

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

Extreme Makeover

Changing minds by changing the questions we ask ourselves

IN THE STYLE SECTION OF LAST SUNDAY'S NEW YORK TIMES, a half-dozen very fashionable women were photographed wearing white suits, complete with matching accessories, a week in advance of Memorial Day. The accompanying text pointed out that forty years ago, well-bred ladies would not have pulled their whites out until Memorial Day and the day after Labor Day all of those luminous summer clothes go back into storage. It was a ritual in our household, close on the heels of the big spring cleaning. Winter clothes got put away; summer clothes came out. Of course, that was in a time and place when seasonal weather and cultural norms were fairly predictable and conformity the key to success.

In South Dakota, it's wise to not push the winter gear too far back into the closet in case gloves are needed to shovel out the August hail. Nonetheless, the change of seasons can be signified in other ways than an old-fashioned change of wardrobe. My proposal is to change life seasons by retiring some old questions and wearing some new ones. Specifically, it's time to retire "why?". Why did I eat that second helping? Why did I leave the term paper until the last minute? Why did I continue the argument instead of going home? Why? Why? Why? That single-word inquiry can get to be as old as last winter's socks and just about as useful when trying to put on a perspective that's fresh and new. What if I leave things until the last minute because I like the adrenaline rush? Then what? Asking "why" often leads us back into memories which bring up self-recrimination for history and habit. It takes a long time to arrive at an answer which can provide useful information and even then, it's usually either too ambiguous or too ancient to point in the direction of what actions might be helpful to effect change. The "why" question usually only appears when things are not going happily. When a client is doing something very successfully, she rarely stops to consider why she's doing so well. When life is smooth, few people ask "why?". They just enjoy it.

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In the interest of changing one's inner wardrobe, I encourage clients to try on a different question style: "What?" . Here's style number one. "What is actually going on and what's going on just inside my head?" This question is helpful to people who never question their psychic abilities to just know what someone else is thinking, what they really mean (vs. what I heard them say), what their motives are. The consequences of "psychic thinking" can be very problematic if such thinking leads us to make decisions or respond to an event on the basis of faulty or incomplete information. For example, a client recently complained that the man she's been seeing shows up for their dates dressed too casually. Her question: "Why can't he dress up more? Why doesn't he make at least a little effort to please me in the way he looks? " Those two simple questions share several assumptions: that he shares the same concept of "casual" as she does; that he's not making an effort; that the desire to please her should be reflected in his wardrobe; that she has a right to determine what he wears and react accordingly when he doesn't follow her wishes. Changing the question to "What's going on in reality?" offers alternative answers. Maybe he's skimping on a new wardrobe to buy her a ring or himself a motorcycle or to change jobs. Maybe he's comfortable with himself and thinks he looks great as is. Maybe he doesn't place much emphasis on looks and would be happy if she dressed down once in a while and appeared more relaxed. The point is that asking "why?" usually leads to a self-generated response which may have little basis in objective fact.

A second "what" question for the new inner wardrobe invites a further step back and deeper reflection. "What can I take away from this to help me do better next time?" Stuff happens. Ed and I, for example, have been plagued over the past few years with water backup in the basement. The fellows who come and take the roots out of our old pipes are my new best friends as we have them in often. In the past, the backup event has generated a lot of "why" questions, mostly along the lines of " Why is this happening to us? We're good people and don't deserve it." If the backup happens when Ed's at work, I can get into full victim mode with "Why does this always happen when I'm home alone?" We actually know why the sewer backs up: roots keep blocking our old pipes. Changing to "What can we do about

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it?” opened up multiple options ranging from a new pipe to a liner to a reconfiguration of the plumbing to an alarm system. Sticking with “why is this happening to me?” keeps one mired in victim-hood. Thinking “what can I take away?” opens up possibilities for solutions.

A final question can be used on a daily basis, just to keep our perspective fresh and to acknowledge and recognize the changes we do make. “What’s new?” is an invitation to track daily life changes and periodically take stock in a broad and objective way. What’s new today might be a new appreciation of a partner or child; a new route to work; a new understanding of an old problem. Push old ways of thinking to the back of the closet. You can always pull them out if you need to or you may, at sometime, decide they don’t fit any more and just give them away.

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