



WHY WE STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR

Nilofer Merchant

“Is it the negro’s hour or the women’s hour?”

It was 1867. And George T. Downing, a NY-based restaurateur and Black activist in the underground railroad movement asked this question at a meeting of the newly-formed *American Equal Rights Association*.

Imagine. That room. That moment.

If you were an Abolitionist, you had *finally* ended the legal practice of chattel slavery, where Black people were considered property, treated as things. And while you were joyous at that progress, you knew that the practice of white people oppressing and dominating Black people since 1619... wasn't somehow just “over” because the Civil War was. It would take more than winning a war to rewrite the false narratives of hierarchy as a natural order. More than new procedures to enable access to equal resources. More than new laws to end the near-constant violence on the Black body.

If you were a white woman in that room, maybe even having fought as an abolitionist, you had witnessed this promise of equality coming into being. And, you yearned for it, too. You were tired of being dominated. Tired of how, once you married, your own legal existence ceased, and consolidated into his. Sickened by how the crime of rape was legal within a marriage. How, if you worked, you got just half or 1/3 of what he earned. How you didn't even have the rights to the custody of your own darn children.

And then you're asked... *Which is it?* “Is it the negro's or women's hour?”

QUESTIONS DIRECT DESTINY

Questions, I find, are the key to change.

Questions are like that toy wooden cube with shapes on all sides, the gizmo that toddlers play with as they learn how to match things up, to know what fits where. The triangle 3D wooden block goes into the triangle outline on the box, not the rectangle or circle shape. (And the sippy cup won't fit at all.)

Questions frame and shape a conversation, inform what possibilities are even considered, and so direct our attention to what comes next. Ask a limiting question and everyone's attention is directed to limited ideas. Ask a generative question and the possibilities open.

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and so direct our attention to what comes next.

Questions direct a destiny.

Which is maybe why I was so struck by this particular question, asked at a meeting for *Equal Rights* of all things. Not only did the question ignore the [intersectionality](#) of Black women in that room, it reeked of scarcity.

It signaled ...

That equality is a competitive sport.

That there is not enough freedom or power or liberty to go around. And...

That we must each go through the turnstile of progress one at a time.

IT CERTAINLY SHAPED THAT ROOM'S RESPONSE

Which explains why the room responded as they did...

"I'd be jealous," said Lucretia Mott, an abolitionist and Quaker minister who preached that the divine light of God lived in each of us... "if men got the vote and women did not."

"I would not trust a black man with my rights," Elizabeth Cady Stanton said. She was angered at the idea of 2 million black men being allowed the vote before women "like her." She was spitting mad that she, " a native-born citizen, having the same religion, speaking the same language, equal in wealth and family and education had been politically ostracized by their own countrymen," to be subjected to being governed by "barbarians" and "savages."

"If you will not give the whole loaf of suffrage to the entire people, give it to the most intelligent, first," Susan B Anthony famously said. Later, Anthony reported that when colored women came to ask for her help in forming a branch of the suffrage, she "declined" due to "expediency."

"With us, the question is a matter of life or death. When [white] women are hunted down, dragged from their houses, hung upon lamp posts, children torn from their arms, not allowed to enter schools, then [white] women will have an urgency to obtain the ballot as equal to our own," was Frederick Douglass' response. Which explains perhaps why he accepted the 15th amendment, two years later. The 15th amendment offered the vote to Black Men first and formally split any potential coalition between Black people and Women (but that amendment was deemed meaningless by poll taxes, literacy tests, and persistent violence).

Is it this, or that, George T. Downing asked?

And four notable suffrage leaders answered. Some, *this*. And others, *that*.

The room responded to the question asked.

Now, *notably*, two folks *did* challenge the very premise of the question. Francis Ellen Watkins Harper and Lucy Stone are both on record arguing that the very question of priority shouldn't even be considered. Harper added, "the rights of Black Men, Black Women, and White Women are all bound up together."

But, even as Harper and Stone *challenged* the validity of the question, in all my many readings I couldn't find anyone providing an alternative formulation, a better question.

And who knows, maybe they did. Maybe they did and weren't heard in that room? Maybe it wasn't recorded? Or, maybe everyone was carrying the ball just as far as they could... for that moment in history, on that day.

I don't know.

All I *do* know is the question invisibly shaped the thinking of those in the room. It's *either* the triangle or the square, not... getting all the shapes into the box.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE QUESTION IS IN THE RANKING OF VALUE

The problem with the question is it presupposed that our fates *could* be ranked. And our destinies aren't linked. Which is, by all evidence, a lie.

A lie with a very real cost.

The lie provides access to resources, or denial of resources through no fault of anyone's own and due to arbitrary things, like... to whom were you born. The lie determines who has the social status or organizational power enough to have their ideas heard or developed or acted upon. And, of course, it signals whose very life is protected, and whose life is nearly always threatened.

Yet, many white women in 1867 believed the lie, wholeheartedly.

