

I Question, Therefore I Am

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Translated by Genie Sakaguchi

In the first period of his life, a human being is given up entirely to questions. This circumstance is scarcely noticed. Otherwise the dispute over the “I” would long ago have taken a different course, for only an “I” can relate to the world with questions. This is doubtless what newborn children do. To exist without the “I” is to exist without questions. Our cat exists without questions. Sometimes I envy her for this. But a human being is different. He comes to himself because the world opens up to him as a space for questions.

Certainly one must distinguish between concrete questions and the philosophical “being-in-the-world” (of Maurice Merleau-Ponty). In the first months of life the child has no questions, and does not ask any. He embodies the question’s mode of being. But as soon as he can speak, thousands of questions well up out of him. When young children bombard us with questions, they do not do it mainly to receive answers, but rather to enjoy the royal act of asking questions: I question, therefore I am.

Through the teenage years, asking questions for the sake of the question has an important role in establishing self-assurance. Adolescents can react very ungraciously when the adults are constantly “hanging out” [“showing off” or “putting on”] their wisdom, as one of my daughters liked to put it. It is always much better to explore a question together rather than to supply finished facts.

To ask questions is the original, open attitude towards learning that we lose when we are overtaken by the desire for finished answers and the urge to identify and categorize things. Through the new media, the problem has reached heretofore unknown dimensions. The sociologist Sherry Turkle has noticed that her students no longer think over questions. “They search Google and find one out of many answers that they then accept.”

Questions and wonder are closely related soul impulses. The archivist in us is encouraged by the act of collecting retrievable knowledge. The more knowledge and power the archivist accumulates, the more we lose the capacity to wonder.

For the sake of success in school, children today are compelled to get out of the habit of asking questions and experiencing amazement to their hearts' desire. One expects that they learn answers by heart. Facts. Rules. Formulas. Scarcely anyone stops to think how tragic this is. Answers are the gravestones on the graves of buried questions. When the question is past, we are moving in a dead zone.

Recently someone said to me, "As soon as I believe I have understood something, ten doors open up to new questions." This was a human being for whom his school years and university studies could not drive out the true philosophical spirit. He had preserved the questioning—childlike—relationship to the world. Or, as Johannes Stüttgen put it: "A mystery gets larger when one goes into it."

After a successful schooling, the students would sum it up in this way: For many years they never stopped being amazed and had learned this above all—that learning is the most beautiful thing in the world. Other than that, the head is free and the heart is full—namely, full of questions.

