

PRIME Questions

In my many years of travelling to different countries and teaching with PRIME, I along with many other tutors frequently used a few simple questions in the 'Whole Person Care' and 'Teaching to change Hearts' courses that constituted some of the core PRIME material. There is nothing new in this as a teaching technique, of course. It is generally regarded as having been initiated by Socrates some 400 years BC and was certainly used extensively by Jesus as the Gospel accounts make clear. Asking the right questions opens avenues of awareness and insight that can be powerful stimulants of learning. One of our favourites was, 'What are the characteristics of a health care professional you would want to see if you were seeking help when unwell?' Wherever we were in the world, the answers usually described pretty much the same qualities. These included: compassion, availability, competence, a clear communicator, kindness, non-judgemental, a wholistic approach, adequate time, a good listener, inspiring trust, and hope.

Why should these vary so little between countries and cultures? It is surely that they describe the best of human qualities that should be the foundation of any personal and societal relationships. They are core human values that reveal the image of God in all people, no matter their racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds, and no matter whether they are aware of the Divine within them or not. Sometimes we might ask a further question in plenary after small-group feedback: 'Who can you think of in history who showed these characteristics as a healer? Most groups would say 'Jesus,' generally an acceptable role-model to atheists and prophet to our Muslim friends. Simple questions, not just helping health care professionals reflect on their values and practice, but potentially developing awareness of the Divine image in which they and their patients are made.

Another useful question under the general aim of resourcing oneself for compassion is: 'What helps make you be more compassionate, and what hinders your compassion?'

Replies to this vary much more than to the questions above as they depend more on people's circumstances and background cultures. However there are some themes which transcend culture, such as enjoying nature, exercise, listening to music, reading good literature and time with friends/family. Also in my experience it would be unusual for at least one person in the group not to say, 'prayer' or 'meditation', into which further enquiry as to what these look like to the individual citing them may result in useful and illuminating discussion. So once again, the opening of channels of spiritual awareness can be facilitated by questions about day-to-day practice and resilience.

Towards the end of the programme we generally had a question like: 'what are you going to do differently as a result of this course?' It is important to get course participants to commit to changed attitudes and behaviour where these have been facilitated by the learning experience. Jesus always emphasised in his teaching (and of course in his behaviour) the need for practical outworking of his words and this question helps learners to focus and commit to particular courses of action.

It is an established tenet of higher education that questions may be more important than the answers (because they can open the mind and heart to new perspectives and attitudes). Correctly framed, simple questions can also raise people's awareness of the Divine within themselves and others, and point to the one ultimate source of compassion in all the universe. Do you have favourite PRIME questions?

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