

**Is To Question the Answer?**  
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**Meditation**

The year has turned. We have marked the turning.

Let us pause now, allow our breathing to settle, our minds to quiet,  
Become fully present to ourselves and to each other...  
Fully present here, our place on earth,  
Now, with the passing of one year, beginning of the next.

Now, may we consider:

What will we do with the time that is given us this new year?  
How will we live our lives?  
How will we use our talents and gifts?  
This day, this year, this life?  
Will we live the values we profess?  
Will we bless the world with our gifts and values?  
Will we bless the world and each other?

**Readings**

From the *Apology*, by Plato

The *Apology* consists largely of two long speeches by Socrates, defending himself to the Athenian jury against the charge that he corrupted the youth of their city... though it may be he was accused and convicted for political reasons as much as for the actual charges.

In any case, in this passage, following his conviction Socrates is making it clear that he would never change his ways, never stop his questioning of and conversation with the youth and citizens of Athens, even if it would save his life:

Some one will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that to do as you say would be a disobedience to the God, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that daily to discourse about virtue, and of those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good... and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still less likely to believe me. Yet I say what is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you.

from *The Heart of Philosophy*, by Jacob Needleman

Socratic self-knowledge is self-attention, which is a force that can exist and act with tremendous power within ourselves. For Socrates, it develops and grows in relationship to the various functions of the whole human structure, in the midst of the “citizens of Athens,” in “the marketplace.”

Socrates is a presence, an attention that can look directly at death.

In that direction, so I have come to understand, lies the solution of the paradox of the death of Socrates. How else to understand that everything Socrates died for is brought together under the heading of the commandment to “know thyself.”

## Sermon

At the top of your order of service are what may be the seven most famous words of Socrates, as they have come to us in translation:

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

This may be so, yet... as Unitarian Universalist writer and minister Robert Fulghum pointed out: “The examined life is no picnic.”

Socrates of all people knew this. As we heard in the first reading, he is said to have spoken his words about the unexamined life during the trial that he well knew would lead to his death – no picnic indeed. He could have avoided death by agreeing to the penalty most would consider lesser of exile, and by agreeing to stop his infernal questioning of the respected citizens of Athens – but he chose not to. For Socrates the greater evil was not death but was to forsake his principles.

Think of it. What would you have done? Imagine yourself given a similar choice – death or exile; and all you have to do is to stop pestering people with your questions. What could be so important about asking people questions?

Why *did* Socrates consider that his questioning of others was important enough to die for? And why should this be of concern to us 2500 years later as we enter a New Year – distressed and distracted by what might well seem to be more important matters: war, terrorism, unemployment, climate change, health care...?

Socrates. Who was this guy?

Here’s how I got to know him. You might say that I first encountered Socrates in the person of a new young professor who would be teaching a freshman seminar at Haverford College: Asoka Gangadean, Indian born, clipped accent, strikingly handsome, bronze skin, full beard... and enthusiastic about the philosophy seminar he would be teaching. I barely knew what philosophy was, but Professor Gangadean’s enthusiasm for Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and the big questions they raised and addressed was infectious.

Sign me up!

Not only my seminar, but my major had chosen me and not the other way around. Yes, at that moment I knew why I was in college. It was (of course!) to discover the meaning of life!

Ah, the idealism of youth.

But Professor Gangadean is still at it, for many years now a tenured senior professor at my alma mater. And I guess I’m still at it too. In a real way, all because of Socrates.

Who was this guy?

Well, I'm not sure if I discovered the "meaning of life" in college, but I did meet Socrates over and over again. Of course not Socrates the person who lived in Athens all those years ago' but also not only Socrates in the person of my professors – Gangadean, Kosman, Desjardins – rather, more fundamentally the Socratic principle of conversation and questioning known technically as dialectic... a term far too dry to represent the deep challenge to our souls that the primary questions of our lives present: What is a human being? What is a good life? What is life for? What is my life for?

Of course Socrates the historical figure is important too. To begin with, without Socrates there may very well not have even been a philosophy department at my college or inspiring professors to teach us. Because it has been said that the entire history of philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Socrates. Socrates who himself never wrote a word, but whose persona comes to us primarily through the pen of his student Plato, one of those young men Socrates engaged in conversation in the marketplace of Athens about things that matter – virtue, wisdom, justice, beauty, love....

Of Socrates' actual life we know very little. His mother it is thought was a midwife, his father a stonemason. He fought honorably in military campaigns.

When it comes to Western philosophy, he is remembered as the figure who brought philosophy down to earth, addressing human ethical concerns instead of speculative concerns about the nature of the universe which had been the focus of earlier Greek thinkers.

And remembered for this dialectic method of inquiry often known as the Socratic method of teaching by asking questions, in this way challenging his conversation partners to more clearly articulate their ideas, and in the process coming to realize they may not have known as much as they thought they did – which paradoxically may have been the first step to genuine wisdom and virtue. At least that's the way his admirers would put it. His critics simply saw him making fools of the citizens of Athens by twisting their words and making their arguments go in circles. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Bertrand Russell suggested, "Certainly if he practiced dialectic in the way described... the hostility to him is easily explained.

After all, imagine Socrates at your next social gathering, someone not interested in the usual polite conversation, but rather in questioning the assumptions and beliefs of your guests.

Someone around your dinner table comments on the print hanging in your dining room: "What a beautiful print!"

