluation of students' answers but on the formulation of the questions they are able to generate themselves. One could rephrase the ancient Chinese proverb to say, "Ask students a question and they inquire for a day; teach students how to ask questions and they will inquire for a lifetime."

The words *educator* and *education* come from the word *educe*, which means to draw or bring out something latent; to cause to appear, to elicit. *What if teaching was less about giving students new information and more about awakening what is already inside of them? What if it really is about educing?*

I'm not casting aspersions on well-meaning and hardworking teachers. I, too, am an educator. I regularly speak to groups of people,

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preach sermons, teach courses, and give lectures at various colleges and seminaries. But oftentimes our educational system, driven by standardized test scores, discourages even our best and most curious teachers from taking this approach. I know it's not all educational institutions, but I'm convinced: we can do better. The best teachers I've ever had—whether in an academic setting or in the classroom of life—were those who asked great questions. A seminary professor frequently asked our class, "How will this information help you to love God and love your neighbor more fully?" Years ago, a mentor looked at me and asked, "What's most important to you?" Years ago, my youth pastor asked a roomful of students, "How will you make your life count for someone beyond yourself?" Those questions have remained with me. When they had a choice between asking a question that was informative or incisive, they often chose the latter.

Not all educational approaches are built on passive consumption. The classical school and Montessori educational approaches have eschewed traditional educational frameworks, embracing instead a self-directed, student-focused model. Well-known graduates of Montessori education include former food television personality Julia Child, Google cofounders Sergey Brin and Larry Page, and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, among others. Bezos believes so strongly in this educational approach that he pledged $2 billion through his Day One Fund toward Montessori schools in underserved communities.

It is impossible to acquire effective *thinking* skills unless we first possess effective *questioning* skills. For founder Maria Montessori, it all began with a few foundational questions: Why are we sending our kids to school in the first place? What if our schools could train students to be better lifelong learners and better adapters to change by enabling them to be better questioners? And thus, how might we create such a school? Similarly, leaders at the Right Question Institute sought to do just that. They developed the Question Formulation Technique, encouraging just one change to the educational approach:

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instead of teachers asking all the questions to their students, train the teachers to push their students to ask them. "The world is so complicated," stated Nancy Cantor, former chancellor at Syracuse University, "the best thing we can do for students is to have them ask the right questions."

OBSTACLES THAT KEEP US FROM ASKING QUESTIONS

Why, then, don't we ask more questions? In my research I've discovered eight obstacles.

Obstacle one: We live in an attention-seeking age.

"Enough about me," the adage goes, "what about you? What do *you* think about me?" We live in a culture that is defined by the tireless pursuit of attention and self-absorption, and thus, we don't often think about asking questions. It just doesn't cross our minds to ask. We are tempted and sometimes even expected to compete for attention at work, in social functions, and online. We seek to suck in as much attention and approval as we can, much like an asthmatic gasping for oxygen. When we're thinking about ourselves, we hardly have any space or energy to think about others. Boston College sociologist Charles Derber calls this conversational narcissism. *How will people pay attention to what I am doing if I don't point the conversation toward me? How will I get people to notice me if I ask thoughtful questions of them?*

Young basketball fans grow up dreaming of becoming like Michael Jordan or LeBron James. Jordan was my favorite player growing up. But nobody dreams of becoming John Stockton. In fact, many may have never even heard of him. Standing at just over six feet tall and weighing 170 pounds, he was small and unimpressive by National Basketball Association (NBA) standards. (It didn't help that he wore some of the shortest shorts the league had ever seen.) Yet he finished his NBA career as a ten-time all-star and helped lead the Utah Jazz to the playoffs in each of his nineteen seasons. He played on the 1992 gold-medal-winning US Olympic team (dubbed the "Dream Team"), was

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named one of the fifty greatest players in NBA history, and was inducted into the Hall of Fame. Most impressive, though, he still holds the NBA records for most career assists and steals—by eye-popping margins. We live in a "shoot first" age that wants to talk and give answers. Asking questions is a "pass first" mentality. Shooting first may make you better, but learning to be a great passer makes the entire team better. In a world of Jordans and LeBrons, it's not cool to be a Stockton. What if we helped to change that?

Obstacle two: We think we know already.

Warren Berger, author of two wonderfully helpful books on questions and a self-described questionologist, believes that one of the biggest barriers is knowledge. We don't ask because we think we already know enough. It seems counterintuitive, doesn't it? The more you know, the less you feel the need to ask. It's called the trap of expertise, and it's easy to fall into it. *If I'm already convinced that I know the answer, why ask at all?*

We can become so sure about how the world works that we never pause and ask, *How do I know for sure?* Ray Dalio, founder of Bridgewater Associates, the world's largest hedge fund, experienced a seismic failure in his early life that he now credits as the reason for his later financial success. In that failure, he shifted from thinking, "I'm right," to asking himself, "How do I know I'm right?" That shift changed the course of his life. The more close-minded we are, the fewer questions we'll ask. Of course, we must always be mindful of our blind spots and biases. But what makes them so frustrating is that, inherent to their definition, we can't see them. The truth is we don't know as much as we think we do. Living a question-oriented life helps to keep us grounded in the reality that there are things we don't know we don't know.

Obstacle three: It's perceived as inefficient and unhelpful.

