

Clarify

Why are you here? This week we are dancing with the chapter titled “Clarify” from Dana Hicks’ book, *The Quest for Thin Places*. Hicks notes that “what you often think you want is not what you really want.” He suggests that “the deepest longing of our souls is the search for awe, wonder, beauty, and being fully alive. People often mean this when they say they are ‘spiritual but not religious.’ But many of us fall for cheap imitations rather than authentic spirituality.”

Jesus was passing through Jericho when he walked by a blind man named Bartimaeus, who, when realizing whose presence he was in shouted out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus called him forth and asked him a very direct and somewhat odd question: what do you want me to do for you?

Question: What would be your response if Jesus called you forward and asked you, what do you want me to do for you?

Hicks shared a story in his book illustrating consulting firm Six Sigma’s advice instructing companies to drill down to the core problem they are solving by asking “why” five times, each time taking the query deeper. The Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. was having a problem: some of its granite was deteriorating more quickly than others, which would be very costly to replace. The problem? Bird droppings. Every two weeks, maintenance crews pressure washed the bird droppings off the walkways which was deteriorating the granite. The first solution was to install nets keeping the birds at bay, but those were unsightly. Why were the birds so present at the Lincoln Memorial? Tasty bugs for dinner! So, they brought in a pest service to apply pesticide to reduce the number of bugs attracting the birds. This had little effect and generated complaints regarding the smell. Finally, they asked the maintenance crew why they thought the bugs were attracted to the Memorial. Lights! The bugs love the bright lights, coming in swarms which attracted bird who then offered their droppings. The solution? Change the timing on the lights so that bugs will seek other light sources before the Lincoln Memorial got lit up. This simple solution reduced the bugs – and droppings – by over 90%. Asking why five times helps clarify the real issue at hand.

Questions: What has been your “why” for pursuing faith through the different season of life? How have your why’s changed?

Josh McDowell was famous in the 1980’s and 90’s for promoting sexual abstinence among teenagers. As part of his presentation to crowds of teens, he would tell his young audience that “Deep down, what you really want is not sex; you want intimacy.” To be fair, sometimes people do just want to have sex for the fun of it. But McDowell was trying to help teenagers appreciate a deeper desire than simple physical pleasure. Our obsession with “drink and sex” remains mostly because we don’t know how to obtain what our soul truly wants. C.S. Lewis once noted:

*We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased (*The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 1949), 27).*

Sometimes we struggle with “why” questions without something to reference for comparison. Many people find themselves pursuing spirituality or faith for the sake of morality. The state of Texas thought that simply posting the Ten Commandments in every classroom would improve morality among their students. This and other forms of legislating morality makes sense to our logical minds. By contrast, we may assume that the lack of concrete rules and laws may lead to greater immorality. We may logically surmise that focusing on such soft and lofty ideas revolving around awe and beauty simply won’t yield stronger morality. Maybe it will lead to the opposite? Research, however, suggests otherwise. According to researcher Dacher Keitner:

*We have found that awe—more so than emotions like pride or amusement—leads people to cooperate, share resources, and sacrifice for others, all of which are requirements for our collective life. And still other studies have explained the awe-altruism link: being in the presence of vast things calls forth a more modest, less narcissistic self, which enables greater kindness toward others (“Why Do We Feel Awe?” *Mindful*. July 14, 2023. <https://www.mindful.org/why-do-we-feel-awe/>, accessed September 1, 2023).*

Dana Hicks concludes:

Morality should not be the goal of our spiritual pursuits, but the byproduct of the paradigm shifts we gain from awe, wonder, and beauty. What is tragic is that many people think they are on a spiritual quest but are, in fact, only pursuing guilt alleviation or the resolution of their cognitive dissonance. The deepest desire of our souls is for beauty, transcendence, or The Divine... What most people want is not to preserve an institution but to experience a deep sense of connection with themselves, others, nature, and the universe. In our better moments, most people long for beauty and transcendence more than conformity (70-71).

Question: How has a desire for morality, or rule and order, been a significant motivation for your faith and the faith you instill in those you influence?

For many people, if morality isn't a primary reason for pursuing deeper faith or spirituality, perhaps "magic" is. Magic here refers to our efforts to do all we can to influence God to act on our behalf. Answering myriad forms of prayer for physical healing, victory, the job we want, wealth, romance – the list is long. Some preachers challenge their listeners to give generously, banking on the promise that God will bless them far beyond their sacrifice. Some people fast to move God's heart. Spiritual disciplines employed for such purposes need to be seen for what they really are: attempts to manipulate the Divine.

Dana Hicks notes:

In contrast, according to Durkheim, religion is about "personal and supplicative negotiation." Or, in layperson's terms, it's about allowing ourselves to experience and be altered by something bigger than us. These experiences will enable us to have generous and positive outcomes for ourselves and others. In other words, it is about allowing The Divine to change us rather than us trying to manipulate The Divine. Many people think they are pursuing spirituality when, in fact, they are pursuing magic, hoping to manipulate or control spiritual forces for their own well-being. The practice of "magic" looks like spirituality, but it is a shadow of what is real (73).

Questions: Have you ever prayed or sacrificed in order to convince God to act, even if it was seen as fulfilling your end of the equation? To what degree is "magic" motivating your spiritual pursuits? How does the content of your prayers help answer these questions? What do we do with petitionary prayers?

My why's have shifted over the course of my life. I grew up in a very devout Christian home with a moderate/conservative orientation (Bible believing/adhering, but not much talk or motivating of hell/fear). The natural "why" for me was family – faith is what we did and part of our identity. Tied into that was not wanting to be out of step with the family (or broader Christian culture) – pleasing my parents was involved as a motivator. Later, wanting to know I was believing the "right" faith was important, as well as not offending God mattered a lot (morality). Mixed in there were some motives that were manipulative for sure, which usually were self-centered. Decades leading as a pastor of a church that has become increasingly progressive has transformed my orientation. So have mystical experiences. I don't view God as the ultimate grant-wisher anymore, which is another way of saying that I don't think God acts that way. God doesn't control much apart from influencing from God's nature of love. This influence is huge – the biggest force on all of creation – but is not coercive. I resonate with Hicks' contention that awe, beauty, wonder and being fully alive are at the heart of my spirituality.

A critical piece that has continued to inform my why came from my doctoral work focused on soteriology – the study of salvation. To save is to heal, to make whole and well, to bring peace. This is what the writers of the older and newer testaments recognized as core to their sense of God's call and movement in their lives. The Hebrew word for this is shalom, representing the primary characteristic of God, the mode of God's being, and the goal of the Divine. Believing this to be true affects my why because anything not aligned with shalom seems a nonstarter. Shalom is primary. The beautiful, mystical experiences I have had throughout my life leave me in awe, wonder, make me feel fully alive and result in greater shalom in my life and a desire to facilitate greater shalom in the world.

Questions: How is all of this resonating with you? How is this helping you clarify your why's? How is that affecting your understanding of spirituality and what you really want?

Wendell Berry noted in his book, *Jayber Crow*:

As I have read the Gospels over the years, the belief has grown in me that Christ did not come to found an organized religion but came instead to found an unorganized one. He seems to have come to carry religion out of the temples into the fields and sheep pastures, onto the roadsides and the banks of the rivers, into the houses of sinners and publicans, into the town and the wilderness, toward the membership of all that is here (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000, p. 321).

Poet William Butler Yeats: "The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

Question: How is all of this helping you clarify the why behind your spiritual pursuits?

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from Dana Hicks' book, *The Quest for Thin Places: How to Find Spirituality after Deconstruction*. Kindle Edition.