The perfect opening for your Socrates: "Yes, but what makes it beautiful?"

"Well, I like the colors," the first guest replies.

"But what is it about the colors that makes the painting beautiful?"

"I just like the way they go together."

"Well then, is it just a matter of *your* preference for these colors, *your* idiosyncratic taste... or is there something about that painting that everyone would recognize as beautiful?"

And so it would go perhaps until someone threw a roll at him!

Or you go to the hardware store and ask for a good hammer. Just your luck, the guy behind the counter is Socrates.

"Good in what way?" he asks.

"Good for shingling a roof," you reply.

“So,” your hardware store Socrates continues, “if one hammer is good for roof shingles and another for nailing two-by-fours, is there some general principle of ‘good’ at work here?”

“Just give me the hammer!” you say. Perhaps with a fresh idea as to how you might use it...

Yes, if this is how he operated (and it is) we can understand why Socrates was accused by some of setting arguments in motion, arguments which never would have stirred otherwise.

And as if this wasn’t bad enough, there was also so-called Socratic irony, feigning ignorance to make a point. Also not calibrated to endear folks to Socrates. For example, young Euthyphro tells Socrates he does not understand a statement he has made about justice. Socrates replies:

And yet I know that you are much wiser than I am, as you are younger. But, as I was saying, revered friend, the abundance of your wisdom makes you lazy. Please to exert yourself, for there is no real difficulty in understanding me...

“Socratic irony” – yes, not the kind of conversation to endear one to citizens of Athens... or, were we to employ it, to our own dinner companions.

So... once we have left school we don’t often have these sorts of conversations. We don’t want to offend or be offended after all. So we are careful, perhaps too careful with one another, and therefore missing the true prey of Socratic questioning, the elusive fruit of the examined life: wisdom. For *this* is what Socrates was after (and this is itself the meaning of the word “philosophy”: lover or seeker of wisdom).

And aren’t we also after this precious fruit? Shouldn’t we be? Not necessarily some grand wisdom – just the practical wisdom of how to live a good (virtuous) life... what a good life is to begin with. Don’t we want that sort of wisdom? As this new year begins? Always?

Socrates, so he said, got started on *his* quest for wisdom when the oracle at Delphi made the outrageous claim that Socrates was the wisest of all people. Outrageous, because Socrates didn’t think he was so wise at all.

So he started questioning those who claimed to have wisdom – politicians to begin with, then others, anyone and everyone. It turned out that none of them really knew what they were talking about when it came to the most important questions of life. Socrates concluded, then, that in one sense only was he the wisest, for though others knew nothing but thought they knew, Socrates neither knew nor thought that he knew. So he realized that the god of the oracle was using his name only by way of illustration:

...as if he said, The one is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.

So – if all Socrates did was to go around proving to everyone that they didn’t really know anything worth knowing... that really would be a pain, wouldn’t it? And showing people that at best we are left only with the knowledge that we don’t know a thing, a knowledge of our ignorance... that would be more than a pain, would it not, perhaps reason for despair.

But Socrates pushes us further.

Pushes us even beyond clarifying our intellectual understanding of such matters as justice, wisdom, virtue, love, beauty – important thought this can be. Pushes us to and in a way

also beyond the edge of the most fundamental questions of practical wisdom: What is a good (or virtuous) life and how do I live such a life? What is life for after all?

For here's the payoff: if we really allow these kinds of questions to work on us, resisting the impulse to dismiss them with easy answers or dismiss them as having no answer... we may discover that beyond any practical personal insights about ourselves and our priorities which we might well gain from examining our lives, lies the possibility of our souls being stirred to life.

Contemporary philosopher Jacob Needleman puts it this way, alluding to the reported magnetic and soul-stirring effect Socrates the man had on his students:

The being of Socrates transmits the taste of the higher; the interrogation of Socrates brings awareness of one's corruption and illusions.

In other words, allowing ourselves to be confronted by these big and persistent questions – confronted by Socrates – we may sense the possibility of a higher or better or more whole way of living. Indeed, don't we ask the questions just because we *do* sense this – and wish to be drawn toward this better way of living, more attuned to the ideals we profess?

In other words, it may well be that “to question *is* the answer,” if our questions come from this place in our soul that yearns for this better, higher, more whole way of living. There may or may not be the kind of final answers to these biggest questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives that we can write down once and for all or broadcast on Youtube.

But if the questions wake us up to the possibility of a better way of living... then they have served their purpose.

I had at least a taste of such an awakening in the presence of my philosophy professors for these many years ago. I have a taste often in our Parish House parlor as we together allow ourselves to be confronted and challenged by the big questions.

Yes, Socrates' invitation still stands... and still might stir our souls.

And as we enter this new year, the invitation may be more important than ever. For – paraphrasing Socrates, who said much the same thing: our culture spends way too much time directing our attention to trivial and in the end quite unimportant matters, and practically no time at all focusing our attention on what truly matters.

A final thought: Socrates, son of a midwife, sometimes characterized himself as a midwife of ideas, believing that knowledge of the good and the good life are within us already, just waiting to be drawn forth if only we would open our minds and souls to the questions of our lives this new year and always (we may think we want certainty – I know I sometimes do – when what we may really need are the questions)... in short, only we would choose to live *examined* lives – which may then become awakened lives.

Maybe no picnic – but how else, truly, would we want to live.

So, then, may it be.