

ARLENE GOLDBARD

ARLENEGOLDBARD@GMAIL.COM | WWW.ARLENEGOLDBARD.COM

The Path of Questions: Art, Identity, and Inquiry

This is the text of a talk I gave on 24 October 2022 for the Alliance for Jewish Theatre 2022 Annual Conference.

My husband's family is from Okinawa. Rick was brought up in Hawaii with Shinto heritage, and sent—much to his distress—to Catholic schools. He isn't Jewish, but he loves to take part with me in holiday celebrations, Shabbos gatherings, and Torah study.

We first met a decade ago. Not long after, he traveled with me to Philadelphia. I was then president of The Shalom Center, a multifaith peace and justice organization founded by Rabbi Arthur Waskow. The occasion was a benefit event celebrating two eightieth birthdays: Reb Arthur's and Gloria Steinem's. The night before, there was a gathering of friends at Arthur's house to celebrate his birthday and offer blessings.

Afterwards, I asked Rick how it felt to be there. "Great," he said. "Jews are so warm and welcoming!" I silently congratulated myself on my choice of friends. "They love to sing," he added, "and they don't care how it sounds!" Well, obviously, many of us do care, but I was glad that night for his generosity in the face of my own difficulty in carrying a tune.

As Rick has become more familiar with Jewish texts, practices, and ideas, people have asked him what draws him, what he likes about it. His answer is always the same. He came up in world of dogma where there's a right response to every query. "Questions," is what he always says. "Every question leads to another, and every answer to yet another." I feel the same. When people ask me why I practice, I usually respond with a question: How could I not love a tradition in which disputation is a form of worship?"

It's not just me. It's *who we are*. People of the book, to be sure, but not one book. We are just as much people of the inquiry, of the dialogue, of the passionate argument, of more than one way to look at anything. Probably my favorite passage from *Pirke Avot* (a tractate from the *Mishnah* containing rabbinic maxims and ethics) is 2:16: "It is not given you to complete the task, but neither may you desist from it." For me, that about sums it up.

That applies equally well to the practice of art as to spiritual inquiry. Many worthy aims are expressed through artmaking, but today, in this country, on this planet, the one that leads my list is to cultivate open, curious, and generous hearts and minds. I worry that too many of us are being lulled to sleep by what seem to be settled answers to questions that can never truly be settled. Waking up and staying awake is my personal aim, and I'm happy to prescribe it to anyone who asks.

I learned something about one way to do that years ago, when there was a tremendous controversy in schools about whether evolution ought to be taught as scientific fact or just one theory. Quite a few people wanted equal time for the idea that life on earth is only a few thousand years old, without humans descending from animal ancestors. Nowadays, of course, everything that can possibly be contested is wide-open for dispute. A little controversy over evolution may almost seem cute. But it wasn't.

I took to heart the advice some very smart people offered to teachers. If there are seemingly insoluble contradictions in what is being asserted, they said, if we are faced with two things that can't be true at the same time, the task is to *teach the contradictions*, something artists can also do by portraying questions and contradictions of great moment in these times, and inviting others to inquire deeply with you.

Jews have had excellent training in teaching the contradictions via that massive and ancient compilation of disputation, the Talmud, in which points are posited, analyzed, debated, and discussed by many commentators, after which still other commentators analyze the debate. It's a practice I'm guessing will go on as long as there are Jews. I'm no Talmudic scholar, but I really like the process, creating a patchwork quilt of questions and observations, shining light on both the hidden and revealed.

When I spoke to Willow Jade Norton about talking with you today, I asked her to give me an idea of the questions on people's minds. Now, I'd like to explore a couple of them.

Can you guess the first question Willow shared with me? She was fresh from an online gathering where it had been offered: *Am I Jewish enough?* Whether that pertains to an individual or to the work you are making, that question opens the door to many others. Three stand out for me:

Why is it being asked? What does the inquiry serve?

Who's judging?

How might the verdict affect you?

It's also a question with variations that travel far beyond the boundaries of Judaism. *Am I Black enough? Am I Asian enough?* Today we are hearing from Jews of color whose Jewishness has been questioned in predominately white spaces by folks whose opening gambit is "Were you born Jewish?" a question our tradition says never to ask. People of nearly every identity are presented with parallel questions.

