

Questions for Discerning Your Calling

Overview

At Acton we believe that everyone can find a calling. If you make it your priority, you too can discover a way to use your greatest strengths doing something you love that meets a burning need in the world.

Some lucky people stumble on a “star.” Most folks who find a calling get there through research, experiments, and self-examination – and a critical part of this process is asking good questions. In fact, you might say that the quest for a calling is just a Socratic dialogue with your own soul where powerful, probing questions guide you to deeper knowledge and more intentional, effective action.

It’s hard to overstate the importance of the questions you carry around with you. Your questions reflect the beliefs and assumptions that inspire or limit you. Vague questions leave you muddling; while sharp ones provide direction, provoke action, and force you to choose. Clear questions help you connect with others who can help and relate guidance you get to your life in a way that makes sense.

This note offers advice on how to ask the kind of questions that will move you forward on your journey toward your “star.” We’ll preview Acton’s Life of Meaning framework – a set of questions to structure your search for a calling and show you how to apply it. We’ll consider reliable sources for powerful questions about your calling and tips for crafting questions that focus and energize your search. Finally, we’ll suggest ways to explore your questions on your own and with others.

Starting With the Framework

Acton’s Life of Meaning (LOM) framework is a sequence of questions designed to help you find your “star.” The framework takes the Big Question, “How can I find my calling?” and breaks it down into manageable chunks that others have used to find satisfying, meaningful work.¹

¹ Acton’s framework draws on insight from career counselors, psychologists, and the wisdom traditions.

To discern your calling, you must first know yourself – “What do I really want? What work inspires me?” – so the first category of questions in the LOM framework is *Self-Knowledge*, questions of PREFERENCE AND POTENTIAL:

- What am I good at?
- What do I really love doing?
- Which of the world’s deep burning needs most compel me?

In addition to knowing yourself, you must know *How the World Works* – that is, what opportunities exist for making a difference and what paths lead to your goal and what sacrifices you’ll have to make. The second category of questions in the LOM framework includes these questions of POSSIBILITY:

- How can I put it all together?
- What next step can I take?
- What does it cost?

Having defined a dream, charted a course and counted the cost, you’re ready to address your resistance to moving forward. Are you willing to make the *Trade-Offs* that your dream demands? What does your reluctance reveal about yourself? What’s at stake for you? This third category of questions in the LOM framework focuses on PRIORITY:

- Is it worth it?
- What’s holding me back?
- What am I afraid of?
- What action is consistent with my standards of integrity?

The LOM framework hooks you into a deep conversation with yourself and between yourself and the world – a conversation that presses you to see things clearly and to identify your driving values and make tough choices.

We’ve addressed the LOM framework questions to a broad audience. You’ll probably find most of the questions (in their broad forms) hard to answer – for instance, how many of us can say offhand what we’re good at? The framework questions give you a starting point for your journey. Your next step is to dig into your memory and experience and to get clues from friends and tests that help you answer the broader questions as they apply to your own life.

Exploring and Personalizing

One tool for exploring questions about your PREFERENCE AND POTENTIAL is Acton’s “*Brainstorm You*” exercise. For instance, to help you figure out “What do I really love doing?” the Brainstorm asks the following questions:

- What did you love doing when you were ten or eleven years old?

- When do you lose track of time?
- What activity that was important at another time in your life do you now miss?
- If you never had to worry about money, how would you spend your time?

Brainstorm You calls on your vivid, specific memories and passions to surface important pieces of your life’s puzzle. Fitting these pieces together is part of finding your calling.

Your *career fantasies* provide another tool for exploring your PREFERENCE AND POTENTIAL. For instance, if your daydreams about commercial real estate development excite you, dig in and try to discern the fantasy. Why does it appeal to you? What might it be telling you about your passions, your strengths and your desire to make a particular kind of difference in the world?

You’ll also get useful (and sometimes even objective) information about your PREFERENCE AND POTENTIAL by asking the *people who know you best* to help you answer the LOM framework (and Brainstorm You) questions. Skills *assessments* (like the Highlands) and personality assessments (like the Birkman) can also provide specific, practical Self-Knowledge.

