

# CHAPTER 1

## Four Profound Questions for Families

*Ellen Miley Perry*

**D**uring my 30 years advising families, I have come to believe that there are a few important questions that, if handled thoughtfully, with care, can be a pathway to deep connection, emotional intimacy, and greater familial well-being.

For many of us, it is not always natural or easy to identify what we truly need to know or appreciate or understand more deeply about ourselves or our family members in order to learn, evolve, and grow as human beings and loving, caring family members, spouses, parents, and siblings.

Too frequently we fall into the old predictable patterns when we are with our family of origin (siblings and parents). We forget to come to family relationships with curiosity, reverence, and a willingness to change our minds. Rather, we often come with certainty, decades-old stories, narratives about the others, and hurts long ago borne.

So often families call advisors like me with a problem, a transition, or a worry. They rarely call when they think that tomorrow will look just like today and that things are going pretty well. Families often look for help or advice with concerns about individual family members who seem lost or stuck or when the family as a whole is facing important changes, such as illness or death, a transition, or an important transition ahead. Stated another way, it's usually when the skills and strategies that got them to *here* don't seem like they will get them to *there*.

Strategies and practices that support a family's ability to engage with one another in deep and meaningful conversations can help them move ahead with more confidence and clarity. That usually involves listening to one another better, empathizing more, learning new things, and evolving personally and as a family. Sounds pretty basic! But deeper understanding, empathy, and connection require forethought, skills, good facilitation, and dollops of patience and good intentions to human improvement and family well-being.

Optimally, the family would engage in these questions and conversations thoughtfully and intentionally, not over a chaotic meal, a casual moment, or attached to another event. The hope is for a rich conversation and open exploration. I wouldn't

advise trying this when family tensions are high and trust is too low. It's important to hold the tender moments that might happen.

You can engage in such conversations as a pair—with just one other family member—or in a small group.

And to be clear, if you are the one asking these questions to another family member—a parent, sibling, or adult child—when they answer you with something that hurts or surprises you or simply seems downright incorrect, the best response from you is, “Thank you so much for sharing this with me. Let me give this more thought.” It is not the time to help them understand why they are wrong, how they misunderstood you, why their memory is faulty, or to help them see that they are too sensitive. Ideally you might ask neutral follow-up questions aimed at understanding more about their feelings.

These questions are meant to be approached with thoughtfulness, curiosity, and an authentic intention to become closer to the other family member(s).

### **1. What can I do more of that makes you feel close to me?**

This question is an acknowledgment that while we may do much right, there is likely much more we can do to deepen our family relationships. There are actions, conversations, and ways of connecting that deepen the relationships with some family members and make that person feel close to us. And we want to know what those are. Clearly. And it is also a declaration that we want to make the other feel loved and valued. Try to recall when the other people in your family each brought you joy. That can only happen if you are grateful for that person.

### **2. What can I do less of that makes you lean out emotionally?**

Let's be honest, we all make mistakes in family relationships. We miss cues, we get busy, we make assumptions, we sound critical, judgmental, disinterested, etc. This question gives permission but is also an invitation to our family members to be honest with us. And importantly, it gives us the opportunity to understand how we are perceived by others. Please understand that for many of us, there is fear involved with being honest with others. We worry that the relationship cannot withstand the honest feedback or criticism. We hold back and bite our tongues because we fear that the other will end the relationship if we say our truth. Often in families, we would rather be polite and safe than honest and risky.

### **3. What do you wish I understood more about who you are or what you value?**

It is hard to change our narratives, stories, and assumptions about the other members of our family. It's equally hard for them to update those assumptions and stories about us. Wouldn't it be great if we asked others what they would like us to see in them? This question is an acknowledgment that we don't understand all there is to understand about them, we don't “see” all of them, and we don't know the many parts of them that they may dearly wish us to know. For most of us, we have insights into others that are limited by geography and time frames. Perhaps we are siblings who haven't lived near one another in decades, or maybe our children are now adults with whole

lives and people we don't know well. This question is a beautiful opportunity to allow others to update our assumptions for us and help us see them more fully. And you too can offer those parts of yourself to others.

#### **4. What are your favorite stories from your childhood, and why?**

We can learn so much from the stories that we tell each other. We learn what moves, scares, delights, hurts, and inspires someone through the stories they choose to tell. So too we learn what and who has had an impact on our family members through the stories. This question is a wonderful one for family gatherings and one that can be repeated over and over throughout the years.

As a rule, I think that approaching these questions over time is better than pouncing on them all at once. Families can benefit most by savoring the conversations that spring out of these questions rather than looking at this as a checklist of Q&A to be accomplished. The possibility of deeper connection and an updated understanding of family relationships is an extraordinary opportunity. Best wishes!

### **Additional Resources**

Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2018).

Rosemond Zander and Ben Zander, *The Art of Possibility* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002).

Warren Berger, *The Book of Beautiful Questions* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2018).

### **Biography**

**Ellen Miley Perry** is the founder of Wealthbridge Partners, LLC. She has 30 years of experience serving as a strategic advisor for family enterprises and family-led organizations. Her work has focused on governance, succession planning, leadership development, and conflict resolution.

Ellen, author of *A Wealth of Possibilities—Navigating Family, Money and Legacy*, is a frequent speaker, author, and advisor on the practices and strategies that create and sustain thriving families over multiple generations. She is a director of both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. She has a particular interest in the neuroscience of trauma and the psychology of well-being. Ellen lives with her family in Washington, DC.

