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WHAT IS INQUIRY?

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Generally, there are two kinds of learning: one that prepares a person for tangible, reducible, measurable, definite, and predictable outcomes, like the exam questions in school; and another kind that “prepares” a person for the uncertain, ambiguous, and unpredictable aspects of life. Learning that $2 + 2 = 4$, along with a billion other “facts” and know-how’s that children and adults learn in schools, belongs to the first kind. Life, however, is full of the immeasurable, irreducible, uncertain, and unpredictable not only because the world is simply a bewilderingly complex place; but also because when humans face the life-world, they don’t just see trees, people, food on the table, money in the bank, and so on, but *see* and *feel* such strange and nebulous things as beauty, love and compassion, joys and sorrows, fear and security, fairness, injustice, and so on. These *qualities* belong to the realm of the *meta-physical*, in the sense of going beyond the tangible, quantifiable, measurable, and even effable. This meta-physical is, however, the dimension of personal meaning and insight, and there is nothing vague and inconsequential about it. Lack of the meaningful can sink us in misery, and kill our spirit, if not our body.

School learning is predominantly about the first kind of learning. We stuff our students with a billion bits of information and skills. Know this; know that; do this; do that. You will be tested to see how much you’ve retained of what we have taught you. The questions we want you to handle have definite and correct answers. We won’t ask you questions that have no pre-given or fixed answers, and you need not ask them, either. After decades of this kind of learning, no

wonder that we become anxious and distressed about life's uncertainty, complexity, unpredictability, and mystery. We become attached to the power of predictability and control, certainty of beliefs, security of facts, and strength of morals. But life refuses to be reduced to our expectations. In the end, we have to learn to navigate in the sea of the metaphysical and work with life's uncertainty and complexity. Inquiry is this kind of navigation.

In inquiry, we ask questions for the creative possibility of seeing things differently for more enriched, novel, vital, or deeper meanings. Inquiry is our quest for meaning or sense-making, value, purpose, perspective, and awareness. When we realize that all the facts in the world do not add up to reveal more adequate or satisfactory meanings, purposes, and values that enthuse and empower one's life, we begin to ask different questions: Are there different ways I can conceptualize and apprehend aspects of life and the world, self and other, than how I took things to be previously when I was presented with them as "normal," "natural," "inevitable," "factual," "objective," and "true"? Inquiry starts with the suspicion and realization that things do not have to appear the way they do; that their appearance has all to do with my implicit or explicit choice to interpret, evaluate, and assign meanings to them even without changing their factual content. In this sense, the realization of one's power of thinking and feeling precedes the practice of inquiry. Thus, if we want our students to undertake inquiry, we first have to help them realize their own power. Needless to say, entrenchment in learning devoted to predictability and control, as is the case in much of our school learning, enfeebles such power. Open-ended and creative as it is, inquiry is not a practice of "dream up anything" and "anything goes." Inquiry is purposeful, requires various intellectual and psychological skills, and is both process and achievement-oriented. As well, it is not something that happens just "inside one's head." Inquiry is in fact most effectively pursued as a group's dialogical activity. This is

because the most valuable aspect of inquiry is gaining *perspectives*, which is facilitated by a group of individuals exchanging their perceptions of things, showing and explaining how they see the given matter. Being able to see a notion, an issue, a situation, a person, or what have you, from a variety of angles, against many different conceptual and psychological backgrounds, and for particular objectives trains one to be creative, resourceful, flexible, and fluid. These are the kinds of intellectual and emotional qualities required for the practice of inquiry.

Another point worth noting is that inquiry is not just a discursive practice. While clarification and analysis of concepts, evaluation of arguments, belief revision, and the like can all be part of inquiry, much more is involved, besides this discursive element. We get into inquiry because of our desire to see and understand differently, with better insight and creative possibilities of interaction, the particular situation and people that one encounters in one's life, and one's own reactions to them. In other words, inquiry is not an abstract exercise but a living practice. Given this, the most important element in inquiry is what the inquirer brings to the process of inquiry: alert and expansive consciousness, sensitivity and receptivity to people and situations, the ability to feel authentically and strongly, the capacity for sustained investigation, creative impulses, imaginative capacities for trying out different "realities," and vitality and enthusiasm. It is well to remember that an inquiry is no longer a living inquiry when the inquirer has abstracted his or her subjectivity out of the content and the process of the inquiry.

In this limited space, I can only touch on about how best to conduct an inquiry. This being a *living inquiry*, the best place to start it is wherever one finds oneself existentially. One looks inwardly into one's own thoughts and feelings, while facing the world, noting how one reacts with conditioned thought and feeling responses. Usually we are too busy reacting that we do not stop to reflect and

examine our response. Inquiry starts at this point of stop. From this place of stop, we question the necessity of “the way things are,” and address the possibility of seeing the world and the self differently and hence relating to the world differently. *“What if I were to . . .?”*