

Taking the Dumb Pill from Margaret Marcuson

In *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Idea*, Warren Berger quotes Paul Bennett on his philosophy of asking questions. Bennett, creative director at the innovation firm IDEO, says, “I position myself relentlessly as an idiot at IDEO...And that’s not a negative, it’s a positive, Because being comfortable with not knowing--that’s the first part of being able to question.” He says he is able to ask “incredibly naive questions” without feeling the least self-conscious. He adds that “it forces people to explain things simply, which can help bring clarity to another complex issue.” (p. 79-80)

Larry Matthews, the founder of the Leadership in Ministry workshop in which I teach, used to talk about “taking a dumb pill.” It’s another way to think about asking naive questions. “I notice we always do _____. Huh. Can you explain this to me?” Why take a dumb pill? It gets you out of the trap of simply getting frustrated or taking on the fix-it role too quickly.

Acting dumb is easier when you’re new to a congregation, but you can do it even if you’ve been there a while. For example, you could ask about the nominating process, “When I came here, you were recruiting a double slate, and we’re still doing that. Can you explain how that came to be?” This approach can help you stay curious and be a little less caught up in the anxiety around the post-pandemic challenges of recruiting people to serve.

And here’s a corollary: Having other people ask *you* naive questions about what you are facing can be a huge gift. You can be too close to your problem to see a way out or possible options. It seems impossible to untangle the knots. It can help you think differently when someone *else* says, “You said this past president isn’t on the board any more but is still calling the shots. What’s going on in your church that brought that about?” Then you have to step back and think about it a little more. The result of the conversation can be some new choices for you in a difficult relationship.

Next week I’m opening enrollment for the 2022-23 Clergy Leadership Roundtable. One value of the Roundtable is having a small group of peers who bring a new perspective to your ministry challenges and can ask “naive” questions you may have never considered. It can help you think in new ways about what you’ve been doing and how you might approach it differently. Groups start in October--stay tuned!

Blessings,
Margaret

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