Questions are often seen as unproductive. In our fast-paced, efficient, productivity-oriented world, it feels as though someone has

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slammed on the brakes of progress when they ask a question. We favor task accomplishment over relational depth. Leaders often feel the need to act decisively and quickly and can become anxious about the perceived inefficiencies that questions might bring. Questions often force us to slow down and think. In our fast-paced world, who has much time for that?

In 1970, American futurist Alvin Toffler wrote, "The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." Many of the most important questions help us to unlearn old patterns and assumptions and require us to relearn. Growth and discovery are hardly efficient. In a world that values—even worships—efficiency, questions can feel frustratingly intrusive and annoying. *Forget questions,* we might think, *we just need answers.* But are they the answers we need?

Obstacle four: It isn't modeled well.

More is caught than taught. We struggle to know how to be a good father if we grew up in a home without one. We can't master the new software being installed across all of our systems at work if we don't receive proper training. Unfortunately, many of us spend a significant amount of time in places and situations where thoughtful question-asking is discouraged and even punished. We are often conditioned to stick to what we've learned: either give smart answers or keep our mouth shut. Sometimes it's in our family systems or schools. Other times it's in local churches or social settings. These places are called question deserts. *If we aren't in environments where questions can be asked freely and openly, how and where will we learn how to do it?* If we are surrounded by people who continually give answers and few, if any, are asking good questions, we tend to think that this is just the way it is. *How can we know how to do something well if we haven't seen it modeled well? How can we learn something if no one has explicitly taught us how to do it?*

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Obstacle five: We don't care to know what other people think.

Let's be honest: sometimes we just don't care to know the answers people might offer when we ask a question. It could be because of apathy, exhaustion, arrogance, or a lack of curiosity. Author and coach Michael Bungay Stanier writes that we love to give advice to others—we *love* it. But if we can build the simple but difficult habit of taming what he calls our Advice Monster, we can stay curious a little longer and not rush to give advice. Asking curious questions is one of the greatest ways we can tame the Advice Monster when it begins to rear its ugly head. Unfortunately, a lack of curiosity can become a breeding ground for stereotyping, rigid thinking, dogmatism, and even discrimination, as we learned in Daryl Davis's experiences with the KKK. When it becomes extreme, it can lead to hatred and violence.

Obstacle six: We're afraid of awkward interactions or what we might learn.

Questions can be risky. Asking good questions is a vulnerable act. It's a verbal admission that you don't know something. Our environment discourages asking questions in a thousand little ways. What if we don't know the answer and we look incompetent in front of others? What if people misunderstand our question and perceive us as being uncooperative or disagreeable—or worse, arrogant and disrespectful? We might ask a good first question, but what if we don't know what to say or ask next?

David Brooks noted that our world is insecure and self-protective, which equates to a world with fewer questions. In many corporate settings, leaders have had questions beaten out of them years prior, often because they learned the hard way. Asking questions can even be hazardous to one's career: raising one's hand in the conference room and asking a question is to risk being seen as uninformed, insubordinate, or both. Sometimes the only way to survive is to give intelligent answers rather than offer questions. There are often unspoken rules and expectations when it comes to leadership across cultures. In some cultural contexts it

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may be more hierarchical or deferential, as asking questions of elders or those in authority can be perceived as disrespectful or offensive.

Obstacle seven: We assume people don't want to be asked.

We erroneously assume people always want to be left alone. Sure, we all need our time away from people—some more than others—but the truth is many people are deeply lonely and long to be known. Most people want to be asked about their lives to share what matters most to them. The late Chicago journalist Studs Terkel was known for collecting oral histories. He found great joy in asking others deeply thoughtful questions, then sitting back and just listening. He said, "Listen, listen, listen, listen, and if you do, people will talk. They always talk. Why? Because no one has ever listened to them before in all their lives. Perhaps they've not ever even listened to themselves."

Obstacle eight: It can be hard work and requires deliberate practice.

Even if we've been given permission to ask questions and it's been modeled well, it doesn't mean it's easy. Neurologist John Kounios observed that the brain is always seeking ways to reduce our mental workload, and one of those ways is to simply accept things without question—or to even ignore much of what is going on around us at any given moment. We often operate on autopilot. While crafting good questions comes naturally to children, we grow out of it as adults. Few of us have developed a specific plan with actionable practices to increase the quality of our question-asking. A paltry number of employees has participated in official training to receive the proper tools and develop the necessary skills to ask great questions. *What if every organization offered formal training for their employees to ask better questions?*

BUT IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT?

Sometimes we fail to ask questions not because we don't care but because we don't have the energy. Many of us go through the day feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically depleted. Several months ago on a flight from Philadelphia to Dallas, I saw a middle-aged woman

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wearing a T-shirt that read, "Too tired to care." Sometimes we just don't possess the relational bandwidth, physical capacity, or mental willpower to ask questions. We may think, *Where will I find the time to learn to ask better questions? Do I have the energy to overcome these obstacles?* There's both bad news and good news here: Yes, asking new and better questions is extra work. It may make our brains hurt at times. But it is worth it. The payoff is incredible.

Nothing is as simple and complex for us as learning to ask great questions. Growing in our question-asking skills may seem as daunting as walking barefoot across hot coals. Despite the obstacles and the time, energy, and attention needed to grow in it, there's good news: it's not insurmountable. Asking better questions is as much about attitude as it is aptitude. You may feel it's too hard to master—let alone learn—the art of asking better questions. But you can do it. It's worth the effort to learn. The world, and your world, will be better because of it.

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