Even *while* they were personally being oppressed, they worked to recreate a hierarchical and divisive relationship to power.

When Stanton and Anthony ran out of funds to pursue their goals, they joined forces with known segregationist (aka racist) George Francis Train. He funded a lecture tour. And he funded the creation of a newspaper for (white) women's rights, with the condition that he be allowed to editorialize in it. Which is how every person reading "*The Revolution*" for ideas about future freedoms, were socialized, conditioned, indoctrinated that other humans were less-than. And how voting should be conditional, using an "educational test" despite it being still illegal to educate Black people in most parts of the country.

This is how dreams of "change" or "progress" or "freedom" get ridiculously distorted. Those white women of 1867 wanted to *change* their own personal pecking order in the room, not to *change* the room that ends oppression itself.

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This kind of jockeying for position explains why the right to vote next went to white women in 1920. Then Native Americans followed in 1924 (and didn't actually get to vote in all the states until 1962). Then Japanese Asian women in 1952. Black women waited until 1965. Folks with disabilities waited until 1990. (And, still, many remain waiting. For example, Puerto Rico or D.C.) Despite being 52% of the population, women's issues are treated as "special interests." And 80% of all elected seats are held by white men, who are only 31% of the population.

The room, 100+ years later, remains relatively unchanged.

HIS QUESTION INVISIBLY SHAPED MY THINKING, MY LIFE

Now, I should clarify that I'm no historian. Nor an expert on suffrage.

All I am, on a good day, is a student of change and change-making. As a practitioner of change-making in the business world, I've helped ship innovations like Apple's first Internet Server, and the first wysiwyg software that let us create the websites we've come to rely on.

Yet, I can see so clearly how George T. Downing's question invisibly shaped more than that room's response, but my own thinking, my own choices.

My early life showed me I had no voice.

You see, as a girl in my family of origin, I had relatively little power to affect the direction of my own life. Like the women of the mid-1800s, I was expected to get married. And given my Asian Indian roots, my family would decide to whom I would marry. A dowry, a “gift” from the groom, would provide my divorcée mother all the financial security she wanted. And my social existence would be seamlessly transitioned from “daughter,” to “wife.”

To be clear, I didn't argue with *any* of this social structure.

I knew how it was, that I needed to keep my voice small to belong. And I wanted to please my family, to be “good” according to the customs I had been raised with.

And yet, I had a yearning, an idea of my own: I wanted to also get a higher education. I was hoping I could somehow do both, but I was told no, I couldn't even ask, not even request that the idea be considered.

But, I still tried to negotiate this “special interest,” by leaving home for what I thought would be an hour. And an hour turned into days which turned into weeks.

And that's how I ended up denounced by my family.

That experience—that terrifying and lonely experience—of having little to no power, of being homeless, penniless, and disowned was when I knew (however unconsciously) I needed to get me some of that power.

And that's how I found myself, within 10 years, running the revenues for a division of a Fortune 500 company. In my first year, we had grown the business from a \$200M-ish business to a \$300M-ish business.

As we started to plan for the coming fiscal year, there was a disagreement.

At the time, the team responsible for growing the \$40M education business directly reported to me. I didn't, however, control the budget for marketing. My best friend from years prior was in charge of the marketing spend. And, unfortunately, my friend and I disagreed on strategy.

And that's how I found myself using George T. Downing's frame, unwittingly.

Because *if* winning is a competitive sport,
And there's *not enough* to go around,
And only one of us gets to go through the turnstile of advancement...
Then that "winner" was going to be me.

I can see so clearly how George T. Downing's question invisibly shaped more than that room's response, but my own thinking, my own choices.

I wanted my voice to count, and like the white women of the late 1800s, I thought that my voice was the only voice that should count.

So, I ended up throwing my then best friend under a proverbial bus, undercutting her argument in a very public fight in front of the CEO and later the Board.

I had come to live out a version of Downing's question, however impoverished a question it was.

WORKING ON THE REWRITE

New, better questions would get asked.

But, first, I would get fired.

As my boss said, I had to go. My team wouldn't trust me after watching that takedown, especially to a friend, to win at all costs. The ironic thing? My boss loved the outcome and didn't mind the competitive, scarcity-minded approach.

She just hoped that I would learn some *finesse*.

But I could sense something big was amiss. That it's not enough to fight for one's own voice, at the cost of others. That the way we think of things as either you fit in or you fight for your own interests was off. That we must learn ways to show up to something bigger than just our own private interests. To be clear, I didn't know if that was possible, just that I wanted it to be.

That's not easy to find in business.

The business world regularly and persistently invites people to compete against one another, to be "the best." It asks a great many to be far too small, to "just do the job they were hired to do." And it demands a certain kind of conformity, because "that's just how we do things 'round here." The vast majority of folks in business don't get to bring their own aliveness to work, their voices are isolated, or squashed.

So I struck out as an independent, so I could more easily explore new ways.

