

# What Even Is a Question?

A talk by Dan Klyn

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Thank you for being here tonight. This is the second time that I'm going to try to say this.

I tried to say it on World IA Day a couple of weeks ago in Nashville and, because it's new work, I really don't know completely what I have to say about it. So apologies in advance for this not being all that polished or worked out, but it's something that I'm compelled by; compelled in many senses, but I'll get to that,

I wish that I could have come here by train. A hundred years ago, there was an interurban electric train that went right down the middle of Main Street in Bowling Green.

You could take that train to Toledo, all electric. You could take the interurban from Toledo to Detroit.

You could take that interurban from Detroit to Ann Arbor. You could take that interurban from Ann Arbor to Grand Rapids to Holland.

I live in between Holland and Grand Rapids, Michigan. And, a hundred years ago..

it seems we were living in a better future than the one that we live in now in some respects.

The inevitability, the seeming inevitability of cars: why did that happen? How come this network doesn't exist anymore?

I wasn't there. 100 years ago, none of us were here.

But one of the reasons that I'm putting this [picture of 1919-era interurban train system in Michigan and Ohio] up here is to think about when we upgrade to some new thing, what are we giving up? And in accepting change into how we all at scale do things as human beings together, all of a sudden, the whole world can change, and a hundred years— Nobody in this town remembers when there was an electric train that went down the middle of the busiest street in your town.

My sense is, if we would have asked some better questions as things were changing (and everything always changes, constantly) the outcomes could have been better.

So, what even is a question? I think developing our capacity for question asking might help us not lose, 100 years from now, so much of the good stuff we've got today.

So that's one of the reasons why I think learning about how to be more effective question askers could be important.

Questions like: why am I here? Where do I come from?

Or in this case, does my laser pointer even work? Not really.

No. So ... I live near Grand Rapids, Michigan; I live in-between Grand Rapids and Holland, Michigan.

That's a little tugboat. I work for a company called The Understanding Group, or TUG for short. We like the idea of tugboats and how a little tugboat can help steer a huge ship into just the right spot.

There's lots of metaphors about tugboats that we like. So I work as an information architect, which is helping big companies do change about their information stuff, websites and apps mostly.

We're headquartered in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I live in Grand Rapids, Michigan and what a delight to move further south than normally where I get to do stuff.

So thank you for the invitation to be here. Maybe someday you will be able to take an electric train to visit me in Grand Rapids, and I would love to come back on an electric train, but we don't have this anymore.

So yes, I am compelled to ask the question: what even is a question. Keith Instone mentioned in introducing me that we know each other through the information architecture community of practice.

One of the people who invented the field of information architecture is this 91 year old man here, Richard Saul Wurman. When I got involved with information architecture, teaching information architecture I wanted to know about the history of that.

My dad was a high school history teacher, and growing up, all the books in our house, every family vacation would go on a detour to points of historical interest. The Herbert Hoover birthplace in West Branch, Iowa.. places like that.

The history of the field of information architecture, that's what I'm interested in, that's what I get to teach.

So connecting with a living founder of your field or your discipline, that's pretty amazing. And through the kind of conference community that people like Keith built in the 90s and aughts, I got to meet Richard Saul Wurman.

We have been working together for eighteen years now on various things.

Right now I'm helping with the book that he wants to make. He never learned how to type, so he needs somebody to take what comes out of his mouth and put it into a place where it can then eventually get into a book.

That's the role that I'm playing right now with Richard: translator, interpreter, embellisher of all sorts of things that are coming out of his mouth and trying to turn that into a book. And it's a delightful process.

He feels free to change his mind all the time about what even this book is.

His interests are so varied and when a 91 year old genius founder of your field tells you that the plan is changing and we're going to do something a little different, my attitude has been okay what are we doing, let's do that.

So perhaps in 2027 you will be able to enjoy the full complement of the fruits of this effort.

To make a book together he's done more than a hundred books just with his mouth. He doesn't type, doesn't like to read.

This book that we're working on right now is about everything—so many different things. It's mostly about the evolution of tools and conversation.

If any of you know the children's author Leo Lionni beautiful illustrator.

Lionni wrote a book that not very many people know about called A Parallel Botany, which is a beautifully illustrated book that describes in quasi-scientific language a whole wealth of plants that don't really exist. It's true, but it isn't factual, in the sense that you get from reading this.

We love Lionni's Parallel Botany, and so what Richard and I are working on is a parallel anthropology.

It's going to be great when we get done with it, if he ever stops changing his mind. But the one thing that he's never changed his mind about is that chapter two should be an academic research paper on, pardon my French, but how he would say it is, what the fuck even is a question?

In this chapter, he wants me to conduct original research on what even is a question.

