

The Most Important Question in Your Life

Alan Kaylor Cline

I'd like you to try to identify the most important question in your life. The one you spend the most time contemplating. Is it "What will I do with life?"? Is it "How can I get this person to pay attention to me?"? Is it, perhaps, "How can I make my parents happy?"? I can believe that all of those things could be very important to you, but I want you to dig much deeper than that - I want you search right down to the question you ask yourself every night in the very corner of your soul ... and that question is "How can I be cool?".

This is what I would like to discuss here.

You may say "What gives you the expertise to discuss such a question of cosmic import?". I answer to you what I have said many times "I only ask you to listen, to weigh my thoughts, and to consider them yourselves". You may find that I have said nothing of value or you may find that I offer you something to retain. All that I ask right now is the opportunity to be heard. In fact, much of what I will say is in the form of questions for you.

Is coolness found in the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the people we know? I think we all recognize that those things have very little relevance to the fundamental sort of coolness that we seek. So then where is it to be found?

My answer is that the road to coolness is the same as the road to inner peace. You must be content with yourself. Given such harmony with yourself, you will radiate your coolness.

So where is this road to inner peace? Where is it to be found?

First I must say that we live up here in our brains. That's the place where the messages from the senses terminate and it's where the processing happens. If we want to live in a special room of inner peace, we must do some housecleaning up there in our heads so it's a wonderful place in which to live. Maybe right now your head has nooks and crannies that are dark and spooky and filled with scary stuff. There's stuff up there that you'd forgotten about and boxes you never want to open.

That stuff is not going to give you peace. It will trouble you; it will haunt you; and anyone who considers himself or herself a thinking person just can't live in harmony with so much brain crap. Thus, now I must turn to how that clutter can be recognized for what it is and cleared out of our heads.

The Backpack of Life

I'm going to use a metaphor to discuss this housecleaning. The notion is that life presents to us a series of challenges similar to hiking trips. On those trips we take what we need in our backpacks. The issue is "What do we need?".

In the 1980's I got back into an activity that I had enjoyed when I was young: hiking and camping. In fact, I vowed that I would camp in all 50 United States during the 1980's. I actually did it - finishing the 50th state, Hawaii, on the last possible moment to satisfy the vow. In the furthest time zone on the night of December 31, 1989 I climbed down into Haleakala crater on the island of Maui. Actually on that final trek, I didn't even carry a backpack: I rolled my gear up in a jacket and tied it around my waist.

Is there a point? Had I learned something?

What I had learned after all of those trips is my message for you today - it is the way that I believe thinking people should find inner peace. It is to travel light.

Now what does that mean in the metaphor and what does it mean for our brains? In the real backpack we take out every item in the pack, examine it and say "Do I need this?". Maybe it's a tool and maybe it's food and maybe it's clothing and maybe it's just for fun; but everything must pass the test: Do I need this? Is it worth the burden to carry it.

Now back to the brains. In our brains are facts (like which elements are in water), and techniques (like how to alphabetize), and attitudes (like what colors we like), and feelings (like how hurt we were when someone ignored us), and memories (like when we graduated from high school). The idea is not to throw it all out: the idea is to examine it all and see what needs to be there.

Well what is there anyway? Suppose you know how to take square roots with paper and pencil. Do you need that one? If so, keep it sharp - if not, toss it, don't feel guilty, and don't even give it another thought.

But what about all of those attitudes and quasi-facts that live up in your head? Have you pulled those out lately for the "Do I need this?" test? How many have been there for so long you're not even sure when they got there? How many ideas do you have that were given to you by your highly worldly big brother or sister when you were four and he or she was seven? Would you accept such stuff from a seven-year old today? If not, maybe you ought to see if some of that is up in your brain right now.

Think of the authority figures of our lives: parents, teachers, and such. Have we processed all of what has been passed to us by them with the "Do I need this?" test? Yes, these people might have wisdom that you don't yet but are we holding onto the non-wisdom along with the wisdom just because we've never gone back to think about it.

My father told me when I was little that if I ate the crusts on my bread it would help me whistle. I realized later (an embarrassingly long time later since I could not accept that my father could deceive me) that this was pretty silly. Did I misinterpret other things my parents told me? Did I accept things from them on subjects about which I now know more than they did? Is it really rejecting my parents to question whether they were always right?

I Don't Know

Actually, as things upstairs are examined for worthiness, maybe it's fine to say "I don't know." Perhaps we just don't have an answer for everything and rather than stake an intellectual claim on fairly unknown territory, we could just say "I'm pretty new around here, and I just don't have all of the answers". It is amazing how smart it is of smart people to say sometimes "I'm still collecting facts."

Evidence checking is not necessarily easy, by the way. I often think about my cat as he sees me drive my car away from the house each day. Now he's been in the car a few times and, as far as he knows, I always go to the vet. Yes, sometimes, he's with me and sometimes not, but he hasn't a scrap of evidence that says I go anyplace else. So every morning as he sees me leave, is he thinking "There goes Alan off to the vet again."?

Maybe we just haven't seen the whole story sometimes.

