

Jumping Out of Assumptions into Questions

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“**W**ait, just wait a minute —she speaks English?” My best friend told me that this is what went through her mind when I first introduced myself to her. She assumed that I did not speak English because I do not look stereotypically “American.” That assumption almost cost her one of the coolest people in my life. Given that awkward start, how did we become best friends?

The most valuable part of a liberal arts education is its ability to nurture curiosity. Liberal arts students take a wide variety of courses that expose them to a broader base of knowledge with different views. From practicing the value of this education, my friend and I learned to jump out of our comfort zones and to ask a lot questions — a lot of good, difficult, and brave questions. Without questioning the background of one another, we would be divided, and not united.

Tonight I am here to argue that our differences do not divide us; it is our assumptions that divide us. Within a liberal arts education, we are encouraged to challenge our assumptions by asking questions. Not just any type of question, but more importantly, three powerful types of questions: curious, critical, and courageous questions.

The biggest discoveries humans have made were inspired by curiosity. Newton was so curious about why an apple fell on his head that he theorized gravity. A 2013 survey of mothers in the UK revealed that children can ask an average of three hundred questions a day.¹ Humanity is born to be curious and is always thirsty for answers. Asking questions, especially curious and intensive questions, helps us understand not only our personal views, but also many other sides of the story.

Juniata College students cannot forget the most memorable icebreaker at the beginning of our freshman year—Inbound. At one time, I thought Inbound was a kindergarten for adults. Then I realized that Inbound was the beginning of my liberal arts journey. Although strangers, we asked big questions motivated by curiosity, such as “Where are you from?” “Why are you here?” “What is your background?” “What are your beliefs?” We did this to recognize our differences and similarities, and to realize how large and diverse our world is.

Though it all starts with curiosity, it does not end with curiosity, but often morphs into critical thinking. From recognizing our differences, we can use critical questions to challenge and accept, rather than ignore, our differences. We do not ask just for the sake of asking. We ask with purpose.

My grumpy professor, Dr. Emil Nagengast, once asked me: “What are you Vietnamese people doing here? You are supposed to hate us!” I grew up in a military family in Vietnam, a communist country. My grandfather fought in the Vietnam War against the United States Army. When I first came to America alone, I was quite scared. I feared that no one would talk to me, that everyone would hate me because of the bloody trauma of the Vietnam War. However, my fear soon disappeared, primarily because Dr. Nagengast would not stop asking me questions. This winter, I had the opportunity to take him and seventeen students to Vietnam, so they could ask even more questions about my country and me. I have a vivid recollection of one of the questions a student in the group had for my grandpa: “How can I reconcile what my country has done to yours?” The student’s tone was not only curious—it was critical. Students did not want to stereotype me or separate me from the group, but wanted to recognize and understand me. And that was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

Curious and critical questions are important, but the final transformative layer of questioning is the courageous question. The courageous question encourages us to cherish, instead of fear, our differences. These are the questions we must ask ourselves.

America is a united nation, not a divided one, because America is the home of the brave. Brave people ask courageous questions. We tend to forget to question ourselves and our own beliefs, as we mistakenly think that they are just obvious. My grandpa witnessed many of his friends dying in battles from American bombs. For as long as I can remember, I have heard him screaming in his sleep at night from flashbacks of the war. But that same man once told me that the best way to reconcile is to ask yourself questions with empathy. He said: “The past I shared with America is not your past, but the present you share with America will be our future of unity.” That man is the reason why I came to the United States to study, and to ask. Courageous questions require self-reflection and empathy. It is how we critically evaluate society’s differences and our own individual values.

After this year’s election, the Spurs basketball coach, Gregg Popovich said: “I’m a rich white guy, and I’m sick to my stomach thinking about it. I can’t imagine being a Muslim right now, or a woman, or an African American, a Hispanic, a handicapped person. How disenfranchised they might feel.”² He did it. He questioned his own identity with courage to empathize with people who are not like him. And this is an example of how courageous questions are the key component to opening someone’s mind and then opening their heart to break the divide in our society.

I proved that I do speak English, and guess what: the person who assumed that I did not speak English and who asked my grandpa how she might reconcile what America has done to Vietnam are the same person. The one who did not mistake vulnerability for weakness and turned her assumptions into curious, critical, and courageous questions is the one I am now so proud to call my best friend.

Pierre-Marc-Gaston, duc de Lévis once said: “It is easier to judge the mind of a man by his questions rather than his answers.”³ I argue for the power of questions. Juniata’s heart of civic engagement has brought so many people into my life that I could never say thank you enough. It has helped me meet many strangers across this nation, and around the world, all whom love to ask questions, questions that transform us from strangers, and from different groups, into friends and family. No matter where I go, the liberal arts values will always be with me. They remind me that the enemy that divides us is our assumptions, not our differences. And the only way to challenge assumptions is to ask. Ask with a curious, critical, and courageous spirit to climb over any wall that separates us from the cool people we love, and more importantly, from all the cool strangers we could love.

NOTES

1. Telegraph staff and agencies, “Mothers Asked Nearly 300 Questions a Day, Study Finds,” *telegraph.co.uk*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9959026/Mothers-asked-nearly-300-questions-a-day-study-finds.html>.
2. Ahiza Garcia, “NBA Coaches Keep Taking on Trump,” *MoneyCNN.com*, May 15, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/15/news/gregg-popovich-donald-trump-spurs/index.html>.
3. Pierre-Marc-Gaston, duc de Lévis, *Maximes et Essais sur Différents Sujets de Morale et de Politique* (Paris, 1811): Maxim xviii.