

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Star Trek's Answer to Your Burning Life Questions

You wake up at 2 AM thinking about it. It nags at your mind in quiet moments. You've read books about it, asked everyone you know, including Google, and nothing you've learned will ease your mind. Ever had a question or a worry like that? I certainly have. Sometimes they are big questions about existence and meaning; other times they are about life choices or relationships. Some I hear pretty often are:

- What makes life feel satisfying?
- Is this man/woman the best one for me, or should I keep looking?
- How can there be Someone good watching out for us when there's so much evil in the world?
- What's the ideal job for me?
- What do I have to do to prove to myself/others that I'm an okay person?
- What, if anything, makes the fear of being alone go away?
- Should I have kids?
- What makes me unique, different from everyone else?

What's so frustrating about questions like these, especially for fact and logic-loving people, is that they stubbornly resist the typical ways we think through and arrive at answers for so many other kinds of questions. Typically, we gather information about what we're curious or worried about through research, observation, people's opinions, etc. until we can get the information to fit together in a way that feels solid enough to make our anxiety about it go down. Armed with whatever amount of information our particular personality requires for addressing such matters, we go forth with our decision, knowing that if someone questions our judgment or if things don't work out as we hoped, at least we can point to our research process to say that we did the best that we could and should therefore be cleared from blame.

But the questions above are different. They are about us, personally and profoundly, even the ones that seem to be about existence and God and relationships. Others' opinions and studies and experiences can only go so far in informing us about our personal way of being, doing, believing, and relating. These questions may sound logical on the surface—like gathering enough facts could soundly solve them—but there's a ton of emotion underneath. And emotion is nothing if not personal and changing.

Still, that doesn't stop us from treating these questions like logic puzzles, turning them over and over and over in our minds as if we could solve them by sheer time and effort spent in thought. So what do we do?

Star Trek to the Rescue

In this case, we will turn to Star Trek, that deeply reliable well of wisdom for the most important questions we serious minded people have. In the 1982 and 2009 movies, command-track

cadets were required to complete a situational simulation called the *Kobayashi Maru* as part of their training at the Starfleet Academy. The problem was presented to the cadets as if they were expected to find a logical solution. What they weren't told was that it was a no-win scenario. They weren't given enough puzzle pieces to solve the puzzle. It was actually their character that was being tested: how they dealt with life-threatening situations that did not have a discernable solution. The "answer" was what they did with the question. It was the way in which their understanding of themselves and their responses grew through repeated engagement with the test. Ultimately, the answer received transformed the question from "How do you solve this challenging (impossible) situation?" to "Who are you as you engage with this situation?"

Though we're a long way from the starship *Enterprise*, the "answers" to our burning, unsolvable questions may be similar. As we continue to ask our question over time, we gain experience about how we approach the question, what it means to us in multiple situations, from multiple life stages.

For example, asking the question "What do I need to do to prove I'm an okay person?" in adolescence might actually mean, "How can I be enough like my peers that they don't pick on me?" A few years later, the same question could mean, "What experiences should my life contain to be worthwhile?" Later, it could be, "How do I know that I'm taking good enough care of my kids, my spouse, my job, and myself?" Still later, it could be, "What could I do before my dad dies to make him finally respect me?" It might eventually change to, "Having chosen to believe that I am fundamentally okay, even when I don't feel like I am, how can I hold onto this decision when my emotions are up and down?"

As we collect experience and awareness about ourselves and life, sometimes the question changes enough that it becomes answerable. Through experience, rather than logic, we sometimes "grow the pieces" that were missing from the puzzle to the extent that the question does not hold the same anxiety for us that it once did. It is answered enough. Further experience might open up the question again, but for now, it rests.

Living Our Questions Less Painfully

So now here we are, back where we started, living with questions that have missing pieces, while apparently, only annoyingly-long periods of time in which unpredictable experiences will possibly, not definitely, fill in the pieces and relieve our anxiety. Well, yes, unfortunately. But stay with me here, because there *are* some things that we can do to make this necessary state of affairs less excruciating:

Do the research, anyway. Sure, the facts are probably not going to solve these questions to their depths, but they can help us to gain a clear understanding of what our questions really are at this point in life. Plus, others might have some good ideas about experiences we could pursue that would help us to shift our questions or grow some of the pieces over time. So it's worth it to ask questions passionately and continue to collect information as we go. But also...

Take research breaks. Once we realize that we're stumped by a personal, experience-based question, not one that can be reasoned through simply with external facts, it can be really good to shelve the question for a short or long period of time. Rather than letting the question haunt us at all hours when we already know we just can't solve it right now, we need to practice containing it by setting a calendar reminder for the next time we'll let ourselves really think about it, or write it on a note and put it in a "question box" that we only open periodically. When it comes to mind in between times, we can quickly check to make sure that nothing has changed

about it, and if not, then mentally put it back in the “box.” When we do return to it intentionally after a period of time, we can ask ourselves, “Based on where I am right now in life, how do I feel about this question?” At that point, we can feel free to renew research for awhile, followed by another break if we hit a brick wall.

Resist the shame trap. Many people, especially logic-lovers who have succeeded in solving lots of other situational puzzles, fear that if they cannot figure something out in short order by studying facts, then there is something wrong with them: they’re deficient. Let me assure you that when it comes to matters like these, the brightest bulbs on the planet still have to live out the question through experience. We are not alone in happening upon questions that cannot be solved with what we’ve got in our brains and current experience history. This is a human thing. It doesn’t mean we’re deficient. Even people who have “lived the question” to a point of finding peace about it, and confidently so, often encounter further experiences that launch them into new seasons of questioning. If they are wise, they let themselves go in and out of questioning periods without fearing deficiency. They simply expect that experience will continue to solidify some conclusions and trouble others as they go through life, and that the process can’t be forced or rushed.

Act “as if.” Since we’ll probably be with these questions for the long haul, we need to resist the temptation to shut down major parts of our lives, refusing to move forward until we’ve received watertight answers. Instead, we need to think like scientists who are testing a hypothesis. They don’t know if their supposition is right when they begin, but that doesn’t mean they hang up their lab coats to go think some more. Instead, they go forward with the *experience* of the experiment, acting “as if” their guess were true long enough to test to see whether it really is.

If our question is, “What’s the ideal job for me?” we won’t find that out through armchair thought simulations. We need to go get a job that seems close to what we think we might want and try it out for awhile. If our question is, “Is my current love interest the right one for me or should I keep looking?” we need to either keep hanging out with the person in different ways over time to see how that goes, or break up to allow ourselves to fully experience dating other people. But freezing the relationship status—not deeply exploring being together and not breaking up—because the answer’s not clear will simply give us more experience of what it’s like to not really engage with our current partner *or* someone else, which is not a very “puzzle piece growing” stance. Acting “as if” your desired answer to the question is true by continuing to make decisions and behave as if it had already been proved true is what allows us to test it to the point where it might eventually *be* proved true.

If you or someone you know would like help wrestling with burning, seemingly unanswerable questions, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

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