

I Just Have **1** Question

But What If “It Isn’t What It Is?”



by Doug Carpenter

I guess I’ve always been a philosophical kind of guy. Not the pretentious sort who cryptically quotes Confucius in casual conversation as much as the pragmatic-but-aspirational type who believes in seeing life both the way it really *is* as well as the way we *wish* it could be.

But even having looked the starkness of modern reality squarely in the eye, I take justifiable pride in the fact that I’ve still managed to remain an optimist — though obviously one of the “cockeyed” variety. [*Some* things you don’t really get to choose.]

And that’s no small accomplishment, especially considering the truly mind-blowing twists of fate and pharmaceuticals we’ve recently witnessed and weathered. It certainly isn’t like finding reasons to be hopeful is getting any *easier*, no matter *how* philosophical you are.

I can only wonder what an old school deep thinker like René Descartes — the 16th century scientist, mathematician and existentialist credited with coining history’s premiere declaration of self-awareness “I think, therefore I am” — would have to say about life today.

Had the world *he* lived in been even *half* as conflict-filled as ours, I imagine that his now-famous and widely-quoted reflection on being human and alive might well have read more like “I think, therefore I lie awake at night and worry... a lot.” [And honestly, who among us hasn’t occasionally done that?]

So, we search for something — *anything* — that will help us put life in perspective, even if it’s just a simply-worded personal saying. [And if it happens to look good printed on a t-shirt or is short enough to fit on a button, all the better.]

As mottos go, the ones that *I’ve* embraced over the years — and there have been many — have been a largely motley group, some of them genuinely inspiring and others little more than catchphrases for the live action TV sitcom my life has too often come dangerously close to becoming.



I also bought into the unfailingly-upbeat, Scarlett O’Hara-cloned “Tomorrow is another day,” until it occurred to me how abruptly and dramatically that statement can — and sadly *will* — stop being *true*. [A good motto, I have come to appreciate, needs “legs” if it’s going to carry you the distance, however long, or short, that distance may be.]

Early on, I admittedly experimented with some of the more clichéd mainstream favorites. For a while, I faithfully tried to “Keep my eyes on the prize,” despite the fact that I never actually knew what the prize *was*. [I suppose I *could’ve* asked around. Someone *had* to have known, right?]

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Some motto-worthy wisdom, of course, is passed down to us by well-meaning family. Like the way my Mother would always encourage me to “consider the source” when others heap negativity on you — advice that came in quite handy on far more occasions than I wish I had needed it.

But that just illustrates how empowering the right philosophy can be. After all, once I fully appreciated what *kind* of person I actually would’ve been *allowing* to make me feel inferior, maintaining my self-esteem really *did* become a whole

different ballgame.

My self-awareness got a similar boost from my Dad’s sage counsel that “pretending to be something you’re not” can only end *badly* when people figure out what you’ve been up to, which he assured me they always — and all too often unforgivingly — *will*.

His insistence on additionally pointing out the *monumental* difficulty of earning people’s respect *back* after you’ve *lost* it made it even scarier — and ultimately more helpful. [I only hope that *he’d* forgive *me* for the times I foolishly disregarded that very wise advice.]

It’s surprising, isn’t it, how much harder the people who love us will work to *help* us than *we* will to help *ourselves*? And you might think that — having received such sincere if sobering guidance in *my* formative years — I would’ve been *sitting pretty* philosophically by now, wouldn’t you?

Well, *not* as surprisingly, I’ve always been the kind who’s inclined to go his own way — as I have in my pursuit of a motto that is, as they say, “one for the ages.” Specifically, *mine*.

Or at least the ages I have *left*, anyway, which I’d like to believe may yet be

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plentiful and productive. I doubt it would shock anyone to learn that I still have things left that I’d like to *say, do* and — should I be fortunate enough to hang on to a byline somewhere — *write* [...not that you’re obligated to read them.]

Which is why I consider myself fortunate to have come up with what I believe is a ~~catchphrase~~ — *uhh, sorry* — a philosophical position statement that will serve me well for the balance of my life’s journey: “*It is what it is, and it takes what it takes.*”

I know. You don’t have to say it. I can almost *hear* you all *thinking* it: “*Really? That old chestnut?*” And you’re right. Insight-wise, it’s hardly the “new kid on the block.” [And that’s O.K. Neither am I.] More importantly, though, it’s *true*.

And despite its simplicity [...which I happen to consider one of its *virtues*...], it may *not* be a personal point of view that you’d expect would instantly make life easier. But at least it doesn’t make things any *harder*. Which is *also* O.K., since the *rest* of the world seems to have *that* job pretty well covered.

