

An excerpt from:  
*Becoming Wise An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*  
by Krista Tippett

Listening is an everyday social art, but it's an art we have neglected and must learn anew. Listening is more than being quiet while the other person speaks until you can say what you have to say. I like the language Rachel Naomi Remen uses with young doctors to describe what they should practice: "generous listening." Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability - a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own best words and questions.

Generous listening in fact yields better questions. It's not true what they taught us in school; there is such a thing as a bad question. In American life, we trade mostly in answers - competing answers - and in questions that corner, incite, or entertain. In journalism we have a love affair with the "tough" question, which is often an assumption masked as an inquiry and looking for a fight. I edited the "spiritual background of your life" question out of our produced show for years, for fear that it sounded soft, though I knew how it shaped everything that followed. My only measure of the strength of a question now is the honesty and eloquence it elicits.

If I've learned nothing else, I've learned this: a question is a powerful thing, a mighty use of words. Questions elicit answers in their likeness. Answers mirror the questions they rise, or fall, to meet. So while a simple question can be precisely what's needed to drive to the heart of the matter, it's hard to meet a *simplistic* question with anything but a simplistic answer. It's hard to transcend a combative question. But it's hard to resist a generous question. We all have it in us to formulate questions that invite honesty, dignity, and revelation. There is something redemptive and life-giving about asking a better question.

Here's another quality of generous questions, questions as social art and civic tools: they may not want answers, or not immediately. They might be raised in order to be pondered, dwelt on, instead.