My first question (perhaps entirely obvious given the story I've just shared): how to make it so more than one voice could count.

So, I would show up in turnaround situations, with companies that had tried and failed to launch new products or gain new markets, and I would ask... hey since you've tried to solve this with a rarified set of voices, *how about asking anyone—quite possibly everyone—in the business to share their ideas.*

And that "[new how](#)" lets folks see the future is not created, it is co-created.

Later, I would work with teams struggling to build the next thing. They imagined they needed to think up brilliance in their conference rooms, and then sell it to folks out there in the marketplace. I asked, *why not step outside the perimeter of an organizational mindset, and find those with shared goals to create the next big thing.*

So, people saw that in this "[social era](#)," connected people could do what once only large organizations could.



Later I would notice that despite decades of research that says innovation emerges from “left-field” sources, most organizations treated those “left-field” folks through the lens of otherness. That’s the irony of originality. Some are seen as “different” and some “distinct.” So I asked, *how do we center on that source of new ideas, that singular spot in the world only one stands, [onlyness](#).*

And people saw... as we are valued, we can create the value only we can.

Please don’t get me wrong. I asked all sorts of shitty limiting questions in this 20-year window of time. I am sharing the generative ones, the ones that drove change, and progress. Not for a few, but for many.

WORDS CREATE WORLDS

Most of us are taught to answer the questions we are asked. Smartly. Crisply. And not enough time is spent on teaching us how to ask a better question.

So let’s do that.

Imagine a new room.

It’s yours. The very one you’re sitting in.

And you get to ask a new, better question.

It can be about work or society or anything you choose...

What would it be?

While you think on that...

Let me just share with you that questions are how we shape our destiny.

It's Einstein asking, what if space could bend?

Or Galileo asking what if the Earth is not the center of the universe?

And, *dare I add*, what if each of us could add that bit to the world only we can?

Despite using the words, "We, the people," the founding fathers of America created the constitution to consolidate power for just 6% of the population. They used freedom to mean their freedom even while they enslaved folks. They used liberty to pursue their interests even if that meant raping their wife.

Which is to say even though the founders *invoked* the words of deep belonging and voice, they were limited in their possibilities. They asked for voice and belonging for themselves, and not for all. And generations later, people are still stymied by that lack of imagination. And I am reminded of Film Director Ava DuVernay's words: "If your dream only includes you, it's too small."

We can learn from this. We can ask better questions, build different frames.

Questions are how we shape our destiny.

Now, some of you, surely, are skeptical at this. I get why.

That each of us counts?

That there is enough to go around?

That we don't have to go through the turnstile of progress one at a time?

Well, each of these seem counterintuitive, given what we're told, sold.

So if you're skeptical... I hear you. (So did George T. Downing.)

I get asked regularly (often right after and despite all the real life, case studies I have just shown them) if any of what I'm talking about is actually possible? And I say, it's not a matter of *if*, but *how*. How do we show up fully alive *and* include more than ourselves? How can both be true, I ask? How do we change the room, not just our own position or place in that room?

And, so I want to invite you to wonder, too.

How could we go together?

How can we change the room?

How can we try something new?

I suspect one reason any of us hesitate to imagine something different, to ask a more generative question is that we don't (yet) know the answer. We worry, perhaps, that if we don't know the answer right at this very moment, then we have already failed. (This, too, is a lie.)

To live a new question is to believe in possibilities, in hope. We can love the question, as the poet Rilke guided us to do, like a locked room or a book written in a foreign language. So that, one day, we might unlock it, understand it. We live the question and love the question because in some distant day, it would help us to formulate an answer worthy of us. Each of us.

We have long been shaped by questions that put us at odds with each other. Isn't it time to find a new way, forward, together? 🌱

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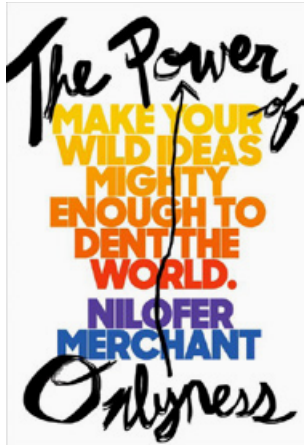
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

During Nilofer Merchant's 25 years in technology, she personally launched more than 100 products, netting \$18B in sales. Onlyness™, the idea she coined in 2011, is why she is ranked amongst the top management thinkers in the world. She was awarded the Future Thinker award by the notable London-based organization, Thinkers 50, noting her as the #1 person most likely to influence the future of management in both theory and practice. HR leaders have similarly recognized her as one of the top 10 thinkers in the world, according to *HR* magazine. Nilofer's third book, *The Power of Onlyness*, is a field guide for anyone to use networked leadership to scale their ideas, especially when they don't have traditional power and status. She is regularly quoted or published in *Harvard Business Review*, *Time Magazine*, and *Fast Company*, and her TED Talk has been quoted over 300 million times.



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