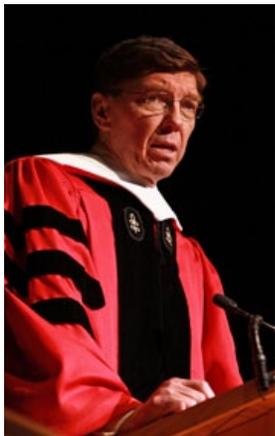


THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT QUESTION

CLAYTON M. CHRISTENSEN

SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

MAY 6, 2011



To get to the point of graduation, you've endured an almost endless sequence of measurements of your intelligence and knowledge, in the form of tests. You have taken more tests than you hope to remember. The role of faculty here and other teachers earlier was to define the questions. Your role, as students, was to provide the right answers.

Many in education, however, have overlooked a frightening fact: finding the right *answer* is impossible unless we have asked the right *question*. Unfortunately our teaching system focuses little attention on teaching us how to ask the right questions. As a scholar, father, and advisor, I have slowly realized that asking the right question is the rare and valuable skill. That done, getting the right answer is typically quite straightforward.

In my remarks today I'd like to describe three instances where people like us have plunged into implementing an answer, without taking the care to define the salient question to which we need good answers. Two are of national scope; the third is personal. My prayer is for each of you – students, graduates, families and faculty – is to see learning to frame questions as a critical part of your work.

The first important question emerged from my work for the leaders of Singapore and an interaction with a friend from China. The answer is that if a society wants peace and prosperity, you need a government that articulates appropriate rules and ensures that people follow them. Individuals must be held accountable if they break the law. I will describe the answers more deeply, and then pose the questions.

There are two ways to get peace and prosperity. The first is to follow Singapore. The founder of that small nation, Lee Kuan Yew, pulled together a diverse set of ethnic enemies, laid out a set of clear rules, and then ruled the nation with an honest and very strong fist. He set a system in place that could identify people who broke the rules; held them immediately accountable; and dispensed fast and memorable penalties. Singapore is a marvelous country – safe and prosperous. The vast majority of people obey the laws because of the established system.

The other option is democracy. The problem of democracy is that the government doesn't look over your shoulder or into your homes to catch you breaking the rules. And if you are suspected of breaking a rule, it takes a very long time to determine whether you must be held accountable. There are juries and appeals – there are no iron fists. So how can democracy work to bring peace and prosperity to a nation?

I asked my friend, who is a Marxist economist from China who came to Boston on a Fulbright Scholarship to study democracy, if he had learned anything about democracy that was surprising or unexpected. His response was immediate and profound: “I had no idea how critical religion is to the functioning of democracy.” I had never made this association between religion and democracy, so I was surprised but he continued to explain,

You don't see it because you grew up in this society. But to me it is one of the most unique things I have seen. Perhaps even more in your past than in the present, most Americans attended a church every week. There you were taught that you should voluntarily obey the law; that you should respect other people's property, and not steal. You were taught to be honest. In America the vast proportion of people obey the laws because God will hold you accountable. Democracy works because most people most of the time voluntarily obey the laws – and it therefore doesn't matter whether the police and courts catch you, or how long it takes. Americans police themselves, knowing that God is their final judge.

My friend then pointed at those countries where, in his words, “America had naively snapped its fingers and demanded, ‘We want democracy here, and we want it now!’” Unless there was already a strong religious foundation in those countries, he asserted, democracy has failed miserably.

My Chinese friend noted that in Russia, for instance, there are religions – but they are not democracy-enabling ones. Few people are influenced by them. As a result many people avoid taxes, and the government cannot afford to collect them. Murder, bribery and stealing are a part of everyday life. He noted that American foreign policy has been naïve in Haiti and the nations of Africa that have been torn by such brutal civil strife. “You just think that because democracy works for you it will work everywhere. It only works where there is a strong foundation of religion, which inspires people to freely obey the unenforceable.”

In societies between the extremes of Singapore and America, the poverty and violence suffered is proportional to the number of people who have concluded that the government will not hold them accountable for their crimes, and they don't believe that there is a God who will do this, either. Pakistan, Nigeria and Argentina are in this morass. Mexico is slipping into it.

Those who seek to minimize the role that religions can play in the public sphere are making two very serious mistakes. First, in trying to push religions off the public stage, they are seeking to minimize the very institutions that have given us our civil liberties in the first place.

And second, the debate that has crept into our judicial discourse about the separation of church and state is a false dichotomy. Religions, as philosophical traditions, can be broadly classified as theistic religions and atheistic religions. Atheistic religions are defined by a set of beliefs, just as theistic religions are. Atheistic religions are not just sweeping theistic religions off of the democratic stage. They are knitting the doctrines of atheism into our legal and regulatory fabric. They are giving us a wrong answer to a badly framed question.

My Chinese friend's insight has helped me understand what the valuable question really is: Instead of debating the question about what degree of separation of church and state the Framers intended, we need instead to be asking, “What institutions can we rely upon to inculcate the instinct amongst the next generation of Americans to follow even unenforceable laws? And how can we strengthen those institutions, so that they do this better?”

The adherents to the dogmas of atheistic religions need to employ their intellect on this question: Do you want to strengthen our democracy? If so, then what institutions do you propose to put on the stage to teach the next generation of Americans – every one of them – to want freely to obey the law?