Because even as we’re going at it toe-to-toe with the already-challenging way that things *are*, out there across the world, countless numbers of those very things are being *transformed* from what they’ve always *been* into something that’s entirely *different* yet, in many confounding ways, still virtually the *same*.

I suspect a few examples might be helpful here. So let’s start with something that’s known these days — both to its friends *and* those who *fear* it — as *A.I.*, or *Artificial Intelligence*.

This should *not*, by the way, be confused with *human* intelligence, a rare and precious *organic* commodity that [...along with human *ignorance*, unfortunately...] is in far more abundant supply. [For now anyway.] And please also take note of one other *very* important distinction.

We’re not talking simply about “computers” here. At least not the kind I suspect you might be picturing. [You know. Glowing electrodes and buzzing noises? Little insertable keypunch cards? Gigantic reels of magnetic tape?

No? I guess you didn’t watch as many ’50s and ’60s sci-fi movies as I did.]

Those kinds of machines have been around in one form or another since the first functioning electronic computing “device” was built in 1945 — although the original *idea* for the computer was first *conceived* of way back in, would you believe, 1822. [And you thought that you were running behind with *your* “To Do” list.]

The controversy-generating concern people are having about *A.I.* — which doesn’t so much involve computers themselves as it does what goes on *inside* them — is that it doesn’t just make the machines “smarter” in a way that enables them to, say, *beat humans* at a very brain-intensive game like *chess*.

Instead, it elevates a computer’s intellectual functioning to an unprecedentedly-high level that scientists describe as “*generative*” — endowing computers’ *artificial* brains with the power to generate things comparable to what might be made by *real people*.

Almost.

Let’s say you were to pose a *question* to Google, or Bing, or even our attentive little friends Siri, Alexa and Cortana [...who are *always there* — waiting patiently to “help” us — inside our phones, our laptops or those little speakers sitting on our kitchen counters.]

If the response your question subsequently elicits was produced with the assistance of “*generative*” A.I., the *answer* you receive *could* contain “*facts*” that the computer *made up*. Let me repeat that. *Made up!*

So unless you’re paying close attention, you might not even *notice* that an informational switcheroo is being pulled on you. Because when computers can not only *think* but *speak, write* and even *create art* that can believably pass for work produced by actual, living *humans*, you can understand why we humans might get — you know — a little *nervous*.

Now, it’s not as if changes like these — the welcome ones as well as the *unwelcome* — haven’t been happening for a long time. Progress, like the humans who drive it, has never been particularly good at “leaving well enough alone.” [It’s a shame we can’t get it to focus its meddling on “*bad enough*,” where change might actually do some *good*.]

Over the years, the evolution of society and its culture has been steady and inevitable. Movies and radio were replaced by TV, VCRs and DVD players; which have now been overtaken first by cable and on-demand viewing and then

by streaming services — until whatever is next after *that* comes along.

Mule-drawn buckboards gave way to “horseless carriages,” which accelerated rapidly into “four on the floor” gas-guzzlers and then into sleek, silent, battery-powered EVs and rechargeable, driverless “autonomous vehicles” [...effectively leaving us with no one to yell at in traffic? What fun is *that*?]

When *tangible* things change, they way they *look* usually changes a little too, giving us at least a fighting *chance* to recognize that something isn’t what it *used* to be. *Ideas*, though? *That’s* where things get a lot *trickier*.

When *words*, for example, stop meaning *one* thing and start meaning something else entirely, *talking* to each other — let alone *understanding* — becomes one more victim of the *other* worldwide pandemic we’re fighting today: communication incompatibility.

It’s like trying to run a DC electrical device on AC current from a wall outlet, Or hitching a team of plow horses to an SUV. You end up getting badly burned or standing ankle-deep in a steaming pile of — among other unpleasant things —

misunderstanding.

And if you *question* how things *got* this way [...as frankly we all *should*...] or criticize how long it’s been allowed to go *on*, the disappointing and resignation-tinged answer you’re likely to get may sound vaguely and discouragingly familiar: “*Hey, it is what it is.*”

But trust me. There’s nothing wrong with responding to that question with one of our own: “*Yeah? Who says?*” Because there comes a time when even the most “philosophical” among us have to draw the line *somewhere*.

We just have to find the places that *need* those lines, and start *drawing*. [How’s *that* for a motto?]

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Throughout *After 50*’s first 16 years, veteran WNY writer and columnist Doug Carpenter regularly shared his wry generational observations with readers as *Everyboomer*. He has now returned to write a uniquely-named new monthly humor/opinion column called *I Just Have 1 Question* — which he says he’ll ask and then bravely try to answer... without, he fervently hopes, looking excessively foolish in the process. [We wish him luck.]

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