

Loaded Questions

by Ashley Lefrak

When her young son started asking about everything from war to physics, Ashley Lefrak had to confront what she didn't know.

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My son's first word was "toi-t." It sounded like "toilet" and "torte" got together to make a new word, but what he meant was "turtle." What mattered was I knew it. Finally, I thought, we can communicate beyond gesture! Good times lie ahead.

It turns out there's a dark side to the ability to form words. My son is now four and his ceaseless chatter manages to threaten the foundations of my knowledge on a daily basis.

I'm talking about The Questions.

I'm still recovering from a recent episode. The morning was inauspicious, humdrum really. My two boys, ages two and four, came with me to the post office, to the grocery store. We ate lunch, tacos. It was sunny. We drove to a new park dedicated to veterans. At the entrance was a cannon. Seeing the weapon, my son asked: "Okay. So how do they get that thing on a pirate ship?"

"Pulleys," I said. "Pirates use pulleys to get leverage. Or they put the cannon on wheels... to decrease friction." We'd recently read a book about pulleys and leverage and how wheels decrease friction. For a microsecond I enjoyed the illusory satisfaction that, by using these words in a new context, I was winning at something.

A quick glance at his face told me he was not so much into the physics of the thing. What he wanted to know was something else.

"Why do people want to kill *eachother*?"

My son still says *eachother* as if it were *alloneword*. He says "aminals" instead of animals and "losted" instead of lost but somehow, already, he is onto the cause of war.

What, or why, or how, or how come? It's impossible to predict when the big questions will arrive. Typically they start with little technical concerns that aren't so hard to answer. "What's inside bones?" he asks, innocuously enough, and words are still leaving my mouth when I'm walloped with the follow-up, "When, exactly, will you and dad die?"

These heavy hitters are intermingled with questions that sound either like pure nonsense or riddles designed to grow my mind if only I gave them their proper due. "What is yesterday?" he asks. I try responding straightforwardly, but where to start? Memory? Time? Orbital revolution? "The day before today," for whatever reason, does not satisfy. I can smell my neurons frying.

I'm not saying the questions I field are consistently paradigm shifting. I would prefer chipping desiccated gum from a long, hot stretch of pavement than respond to a few. One son recently asked, "Why does dad have no boobs?" What intrigues and feels instructive is hearing, in each new question, how my children angle themselves toward their surroundings for maximum absorption. Through my sons' eyes, I've been shown again and again how a question can evolve from the seemingly simple to something more layered and suggestive. "Why are we in the car?" turns quickly to "Why do cars make noise?" My eyes will be midway to a complete blink when I hear, in the momentary flutter of darkness: "Why is moving sound?"

"I don't know," I say. Often. *I don't know, I-don't-know, Idontknow*. A mountain of maternal "I-don't-knows" reaches new heights each day. I don't know the steps by which paper is made or how a building's foundations are laid. I don't know the history of ninjas or the mechanics of ... almost anything. It turns out I know practically nothing, really, about anything. Really. My knowledge of the world could be better described as not-knowledge punctuated by random facts.

This may sound like a fast track to certain humiliation, but turns out it's not. The questions mark a welcome shift in our relationship. While I adored my boys when they were babies, the benefits of looking after them seemed to accrue, largely, with them, in the satisfying curve of new thigh fat or the occasional toothless grin. I felt mothering to be largely an act of giving. Now that my boys are a bit older, our time together feels newly nourishing. Our conversations burst with what Robert Louis Stevenson called the "random provocations." This attitude of inquiry actively endows the world around us with something – poetry? mystery? It is generative. To be in the presence of this roving open curiosity, unlimited by preconception, snaps me to a level of attention that feels, in many ways, like the point of being alive.

Certain whoppers, though, like my son's question about why there is war, have started to arrive at increased frequency. These no-joke questions – and in the past months they've ranged in topic from divorce to poverty, child soldiers to environmental destruction – have begun to make me squint with feigned focus at nothing whatsoever while heavily sweating, my way of registering the vast distance between what I want to do and what I ought to be doing. In response to these questions, what I want is to say breezily, "Oh, it's complicated," followed by, "Let's have a show of hands for pretzels!" What I want is for the responses to my child's hard questions to match his goodness, his wish for everyone, everywhere, to be basically safe and happy and okay. What I want is to give him the answers he hopes for, to tell him the world is the way he imagines it should be, and also to not be lying.

What I sense, however, is that when he formulates his Questions, he is owed some version of the truth by which I don't mean Answers, but genuine conversation, open engagement. When my son asked the canon-inspired question about war, I wanted to ignore him, tell him to go play, change the topic, all things I've done in the past. Instead, this time, I dug in.

"Oh, it's really dumb, I mean it's awful," I started, "but sometimes people resolve their conflicts with weapons instead of talking." I refrained from addressing the outmoded

nature of the cannon and the techniques of modern warfare to my wide-eyed child, but was compelled to continue with this keeper, "People hurt each other in an attempt to resolve their conflicts. It's not effective, and also people die, so it's terrible and sad."

He was silent. Small wonder. *Effective? Resolve?* Half the words I was using were Greek to him; the other half were super scary.

He re-phrased the question: "Why do people want to kill *eachother?*"

I reminded myself that he has nightmares about characters in kids' books. He thinks that any rustle in the leaves is "really, probably a vemo-mous snake." He was convinced there were monsters in his room until we made a dream catcher and, magically, they disappeared. I thought of all of his four-year-old fears and fantastic thinking and decided I owed him a strain of honesty tempered by love. "Most people don't want to kill each other," I said. "But sometimes, once in a while, there's a war... between countries."

I was far from crushing it. War is a word he doesn't understand. "Countries" is an abstraction he barely gets. The other day he shouted from a cardboard box he was sitting in with his little brother, "We're on a ship leaving Pennsylvania and *heading to Philadelphia!*" Also, mine was a questionable form of honesty. "Sometimes" there's war. There's been war every second since you were born, kid.

He continued, asking, "I won't go to war though, momma. Right?" At last it sunk in that this was, in its sun-drenched, suburban, blue-skied way, a terrible moment. I said, "I hope not. I would not want you, or any child, to go to war." I was awash in a wave of unjustifiable anger at the park-side cannon. I was also starting to resent his relentless line of questioning. The pause between us grew longer while he digested what I was saying and I parsed how to be clear but not completely terrifying. Either what I said was not sinking in, or my own bewilderment was being communicated too well and he didn't like the unresolvedness of the whole thing. So he asked a version of the same question for the third time, "Why do some people go to war?"

"They think it's the right thing to do," I tried, "to protect their country and their values." I did not mention nationalism, or the military-industrial complex, or the impossible economic strain that causes many to join the armed forces. There is only so much one can accomplish in a morning.

Finally, he had enough of me and this terrible, abstract business of countries and values and killing *eachother*. The swings had started their cranky song and he was suddenly

aware of where we were. Our exchange ended as abruptly as it had begun. The see-saw called.

And me? I was left standing there by the car, confronting a few questions of my own. What am I doing? How did I get to this moment? Why *is* moving sound?

Mom?