

„Soul Talk – The Art of Asking Clever Questions“ (Lilia Vogelsang)

Sample Translation

By Lucy Jones

Lilia Vogelsang:

Soul Talk – The Art of Asking Clever Questions

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Introduction

‘You’re a good person to talk to’ is a phrase I often hear. And of course, it makes me very happy. Because it means that people feel comfortable around me.

Many people think that being good at conversation is a gift. They see my ability as a natural talent or think I am some kind of personality type that means I can have open, trusting conversations. As if I’ve mastered some trick that opens doors in conversations and makes them

more interesting and entertaining. However, what’s true about magic tricks also applies to having good conversations: It’s a skill you can learn!

I can’t remember when exactly I discovered this little trick. Perhaps it was an important conversation on my father’s sixtieth birthday, brought on by the question, ‘Dad, what things really mattered to you? And what do you wish you’d done differently?’

Perhaps it was the special connection I felt to an almost-stranger, having asked many questions before we met in person. Maybe it was the many small moments with friends, at work or at events where I stood around in a corner at first but ended up going home after a really stimulating conversation. All of these situations have one thing in common: I ask questions. Learning to ask good questions isn’t like doing witchcraft. You can learn how to do it. Coupled with a genuine interest in the person you’re talking to, good questions can give your conversations new depth.

If you make the effort to ask good questions and respond to the other person, something very special happens. People open up and share stories and emotions. New connections are forged. This applies as much to people we’ve just met as to those we’ve known for a long time. Good questions remain good questions, no matter what. If you develop a feel for what’s going on around you, you can always ask questions. Whether at a team lunch or a dinner with old friends, questions open the door to other people’s hearts. I’ve experienced it myself over and over again, most recently on TikTok.

About a year ago, in a ShareNow car with cable headphones – the most uncool thing you can own according to my Gen-Z siblings – I said into my mobile phone camera: ‘I’m good at asking questions and so I’m going to start asking one every day from now on.’ What happened afterwards was something I’d never have guessed.

That short clip reached 1.6 million people on TikTok. The hashtag #jedentageinefrage (#aquestioneveryday) currently has several million views. Since then, I’ve been asking a question a day and people on TikTok have been answering – in the comments section or by text with their friends. People write to me @lilicurious every day, saying that they have turned my questions into a ritual with their flatmates. Or they use my questions to help them out at events or dates. Some discuss my questions with their partner in the evening and feel closer to them after talking. What I hear from their comments over and over again is that people long for closeness, connection and good conversations. And my questions seem to produce just that. Of course, a lot happened before that magical TikTok moment when I was sitting there with my phone in front of my face. Realising that I was good at asking questions came from trying to get to know the person I was talking to better. Sometimes, I made new friends or fell in love as a result, or I was able to decide whether to bring someone on board as a business partner. But the really amazing thing about asking questions isn’t just that you understand other people better. Good questions help you learn about yourself too, no matter what the context.

WHY DO PEOPLE LIKE QUESTIONS?

Studies repeatedly suggest that people who ask good questions are happier, more successful and more popular. Because questions create deeper, more intensive conversations. These strengthen interpersonal connections, which in turn make us happier. People are and have always been social creatures. We need community.

Before I go on, I'd like to address the issue that asking too many questions might seem awkward or unprofessional. The truth is that people love answering questions. It might seem like a paradox at first, but people who ask good questions appear smarter. A study by the Harvard Business School and the University of Pennsylvania came to the conclusion that people consider their counterparts to be smarter if they ask questions or for advice. Don't be afraid of seeming incompetent or stupid to your boss, friends or partner just because you ask questions: there's absolutely no reason to feel that way.

As I've already mentioned, the opposite is true. It shouldn't come as a surprise that someone who asks questions has an easier time in life. Because asking smart questions is more likely to help you understand the context and benefit from the knowledge of others. It has two benefits: you learn more *and* are viewed as more pleasant to deal with.

This is because asking questions makes you come across as human. Sure, it reveals that you don't know the answer to something – but who always has the answer to everything? When asking a question, whether you want advice or because you're interested in the other person's opinion, you show interest in the other person and you show that you're not a know-it-all. And that's a likeable trait.

On the other hand, our partner in a conversation feels good when we ask his or her opinion. Ultimately, it means that we value the other person's assessment of a topic. And who doesn't like that feeling? Ask yourself: How do you perceive a situation where someone asks you a question or for your opinion? Do you feel appreciated and enjoy thinking about the answer? Exactly. So why should your partner in a conversation feel any different? Good bosses often excel at asking the right questions – much more so than those who always have the right answer to hand.

If you ask questions, you also allow the other person to tell you something about themselves. And that's exactly the key to a good conversation. Studies have repeatedly shown that people find a conversation particularly enriching if they get to talk more. A study by Harvard University found that subjects who were encouraged to ask as many questions as possible were rated as significantly more likeable by their counterparts. People who ask a lot of questions during speed dating also have a greater chance of being invited on a second date. Which, of course, does not lack a certain irony. How should the other person know if you are likeable if you only ask questions? And yet, the easiest way to be viewed positively, a topic I'll come back to later – is to ask lots of good questions.

