

Forget Resolutions, What's Your "Beautiful Question" For 2015?

BIG QUESTIONS CAN LEAD TO BIG BREAKTHROUGHS, WRITES WARREN BERGER, AUTHOR OF *A MORE BEAUTIFUL QUESTION*. HERE'S HOW TO FIND YOURS.

WRITTEN BY Warren Berger

With New Year's comfortably behind us, we've all had enough talk of resolutions. But for those still looking for a way to spark change in their lives, I'd like to suggest a different approach. Try formulating your own "beautiful question"—one that is bold and engaging enough to keep you working on it throughout 2015.

A beautiful question (at least according to my own, admittedly subjective definition) can be thought of as an ambitious, yet actionable, question that can begin to shift the way we think about something—and can serve as a catalyst to bring about change.



In researching the power of questioning, I found that many change-makers—designers, entrepreneurs, groundbreaking artists, inventors—tend to spend a lot of their time pursuing questions that fit the definition above. And often, those big questions lead to big breakthroughs; in fact, I found that everything from the inspiration for the Red Cross, to the birth of the Internet, to the invention of the cell phone, could be traced back to a question. The same can be said of many startup companies: Polaroid, Pixar, Netflix, Warby Parker, Airbnb, and many others began when company founders set out to answer

game-changing questions about why something was lacking in the marketplace and how that gap might be filled.

But there's no reason why asking beautiful questions should be the exclusive domain of inventors and entrepreneurs. All of us can benefit by grappling with ambitious questions that encourage us to step back and consider possible ways to reimagine our lives or reinvent our careers. By asking, for example, How might I reposition myself in response to changes happening in my industry?, or, How might I use my own strengths to tackle a specific problem impacting my community?, you set in motion a process that can lead to profound change.



That may surprise some because we don't usually equate "asking a question" with "taking action." But just by putting an ambitious question out there in front of you, you begin to engage with it. A few years back, a fascinating University of Illinois study found that when people are trying to motivate themselves to do something, questions actually work better than statements or commands. In other words, asking "Will I do X?" or "How might I do X?" is more motivating than declaring "I will do X!" The researchers found that articulating a challenge as a question had the effect of getting people to immediately start thinking about that challenge: why it might be worth doing, how it might be accomplished.

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Questions also fire the imagination. A question is a puzzle: once it has been raised, the mind almost can't help trying to solve or answer it. In this way, questions enable us to begin to act in the face of uncertainty; they help us to "organize our thinking around what we don't know," explains Steve Quatrano of the nonprofit Right Question Institute, which studies and teaches questioning methodologies.

But not all questions are equal: some are more motivating and inspiring than others. Should we have glass or plaster walls in our new conference room? is not a particularly beautiful question, whereas, How might we create a more collaborative environment? could be. With beautiful questions you're looking for something more open-ended, more ambitious.

On the other hand, if they're too ambitious (How might we end all wars, starting today?), beautiful questions tend to be less actionable, and they don't stick. The sweet spot of questioning was described to me by the renowned physicist Edward Witten, who said that in his work he is always searching for "a question that is hard (and interesting) enough that it is worth answering—and easy enough that one can actually answer it."

Where and how might you find your own beautiful question?

Start building your own beautiful question by looking to where your interests and passions lie—ask yourself some questions about what moves you, what you care deeply about, what you feel you were meant to do. Look for a tough problem that needs solving, in your business, your community or your personal life. In my book *A More Beautiful Question* I interviewed social entrepreneurs such as Gary White of water.org and Jacqueline Novogratz of The Acumen Fund and found that their careers started with identifying a social problem and then framing a powerful question to attack that challenge. A beautiful question may involve an issue that is right in front of you—though you may need to "step back" to see it fresh. (Often identifying something you're shying away from or afraid of is a great starting point.)



Once you've found a challenge worth pursuing, get your arms around it by putting it into the form of a "How might we" (or, in the singular, "How might I") question. Innovators at Google and Ideo have been using this form of questioning for years because it's a great way to phrase a question that is open and expansive, yet still action-oriented. As Ideo's chief executive Tim Brown explains, when beautiful questions are worded this way it frees up creative thinking. "The 'how' part assumes there are solutions out there—it provides creative confidence," Brown says. "The word 'might' says we can put ideas out there that might work or might not—either way, it's okay."

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My own beautiful question these days, perhaps predictably, is: How might I find ways to encourage others to question more? Having become steeped in the subject, the question is right in my wheelhouse, and is therefore actionable—but it's also grand and ambitious enough that it could keep me chasing the question for a long, long time.

That's as it should be with a beautiful question. When you find yours, be prepared to live with it (or a version of it; they often morph). We have become all too accustomed to getting quick answers to our daily questions on Google, but a beautiful question calls for a very different kind of "search"—which may lead you to unfamiliar places, new ways of thinking, and (with a little luck) a breakthrough somewhere along the way. As Einstein once said, "It's not that I'm so smart. But I stay with the questions much longer."