You can start exploring questions of POSSIBILITY through *online research* and *informational interviews*. Read all you can find about people whose career paths excite you. If you know which of your own talents you want to use at work, ask experienced business people to help you identify people using these same talents at the top of their game. Find out what it takes to get into an industry or firm that interests you and what it takes to advance there. Your research and interviews will give you a clearer picture of the skills required and the cities where it’s “happening” and the different roles you might play. Each article and conversation will answer some of your questions and spark new ones.

As you gain Self-Knowledge and get clearer about How the World Works, you’ll come face to face with inevitable Trade-Offs. Questions of PRIORITY pop up *anytime you explore* your passions and possibilities – and they are always personal and specific. “Company X seems like a great place to learn the oil and gas industry, but is it really worth living in Houston for five years?” Or, more to the point, “Would it really be worth dealing with how much my spouse would hate it?”

Just as career fantasies can point to hidden dreams, internal objections can point to *hidden fears* and unconscious controlling beliefs. When you encounter a paralyzing Trade-Off, ask yourself, “Where is this coming from? What am I afraid of? What’s this really about? Where am I stuck?” *Curiosity* invites insight, even if you don’t get an answer right away. Also, make a point of discussing with *people you trust* any obstacles and tough choices you discover on your quest to find a calling.

Refining Your Questions

As you apply the LOM framework to your own life, take care to craft questions that provoke and direct you. Well-framed questions energize your search and “invite you forward.”

For instance, consider the following questions:

- *What should I do with my life?*
- *How can I find my calling?*

The difference may seem subtle, but it’s important. The first question sounds like an appeal to an outside authority – someone else knows what you “should” do; the second question seeks guidance for a challenge you’ve accepted as your own. The first question is wide open; the second question shows that you already know something about what you’re after. Moreover, the term “calling” invokes a specific approach to building a life.

When you’re seeking guidance – about PREFERENCE AND POTENTIAL, POSSIBILITY OR PRIORITY – you’ll do well to ask questions that hold you personally responsible, make full use of what you already know, and use vivid specifics instead of vague generalities.

Take personal responsibility. That’s the first criterion for a well-formed guidance question. As you frame your questions, focus on things you can influence or control. For instance, consider the following questions:

- *Should I go back to my old job or try to break into real estate?*
- *Why is taking a chance on real estate so much more appealing than my old job?*
- *How can I persuade Real Estate Firm X to hire me for a project this summer?*
- *What’s the greatest risk to quitting my job for the sake of trying real estate? Am I willing to take that risk?*

In the first question, you give up responsibility for making a decision. You want someone to tell you what to do. In the other three questions you’re seeking information – about PREFERENCE, POSSIBILITY and PRIORITY, respectively – and clearly recognizing that the responsibility for the decision is yours. Here’s another set of questions:

- *Will my parents approve if I go to work in the film industry?*
- *Why do I need my parents to bless this move?²*
- *What could I show or tell my parents to allay concerns about the risks I’m taking?³*
- *Am I willing to take a job in the film industry knowing my parents will never approve?⁴*

² PREFERENCE

³ POSSIBILITY

⁴ PRIORITY

It's tempting to ask questions like the first one – questions that predict the future or validate our choices. We want certainty that we're making good choices – or at least have an authority to blame if we get disappointing results. When it comes to your life, however, you're the authority. And you'll find personally-responsible questions energizing, because they shift your perspective from external factors (waiting for them to change or trying to change others) to what you can do to move your dreams ahead.

Use what you know. When you're crafting a question for guidance, make sure the question builds on what you already know and reaches for what you don't know. Your rule for crafting good discernment questions: Ask from the frontier of your knowledge.

Consider the following questions. In each case, the first version doesn't make full use of what you know. The prompt questions *in italics* surface additional information that shows up in the second version.