Of course, it's important that you listen carefully to the answer and don't just wait impatiently for the person to ask you the same question as soon as possible. In times of social media, where one statement after another is made, it's all the more important that we don't forget to listen in real life.

It makes me uncomfortable to see us cosyng up in our little digital bubbles, where critical questions are ruled out. Online discourse is not the only thing affected by this shift: little by little, the kind of debates that take place on social media are also filtering into the analogue world where divisions between right and wrong are very distinct and there's nothing in-between. And there's no time for questions.

WHY SHOULD WE ASK MORE QUESTIONS?

In addition to all the benefits that asking questions offers – deeper connections, feelings of happiness, better dates and more positive perceptions – there’s another reason why we should ask more questions: They bring us closer together as a society. Unfortunately, we’re far too often busy talking *about* instead of *to* each other. And a new crisis is upon us. The epidemic of loneliness is spreading. In Great Britain, a ministry has even been set up for this purpose, which sounds like something out of the Harry Potter books – the Ministry of Loneliness. People increasingly feel a lack of connectedness and closeness. This can’t be completely cured by asking questions in everyday life, but at least it can alleviate these feelings a little.

If you ask questions, you get into conversations. If you ask questions, you get to the bottom of things. Given the current political climate around the world, I can’t help feeling that we urgently need to start asking more questions. Questions that help us get closer to each other. Questions that expose overly simple answers as lies and deception. When two points of view clash and no one tries to understand why the other person thinks and acts the way they do, silence and alienation begin. But understanding usually starts with a question.

HOW DO YOU ASK BETTER QUESTIONS?

Questions enrich our lives. They help us to connect with our surroundings, get to know each other better, work together more efficiently as a team, and enrich our romantic life. It’s surprising we don’t walk around the world asking questions the whole time, right? However, for many people, asking questions is not that easy. Why is that? There’s more than one answer to that.

As we grow up, we forget to ask questions. Children ask anywhere between two and three hundred questions a day. But the moment they start school, this dramatically decreases. Optimists may say it’s because, at school, children find all the answers to their questions. I laughed at that one too. The unfortunate truth is that children are systematically stripped of their curiosity at school. *Sit still. Listen. Write this down. Don’t ask questions. Don’t disturb the class.* In school, children are taught to be ashamed when they don’t understand something. It’s embarrassing to ask a question that you’re supposed to know the answer to. No more: Who, how, what, when or how? No more: ‘There are no stupid questions, only stupid answers.’ That’s why many people are afraid that if they ask questions, others are going to think they’re inept. People also worry that they’re crossing a boundary by asking questions. This isn’t an easy issue to solve. Because, of course, it requires a feeling for the appropriateness of a question. But it’s only when you take a step in another person’s direction that they have a chance to open up. And you can always apologise if you cross a line because you were genuinely interested in a topic.

The third big concern when it comes to asking questions is that people often don’t know what to ask. And this is precisely what this little book is for – to give you ideas and inspiration. As well as the concrete ideas in each chapter, however, I want this book to achieve a little bit more. You see, I’m firmly convinced that everyone can learn to ask good questions. Fun questions, that aren’t banal and don’t seem fake. Just really good questions. I hope that when you’ve finished reading this book, you won’t try to slavishly stick to the examples I give. Because you’ll come up with your own. This book is a guide to get you in the flow so that you can think of your

own stimulating questions in any given situation.

To start with, there are a couple of very simple rules to a good question:

You can't answer with yes or no. It kicks off a whole series of follow-up questions. These build the rest of the conversation.

Asking good questions means listening carefully. The best questions, especially in a professional context, are the ones that people like to answer. So, pay attention to the topics the other person reacts to in some way.

It doesn't have to be complicated. Often questions that open up the conversation are so obvious that people have just stopped asking them. A good question can be quite simple. Your own answer doesn't matter to begin with. The worst kind of question is the kind that you only ask so that you can immediately answer it. If you ask a good question, you should also listen carefully and respond to the answer.

Depending on the context, a good question may be inconvenient. The best conversations and questions arise in moments when it isn't necessarily the social norm to ask questions. You can also question the status quo with questions.

And despite how fun it can be to provoke, a question has to be appropriate to the context.

Asking your boss about her best childhood memory at a team lunch might result in an awkward silence.

What's important to know is that everyone can become good at asking good questions. Even though a lot of love and thought went into the 222 questions in this book, they will never fit every situation. Think of them instead as the first link in a chain that you can continue to build.

WHO ARE THE QUESTIONS IN THIS BOOK FOR?

These questions are for parents, children, sons, daughters, bosses, employees, partygoers, people looking for love, boyfriends and girlfriends. They are for everyone who's understood that good bonds exist when you understand the person you're talking to better, no matter what the situation. And what's the key to understanding? That's right: Asking questions.

For me, questions have done incredible things. They have revived friendships. They have brought me closer to very special people. They have helped me understand myself better.

Finally, they have connected me to many people at the same time in discussions where we disagreed and then we asked ourselves why. That's exactly what I hope you will find out by reading this book.

from p. 31 on

‘HEY, HOW ARE YOU?’