What a great challenge to be given! And so that's what this is.

That's what I'm going to tell you about, is what I found out when I tried to answer the question 'What even is a question?'

This is a picture of Richard and I at the Salk Institute.

Has anybody here been to the Salk Institute in La Jolla in California? There are so many great people in history that we've forgotten.

One of them is Jonas Salk, who found but refused to patent the cure to polio.

He said, can you copyright sunshine? He thought that the work of finding out how to cure polio—because it's using the natural environment and the forces of nature—that it was preposterous that you could patent that and then withhold it from sick people who couldn't pay you for it.

So he built a marvelous research institution after solving polio. The March of Dimes gave him a really big budget and said, 'you're a genius, go build a place that will make more people like you, that will do important stuff for humanity.'

So that's what the Salk Institute is. And the Salk Institute was designed by Richard's teacher, his mentor, the person that he thinks about and has a little cry almost every day is Louis Kahn, the American architect from Philadelphia who he studied with.

Who built this amazing place. And what Khan said is that a good question is worth more than a brilliant answer.

And that has been, where did information architecture come from?

It comes from one of Louis Kahn's students who had this mindset. A good question is worth more than a brilliant answer.

So what even is a question?

I use this picture a lot. [Cartoon strip by Alex Norris] I do consulting with big companies like Apple and Walmart and Ford Motor Company.

I've used this comic with clients to help start the conversation about; well, what's going to be different this time? You make this thing, and it's not good, and now you're going to go at it again.

What's going to be different this time?

When you hire somebody to work on the information architecture of something, one way to talk about that, one of the ways that Richard coined to talk about that is to say, well, that's making the complex clear. That's why Carhartt or some big glass company or a university, why would you work with an information architect?

It's such a weird word.

To make the complex clear. And this cartoon shows somebody showing up on the scene with a complex the squiggly, wiggly, complex thing.

There's somebody wearing a suit who loves it, who says that they love it, but let's get rid of the unusual bits so it fits with everything else.

And that process, I like to say that this is a picture of why we can't have nice things. The thing over there, that's a nice thing.

The thing as think is complex and weird and wiggly and great.

Somehow the process of somebody in a suit turning it into a product or service, perhaps unquestioningly removing all of the parts that are difficult in order to stack it up with all of other things. So on what basis is that happening?

That's what I'd love to be able to do is to interrupt this chain of events and to help everybody, myself included as a participant on teams like this, focus on the thingliness of things to try to accept and embrace the complexity of a thing. And know about it so well that you can conserve as much of the complexity as possible.

To my way of seeing, the value of a thing is less in how you rectilinearize it and make it like everything else. One way to look at this is that much of what's valuable is precisely what's being removed in order to make it slot in with everything else, unquestioningly.

So one way to think about questions and what I'm going to talk with you about what I've already begun talking with you about tonight is a way to address the question before the question of what even is a question—which is, what even is a thing? Dealing with the complexity of a thing.

Like, why are there no public bathrooms in cities where there's human bodies that have to eliminate waste every so often? That's really complex.

Why don't we have public bathrooms? I think one of the reasons why we can't address complexity is because we haven't learned how to ask good questions in order to know enough about what even the opportunity is before we act on it.

One of the things that Louis Kahn liked to say is that there is an agreement behind the making.

In his case, what he liked to make was buildings. The idea is that there are ways of doing something, ways of enacting a complex process like making a building, that taps into and relies on a set of agreements in culture.

What Khan thought is that, well, the first thing that you do is accept and recognize and explore the idea that there's an agreement already in the world, in culture, in a context where you're going to implement some changes. Well, before you go and make changes in that context, you would do well to understand the agreements.

And whether it's good or bad or not. I'm not sure but the agreements that he's talking about are not written down that there's this invisible but absolutely real set of agreements behind what we seek to make, that if we just go ahead and make the thing in front of it, without adequate regard to the agreement behind it, that is how we get into trouble.

And that's how we don't make nice things. This is a picture of the school side of a project that Khan built in Rochester, New York.

It's the Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York The program for this was a church with a worship space and a school for elementary school aged children. And this is the school's side of it.

I spent a lot of time circling this building, taking pictures of it, and just... Dumbstruck by how great it is—I never even went inside; nobody was there to let me in.

Just how great this is. And how seemingly marvelous the mapping between the agreement about what this community believed in, what its values were about education and about children.

It's all here, it's all encoded in this awfully durable thing that this was built in the late 60s and it's still there. Testifying to an agreement that these Unitarians have about what kind of a world Unitarian's want to affect together when they make there be an organization and institution in the world that people can belong to.

One of the agreements behind how this is made that I, this is just me. I'm an amateur.