Walk with me to another intersection in the busy traffic circle of identity: *Can I call myself an artist?* I often speak to groups of students in arts schools. Many of them have internalized the idea that rather than being a flatly descriptive term, like *plumber* or *lawyer* or *counselor* or *cook*, the word "artist" is aspirational. They've been convinced that you have to live up to it or earn it, and they doubt their own ability to succeed. I'm sure some people here today have felt that

double whammy of their identity being questioned, both Jew and artist. For some, it's been triple or quadruple.

Consider how the question of being *something enough* can be turned to political ends. How often have we heard it said, mostly by white supremacists, that someone is not "a real American" on account of political positions, immigration status, race, religion, and so on?

So why are these questions asked? What is being served?

The simplest answer is that people sometimes want to exclude or degrade others, for reasons that often fortify their own sense of entitlement to judge. If I'm just fine with questioning *your* legitimacy as a Jew, surely no one can question *mine*. I am right where I belong, in the gatekeeper's seat.

Gatekeepers thrive in a world of scarcity. It's easy to see this functioning in artworlds. When everyone knows there aren't enough grants, awards, honors, fame, or accolades to go around, gatekeepers' power comes from being the ones authorized to say who's in and who's out. The systems they operate are conditioned on this truth although it is seldom stated outright. Most foundations, for instance, reject ten or more applicants for every grant they make. Don't get me started on the structures that sustain this system: I'll just say that the rules require them to spend a mere five percent of the market value of their assets each year on grantmaking and very few do more than that. Self-perpetuation and the glory that clothes it is more of a priority than supporting work, but you would not know that from these institutions' own words.

When the question is whether you or I are *something enough*, there is always the implication that others, the ones who are not being questioned, indisputably measure up. The act of separating the good enough from the not elevates the power and privilege of the questioner. No matter what is said about gatekeepers' reasons—to uphold the purity of the community, to set standards that prevent chaos, and on and on—*Cui bono?/Who benefits?* the question that the Roman statesman Cicero put forward more than two thousand years ago, still matters.

Who is judging?

Who feels authorized to question other Jews' (or other artists' or other people's) authenticity? In my experience, they are not seekers of multiple truths; they are the folks for whom the stability of the world rests on settled answers that put an end to inquiry, and they're often embraced by a community that shares that consensus. Sometimes they are also embedded in an official structure, as in communities where a senior rabbi adjudicates disputes and rules on what is permissible; or in an artworld in which obsequious deference is paid to a critic, curator, or artistic director.

A river of questions flows from these external sources of legitimacy, inviting you to explore your own conception of true authority. Does it come from position? From reputation? From

accomplishment or expertise? In your own opinion, who is authorized to pronounce on your legitimacy? If you find yourself plagued by doubt about whether you are enough, I recommend listing your answers to these questions and taking time to interrogate how and why you have granted those you list this access to your autonomy.

Full disclosure here, I'm a big proponent of self-authorization. I believe all should have the right to consider questions that affect us, to offer criticism or praise, and to have a voice in democratic decisions. So if you ask who can judge me, I won't be naming names. But that's me. There are countless circumstances in which people willingly submit to an authority they truly respect. Another person might find my operating principle willful or self-regarding. What is your operating principle?

How might the verdict affect you?

External authorities present the easiest challenge: you have the power to consider who feels entitled to judge you and decide for yourself whether you agree. But very often, the source is not literally external. The great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire introduced the concept of "internalization of the oppressor," whereby messages that make us smaller and weaker than we really are have been broadcast long and insistently enough that we come to mistake them for our own inner voices. Freire prescribed the antidote: cultivating critical consciousness, where a process of exploration and dialogue helps us learn to free ourselves from those messages, becoming active subjects in history rather than remaining the objects of those who benefit from keeping us pliant and passive.

Freire wrote in the twentieth century, but my favorite story illustrating this is from a much older source, Parshat Shelach (Numbers 13:1-15:41), in which spies are sent to scout the promised land. Instead of returning excited at the abundance they find, most are full of fear, speaking of giants. "We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves," they say, "and so we must have looked to them." Internalization of the oppressor.

It can be very hard to face challenges to your identity or to endure rejection and not wonder if these things actually do call the question of your legitimacy. To unmask internalization of the oppressor, inquire into the sources of your beliefs. Is there the image of a figure—a strictly observant Jew, say, or a writer, actor, or director you greatly admire—residing in your head, commenting on the sufficiency of your beliefs or behaviors, your skill, learning, or commitment? When did that gatekeeper show up? Where did you encounter the ideas that animate your resident gatekeeper? In light of what you now know, are those ideas true?

