

Conversation 9 – From *Why* to *What*

Purpose: When bad news hits, can you change the question in your head from “Why?” to “What?”

Background:

“I’m sorry Mr. Raison, you have cancer.”

I heard nothing after that.

It was August 2014. I’d gone in for a routine colonoscopy having hit the magical age of 50. Outpatient screenings had become quite accessible and recommended. But at 50, I knew how these things were supposed to go. If they find anything slightly suspicious, the doctor says, “We found a small spot and have sent it out to the lab for a biopsy. We’ll not even call unless there’s a reason for a follow-up test.”

Right? No doctor ever just walks in the room, sits down, looks you in the eye, and says, “You have cancer.” That’s not how it works. Or so I thought.

It’s remarkable how many things can run through your mind in an instant. It’s an explosion of thoughts... pictures of those you love... of your hopes and dreams... of questions like, “How long do I have?” But after a few hours of settling down (often protracted and greatly worsened by Googling things like, “colon cancer survival rates”... which I would NEVER recommend), one question emerges, and often lingers:

“Why is this happening to me?”

I think it’s a legitimate question, and I think it’s natural to ask. But it’s dangerous to remain in that space. Asking “why” does nothing helpful because there is no answer. Cancer happens.

And guess what. Job loss happens. As does stress. Emotional breakdown. Pain. Death. Or how about criticism? (That can be extraordinarily painful.) Write your own list. Better yet, don’t. Instead, see if you can reframe the question (and your thinking).

The Switch:

When faced with a major life challenge or pain-point, this is perhaps one of the most powerful things a person can do. Instead of asking, “**Why is this happening?**” ask, “**What can I learn?**”

As a mentor, if you can help someone shift their response from “why” to “what,” you can change their life.

The Final Challenge:

Okay. If you have decided (or convinced your mentee) to try and do this intellectual shift the next time you experience a significant pain or stress point, you are to be applauded. Now, I hate to tell you this, but don’t stop there. Once you’ve changed the question from “Why is this happening?” to “What can I learn?”, it’s now time to ask yourself:

“What can I do?”

It’s okay to take some time with this question. For my cancer diagnosis, they told me what to do. (Make an immediate appointment with a surgeon and an oncologist.) We did that. [Note my shift from “me” to “we.” Here, my life-partner and spouse became an integral part of the process to help me make these decisions.] But after a local consultation that described a tried-and-true surgical procedure, we decided to get a second opinion from a teaching/research hospital, the James Cancer Center where I work at The Ohio State University. There, we learned about a less invasive procedure that had the same success rate (but far fewer side effects and/or lifestyle changes).

What could we do? We took action, educated ourselves, and made a decision for the second option which today, finds me still cancer-free after almost 10 years.

Along with the second opinion, we also took action to lower our mental stress by leaning into our family’s faith tradition and ancient wisdom literature. Here, we found a different, but significant, “why.” If interested, please see the text inset, “Other Action: Leaning on Faith” below.

Follow-up:

Assign some homework on this one. Ask your mentee to watch for the “why” question to hit their mind in the coming week or two. Challenge them to really pay attention. It need not be a life-altering event. But watch for a stressor or trigger point.

Then, when they encounter the trigger-event (at work, home, play), have them text you the very moment they change the question in their head from “Why” to “What.” Ensure them you REALLY want to know when it’s happening. (Compelling them to immediate action on this experiment will greatly help to cement this as a habit in their brain.)

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Addendum: *Leaning into a Faith Tradition*

[Hundreds of research studies show positive mental and physical health benefits in people with a faith tradition. Please see the conversation on “Faith” which appears later in this book for more on that topic.]

Other Action: Leaning on Faith

When I got home from that early morning appointment and unexpected cancer diagnosis, my head was still reeling from the doctor’s words. And I was still asking, “Why?” I was locked in one of those existential moments and wondered if I would get to grow old with my spouse, or see our young daughters grow up. I also wondered how I personally would handle the challenge. Would I be scared, angry, victimized, defeated? It was an unbelievable weight.

Fortunately, I thought to look for answers or wisdom in my faith tradition (which is rooted in the very difficult teaching of practicing gratitude, loving everyone, being humble, and giving of your self and your resources to help others). This way of living was suggested (documented in both Biblical and other historic texts) over 2,000-year-old from a Jewish rabi called Jesus. Though tremendously challenging, some find this way of life quite fulfilling as well.

My search for hope quickly yielded two passages that were particularly helpful to me... and may be applicable to anyone who's having a hard time. The first was from James the Just who wrote:

"Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." James 1:2-4.

That's quite an idea... and quite a promise. But I wondered if it could really be true. Could this "trial" actually make me stronger, more "complete"? Wow. What a thought. I guess the modern version is, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

I then had a successful surgery. When I got home after 7 days in the hospital, I was reading "The Message" (Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible). In Paul's second letter to the early church at Corinth, he says:

"Distress that drives us to God...turns us around. . . We never regret that kind of pain. . . You're more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible. Looked at from any angle, you've come out of this with purity of heart." (excerpts from 2 Corinthians 7: 10-13)

What? Distress is helpful? Yes. (See transformational leadership theory.) Major life events and/or stressors like this can help us focus and truly become more alive. (See my "Bucket List" and "Personal Mission" conversations.) Writers and philosophers from Steven Covey to Rick Warren to the 14th Dalai Lama to John Lennon have paraphrased this same idea, challenging us to get busy living.

So whether you have a faith tradition or not, you (or your mentee) may find support or wisdom or hope these remarkable commentaries and writings. I urge you to look at texts from multiple sources. Many faiths offer wonderful ideas that can bolster our mental outlook which in turn, helps our physical healing.

Whether cancer or criticism, we experience trials and distresses every day. The secret is to reframe our thinking. If you are post-cancer like me, living with it today, or just having a hard time right now, I hope you'll remember this: We can learn a lot when we struggle. We can grow exponentially through trials. We can lean on each other, and perhaps a faith tradition as well to help. The secret is simple: Change our question from "Why?" to "What?"

General Reflections:

One thing that struck me about this topic was: _____

I'm still pondering (*and may seek more information on*): _____

As a result of this reflection, I plan to: _____