Male Answer Syndrome

There's a behavior pattern found often with males that we can call "male answer syndrome". It's the tendency to have an opinion on everything whether there much support for the opinion or not. It's not solely associated with males and it's not found in all males but you probably know what I mean. Be it car repair, finding one's way in a new city, or the national debt, many males believe that they just ought to have opinions. The alternative is to look foolish. Saying "I don't know" just won't cut it. Well maybe someday try this: "Everything on my Y chromosomes demands that I respond some half-baked piece of nonsense, but I think I'm just going to say I'm clueless."

Female Silence Syndrome

While I'm picking on one team, I'd better kick the other around, too. The other side of the male answer syndrome coin is what I will call "female silence syndrome". By this I mean the tendency to hold back, to feign total ignorance when you're not 100% certain. Again, this isn't found in just one sex, but again, you probably know what I mean. For the double X's (or at least those of either sex who display this), might I suggest the usage of our old scientific friend: error bars. How about saying "Yes, I'm not totally sure, but I'm 80% convinced that ...<whatever>."? To express no opinion at all does nothing to separate you from the people who know nothing at all.

Our Backgrounds, Our Environments

Are we really comfortable defending our opinions with such statements as "I was always taught ..." or "I was brought up to believe ..." or "People from my neck of the woods think ..."? When I hear stuff like that, I'm tempted to say "Well that's interesting that you were *brought up to believe* ..., but that's not quite what I asked. I asked what you *believed*. Are you actually saying that you've given it no thought and you're happy to accept the prejudices of whatever group you affiliate with?". These can be the hardest pieces of junk to toss from the backpack, but a start is this "Goodness, I seem to believe what everyone around me believes, maybe this calls for some extra testing?".

Journey versus Destination

Let's take a little side trip (or what may seem like a side trip) on this hike to consider the question "Do I want to be headed where I'm headed?". Maybe you have some goals that have been with you for a long time and you should wonder about their value. Please do not mistake me - I'm not claiming you should not have goals - just like I'm not claiming you should not have beliefs. The issue is the testing: do I really want to accomplish this? This is very tough since it can be difficult to predict the value of many goals.

But sometimes we just haven't stopped to consider at all. Many of us are so tuned to competition and winning that we don't even ask "Did I really want to win that?". Suppose there were a competition to see how much of the output of someone's garbage disposal (or something even more disgusting) you could eat. Would you actually want to win? Might you say "Gosh, for years people have been doing this garbage eating thing so I'm sure I want to be a star in that as well."

Ever thought about spelling bees? The world's greatest competition designed to show no creativity at all and we idolize the winners and never ask "Have I just witnessed world's foremost garbage eater.". So you say, "Yes, but spelling bees are just for fun." And I'll say "fine, as long as you don't pretend it's anything more."

Now let's go to the other extreme of goals. Maybe you want to win a Nobel Prize. Wonderful, have at it, but please recognize that your life will have to go on the day after you get the prize. Even something like that will be mighty hollow if the only joy was attaining the goal. Most of your life will be spent on the journey not sitting on the destination. The journey must be enjoyable.

It's amazing how many super achievers I've met who are actually very troubled. (Perhaps the trouble is what provides their driving force.) Their lives have none of the peace we seek because they're always off chasing another goal ("First This", "Best That") but never enjoying the journey. A friend of mine was elected to both the National Academy of Science and the National Academy of Engineering but still worried "But have I proved my last theorem?". He didn't have much joy in life until, rather late in life, he got married.

While we're on this side trip, let me say a word about memories. What gives life its richness? Is it an endless series of identically wonderful days? If chocolate cake is a favorite, would you appreciate it three times a day for the rest of your life? Doesn't the lack of it give some definition and extra enjoyment to the having of it? In fact, isn't your life a bit richer for the memories you have of the chocolate cakeless days - the times when you not only didn't have chocolate cake, you didn't have a thing to eat?

One of the least favorite of my camping experiences in the 1980's was the night spent in Kansas. I was all by myself (and had been for several days), it was 15 degrees, and there was nothing to do all evening but listen to my radio. I hated it - and yet it's one of the most memorable nights of all of those years.

Memories are not just associated with nice times. Actually, if everything were nice times, there wouldn't be many memories good or bad. There's be no bad times and you wouldn't appreciate the good times.

Feelings versus Rationality

I once considered feelings to be almost ignorable. I couldn't see much purpose for them and they just seemed to get in the way of rationality. Now I believe they are the among the most real of things - but there are still dangers associated with them.

My great-grandmother Estep was not a very educated woman, but she knew how to deal with feelings. She knew nothing about the chemicals flowing through her body or how moving muscles could bring a flood of different chemicals into her system. To her it was "when things get me down, I go to my garden and pull weeds". In spite of her lack of knowledge, she recognized her feelings and she recognized a method for dealing with them.

When people say they hurt, they really mean they hurt. Whether it's the hurt associated with a physical injury or an emotional injury, they still hurt. Sometimes our desire to be rational has us dismiss the emotional injuries and we shouldn't.

On the other hand, we should not abuse the word "feel" to hide our lack of thinking. When we say "I feel X" do we mean "I believe X" or do we mean "I'll claim X but I haven't given it much thought". Maybe that's the time we should say "I don't know."

Your head is where you live. It's got feelings, attitudes, memories, prejudices, ideas, and facts. My message to you is to consider what's up there and to travel light.