Despite what both internal and external gatekeepers may expect you to believe, whether or not you are an artist isn't a performance evaluation. It's a choice of work and identity that is yours to make. Others are free to criticize the results—you might conclude I'm a bad artist or a good one—but they cannot take away your right to choose unless you let them. Whether or not you are Jewish enough is a question between you and yourself. Perhaps after you let it swim around

awhile in your mind, a new question will arise. What if you asked instead how you can best embody and express your Jewishness in your life and work? Might that suggest more possibilities? The best antidote to a self-flagellating question is a self-summoning one.

The second question Willow and I talked about may be familiar too: *Is art enough to make a better world?* Let's explore the same three inquiries:

Why is it being asked? What does the inquiry serve?

Who's judging?

How might the verdict affect you?

So what does the inquiry serve?

The students I meet in arts majors are mostly desperate to matter. This desire often has two roots. The first is a beautiful thing, the durable impression made on young people by the experiences that set them on their course.

Can you remember the first time you sat in a theater seat and your whole being came into focus when the lights went down? Do you remember the *aha!* moment of understanding something new about who you are and what you want? If we don't forget it or allow it to be overshadowed by other concerns, the thrill of that galvanizing moment can last a lifetime. When they dream of their lives after graduation, these students imagine their own roles in opening the mysteries of story, empathy, mastery, beauty, and meaning to others.

The other root of their desire is pain. They may have had to fight hard to enroll in drama school, pushing against parents, counselors, and a general social attitude that trivializes art as mere decoration or entertainment, fine for those who like that sort of thing but not a grown-up way to make a living. *How will you make a living, anyway?* can be a constant refrain, and answers don't come easy. Like most of their friends, they are probably plugged into online news 24/7, where what the cognitive scientists call an "availability cascade" amplifies every blood-soaked or demoralizing story until the rest of reality is blotted out.

In the face of this pain, the students I meet want their art to enter people's lives, winding itself around their deepest questions, offering them reasons not to go to sleep, to keep the inquiry going.

What is being served by the legions of gatekeepers who scoff at the idea that art can fulfill these desires? They are serving a social order that treats life like a commodity instead of the ground of what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called "radical amazement," instead of a gift beyond price. Like the Borg on *Star Trek*, they want everyone to be assimilated into the system they've created. Questions just get in the way.

Who's judging?

A decade ago, in my book *The Culture of Possibility: Art, Artists & the Future*, I dubbed this social order "Datastan," a place where value could only be counted, weighed, and measured, as if human lives were simply matter, like rocks and gasses. I wanted to live instead in "Storyland," where we all have our stories, where feelings, metaphors, and images add up to a larger and truer picture of lived reality. I encouraged everyone to ask what it would be like to give art and culture their real worth as the crucible in which our shared values and visions are forged. I invited them to consider how much poorer we are as a people when we dismiss them as frills, luxuries, and irrelevancies.

Sadly, the world wasn't transformed. We are embedded today in a society held hostage by people who put their own profits ahead of everything else, who have no trouble dismissing the harm they do to the rest of us as necessary collateral damage. They fear the impact too many questions may have on their dominance, calling out the emperor's nakedness. They represent polluting industries, corporations whose skyrocketing profits are achieved by exploiting workers and consumers, politicians for whom democracy is merely an impediment to their dominance, and every other species of self-regarding power.

What's so funny about this state of affairs is that it is grounded in an entirely untested assumption that is treated like fact: that any form of endeavor in and of itself is enough to make a better world. I'm amazed at the persistence of the default settings that treat certain policies and practices as successful simply because they are persistent and familiar. Consider the kind of teaching to the tests that has taken hold in many of our elementary and secondary schools. Datastan adores test scores because they are a closed loop: they measure what can be measured and pretend that says something ultimate about value. I love the way Einstein demolished that assertion: "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts."

When people who have internalized Datastan's assumptions ask me for proof that art is enough to make a better world, I first answer with a question: where is the proof that any enterprise is enough to make a better world?