I don't have any training in architecture, other than Richard telling me about it a lot. But to me, the agreement behind the making of this includes some of the most fundamental agreements.

It's about childhood, which is to say, it's about bigs and littles. It's hard to see in my slides, but these niches, this syncopated rhythms of bigs and littles, what is an elementary school, but a syncopating rhythm of bigs and littles.

The littles are on a track to become bigs. And so how do we value our littles when they are on this path to becoming bigs?

These are entries, these are doors that open out into the playground. But there's a little window.

knee height to an adult in each of those little niches that you can peek in there, there's a little hide-ey place next to these doors that go out to recess area. And that's saying something about, well, what do we agree about childhood?

What is worth protecting and celebrating and making there be more of the, the playful, the interplay of big and little and making sure that the dignity of the little places is accounted for in the architecture, is doing stuff for little people at a little scale. And it's terrific.

Even the decision to not put it on the ground, that we have an elevated sense of how valuable it is to teach children and for children to be well taught, and that isn't down and dirty. That we elevated a little, or TUG for short....

four inches of elevation—it's not much, but it's saying something. So going to town with an interpretation of a building, I feel the permission to do that with the Louis Kahn building based on this idea that he talked about, that there's an agreement that this.

This building is an instantiation of that agreement that you can read it and that it doesn't have to be some intellectualized stuff that architecture nerds find interesting, that this is really happening in the real world, that this helping to enshrine the values that we have every time that people interact with it, which is incredible. So this is something that can be read.

As a report on what does this community agree on. And there's a fair amount of theory out there from different disciplines, architecture, linguistics, literary theory, critical theory, that talk about this idea more broadly, that what a community has, the values that we all share, If this is a writing down...

That we then what we use to decode that there's an encode/decode thing going on here. A community knows what that is and how to use it and keeps that building is in perfect condition, the community that built it initially still loves it.

Why are they doing that? because they're still getting meaning out of it.

Because their community shares this invisible repository of meaning. And there's a researcher named Stephen H. Daniel that this is all based on—I'll give you a link to the research paper.

Stephen H. Daniel insists that reading a writing is what's going on in the built environment. When people use a place, they can use it because they can read it.

And that all of the things that even this water bottle is a writing that we all know how to relate to through something we share together, which we could think of and refer to as a reading. And that reading, and in my research into this, especially working with an architect and the student of a great architect, thinking about that as something that's

structural, that the reading itself that the community has, that you all are a part of this, so you all have, this research is arguing, that you will have a reading that you rely on accessing what is in that reading all of the time to make sense of things.

That occur in your in your day in front of you. Right now you are using the community's reading to understand things and that we could benefit from a spatial architectural way of looking at and thinking about that.

And this is a picture I drew for myself to try to explain this to myself. So what we all know behind the scenes is always there.

It's in culture, it exists, it's real. There's no one instance of it that we can print or isolate.

It's a dynamic system of everything that the community knows is its reading. And any particular thing, the way that we're able to recognize what it is and use it and make judgments about how much or little we want to interact with it.

Is all mapping back into that agreement behind how anything is made is how the theory works.

So in trying to address Richard's request of me, what even the fuck is a question? My sense is that questions are a lot of things, but for the purposes of what we're talking about here, questions are the mechanism that we use to do...

How do we know what there are plenty of things that we encounter every day that we've never encountered before and yet most of the time we immediately are able to identify them somehow to provisionally slot them in some sort of a category for ourselves and to start to get to know it. How are we doing that.

What is the mechanism that works in this space between what everybody knows and something that exists. what I've honed in on is that questions are that's why we have questions.

Questions are a way to get at, to access what the community knows and to adjust it, to work on it together, ongoingly all the time, we're using questions to continually rebuild agreement behind everything that we make and to continually reinterpret and understand what are things.

When certainly questions are more than that, but to focus for a minute with me now on that idea that a question is the tool that we all use to close the gap for ourselves between a thing and all of the stuff that the community already thinks that it knows. It starts to lend itself to being a method for starting to ask questions differently.

So the, as one is want to do when coming up with a some research, you want to then turn the research into something that you can use to make it operative. And one of the ways that learned borrowed or stolen from Richard.

how do you make something operative is, map it to an acronym. One of the, one of the most famous things that he is known for in information science is the acronym latch that you can organize, that information can be organized five ways location, alphabet, time, category, and hierarchy.

And if you can remember that it's like the, how do you open the latch to understand something LATCH It's operative, you can use it. And do we want to argue that there might be a sixth way to organize information?

Sure, there might a seventh one too, but as an operative you can that little acronym, those five things to start to know how to, what are five ways that I could start to organize

something? That's great.

So I've done that with questions and the model, the acronym is odd and I'm proposing that you can remember this. Even without some sort of a visual aid or something on your phone, although I will give you both of those as well, but just odd.