15 alternatives to the usual chit-chat

1. What’s been good about your day so far? On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel today?

If you want to go a step further, you can ask: And what would make it a little better?

These are wonderful alternatives to the classic ‘How are you?’ Based on the response, you might want to ask your partner about the best day they’ve ever had. But context is everything!

2. What place do you call home?

A twist on the usual, ‘Where did you grow up?’

3. How do you spend your days? Do you work in the field you always thought you would work in?

Instead of ‘What do you do for a living?’ or ‘What do you study?’

4. If you could only travel to one country, which would it be?

Turns small talk about holiday destinations into an exciting conversation. Depending on the situation, you can mix in some humour by asking ‘What was your biggest holiday disaster?’

5. If you could only live in one season, what would it be?

A good alternative to ‘Nice weather today, isn’t it?’ You can also tell a lot about a person from whether they prefer life in autumn or spring.

6. If you didn't have to work from now on, what would you do? What do you have too little time for at the moment?

This steers towards hobbies and interests – an important part of chit-chat because, through them, we find out things we have in common. Perhaps this is when you find out that a shy colleague plays the flute, like you. Or something similar.

7. Which non-human being are you closest to?

This is a fun alternative to asking about pets. By asking this, I found out that people who have pets love nothing more than talking about them. And people who don't have pets always have a funny answer.

8. If you could only listen to one song in your life, what would it be?

This is my favourite opener for a conversation about music. Music is often a great way to connect. But the question 'What kind of music do you listen to?' doesn't coax people out of their shells. It's often just a way to show off what someone *should* be listening to, whether it's cool DJs or famous composers. What song people sing in the shower is something we all find interesting.

9. What was the best thing you've ever eaten in city XYZ, and where? If you were celebrating your birthday in city XYZ, where would you go?

This will help you find out which restaurants and clubs your partner likes to go to. When I first moved to Berlin, it was one of the most common questions I asked everyone. It not only helped me to get to know the other person better, but I also learned something about my new city. So, open up this topic!

10. Which film would you like to live in? Which film scene would you have liked to go through yourself?

This is one of my favourite conversation starters. These questions can always be used to

steer the conversation towards history and pop culture. What’s more, you’ll find books or films you both like: ‘Oh, so you like Harry Potter too?’; or don’t, which leads to a discussion about why: ‘Wow, *Armageddon*, seriously?’ Why’s that? These questions can open up the conversation as much as the question ‘What’s the last film you watched?’

11. Which book have you most often given away? Is there a book you’ve read more than once?

From the warm memories of my mother reading to me as a child, then learning to read myself, discovering international literature, and those special books I keep like talismans next to my bed, books have accompanied me throughout my life. There’s so much more to this topic than ‘Do you have a favourite book?’

12. Which historic sporting event would you have liked to be part of? If you’d become a professional athlete, which sport would it have been?

I was told that some people like to chat about sports. There are many facets to it – it can be a hobby, the sport a person likes doing in their free time or a team they’re a fan of. The question ‘Do you have a favourite sports club?’ doesn’t sound particularly interesting to me, though.

13. What gadget has made your life easier? Why should more people know about it?

People love being asked for advice. This doesn’t mean you have to tell the other person about your worst crisis in a small-talk situation. But it’s always good to give them the feeling their knowledge contributes to a situation.

14. What’s the funniest thing that happened to you in the last few months? What was the last thing you laughed about?

This question gives your partner the chance to tell you a nice anecdote.

15. If you could only eat one more thing (and still be healthy), which dish would you

choose?

Of course, the classic question about a person’s favourite food is not one to be missed. Just don’t make it boring. I think that food is one of the biggest drivers of conversation that exists. I remember my shock on a long car journey when a friend told me: ‘I only eat so that I’m not hungry.’ He didn’t care about food at all. The discussion that followed was one of the most passionate I’ve ever had.

These ideas are ultimately just standard chit-chat in a new guise, like a package that’s been nicely wrapped and has a bow on top! They give the impression that you’re not just skating around on the surface, but at the same time, you’re sticking to what the situation calls for, which is making light chit-chat.

This range of questions is meant to inspire you; of course, you’ll have to fine-tune them to the situation you’re in. Do the questions fit the context? Am I putting my partner into an awkward situation by asking these questions? And what if none of these ideas or topics are suitable? Then here are a few touchstones you can resort to.

Have you both been invited to the same event? Then try asking: ‘How did you end up here?’ Are there pictures on the wall? Take this as a lead-in. Perhaps talk about the subject of the pictures, or try something like ‘What would you paint if you could?’ Is there a topic in the news right now? Depending on the situation, you can also use this as a starting point.

When I was invited to a formal dinner, these ideas helped hide how nervous I was. Probably no one but me noticed how out of place I felt. But a few well-considered questions got me through. I can’t remember what I ended up talking about to my table partner. But I do remember very clearly that even after all five courses had been served, we stayed seated so that we could carry on talking. Nothing earth-shattering happened: it was all just light and casual. Just how chit-chat should be.

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