- *Would I like working in politics?*
Why do you think you would? Why do you think you wouldn't?
- *I love polling and crafting strategy and messages for candidates, but the introvert in me tires of rallies and receptions. How would I manage this tension?*⁵
- *Could I get a job working on a magazine?*
What sort of magazine? What sort of job? How would you show an editor the value you could contribute?
- *If an experienced photographer and political speechwriter with an expertise in urban ecology wanted to impress Texas Monthly and Conde Nast with the range of features I could produce, what should I submit as a portfolio?*⁶
- *Would I be happy as an account executive in corporate sales at a computer firm?*
What do you care about that a job like that could get you? What's the downside of that job? Is it worth it?
- *I know I've got the communication skills needed to sell IT equipment to businesses, but would it be worth it to travel 15 days a month, working 60 hours a week for two years to get the skills and connections needed to be VP of Sales at a tech start up?*⁷

In each case, the second version of the question is richer and more provocative than the first – closer to the heart of the matter, to what you need to consider as you compare your options.

Get specific. That's the third criterion for a good guidance question. As often as you can, replace general terms with specific ones, abstract with concrete and theoretical with practical. Consider the following examples:

⁵ POSSIBILITY

⁶ POSSIBILITY

⁷ PRIORITY

- *Can I find a job in Austin that is not in my preferred industry but that makes me happy and earns plenty of money?*

Let's see how replacing the qualitative terms with concrete specifications can sharpen this question. First, what does "makes me happy" mean? When asked, the seeker who wrote the question said, "I want to use my analytical skills solving challenging finance problems. Oh, and I only want to work 40 hours per week." OK, that's specificity we can work with.

Next what does the seeker mean by "plenty" of money? When asked, she said, "\$70,000 per year. Finally, when asked why she was limiting herself to a job outside her preferred industry, she said, "I'm not. I'm just saying I'd take a job outside the industry if I could satisfy the other criteria." In that case, we don't need the qualification. Maybe she'll get lucky and find it all.

Here's the revised question:

- *Can I find a job in Austin making at least \$70,000 annually using my analytical skills to solve challenging finance problems and working no more than 40 hours per week?*

Maybe Austin offers lots of these jobs – or maybe only a few. At least our seeker now has a sharp question of POSSIBILITY to guide her research. (She did, in fact, find such a job.)

For questions about Trade-Offs or PRIORITY, make the competing objectives explicit, as in the following examples:

- *Would I work a lot more hours per week on my own venture than I'd work for someone else?*
- *If the money were the same, would I rather work 60 hours per week on my own venture or 40 hours per week doing similar work for someone else?*
- *Should we stay in Austin or move back to Oklahoma City?*
- *Is it more important right now to live in the green-energy deal stream or to live close to our parents as we're expecting our first child?*
- *Should I get a job in a start-up or in an established firm?*
- *At this point, can I learn more from participating in an experiment or from inside observation of someone else's success?*

In the first example, the vague term "more hours" gets converted to a specific quantity that makes comparison easier. In the second example, Austin and Oklahoma City act as symbols for the real concerns of the seeker – proximity to business opportunity or to family support. In the third example, start-up and established firm stand for competing learning objectives. Making the objectives explicit makes the question sharper and stronger.

Acting on Your Questions

Once you've applied the LOM framework to come up with questions to guide your quest for a calling and you've refined the questions to make them accountable, informed and specific; you're ready to put them to helping you find a star and pick your next steps.

Once you've got specific questions of POSSIBILITY, your online *research* and informational *interviews* will become much more efficient. Ask people who know you well to help you sort through your revised questions of PREFERENCE AND POTENTIAL. Questions of PRIORITY sometimes make for the best interviews. If you can win the trust of your subjects, they may share hard-won lessons about what really matters.

Small *experiments* can answer some questions of PREFERENCE AND POTENTIAL and PRIORITY. A two-week temp job or a short-term project can teach you whether you'd really like a job, a firm, or an industry. A short-term rental with a longer commute can help you figure out how much it's worth to live close to work.

If you're actively exploring your questions, in research, reflection, interviews and experiments, they will fuel your journey. If you start your quest with the ten questions that matter most to your search for a calling, and if you pursue these questions diligently, your list will evolve. Some questions you'll answer right away. Some questions will become unimportant. Others will rise to the top of the list and get reworked as your perspective changes.

Just keep in mind that the questions you ask will determine where you look for answers and what you can see. That's why you must choose and create your guiding questions wisely and fully employ them as you search for your star.