When we have a question, sometimes we say, isn't that odd? That is odd.

I wonder. So as a way to get at, well, if it's, if asking questions more effectively is going to give me more and better access.

To what everybody already agrees things are and how meaning works. That seems pretty helpful, pretty important.

And if it's gonna help me ask, figure out what things are, if there are new things in the environment, as consultants, we end up in a different environment. Sometimes in the same week, we're in four or five different environments with in one client instance, it's water.

In another instance, it's... Dirt.

In another instance it's ceiling tiles or carpeting that you can use the same approach to question asking irrespective of the domain that you're asking the questions into because all of those domains are in that agreement behind the making. So how do you use odd to ask better questions?

I'll tell you.

The first thing that you work on is the O of odd, which is the idea of making an opening that question asking and again thinking of this as a spatial phenomenon. All of the stuff that everybody already knows, some thing that is in contention, some perhaps new thing that we're working on, that we are trying to make it show up in the world in a way where people can use it and accept it and love it.

Well, the first move to make in questioning is to figure out the size of the opening that you need in order to get what you're curious about. And where to make that opening.

So thinking of this relationship between thing and everything else, there are different positions for opening up your inquiry and not every position is as advantageous for getting the kind of inquiry going that you're interested in. Thinking about the size of the opening, do I need to open it up just a little in order to get at the agreement behind what everybody understands about this thing already?

Or is this going to need to be a big opening? So size, and then also location of the reopening.

Is the opening that I need in order start talking this through and understanding it better closer to the immediate term closer to real time chronologically? Or is it a more fundamental thing that goes further back into tradition, into things that are deeper and further back from the current moment?

So that first move of question asking, again, the idea that there are agreements: do I need to open up the agreement space a little to get just the little thing that I need right now or am I trying to to open it up in a big way in order to renegotiate to start renegotiating what some of those agreements are that's the first question how big of an opening and where are you going to make the opening

the second part of the model is the idea of a direction that your question can move in one of two ways. And using an analogy from fishing, even though that is not an activity that I personally engage in, that once you've figured out where and how you're going to open the question up, then the direction, the trajectory of your question, I found it useful to think about this and classify it in terms of a duality between a hook kind of a question, which is pretty specific vector to direct your attention or the inquiry specifically to get something quite specific back.

A narrower set of, so this is at least half of the question game as far as I'm concerned, are things that work like hooks, things that are meant to get something specific and that you're directing these kinds of questions more narrowly.

The other side of this continuum of how you're going to direct a question is more open. So even though you are not looking for everything in reply to your inquiry, the difference between what time is it, I only want to know something specifically, that's I want to pull back something small.

What is time? I don't wanna pull back everything, so it's more like a net.

There are any number of things that might swim into the range of, I've opened something up, now I wanna direct what I'm doing, am I looking for something that's gonna open up or something that gonna narrow down? So that's the second dimension of this model.

You find a way to open up your question, you figure out a size and a place to do that. Then you set a direction.

What kind of a direction do I want for this question? Is it a hook?

Is it a net?

Then the third element of the model is depth, and this again goes to the spatial aspect of the explanation here. And back to this visualization.

The surface of what everybody, the agreements that everybody knows about and that everybody is party to, if we ask a question that transgresses the surface of what's already

understood, that is a different set of effects, that has different consequences than if you are staying on the surface on purpose. And unintentionally transgressing what the set of agreements is in a community creates needless friction.

If you aren't intending to violate, to transgress, then to do so while trying to get at what you're trying to do is going to be working against you. So, in this third dimension of depth...

The question is, can I rely on the set of agreements that already exist? Can we find the satisfaction to our inquiry that we seek without violating the agreements that already exists, or are we going to have to transgress?

With an answer or a provisional answer at least to that question for yourself, you are positioned more adequately to ask a good question.

So that's really what it all depends on, as far as I'm concerned, is the idea that there is an agreement behind how everything is made and that we can use questions to poke at, to probe, to bring information back from that set of agreements. In order to then make better decisions about what we're going to do next.

So, great, if that's a model for asking questions, if you can remember odd, if I want to ask a better question, I could open my question in a more purposeful way. I could set the direction of my question either more narrow or a little bit more open.

Then I could think about the depth of my questions and whether it's going to be a transgressive one that disrupts the agreement space or whether I'm going to explore the agreement space more thoroughly in order to find a way to talk about it in terms of agreement. That's all well and good.

So why am I telling you this? Why am I talking about this?

That's what information architecture is. The structure that we use to go back and forth here, questions are an infrastructure for participation in the construction of that shared meaning.

