

## HOW EVERYTHING TURNS AWAY

*How do we know what questions to ask?* This is such a different assignment from the kind I am accustomed to. It's a sort of reversal, for me, because each day, as I answer the cascade of e-mails that come in through my website, or the letters that publishers forward, I find myself again and again trying to *answer* questions. Some of them silly, like "What is your favorite color?" (which seems to be a favorite of 10-year-old girls) and some of them irritating, like "How many books have you written?" – irritating because you want to say, "Don't

you know how to *look things up*? Don't they teach "library skills" any more, for god's sake?"

Nobody suggests that I *ask* questions....or even to think about the asking of questions....and yet I think it is the task of the writer of fiction, always, to ask. But you did. Thank you for that.

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I began preparing this speech when I was on vacation recently. I actually took my laptop with me to a Caribbean beach where I was sharing a rented house with a group of close friends. In fact, though they needled me about the fact that I was holed up with my computer while they were out snorkeling and kayaking, the question put to me by the University of Richmond – "How do we know what questions to ask?" – provided a lot of dinner table conversation each evening, as eight people from eight different professions—a Unitarian minister, a sculptor, a scientist, a restaurant owner, a composer, among others—argued and debated "how do we know what questions to ask" and okay, I confess, ate too much and drank a substantial amount of wine.

I listened to, and participated in, all of those conversations and I suppose I took bits and pieces of those opinions each time I went (reluctantly) back to my computer,

and maybe I incorporated them into my own thoughts as I worked.

Then I came home, back to snowy Boston, back to reality, with my tan fading even as I got off the plane. I dumped leftover sand out of my sandals and Windexed the spit out of my snorkeling goggles and put them away, and weighed myself and decided to go on a diet, and I went back to real life and back to my computer.

Then I was blindsided. This was about two weeks ago. The phone started to ring and the e-mails came non-stop.

(Some of them were because I had been a clue....54 across, to be precise....in the New York Times crossword puzzle the week that I was away. It was amazing how many people do that puzzle, and of that number, how many of them got in touch with me. It included a man in Texas whom I last saw when he was a boy, 50+ years ago, in high school.)

But the thing that whacked me upside the head, as it were, was something else. There were newspapers and radio stations calling, asking for a statement, because in two separate places in the United States...Florida and Missouri, as it happened...books of mine had incited controversies. People were taking sides. Hearings were being held. In one case (Lake Wales, Florida) the book in question, (a light-hearted novel published way back in 1982) the school board actually voted to ban the book, to remove it from the school libraries.

In Kansas City, a hearing was scheduled for this week to decide the fate of The Giver. Someone e-mailed me, and I quote: “The forces of evil are coalescing” (and he was on the side wanting to retain the book!) Emotions were very high.

So I answered questions, made statements, did telephone interviews, wrote letters, and for a period of several days was completely distracted and did not go back to the speech I’d begun writing.

One morning I checked the Kansas City newspaper to see what frenzied outbursts had newly appeared, and I read this, from a woman who wanted to ban The Giver: “The lady (*that would be me*) writes well, but when it comes to the ideas in that book, they have no place in my kid’s head.”

And from another: “Everything presented to kids should be positive and uplifting...”

And you know the phrase that came to my mind, as I read those? The phrase I had given the University of Richmond as a title for this speech:

*HOW EVERYTHING TURNS AWAY.*

Let me explain that.

I was asked, probably six weeks or so ago, to provide a title for this talk, and it was much too soon...I had not yet thought about what I would say. I knew, of course, because it has been provided to me, what the theme of this series was to be: “How do we know what questions to ask?”

Thinking about that question, (hastily, because I had to provide a title), I thought: *We don't. We don't have a clue.*

Then I thought: *Why don't we?*

And the answer that came to me was: *Because we turn away.* A phrase from an Auden poem came to my mind.

(I happen to be a great fan of W. H. Auden. Once, in fact, at a dinner party, the talk turned to poetry, and a man sitting on my left—a complete stranger, someone I had never met before that night—asked me what my favorite line from all of poetry was. I replied, “Lay your sleeping head, my love, human on my faithless arm” and he looked absolutely terrified and quickly turned to the person on his other side).

*HOW EVERYTHING TURNS AWAY.*

It's true, I think, that we turn away from things.