No single activity can transform collective behavior or reverse collective harm. To redirect a society—or even a single institution or policy—requires engaging people in all four worlds, physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. How we feel about climate moves the needle just as much as seeing the data that backs up scientists' observations. I could argue it matters more. How we hold the dignity of human life, our capacity for listening to and feeling with others, has just as much power to move us toward racial and gender justice as do statistics illustrating how social and economic structures promulgate inequality and injustice. So here's one tip: when people challenge you to prove the worthiness of your work, make sure they are applying the same criteria to their own, not simply skating on assumptions that have been in place so long they seem like truths.

How might the verdicts of these self-appointed judges affect you?

Making art in this society can feel like pushing a big rock uphill. Or maybe whiplash is a better metaphor. The labor, excitement, and satisfaction of realizing a vision onstage can be applauded and rewarded today, but tomorrow you may have to go back to the perpetual game of defense against those who don't respect or comprehend the power of art, or who just like using it for target practice. Fatigue, demoralization, depression—we've all seen them take their toll.

When a question cancels itself, my advice is to pick a new one. Who says art by itself has to be enough to make a better world? Is that really the criterion? Instead, try asking what can strengthen your art's role in the collaborative enterprise of repairing the world—or any other question grounded enough in reality to recognize your agency not as a solo world-saver, but as part of a larger reality.

Progressive activist C. Wright Mills wrote about the tendency to treat public issues as private troubles. When someone loses a job, instead of looking at structural changes in the field or policies that shape overall employment prospects, a typical response is to wonder what that person did to deserve being let go. This personalization of social issues is epidemic, and it speaks directly to the questions I've focused on this morning.

The dynamics at play in the smaller worlds of our communities, families, and individual lives are also always present in the big world of shared experience. If something in the spirit of the times is pressing you to question your legitimacy as a Jew or an artist, you can be sure others, even those with very different identities, are also feeling the pinch of self-doubt. If skeptical voices question the sufficiency of your effort in relation to the challenges you address, you can be sure others are hearing them too.

So here's a question truly worth pondering: what does it mean for our culture that so many people dedicated to making beauty and meaning, rooted in their own identities and histories, are agonizing over their right to do so? I'm not suggesting the goal is to be free of doubt. We've had a close-up nightmare in this country—and not only this country, as authoritarian regimes multiply—of the price we pay when unmoored certainty is in charge. So, yes, a little self-questioning can be a salubrious thing. I like the story told about Rabbi Simcha Bunim, who taught that every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "I am but dust and ashes," words spoken by Abraham in Genesis. In the other pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "For my sake was the world created," which comes from the Babylonian Talmud. You titrate the dosage, reading one text when your ego swells, the other when life has you down. Neither truth cancels the other.

I have a new book coming out in January. Willow tells me she'll be sure to let you know about it. It's called *In The Camp of Angels of Freedom: What Does It Mean to Be Educated?* and it's

something of a departure for me, given that my prior books have mostly been about cultural politics. This one is much more personal, with paintings, memoir, and essays animated by the heartbreak and anger I feel about the way social goods such as education are being converted to profit centers, at the disrespect meted out to those whose wisdom emanates from lived knowledge instead of credentialed expertise. My heart is fully in it, but it also feels risky.

Before my publisher sent the book to the printer, it was my job to collect blurbs for the cover and inside pages. I had to summon every ounce of chutzpah to send off my requests, hoping that people would *like* what they read. As the results came in, my husband remarked at the intensity of my surprise. It turned out that people not only liked it, they loved it! Rick asked me to explain my astonishment. I said that the process had made me understand something I hadn't fully realized before: that I had a lifelong habit of preparing myself for disappointment, to be misunderstood, dismissed, rebuffed. That bad habit is adopted as a defense against feeling so much pain if the worst happens, but all it actually does is make you pre-disappointed. It's like moaning about never winning the lottery while refusing to buy a ticket.

So I understand that it's human to feel daunted. But it's also possible to hear doubt as a summons to walk the path of questions in your own heart and mind, and to see your artmaking as an invitation to others to join you there. Just now, humanity is suffering greatly from excess credulousness. People believe all sorts of wild and wicked lies, and loud voices are exhorting us to join the club. Questions can disrupt the temptation to go along, to stop our ears with settled answers to questions that can never be settled. Questions can wake us up and keep us aware. Historically—perhaps even at a cellular level—Jews have always been training ourselves to walk the path of questions. Now our challenge is to choose questions that can awaken us to full radical amazement, lifting us from doubt to possibility.

What questions are burning a hole in your brain? Feel free to type them in the comments or raise your hand to share them.