An Interview with Peter Block

The Art of Asking Powerful Questions

How might conversations about purpose be a catalyst for communal transformation?

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Peter Block is an author and consultant who resides in Cincinnati, Ohio. He describes his work as being about empowerment, stewardship, chosen accountability, and the reconciliation of community. Among his books are Community: The structure of Belonging, and his most recent, An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture which he co-authored with Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight. LCWR director of communications Annmarie Sanders, IHM interviewed Peter on how leaders may best facilitate transformative process within their organizations.

Question - Religious life in this country is experiencing profound shifts with fewer numbers and some growing ambiguity over the role of this life in society and within the church. We seek to live into these changes in a proactive way, not merely accepting them as inevitable, but welcoming the opportunity the changes provide for true transformation of this way of life. Often religious life leaders feel that their work pertains to problem-solving for their communities, rather than the work of transformation. How would you describe the difference? What can make the work of leadership truly transformative?

All transformation is a shift in conversation. The challenge is to find a new way of speaking and thinking about what is happening in religious life right now. The language that has no transformative power is that of problem-solving, such as talking about the fact our membership is aging and contracting. What do we do with all of our property? Or the fact that all the ministries we founded have become privatized. This language is practical and needs to occur, but it is not transformative. It is not deep enough, personal enough, imaginative enough.

Question - Do you have any ideas about how to find that language?

Well, it’s a purpose question. What are you here for now? You have a traditional church leadership function in this consumer-driven, so called free-market enterprise that isn’t working. You are an alternative to this culture, you are creating faithful and relational ways of thinking, your leadership produces a personal and lyrical way of being together. You are a role model of what leadership and imagination can look like in today’s violent, poverty-stricken world. You aren’t afraid of feminine power and not afraid of imagination. So, if anyone asks what the future of leadership for the rest of us looks like, I am looking at you. We see glimpses of the future in the way you lead collaboratively, the way you care for the common good, in your hospitality to the stranger, in your nonviolence. You are unshakeable. You have organized your life and have a set of convictions and a purpose that has meaning. You have a relationship with God and a faith that no institution can get in the way of.

Who Catholic sisters are has nothing to do with your works, your properties, your status, or your standing. So I would say that transformation will occur in your determining who you are now.
And that won’t be determined by measurements and growth standards. The hardest thing is just to embody your gifts, your grace, your power. What’s required of you is to take in and integrate the grace and power you hold, and not measure yourselves according to the conventional market measurements of scale, speed, and size.

I think there is going to be a renewed interest in your way of life. You represent a life-choice in a consumer, materialistic society that is going to appeal to more and more people. As people become more isolated, walk away from the unattainable upwardly mobile life, they will find you. I think the task for you is: If you want to know how you are doing, you will invent measures that matter to you. You are going to have to invent those. Numbers are irrelevant.

There is a movement going on in the world towards more cooperative living and working. We hear now of co-housing. Cooperative businesses, where everyone has an ownership stake, are growing like crazy. You know something about these things, you have been practicing them for years. You have something to say about economy, the sharing economy, the economy of generosity, the non-monetized economy. And you have something to say about the planet.

So your transformative processes are not processes of planning. These are processes that involve discerning what you are good at, what’s unique about you, and what your gifts are, and then giving expression to that. And I would encourage you to look at what your gifts are in the secular world. I think your gifts are to help us deal with secular questions such as how to use our capital surplus, our land, and our buildings, and to look at the questions of lifestyle and measurement. The world needs you for this until your last breath.

**Question - How would you encourage leaders to consider these types of questions, and then to encourage their members to do the same?**

You cannot teach this, but you can convene people into it. Leaders have the power to convene and name the conversation. So every time sisters gather, make this a part of the conversation. The umbrella is: What gifts do we have to bring to the common good? What does our community have to offer now? What is being called forth from us?

We have a fractured economic system, and charity won’t fix it. Your greatest gift is your capacity for cooperation, and for love. So, get some conversations going about your own relationship to money. Look at things like alternative enterprises, alternative culture, co-ops, and a neighborly culture, and say, “Let’s learn enough about these so that we can contribute ideas and support them wherever we are.” You already run centers of spirituality, but I’d like to see you also run centers of economic possibility. The woundedness and the violence that we see in the world are responses to the broken economic systems.

