

## CHAPTER ONE

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# IT'S BETTER TO KNOW SOME OF THE QUESTIONS THAN ALL OF THE ANSWERS



**B**ack in the days when I was fortunate enough to have a lawn, I enjoyed mowing my grass on Saturday mornings. I'm not sure why this was such a pleasurable experience for me, but it really and truly was something I looked forward to doing. One of the things I enjoyed most was the smell of the newly mowed grass; another was the feeling of accomplishment that comes with completing a project that allows you to admire the results of your labor instantly. Those of us who have been educators never tire of experiences such as this, experiences that provide even a small measure of instant gratification. Maybe this is because it seems as if we have to wait most of a lifetime to see the results of our efforts with children in classrooms.

Although I like smelling the newly mowed grass and admiring the results of my handiwork, perhaps the thing I liked best about mowing my grass was the feeling of power I derived from mowing down all those thousands and thousands of blades of grass while gliding along effortlessly behind my almost new, self-propelled Honda mower. When I first brought my Honda mower

home from the store, my wife took one look at it and exclaimed, “Wow! It looks like you could drive it to town.” My wife doesn’t exaggerate—it was an impressive mower!

Over the years, I established a pattern for mowing my grass that suited me perfectly. I always attacked the project by cutting all the odd-shaped, uneven areas around the edges of my lawn first, so that after a while I was left with a large circle of uncut grass in the middle of the yard. Then I would go round and round the remaining circle of grass in a nice easy rhythm interrupted only by my stopping occasionally to empty the bulging grass bag. It was downright peaceful and highly gratifying!

As I cruised along effortlessly, watching the circle grow smaller and smaller with each completed circuit, I would wear my genuine Dale Earnhardt earphones and listen to public radio. There were, and are, a lot of good shows on PBS radio on Saturday mornings. There was *Rabbit Ears Radio*, and there’s *Car Talk* and my favorite mowing show, *Whad’Ya Know?* which is produced by Public Radio International and is broadcast live. The host of the show is the clever and entertaining Michael Feldman. Michael always begins the show with a question for his audience. “Whad’ya know?” he asks in a rather loud and demanding voice, to which the members of the studio audience (and all of us listening out there in radio land) reply in unison, “Not much!”

The show is a quiz show, and as it progresses, it becomes more and more evident that indeed, the contestants on the show don’t know much. At least they don’t know very much about the questions that Michael Feldman has for them. The questions on the show are designed to trip up the contestants and make them look foolish by asking about silly and often obscure facts gleaned from nonsensical categories such as “things you should have learned in school had you been paying attention.” The producers of *Whad’Ya Know?* acknowledge that the questions are a little ridiculous, with a disclaimer that advises listeners to get their own shows if they don’t like the questions they use.

Thirty or forty years ago, had you asked me “whad’ya know?” I would have responded very differently to the question than I would today. Like many young people (including the two sons who grew up in my house over the past several decades), I thought I knew just about everything in this world that I needed to know.

It was during this early period of self-enlightenment that I was asked by my state school administrator’s association to deliver a series of workshops at a number of locations around the state. The purpose of the workshops was to help building-level school administrators improve their skills as instructional leaders. Now, I must tell you that I feel strongly about the importance of instructional

leadership in our schools, but I must also tell you that I have a problem with discussing this topic in public. It seems that I have a predisposition to preach on any topic about which I care deeply—unfortunately, that includes a fairly broad range of topics, because I tend to be a very caring person. At any rate, if I'm not vigilant, suddenly—and without warning—I can find myself preaching rather than teaching.

Apparently, that's exactly what happened to me when I delivered my series of workshops on instructional leadership those many years ago. I was sitting in my office one day after the series had concluded, congratulating myself on the fine job I had done, when I received a piece of correspondence in the mail. The message was simple and straight to the point. The message read, "It's better to know some of the questions than all the answers!" Below this simple message was the inscription "James Thurber (1894–1961)." At first I was thrilled; I thought perhaps James Thurber had sent me the message. But almost instantly, reality set in, and I realized that James couldn't have sent me the message, because he had been dead for quite some time before someone used his sage words to pull me down from my pedestal, plunking me firmly back down on the ground where I belonged. I had been so busy telling everyone the answers to becoming an effective instructional leader that I had forgotten to address the most essential questions.

To this day, I have no idea who sent me that simple but powerful message. At first, I was offended at the implied put-down, but after I'd thought about it for a while, I was grateful. Whoever that thoughtful and caring person was who sent me the message, I want to thank him or her for reminding me that I should be focusing more on the essential questions in my life and not worrying so much about the answers. For although the answers to life's most important questions may vary with the times, the particular circumstances that exist at a given time, or with the persons who are doing the asking or being asked the questions, the essential questions never change. The most essential questions in life never change because they are, by their very nature, eternal.

In her wonderful book, *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret J. Wheatley (1992) has the following to say about the uncertain nature of life and the futility of wanting someone else to give us the answers to life's most important questions:

I haven't stopped wanting someone, somewhere to return with the right answers. But I know that my hopes are old, based on a different universe. In this new world, you and I make it up as we go along, not because we lack expertise or planning skills, but because that is the nature of reality.

Reality changes shape and meaning because of our activity. And it is constantly new. We are required to be there, as active participants. It can't happen without us and nobody can do it for us. (p. 151)

I believe (and I don't mean to be preaching here) that the best leaders spend a great deal more time pondering the important questions in life than they do dispensing the correct answers. It's not the right or even the responsibility of a leader to always have the right answers to life's essential questions. It is, however, the responsibility of a leader to acknowledge that these crucial questions exist for every organization and for every individual within an organization. As Collins (2001) notes,

Leading from good to great does not mean coming up with the answers and then motivating everyone to follow your messianic vision. It means having the humility to grasp the fact that you do not yet understand enough to have the answers and then to ask the questions that will lead to the possible insights. (p. 75)

Jack Welch (2005), the highly acclaimed former CEO of General Electric puts it this way:

When you are a leader, your job is to have all the questions. You have to be incredibly comfortable looking like the dumbest person in the room. Every conversation you have about a decision, a proposal, or a piece of market information has to be filled with you saying, "What if?" and "Why not?" and "How come?" (p. 74)

Human experiences in organizations are transitory: it is not the responsibility of the leader to dispense the right answers, but rather, to work faithfully with others in the organization to identify the right questions. Once the right questions have been identified, then everyone working together can seek the answers to those questions that are most relevant to them at a particular time under a prevailing set of circumstances. Ultimately, struggling together with the critical questions will do more to define a successful organization than all the answers in the world. In my view, asking the critical questions in the right ways at the appropriate times helps to define one who is caring enough to lead. Therefore, in the chapters that follow, we will have plenty of opportunities to ponder important questions about caring leadership together. As we embark on our mutual journey, I want to prime you with a single, simple question: So whad'ya know?

## TAKE TIME TO REFLECT

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1. Chapter 1 asserts that life's essential questions are, by their very nature, eternal. List what you believe are several of life's most essential questions. If you are working with a group, how does your list compare to others' lists? Can (or should) individual circumstances color how we see life's most essential questions?
2. Consider your organization for a moment. What are the essential questions for your organization at this particular moment in time? Are the essential questions different for the major stakeholders in the organization (e.g., the employees, the boss, and the board of directors)?
3. Discuss why it is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers. Give at least one example of a time when you've found this to be true. What were the circumstances that led you to a key realization about the importance of questions?

