

the seeker

Sometimes you don't need all the answers in life, writes David Leser. It's enough just to ask the right questions.

A few years ago I was asked a surprisingly lovely question by a stranger. His name was John O'Donohue and he was an Irish poet, philosopher and Catholic scholar who was speaking to me through his audio books.

O'Donohue had died in his sleep in 2008 in France, at the age of 52, lying beside his beloved partner; while I had just separated from my wife and was living alone in a cabin in the hills, drinking too much Irish whiskey at night by a pot-belly stove, listening to O'Donohue's meditations on the wisdom of the Celtic world.

"Ask yourself," he said in his lilting accent, "what the earth thinks of you?"

I'd never pondered such a question but it fed an unnamed hunger in me, perhaps because in the previous weeks of grief and aloneness I'd been looking and listening closely – possibly for the first time – to nature's wild invitation: the whispering of the wind through the white gums, the flocks of geese swooping through the valley, and that wonderful cracking duet of the whipbirds at dawn.

And now John O'Donohue, a man adored by millions for his investigations into the mysteries of life, was talking to me in my fire-lit cabin about the stillness and ancient memory of the land, and inviting me to consider what it might be like for the land to have us walk upon its generous surface.

What does the earth think of you? It's a beautiful question and it has made me think a lot over the years about beautiful questions. The kind we might ask our partners, children, parents, grandparents, friends or colleagues at different times in our lives. And, indeed, ourselves.

Who am I now that my children have grown up and left home? Who am I if I'm not this job? Who am I if I'm not in this marriage? Am I afraid of what's beyond the horizon, out of view? Do I know how to love you better?

When I was living in the hills, I also discovered the Yorkshire-born poet David Whyte, who, like O'Donohue, had built up a following with his musings on what it means to be human.

It was through Whyte that I'd first heard the concept of the "beautiful



question" and how these questions often emerge at unbeautiful moments in our lives. "How can I have taken the privilege of my good health for granted?" "What will it mean for me to ask for help?" "Why didn't I say all the things I'd been meaning to say?"

I saw Whyte on tour and heard him talk about an argument he'd had with his teenage daughter years earlier; how, in an attempt to diffuse the tension, he'd invited her into the kitchen for tea to ask her a ground-shifting question.

His daughter was so furious she could barely look at him, but as he poured the tea and offered her one of her favourite

biscuits, he said: "What would you like me to be more of and what would you like me to be less of?"

I have no idea what her reply was – probably the standard critique any child has of a parent – but the key was not in the answer, it was in the question that offered up a new way of relating.

When my father died seven months ago I asked him just before he left us whether he was ready to go. I hesitated before posing that question, but once the words had left my lips and he'd told me that, yes, he was ready to leave and that he was at peace, we were able to have the conversation we were both longing to have – namely the one about what we both meant to each other.

It's curious how few questions some people ask of others. Perhaps they think it's intrusive to ask. Perhaps it doesn't occur to them to ask because the voice in their own head is too loud. Perhaps they simply don't see you next to them because they're too hunched over their screens.

I'd like to ask my daughters next time I see them what they'd prefer me to be more and less of. I'd like to ask my mother what her most cherished memory of my grandmother is. And how I might be a better son.

I'd like to find out from the next stranger I'm introduced to, not what he does for a living, but perhaps what his favourite song is. A complete stranger had asked me that last year in a New York bar, and it worked like magic.

"So Lennon or McCartney?" he then asked. And I'd said: "Lennon." And down we'd walked through the tower of song into a moment of pure serendipity.

Or the question that flummoxed me only last week in Newcastle when a fellow writer, a delightful woman with a burning curiosity, asked me whether my life consisted of any great love stories. Yes, it did, but the question was so surprising it stopped me dead in my tracks and I'm still pondering it now.

And isn't that the transformative power of the beautiful question? You just don't know where it's going to take you. •

David Whyte tours Byron Bay, Melbourne and Sydney from April 24 to May 3.

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