**Question - How would you recommend we learn about these?**

There are all kinds of people who are writing on these topics. I would recommend *Yes! Magazine*, the website of the Schumacher Center for New Economics, and the writings of Van
Jones, Peter Barnes, Jonathan Rowe, Wendell Berry, and others. Study and then be a voice for right relationship with money and get involved in this movement to bring neighborliness back into the mainstream. We need you in places where we are not used to having you – where people are talking about developing businesses. We need you to show us how to take responsibility to care for the world. People want to listen to you and hear what you think on these matters. Start doing programs on spirituality in the marketplace. Ask powerful questions. This is a great venue for asking them as we tend this wounded economy.

**Question - You speak often about questions being more transforming than answers and, specifically questions that engage people in an intimate way, that invite them to co-create a future possibility. What advice can you give us for formulating questions that have the power to make a difference? How do we know when we have created a powerful question?**

A powerful question is ambiguous – in other words, those being asked have to bring their own meaning to the question; it’s personal; and it evokes anxiety. If there is no edge to the question, there is no power.

Some of the questions of meaning that I use that can be applied in any context are ones like these: Why is it important for you to be here today? What are the gifts you hold that have not been brought fully into the world? What is your contribution to the very thing you complain about? And, there’s my favorite: What’s the question that if you have an answer to would set you free? Create questions around purpose, possibility, choice, crossroads. Poke around a bit and find the question that can create some tension because it is there that we are alive and engaged. These kinds of questions breed intimacy among us – and isn’t this what the sisterhood is about – creating intimacy and finding God in one another’s eyes?

When I am working with a group, I always break them into circles of three so that everyone’s voice is heard and I ask: What is the cross roads that you find yourself in at this stage of your life? After 15 minutes, I bring them back and ask what struck them. The answer is always the same: “I am not alone and I am not crazy.” Sisters are the antidote to a culture that makes us think we are alone and much of our private thoughts are treated as signs of madness.

**Question - You note that the work of communal transformation requires some shifts in our thinking about leadership. You say that leadership is about intention, convening, valuing relatedness, and presenting choices. You note that shifting the way we care for the world and our organizations required engagement of people and that the task of a leader is to provide means for that engagement. You also add that among the leader’s most important tasks are listening and paying attention. What advice do you have for leaders who may wish to exercise their leadership in this way?**

Sisters are a stance for not-knowing. In our culture today, leaders often think that they know and that they have answers. You are honest. You aren’t afraid to say, “I don’t know.” You are a stance for the uncertainty of life – and that is badly needed. Violence comes from certainty and
believing there is only one answer. So help people see that uncertainty is valuable, and that each person’s gifts matter when looking at a question, discerning a next step.

**Question** - You say that if we want to change a culture, our work is to change the conversation – or, more precisely, to have a conversation that we have not had before, one that has the power to create something new in the world. You note that conversations that focus on the past become a limitation to community, while ones that focus on the future restore community. How can we prevent ourselves from slipping into old conversations, or conversations that focus on the past? How can leaders foster those new conversations?

It’s a good practice to stop halfway through any conversation, look one another in the eyes and ask, “How’s it going? Is this a conversation we had before? If so, then why are we doing this?” If the point of the conversation is simply to share memories, that’s fine. If it is to create a future, then why would we have that same old conversation? Change the conversation, ask the unsettling questions.

**Question** - You have said that the conventional belief is that individual transformation leads to communal transformation, but that your understanding is that transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale. What, though, is required of the individuals participating in a transformative process? How important is individual transformation to successful communal transformation?

Individual transformation is essential since change occurs from the inside out. However, it is just a first step because most of the time we stop with the individual. The church tends to focus on the individual relationship with God. The challenge is how to move to the collective. What is our communal relationship with God? What is our communal relationship with materialism and the land? The rest of the world is fighting poverty; you chose it. Why? Because you know that if you trust in your community, you will always have enough to live well. You have the capacity to live beneath your means. Again, this is where sisters can offer something important. You have chosen to live communally, and in an alternative economy. You have the experience and wisdom that is most needed in the world.