So this is the one moment where lower lights. Lower lights would be bad for staying awake, but what this is supposed to be showing is...

That spatial, how do we connect what this invisible thing, the agreement behind the making that everybody knows and this new thing that we're trying to work on. That which connects these things is invisible, but that's what the information architecture is.

The labels, the lines of connection between what we do not know and what we seek to know, that's all architectures of information.



**Dan Klyn**

Okay, so our app says that is a gap filling question. And because it's red, that means that it is a hook type of a question and fills a hole in understanding. Like what year did the revolution begin? A gap-filling net type of a question. And so you get.

**Audience**

Oh, she has it. OK, but I'll take it up to run that up.

**Dan Klyn**

Okay, is there another question that we can try out the Questionatron 2000 on? Andrea.

**Audience**

This was asked by a really famous electronic musician in Detroit, which is, who am I interrupted? Who am I, interrupted?

**Dan Klyn**

Who am I, comma, interrupted? Whew, OK, and the question is already at the end there, so.

This is also a gap-filling question according to the logic of the app and you could also have a full set if you like, but Fills a hole in understanding who am I comma interrupted the answer to that? What this is telling us is that is a specific kind of you're looking for something specifically to pull back from that type of a question And I'm interested in the objective.

**Audience**

I might disagree, so that's interesting.

**Dan Klyn**

And that's the whole idea, to test things out, is to find problems.

**Audience**

How do I know what I think until I see what I say?

**Dan Klyn**

That is a classic one that I always need to. How do I know until I see what I say?

Imperative eliciting. Interesting.

So that is also a hook type of a question and it seeks a command as an answer. And so I'm curious, does that work for you?

How about the seeking a command as an answer? So how do I know what I think until I see what I say?

So you see what you say, and then the answer comes back. This is what you think.

Not, you think this, you this, so not a net, but a narrow directed thing where you really want to be told something. Then we don't always want to be told.

**Audience**

Trick, trick, and trick, trick and trick.

**Dan Klyn**

I wonder if anybody has another question. Perhaps we could get a blue one out of some of you. There are only two more sets of treats, though. So there are only two more incentivized questions. You are in a question asking pose, sir.

**Audience**

Yes, but it's not a question for the question answers. This reminds me of discourse semiotics.

**Dan Klyn**

Say more. This reminds him of discourse semiotics from Lit Crit.

**Audience**

So how does this? You take a text, and you? No, I'm just saying you can ask the question. How would I ask? Form your answer in the frame. Can we have the Jeopardy music, please? Yeah. Thank you very much.

How is the ODD framework different from this course? Yeah. OK.

Yeah, obviously the ODD framework reminds me of discourse semiotics. Is this a valid comparison?

**Dan Klyn**

We should talk about this, you and I, but let's see what it, what it does. So, so feed me the actual prompt.

**Audience**

Or how it ends. How is discourse semiotics?

**Dan Klyn**

Distinguished from, different than...

**Audience**

Related.

**Dan Klyn**

Related to.

**Audience**

It just seems like there is.

**Dan Klyn**

To Wurman Klyn odd theory, if that's a thing. Oh, hooray, variable. So that is a net type question. And what this says is it uses who, what, where, when, why, or how, and that those are all looking for more than just one thing.

**Audience**

Share their questions. Have a great day.

**Dan Klyn**

Yes, so the way that this little app works is if you click share the question it will encode the question in the URL string. So if you hit copy it will then take your user to a landing page that reiterates the question and then shows what type it is. He's aware of it.

**Audience**

If you can dictate his answer to me.

**Dan Klyn**

Oh, we have a question up there. Yes.

How does this website work? That is a terrific question.

Let's see. And then I'll ask you if you really wanna know.

No. Oh, this is fascinating. I'm not sure that the logic here is correctly parsing, but I love what it came up with.

Because when you say, how does the website work, what do then I say? Oh, so you want to know how the website works.

That the nature of it, the way you phrased it, and so underneath the hood here, it's all vibe-coded with Claude, and it's a good 20,000 lines of code that eats 23 research papers and then uses the odd typology inside of that. The short answer is I don't know how it works.

But I built it. Yes.

All by myself. All the layout.

All Claude.

**Audience**

Way that you're shading.

**Dan Klyn**

Oh, you mean like the knockouts of the capitals? This is a typeface that was developed to transcribe Roman stone carvings and so it has a different glyph for a destroyed quadrant of every letter So those are all four quadrants of the capital letter destroyed in a type face called Mercure transcript And the reason that I put them there is because they looked

better there.

A famous graphic designer once said, what is graphic design? I move things around until they look good.

**Audience**

I can't believe the question was that. Or either do you?

**Dan Klyn**

You can have as many of these as you want, Mr. Cooney, so. There's a man with a Carhartt hat back there, yes.