Now the second issue in which we need to ask better questions. One of the most important issues in America's foreign policy is Iran – a bad actor on the world scene. It is anxious to obliterate Israel; frames America as an evil enemy; and works furiously to develop nuclear weapons. The American solution has been to isolate Iran, and strong-arm our allies to follow suit and stop trading with Iran. The rationale is that economic deprivation will drive the Iranian government to its knees and give up on its evil designs.

I saw a different angle on this strategy in 1982. I was in the Reagan administration as a White House Fellow; and had lunch with former President Richard Nixon. Just ten years earlier as President, he had taken the unprecedented step of opening diplomatic ties with Communist China. China was our bitter enemy, governed by Mao Zedong – who is believed to have killed over 40 million

of his countrymen. Why, I asked Nixon, would you establish a relationship with such an evil enemy?

Nixon explained:

Whenever in the history of American foreign affairs we have attempted to isolate a nation that is governed by a totalitarian dictator, isolation has had the effect of strengthening the tyrant – because it enabled him to control what his people could know, and to blame America for all of the problems that its mismanagement of his country caused. In contrast, he observed, whenever America had opened relationships with such a government – initially diplomatic relationships, which then expanded into cultural, educational and ultimately commercial interactions, the totalitarian dictator was weakened and his government ultimately destroyed.

I saw that since 1949 when Mao and his communist armies had conquered China. America's policy had been to isolate China – in the belief that isolating them would bring the communists to their knees. True to form, it had the opposite effect: Mao's government had gotten stronger and stronger. I determined that we needed to weaken it.

Think what has happened since that time. Communist China, our mortal enemy, was destroyed. China is now a strong ally. But where our policy has continued to be isolation – North Korea, Cuba, Myanmar, Iraq (until the current war) and now Iran – the tyrannical governments haven't just persisted, they have grown stronger.

Why would our government persist in a policy against Iran that has proven to strengthen tyrants? I fear, it is because our leaders have not asked the right questions. Rather than asking how we can coerce our allies to join us in diplomatic and commercial embargo, instead we need to ask, "What is the best way to help the millions of people in Iran and North Korea see that honest rules, open markets, and education bring prosperity and freedom?"

This isn't achieved by keeping them in the dark. Rather, we need to invite their best students to study in America's best universities. We need to help their manufacturers find markets here for their products; and to make it easy for their citizens to see the real America, and our wonderful people. I suspect, again, that we would transform these enemies into friends without firing a shot.

I have given two national examples of the mistakes our nation is making because our leaders don't ask the right questions. I'll close my remarks by reviewing a third instance where asking the right question can make a huge, positive impact in our personal lives. Let me illustrate this another personal story.

Years ago I was driving to work early one morning when I got a strong impression that I was going to receive an important new position. The feeling wasn't specific to a particular responsibility – but it was a very strong feeling. A while later my boss announced he was accepting another position. I put two and two together, and decided that I was going to be asked to take the job – which would be a major advancement for me.

A short time later they announced that another man had been asked to take this job instead. I was just crushed. I had never aspired to positions in the hierarchy of my profession or my church. But I always have aspired to play a productive role in my professional assignments and in my church, and somehow I felt that if I had been given that job I would have been in a position to do more good for more people.

This development threw me into a two-month period of crisis – questioning my talents and my qualifications. Somehow within that crisis, however, I developed an insight that profoundly altered my life. I realized that we, constrained by the capacities of our mortal minds, need to rely on summary statistics in order to have a sense for what is going on. A manager cannot see the big picture from looking at specific orders from specific customers; he or she needs to have things aggregated as revenues, costs, and profits. President Benson needs to look at graduation rates; admission rates; faculty turnover, and so on – to get a sense for how things are doing here. I realized that God, however, has an infinite mind – so has no need to aggregate anything beyond the level of individual people in order to comprehend completely what is going on in the world. In other words, God is not a statistician or accountant. His only measurement is the individual.

Somehow, after all of this, I came to understand that while men and women might measure their lives by summary statistics such as number of people presided over, how high in a hierarchy they are promoted, and so on, the only metrics that God will apply to my life are the individuals whom I have been able to help become better people, one by one. When I have my interview with God

when my life is over, the fact that I held the title of a professor at Harvard won't even come up in the conversation. Rather, God will say, "I put you in that situation, and then that one. Let's just discuss the individual people you helped become better people, using the talents that I gave to you." And when he interviews Mike Benson, the fact that he had the titles of President of Snow College and then Southern Utah University won't come up in the conversation. Rather, God will say, "I put you in that situation, and then that one. Let's just discuss the individual people you blessed using the talents that I gave to you." His conversation with each of you will be similar – comprised of a recounting of the individuals whose self-esteem you were able to strengthen, whose talents you were able to reinforce; and whose discomforts you were able to assuage, in all of the situations that you will find yourself in the years ahead. These are simply different contexts within which God's real purposes can be fulfilled, and the true measurement of our lives taken.

This realization, which occurred over 20 years ago, has made a huge difference in my life – because it has told me what questions to ask. Every day I ask God to help me find someone whose life I might bless in some way. Because I ask the questions God gives me the answers.

I hope that the leaders of our nation will take the time to ask the right questions before they throw religion out the window. I hope that they will ask the right questions before they take the next step in isolating Iran and other tyrant-governed countries even further. But much more than these, I hope that each of you, graduates of this university, will cultivate the habit every day to ask the right questions: What will be the true measure of my life? And then, Who can I bless or help to be a better person today? I promise you that if you will ask these questions and act upon the answers you receive, your happiness, your sense of worth in your families and communities, your contributions in your professions and in your churches, and your stature in your nations, will be extraordinary. Thank you; and may God bless you.