

“What Do You Want to Talk About?” – p4c Lessons in the Family

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I was attending a conference in Los Angeles a few years ago, and, as is my habit, I called home as soon as I checked in at the hotel. My son Peter picked up the phone. After asking me what kind of plane I was on and what the time difference was, Peter, quite out of the blue, said “Maman, what do you want to talk about?” I remember being surprised by the question. My son had never asked me before whether there was a subject that I might be interested in. Typically, he would shower me with all the things that he had on his mind and expect me to comment on them. After I had hung up the phone, I thought: “This is the first time my son is inquiring about something that I would like to share with him.” Then a few months after our telephone conversation, my husband, who was traveling in Europe, rang us up, and Peter asked him the same question: “What do you want to talk about?” From then on that question has become part of our family routine whether we travel or just sit around the kitchen table in our Makīkī apartment. No matter how often I hear it, it always makes me smile. It isn’t just the question. It’s also the very earnest face that Peter wears when he puts the question to us. He has a way of conveying to my husband and I that he is genuinely interested in what we have to say. He fixes his eyes on the person he is speaking to and won’t let them off the hook until he has an answer. Frankly, there have been days when Peter’s question has helped my husband and I turn away from our day-to-day worries and think for a moment about subjects we really want to tackle.

It was only last year that we realized where Peter had learned to ask, “What do you want to talk about?” Peter was telling us one day about an exciting P4C session he had at his Waikīkī School. The subject was whether ghosts exist. Peter told us what his classmates’ thoughts were: that ghosts were invented to scare children and therefore were not real; that some were good, others weird; that one needed to make a distinction between ghosts (bad) and spirits (good), that ghosts were different from angels... We got a whole lecture presented to us about all the things one should consider when

speaking of ghosts. Peter was just about to ask us whether we thought ghosts existed, when we interrupted him. We wanted to know how he and the other children in his class found their topics. Peter smiled at our silly question and just said, “We ask what we should talk about.” And as he went on to tell us how he and his classmates collected subjects, took a vote, and how it just never happened that one of his topics was chosen (sigh!), my husband and I finally understood where that “What do you want to talk about?” question came from. It came straight out of the P4C sessions at Waikīkī School, and Peter had adapted it to our family conversations!

This year Peter is in a school in Sofia, Bulgaria where he gets to perfect his Bulgarian and learn much about the history and geography of the Balkans. The school climate is highly competitive. School children challenge each other with questions related to Bulgaria. The names of past tsars and their accomplishments flow easily from their lips. They know the location of the smallest towns and the courses of all major rivers. Every child plays a musical instrument, and even English grammar is a required subject. One day when Peter arrived home from school, there was something about his expression that made him look as if enveloped by a thick, grey cloud. Something was on his mind. It finally burst out of him—“You know, I don’t think children talk here.” Children obviously do talk in Peter’s Bulgarian school, and they are smart and knowledgeable beyond their ten to eleven years. What Peter had meant to say was that there was no time allocated in school for sharing stories and hearing what other children thought. Peter could never hear their stories: how they spent their weekends and what they liked to do in their free time. There was no way to find out what ideas and opinions they had. You could also say they are never asked ‘What do you want to talk about?’

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