**Audience**

Yes sir, question I got is could it be your fault?

**Dan Klyn**

That's the question, could it be your fault? My gosh.

Hypothesis scanning. Yes, that is a great thank you for offering that one.

So this says tests possibilities without foreclosing others. And if you said, this was your fault, right?

That would be an echo question. But saying it, could it be your fault?

That's bigger than, it's probably you at fault here, buddy, right. Yeah.

Excellent question. Please run this up to the man.

**Audience**

You know, so.

Something that I had heard George Furnas do, I don't know if you've ever seen George Furnas. He was talking about how. You know, a sentence can be written in two different ways about the same meaning, like the dog bit the man, the man was bitten by a dog. Have you, like you just did with this, could it be your fault? I wonder if you took the same, could you express one thread, one question in all these different ways? Does a question stretch in those ways?

**Dan Klyn**

Do and so for the benefit of the room so Dan was asking about the Can and this is not his words, but could you put the same question? I think this is what you're getting at through

its paces by changing the word order or other ways Yes so it becomes the different kinds of questions and thank you Dan because this is the one other thing that I would like to say and then I feel like I've said most of the things that I wanted to say is that so what are you all going to do with this.

Here's a poster if you want to print out a poster of all of these questions all of the kinds of question if you wanna get into so if you click on one of these it'll tell you about it if you Click on the side here it'll reveal all of these kinds of questions with their definitions, et cetera. So having one question, just like Latch, Mr. Wurman's Latch if you had a spice rack and you wanted to think about could we live better if our spices were in more of an orderly way and you could go through, well, we could organize them by location.

So the spices we use more are closer to where we reach and the spices that we don't use a lot are further away or we could put them in alphabetical order, Etc. Etc...

The 20 questions to put the same question through all 20 kinds of questions is a powerful way to understand which of those 20 forms of the question is the one that's going to give you the combination because there's like with anything information architecture there's no right way but there are good ways and so how do you figure out the optimal balance of. How big or small of an opening and where am I gonna make the opening with this question?

And that's the, oh, hook or net, surface or transgressive. If you take the same question through 20 modalities of questioning, one or more of those might be a more optimal balance of the odd thing.

That's. That's what I suspect and so I went and I listened to a weird guy from Michigan say some half-baked stuff about questions and then what?

The then what could be well? There's something that you're curious about right now.

I'm sure of it If you could put it ask it 20 ways to yourself Maybe one of those ways is a way you haven't asked it yet or a better way to ask it than the 19 ways you've already tried. But that this is a infrastructure for participation in the construction of shared meaning, that's the other way to think about what, well, why would I bother trying to, I have a question.

It's probably OK. I'll just ask it.

Why go through 19 other ways of asking it? There's something about the, and I you as a human being.

You entertain ideas about maybe we could do something better for ourselves, that progress might be possible. And so to think about your question asking as maintenance, gardening, pruning the reading that the community has, So that we don't forget stuff or

we don't emphasize the wrong stuff, I think that's, that's another reason to maybe try to come up with 19 different ways to ask the question that you already are asking effectively is, well, maybe some of those other ways help curate the whole community's meaning.

Whereas I have my one question that serves my purpose. Ask it 19 other ways and you might find one that floats more boats than just yours.

Yes.

### **Audience**

How does this system now or how could it in the future address the privilege of the ability to ask it?

### **Dan Klyn**

Yes, this all does presuppose equality that probably doesn't exist in the environment where it's being applied. And that sense of that, we all are, if not obliged, we would do well to ask questions in all of our role as maintainers of the construction of shared meaning.

Yeah, that's always taking place in an environment where some people because of how they show up. Aren't allowed to ask questions as freely or as, or be listened to in their question asking.

I think acknowledging that reality is the first part. And to be persistent, those of us who have had the boot of power on our neck, that power is often, when we think about those powers that we want to resist, one of the ways that we talk about them is that's an unquestioning power.

That the adherence to that power system are doing it in an unquestioning way. That they've just signed up for it.

They've got the right color hat and now they're doing the behaviors. Doing more with questions is, and especially if you think of that third aspect of question asking, that the depth of the question includes transgressive depths of questions.

Thinking of your fundamental right to be a question asker. And if you hit resistance with your one question, coming at them with 19 more versions of the same question as a framework for resisting what's going on in an environment of unequal ability to ask questions, my aspiration is, well, these are tools that we can use to liberate ourselves, but I'm saying that as an enjoyer of all of the privileges of our culture.

That's something I want to keep looking at and asking questions about. Yeah, not feeling like you're allowed to ask a question.

Is probably among the most universal experiences. When you think of something that we've all gone through, you know that you've got one.

