

The Most Important Questions Are the Ones You're Avoiding

10 Feb, 2026

If you do not know how to ask the right question, you discover nothing.

–W. Edwards Deming

We're taught early that progress comes from having good answers. That smart people solve problems. That the world moves forward by identifying gaps and filling them in neatly, like bricks in a wall. It's motivating, tidy, seductive, and mostly wrong.

The truth is simpler and far more useful. What actually moves the world forward isn't having good answers. It's noticing when the question itself is wrong, or missing entirely.

This isn't just a personal quirk or a writer's indulgence. It's how real discovery actually happens. And once you see this pattern, you start noticing it everywhere. In science, in culture, in the messy middle of your own life. The pattern is always the same. Real discovery doesn't arrive through methodical problem-solving and decision-making. It arrives sideways, through lingering doubt, irritation and discomfort, the gnawing suspicion that the wrong questions are being asked.

Science is a perfect example. It doesn't move forward the way we prefer to remember it. It advances less like construction and more like wandering. Less bricklaying, more bushwhacking. You don't build your way to insight or discovery. You stumble into it, you break it open, you fight for it, you lose sleep over it.

Take Darwin. He didn't begin with a grand theory. He began as a detective with evidence that refused to behave. The facts weren't neatly laid out, begging to be noticed. They were scattered at the edges, relegated to footnotes, treated as curiosities. The story only worked if you accepted the way it had already been told. And Darwin didn't. The deeper he looked, the stranger the inconsistencies became—an oddly shaped finch beak, a fossil showing up in the wrong era, a trait that only made sense if you told the story backward.

Species were believed to be fixed, perfectly designed, finished beings. The work of an omniscient hand. This was doctrine. And yet wherever Darwin looked, nature refused to comply.

For years, the deeply devoted, god-fearing husband and father of ten tried to bend the evidence to fit the story. Tried to force it back into the explanation he trusted. But it wouldn't fit. Eventually his irritation curdled into a question that severed him from everything he'd been taught to believe: *What if species weren't designed at all, but shaped—slowly, clumsily, imperfectly, relentlessly—by pressure and time?*

The scandal here wasn't the answer but the question itself. Once asked, it turned the old story into theater. Impossible to believe.

Same with Einstein who backed into his shape-shifting breakthroughs the same way. Not through revelation or lightning bolt, but by refusing to stop being annoyed. By the early 1900s, physics was widely considered more or less finished. The equations worked. They described the world with astonishing accuracy, predicted planets and particles, powered machines and lit cities. The intellectual machinery of the universe hummed along beautifully.

Where it didn't quite work—where light behaved strangely, where time refused to stay put, where measurements disagreed just enough to be inconvenient—those problems were politely cordoned off, marked as technicalities and minor embarrassments at the edge of an otherwise triumphant story. Nothing worth interrupting a room full of very satisfied geniuses over.

Einstein refused to accept that kind of satisfaction. He couldn't understand how reality could object, however softly, and be told to wait its turn. The more effort it took to preserve the story, the more suspicious he became. Not that the math was careless, but that the question underneath it was wrong.

This is the pivot most people never make.

You stop assuming you're missing an answer and start suspecting you're standing inside the wrong question. You stop trying to fix outcomes and start wondering why you're so committed to protecting them in the first place.

This is the exact moment most people turn back, relieved to rejoin the safety of popular opinion and the crowded bell-curved middle of the approved story.

Not Darwin. He stayed with the irritation long enough to be cornered by it. After years of watching the contradictions pile up, he let them tear the old story to pieces and force something truer into view. Species weren't fixed at all. They were shaped by pressure and time.

Einstein, neither. He stayed with his doubts long enough for them to pay the rent. From unknown patent clerk to the most celebrated, most inconvenient man in physics, his patience paid off. One night, walking home, he realized the equations weren't broken. Time was.

For both men, the breakthrough wasn't an answer. It was the moment they realized the question everyone else was protecting was wrong

And once a truly good question appears, it has a strange habit of erasing its own origin. It feels obvious in retrospect. *Of course that's the question. How could anyone not have seen it sooner?* But before it existed, it couldn't have been planned, proposed, or politely asked for. It had to be discovered sideways, while the mind was still wrestling with the wrong frame.

This is what Itai Yanai and Martin Lercher call "night science" in their paper *What Is the Question?*—the unguided, slightly embarrassing stretch where you feel lost, stupid, unproductive, and vaguely guilty. Where nothing quite adds up. Where the work refuses to explain itself. It's the part most people abandon, retreating to something safer and more immediately rewarding.

But this is always where the most interesting work lives. Not out in the open where progress is clean, legible, and rewarded on schedule, but off to the side—unmarked, inconvenient, challenging, easy to miss.

The same pattern repeats outside of science. In culture, we anoint one story as serious and relegate the rest to the margins. In our relationships, we treat love as a law of nature, something fixed and inevitable, when really it's just loud, assumed, heavily scripted. Like, on the other hand, is far more selective and resonate and un-inevitable, the thing that actually holds.

Night science lives in this same terrain. So did Darwin and Einstein. So should you.

I've tried to follow this instinct before. In my recent piece, *Holy Shame*, I inverted the usual approach to our collective and deeply disturbing addiction to technology. Instead of asking how to get people to put their phones down, I wondered: *what if the same status-obsessed force that built the addiction was the only thing capable of breaking it? What if the real antidote wasn't warnings or information or regulation, but the one emotion modern culture is most eager to exile: shame?*

That wasn't an answer-first move. It was a bottoms-up, back-to-front contrarian take aimed at questions no one else was asking. My goal wasn't to improve the polite, head-nodding conversation around tech addiction. It was to blow the whole thing apart by digging for the unasked questions underneath it.

The same pattern shows up everywhere you look. Darwin and Einstein didn't stumble into their breakthroughs by accepting approved stories. They found them by refusing to. By staying uncomfortable longer than anyone else was willing to.

This is why I've always been suspicious of consensus and the whole *wisdom of crowds* philosophy. Easy answers smooth over resistance. Complex problems expose it. Night science is where high-agency people live, where you tolerate ambiguity instead of anesthetizing it, where saying "I don't know" doesn't collapse you but ignites you. Where you're willing to look foolish long enough to notice what others miss because they're too busy optimizing for speed or a pat on the back.

Most people want *easy* because easy feels comfortable. They want *answers* because answers feel final. But answers close doors. Questions keep them cracked open just enough to remind you there's something on the other side.

I'm not talking about clever questions or impressive ones, the kind you spray out at dinner parties to sound smart. I'm talking about the ones that tug at your sleeve and keep circling even when you'd rather be done already. The ones that don't suffer fools or offer clarity so much as companionship.

So if you've been feeling frustrated, irritated, or confused lately—about your work, your relationships, your direction in life, your beliefs—good. I'm happy for you. These aren't failure states. They're necessary friction. You bumping into something that refuses to be ignored.

Don't rush out of it.

Don't turn it into a plan too soon.

Sit with it.

Let it ferment.

Follow the irritation.

Let the question breathe.

That's usually where the best stuff is hiding.

#favorites #questions

