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**The five essential question so life with James Ryan @[deanjimryan](#) from Harvard's Graduate school of education. This is episode 75.**

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VICKI: Happy Five Idea Friday. And today we're talking to Dean James Ryan, the dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Education and author of Wait, What? And Life's Other Essential Questions <http://amzn.to/2qzuwXp> . So, Jim, why did you write this book? I mean what is the deal with these five questions?

JAMES: That's a good question. I wrote the book because last year I gave a commencement speech <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bW0NnguMG1bE> which I have to do every year. And in the speech I talked about taking time to ask good questions and made the point that we should spend more time worrying about good questions and worrying about the right answer. And to make tie more concrete I gave a list of what I think are five essential questions. And someone from my communications department put the clip of the speech that talked about the five essential questions online and it went viral and I think it's been viewed by over 8 million people now including an editor at HarperCollins who persuaded me to turn it into a book which I did.

And it goes through each of the give essential questions and explains why each one is useful across a number of contexts.

VICKI: I love it. And one of my favorite quotes from the book is on page 15. You quoted Einstein who said "If he had an hour to solve and problem and his life depended on it, he would the first 55 minutes determining the right question to ask."

So Jim, what are these five right questions that we need to teach our students to ask?

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JAMES: Sure. So they are in the order that they appear in the book. The first one is 'wait, what?' as the title suggests. The second is I wonder which can be paired with "why" or "if." So, I wonder why or I wonder if. The third is "Couldn't we at least?" The fourth is 'How can I help?' And the fifth is 'What truly matters?'

And in the book I explained why each of those questions is useful. In a number of contexts both professionally and personally.

VICKI: So, what do you think is the first question you think that we should be teaching out students to really start asking?

JAMES: So I would start with “Wait, what?” And partly because a lot of them are already asking that question. I have four kids and they ask that question all the time. What I actually love about the question, although it can sometimes be asked by someone who’s not paying attention. What I love about the question is that the weight reminds you to slow down and to ask the speaker to slow down to ensure that you understand something. And I think encouraging kids to slow down and make sure that they understand what’s being taught or what’s being said is an essential skill and it’s one, frankly, that not enough adults have.

VICKI: That’s so true. Now, I love your second on which is I wonder. And I do genius hour 20% of the time, all these things in my classroom – sometimes I’ll come across a student who just looks at me with a blank look and says, “I don’t know where to start.” And it makes you wonder if the ‘I wonder’ has kind of been trampled out of them by traditional schooling. Do you think that happens?

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JAMES: I do, actually. I mean, I think that the heart of great teaching is cultivating the curiosity with which all kids are born. I mean, when asked what’s the first question to bring to students, I picked ‘wait, what’ instead of ‘I wonder why’ because I think kids are born knowing the question, ‘I wonder why.’ I mean, I’m sure I’m not the only parent whose two and three year old children constantly asked why, why, why.

But what I’ve noticed is that overtime, kids become less curious rather than more. And I think that’s really unfortunate. And I think again, what great teachers do is cultivate that curiosity and I think they do it by modeling it. So they organize their classrooms around questions. They ask questions, they encourage their kids to ask questions and like I said, I think kids are naturally curious so I don’t think it’s something that you have to teach them, I think it’s something that you have to preserve and encourage.

VICKI: Now this last question, ‘what truly matters’ is a tough one because there are teachers now who feel like they’re being asked to do things that don’t truly matter. And as dean of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, what do you think truly matters that we should be doing in K12 classroom today? I mean, are there some things you wished would be moved out and others moved in, like, maybe asking these questions?

JAMES: That’s a very big topic as you know I think that there are some essential things that should be happening in classroom. Obviously, it depends on the grade and the age of the child. But I think it’s a combination of focusing on what are the essential skills that are trying to be taught? And if you’re talking about younger kids it could be literacy which is absolutely fundamental. For older kids, it could be effective writing or communication skills.

And I also think that there are some essential content and that too depend on age. But beyond that, I think that it is in some respects helping students to not only remain curious but learn how to learn.

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I think we're at an age where we need to be really focused on producing kids who are going to be lifelong learners because they're going to have to adapt to an ever-changing world. And if they don't leave school feeling like they actually enjoy the process of learning, when it comes to a time to learn new skills for a job or learn about a new area of the world that moved from one place to another, they're going to be hampered for the rest of their lives.

There are a lot of different ways why that you can prepare kids to be lifelong learners, I don't think it's formulaic. But if you're focused on that as what truly matters I think it can help orient what happens in classrooms. Although admittedly I recognized that teachers are often arm-strung by rules and regulation about what has to be covered. So you make it a challenge sometimes.

**VICKI:** It does. Now, you also in the book have a bonus question which I found kind of interesting. What's the bonus question?

**JAMES:** So the bonus question comes from a poem by Raymond Carver called Late Fragments. <https://allpoetry.com/Late-Fragment> And the poem begins - it's a very short poem. It begins with the question, and did you get what you wanted from this life even so. The poem goes on to say 'I did' and it asks 'what did you want' and the narrator says 'to feel beloved.' And the thing that I love about this question is that obviously it's a question that's been asked in a lot of different forms and it's a question that at the end of the day is probably the most important question any of us will face. It's a question that asks 'did you achieve what you wanted to achieve in life?' And I don't think it's about material gain. I mean, I think when you look at your life and you think about what's important to you I think it's going to be the relationships that you've developed and the mark that you've made on the world and so far as you've made the world a better place.

But by asking the questions 'did you get what you wanted even so' even so a part of it to me is so buoyant because it recognizes that most lives lived fully are going to also involve some pain and disappointment.

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But the ultimate hope is that even so, you'll be able to get what you wanted from this life. And part of the point of the book is that if you live a life that is fueled by asking questions and listening to the answers, you're more likely to be in a position to answer 'I did' when you have to ask yourself that questions, whether you got what you wanted from this life.'

VICKI: The book is fantastic, it's Wait, What? By James E. Ryan. And he also has a term that I'm starting to use with my students called generous listening. And I think that's a big important piece of this. It's not only must we ask the right questions but we must be generous listeners and truly take in the answers. So rather than just thinking about the next questions. But t's a very powerful book, there's a reason that the video went viral and I'll include that in the show notes. So take a listen and get inspired and start asking those essential questions of life.

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