

Such questioning may sound easy. But many people, including me, have trouble framing questions that are not advice in disguise. “Have you thought about seeing a therapist?” is *not* an honest, open question! A question like that serves my needs, not yours, pressing you toward my version of your problem and its solution instead of evoking your truth. Many of us need help learning how to ask questions that make the shy soul want to speak up, not shut up.

What are the marks of an honest, open question? An *honest* question is one I can ask without possibly being able to say to myself, “I know the right answer to this question, and I sure hope you give it to me”—which is, of course, what I am doing when I ask you about seeing a therapist. A dishonest question insults your soul, partly because of my arrogance in assuming that I know what you need and partly because of my fraudulence in trying to disguise my counsel as a query.

When I ask you an honest question—for example, “Have you ever had an experience that felt like your current dilemma?” or “Did you learn anything from that prior experience that feels useful to you now?”—there is no way for me to imagine what the “right answer” might be. Your soul feels welcome to speak its truth in response to questions like these because they harbor no hidden agendas.

An *open* question is one that expands rather than restricts your arena of exploration, one that does not push or even nudge you toward a particular way of framing a situation. “How do you feel about the experience you just described?” is an open question. “Why do you seem so sad?” is not.

We all know the difference between open and closed questions, and yet we often slip-slide toward the latter. For example, as I listen to you answer an open question about how you feel, I realize that you have not mentioned anger. Barely aware of what I am doing, I start thinking to myself, “If I were in your situation, I would certainly feel angry . . .”; then I think, “You must be bottling your anger up, and that’s not good . . .”; and so I ask you, “Do you feel any anger?”

That question may seem open, since it allows you to answer any way you wish. But because it is driven by my desire to suggest how you *ought* to feel, it is likely to scare your soul away. The fact that I would be angry if I were in your shoes does not mean you have hid-

den anger; as hard as I may find it to believe, not everyone’s inner life is the same as mine! And if you do have hidden anger, my effort to draw it out is likely to make you bury it deeper, as a protection against my presumptuousness. If you are angry, you will deal with it on your timetable, not mine—and step one will be to name your anger for yourself rather than accept my naming of it.

“Try not to get ahead of the language a speaker uses” is a good guideline for asking honest, open questions. By paying close attention to the words people speak, we can ask questions that invite them to probe what they may already know but have not yet fully named. If I ask you, “What did you mean when you said you felt ‘frustrated’?” it might help you discover other feelings—if they are there and if you are ready to name them.

But even a question like that will shut you down if I ask it in the hope of getting you to “say the magic word,” such as *anger*, that I am expecting to hear! The soul is a highly tuned bunk detector. It is quick to register, and flee from, all attempts at manipulation.

In my own struggle to learn to ask honest, open questions, I find it helpful to have a few guidelines. But the best way to make sure that my questions will welcome the soul is to ask them with an honest, open spirit. And the best way to cultivate that spirit is to remind myself regularly that everyone has an inner teacher whose authority in his or her life far exceeds my own.

The finest school I know for watching the inner teacher at work and learning to ask honest, open questions is a discernment process called the “clearness committee” that has become standard practice in many circles of trust. That name makes it sound like something that came from the sixties, and so it did—the 1660s!

The clearness committee (so named because it helps us achieve clarity) was invented by the early Quakers. As a church that chose to do without benefit of ordained clergy, Quakers needed a structure to help members deal with problems that people in other denominations would simply take to their pastors or priests. That structure had to embody two key Quaker convictions: our guidance comes not from external authority but from the inner teacher, and we need community to help us clarify and amplify the inner teacher’s voice.