Your way of relating to meaning is incomplete and feeling like you can't because of embarrassment, because of unequal power, because of whatever it's because of. We've all

been.

**Audience**

Another side question I guess, have you ever looked at or examined active listening as a technique to guide these types of questions?

**Dan Klyn**

I have and it's certainly informed by that. There's a frame. There is also a related framework called clean questioning clean questions. Take a look at it. It's a this is not explicitly mapped into that methodology, but Worth exploring.

**Audience**

Do you find yourself in day-to-day conversations categorizing the questions that people ask?

**Dan Klyn**

Yes, yes, the, the. I almost said burden, but it's a pleasant burden to know that their unquestioning behaviors, those aren't usually any good, including the unquestioned way that I have approached questions prior to doing this research.

So, I feel like I hesitate now, not because of any reason other than... I want to go through some of the permutations of the other ways that I might ask a question.

So, yeah, I used to enjoy blurting out a question that wasn't very well formed. Sometimes those are terrific questions.

There's a risk in knowing about a framework for questions where it's going to get, it certainly has happened to me, where it gets in between that impulse of, oh, I just wanna blurt something out. And now I wanna keep my powder dry for a couple of seconds longer to sort of go through, again, like, am I trying to transgress here?

Because if I don't need to, why am I? And my blurting out of questions, I think, if there's a category of reasons to not do that so much, I think it's that third dimension of, I like to show off with a transgression in my question.

And that's not always a good impulse. Great, great question.

**Audience**

I don't really have a question, but this is making me think what you were talking about, Maria, and then your question. I was sitting here thinking, as someone who was undiagnosed with autism for four decades, I asked a lot of questions and learned that

people really do not like to be asked questions. They get very annoyed with questions and I could be asking something in a hook way and they will answer me and in that way, they will assume that there's subtext to what I'm asking and there isn't. Or they will assume that I am speaking with subtext when I'm not. But what you just said made me think of a

researcher who works with neurodivergent people and helps us to understand that people are taking our questions as transgressive when they are not.

**Dan Klyn**

Well, if your body shows up as transgressive, anything that comes out of the hole in your face doesn't have a chance.

**Audience**

Right, and so, I'll share her research and thoughts with you, because what she's saying is like, we end up being less effective than what our potential actually is because people are taking us as transgressive when we are asking questions to get to a deeper meaning, to get a better solution.

**Dan Klyn**

Yeah, and possibly the other parts of the framework could help with that. If, if you are a member of a community that's got a boot on its neck where you're already being marginalized, your remit to ask the transgressive question is already less than other people in the room or some of your colleagues, there are those other two dimensions still there's at least two other dimensions than that, not in a capitulating to the imbalance way.

As again as an operative knowing that if you if the way you show up is already a transgression then a question asking strategy that doesn't start with the depth or that tries to use the depth without transgression and then uses the other dimensions in a more canny way that could be a way to operate in reality without rolling over to the injustice.

**Audience**

Do you think that, for those people who don't like those questions, I don't know that this framework would be helpful in terms of, like... Oh, not for them. No, it's definitely not for... Not for the question...

**Dan Klyn**

Not for the question receiver, but for the questions asker Not only do marginalized people in marginalized communities end up doing more work For less compensation and here's another here's just another log to throw on your fire Then here's something else that you can do more than what other people have to do which is being more purposeful in question asking and Choosing to be less transgressive in order to get the effects that you want especially if some of the effects you want are to co-construct the community's sense of what does anything mean, backing off of that transgressive piece, even though you ought to have every right to be that transgressive too.

**Audience**

Sorry, it doesn't feel like a softball in the same way. I don't know if all the things are like, the idea of like... How does... So how does it participate in the construction of shared meaning? Is it opening up? What's the relationship to meaning and shared meaning, and

how does the question sit in? And if you speak more to that, what do you think?

**Dan Klyn**

Yeah, The picture that I gave to myself about that was this one. There's a can you restate the question?

**Audience**

It's basically that idea of if I'm using a question to participate in that field of agreement that the community has around. An old thing, a new thing.

**Dan Klyn**

Electric interurban transit. Transit

**Audience**

But how does the question, how do you say more about that act of it participating?

**Dan Klyn**

Yeah I think where it starts and maybe the whole of it is to do so much more questioning that my sense just personally is that the agreement behind the stuff that we make is falling apart right now. It's in shambles, it's in tatters.

The fear that I feel about transgressing in everyday interactions for outing myself as a member of a side, to out myself as a Star-Bellied Sneetch, if you know the Dr. Seuss, in a room full of folks that ain't got stars upon thars, that whole milieu is of unquestioning. It's of not engaging and it's kind of the opposite of what I just said with Andrea's.

Well, if you're already in a marginalized group, maybe you back off of the whole transgressive aspect of questions to focus more on the other aspects of questions. But in general, I think if we, I care deeply about the ability to have shared meaning.

As that becomes threat, that's under threat, I believe. And if I asked 300% more questions tomorrow, than I otherwise would have, I believe the effect is gardening, curation, that is tending that shared resource of meaning because it, and it is awfully transgressive to ask.

I mean, there's the famous thing that Alan Watts says about, why this, why this? Why this, why this?

Eventually, what you want to say is, oh, shut up and eat your bun. Like a little kid asking questions all the time.

Oh, shut up and eat your bun. What if we don't shut up and eat our bun if our ways of being agents in the world were to be dramatically more question asking like bigly like

you're asked like like we forsake statements prep and shift to questions as like I think that's that's That could be a real thing.

To be an agent provocateur, and people who are coded like you and I should be the first ones to do it because culture gives us more permission to do it. How come there's only men on this panel?

Why was I invited to this? I have lots of other colleagues who could have been invited to this.

To just question everything would go a long way, I think, to rebuilding because to get at the, to respond to those questions, you have to access that shared repository of meaning. That's the only place that you can go to deal with all of my damn questions is, well, what does anything mean?

You and I, Dan, we can do this more than most of the other people who aren't white guys in this room. We could maybe even create more permission for other people in these spaces to be answer providers.

We've been looked to for being the providers of answers if we were to flip into the mode of I have some questions. But people who look like me have been answering these questions for a long time and look where that's gone.

**Audience**

The idea of asking the questions.

**Dan Klyn**

Yeah. Yep.

**Audience**

Can determine what you get back. But I would assume the goal is to get a response and to get towards an answer, even if it's just for yourself. But a lot of questions are asked not looking for an answer. They're asked to make a point.

**Dan Klyn**

Yes, thank you for asking that. And as you were formulating your question, what I was thinking of is lawyers.

Like as a class of people who ask questions, is anybody here a lawyer? OK, well, let's just talk about them.

My sense is that they are a special case of question askers. I've heard from, you've probably heard this too, that lawyers never ask a question in court that they don't know the answer to.

So I think if we generalize from there and think about 20 kinds of questions, I don't know, I, I have to do more research. I don't know that they all require or expect answers.

The, the odd model, I think explains what lawyers are doing with their questions, which is, they are looking for There's a really specific place in between the thing we're talking about, did they or didn't they do the bad thing and what everybody knows and what everybody agrees on, there's a very specific place, like fly fishing. Again, I don't know anything about fishing or the law, so I'm in double trouble here.

But I have a buddy who, he could put a fly on the nose of a trout if he wanted. Like.

So specific with that hook. So there is a really specific thing that the room needs to hear.

And if the room hears it, we all understand more. Maybe we're even repairing and improving that agreement behind the making.

And that isn't looking for an answer at all. It's exposing, so in that it's the it's knowing where to open it So if we opened it just a little bit here, then it would change the temperature in the room.

If we open it too much, it's gonna, we're talking about everything and it's going to dilute the case I'm making. So I'm going to open this up a little bit and I'm gonna show you specifically some dimension of what anything means or what is supposed to have happened.

And that's the prosecutor and the defense attorney. Is gonna try to open either narrow the opening or make it bigger and say well if what the prosecutor is saying is true then none of us can be citizens anymore so, that guy said it's oh it's just this it's it's people who flew on a plane here to have a baby they can't be oh but what about the secretary of state his parents weren't So it's how much or little are we going to open the reading together.

There's something about a Bible being open. Like, we've opened the reading.

Like, this is the thing that we're talking about. So we could use a question to open something to a very specific place in the reading for us to then pay attention to that without it being an answer.

It's just saying, this is a thing. As a non-fisher, non-lawyer.

Does anybody here fish? Is there something that is not covered by nets and hooks?

Is there a middle way?

**Audience**

Fishing.

**Dan Klyn**

So I think, yeah, questions that we're not looking for an answer. Some of them might be spears.

Some of it might be dynamite. Oh, just grabbing the fish?

There is a lot to still explore in Questionland, and there is on the website, on the other side of that QR code, there is a paper here. And it is masquerading as an academic paper with an abstract and all the right formatting and stuff.

So all of this is chapter two of a forthcoming book by Richard Saul Wurman called Richard Saul Wurman Five. And if you'd like to read chapter two in advance, you are welcome.

**Audience**

I think that's good.

**Dan Klyn**

Thank you all for coming. Please ride the electric interurban to Grand Rapids the next time that you see it coming down the middle of Main Street. I'd love to return your hospitality if you come visit me. All right, thank you.

**Audience**

We'll hang out some more if you want to have...