We turn away sometimes because it is too painful, and we don't want to face it (I have a close friend, a dear and honorable man, who cannot go to the Holocaust Museum); and sometimes we turn away simply because it is too hard, and asks more of us than we have to give.

And sometimes we are simply not paying attention.

The poem by Auden from which the line comes is called “*Musee des Beaux Arts*” and the final stanza speaks of an

actual painting that hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels.

....In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything  
turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have  
seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

I had quoted it back in 1990, in accepting the Newbery Medal for Number the Stars a book set in Europe in 1943, a time when too many people turned away.

Suddenly, thinking of that poem, and reading the words of the frightened people in Kansas City, it all began to come together in my mind.

I wanted to call up my friends from the preceding week in the Bahamas—who had all, after our vacation together, gone their separate ways—and tell them. I didn't, though. I am telling you, instead.

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First, because we don't have the painting in front of us, let me describe the scene: It is actually called "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" and it's a complex landscape. A farmer wearing a bright crimson shirt is guiding a plough behind a horse in the foreground, and beyond him, past a border of shrubbery, another man, a shepherd, stands beside his dog while his sheep graze nearby. Behind him, across a vast bay, a great city rises, and surrounding the bay, jagged cliffs and mountains emerge. Several sailing vessels are moving through the turquoise water; and all of it is bathed in a golden light from the low sun beyond.

In the lower right hand corner of the painting, in a place where the sea is dark, shadowed by one of the ships, two bare legs are visible in the water. You can almost hear the thrashing sounds and feel the anguish of the drowning boy.

And it's not just a drowning boy; it's a colossal tragedy. He has flown! Up to the sun! His attempt is amazing, and his failure is monumental; he has flown higher and he has fallen farther than any human ever has.

And no one is noticing.

They're too busy, maybe. They're in a hurry, perhaps. They have somewhere to get to. Or perhaps it is just too demanding, too scary, too sad.

And the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

*How everything turns away.*

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Thirty-three years ago my son Ben, then eight years old, took his pet rabbit, Barney, out of his cage and let him nibble and scamper in the lawn of our front yard. He had done it many times before. But on this particular summer day, a neighbor's German Shepherd came bounding out of his own yard nearby and grabbed Barney Bunny by the neck.

Somehow Ben rescued Barney and came into the house holding him, and I examined the mortally injured rabbit—its eyes glazing, a bit of blood leaking from his mouth—and had to tell Ben that his pet was probably not going to survive. We talked sadly about it, Ben and I, and then he left the kitchen, still cradling his dying pet in his arms.

After a while I went to see how and where he was, and from the upstairs hallway I could see that he had taken Barney into his bedroom and placed him in his bed. The bedcovers were drawn up to the rabbit's chin, the long ears were neatly spread



on the pillow. Ben was lying beside him. I tiptoed away, not wanted to intrude.

Some time later Ben came to me and told me that Barney had died. Together we planned a funeral.

And Ben explained what he had been thinking about as he lay there beside Barney. He was remembering, he told me, the saddest sentence he had ever read. Page 171 of Charlotte's Web.

"No one was with her when she died," was the sentence.

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"Everything presented in a book for a child should be positive and uplifting," the woman in Kansas City said last week.

There is nothing "positive or uplifting" about a solitary death.

But there is something profoundly moving about a man, a gifted writer, E.B. White, who was able to put down on a page eight words..."No one was with her when she died"... that went to the heart of a little boy and taught him something about loneliness and loss.

*How everything turns away?* That writer didn't avert his eyes from something painful. I wish I had known him. I hope I've learned from him. He knew what questions to ask.

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In 1992 I sat down to write the book that ultimately would be titled THE GIVER. Probably THE GIVER is the main reason that I have been invited to speak to you here tonight, because it is the best-known (and most controversial) of my so-far 32 books.

There is always a period of time, after I have written a book, before it is published, when I begin to worry that my brain has simply run out and become empty, the way a cookie jar does, and all the good stuff is gone; only a stiff raisin and some stale crumbs left. I worry then that I will never be able to write the next one.

I was in that period...that frightening “Oh my God, I will never have another idea. My career is over” phase in the fall of 1992 when I took a trip to Virginia.

It was something I did very frequently then, flying from Boston, where I lived, to Charlottesville, renting a car, driving west to Staunton. My brother was a doctor there. My parents, in 1992, were 86 and 87 years old, and they were failing. A few months before, Jon and I moved both of them to a nursing home not far from his office. He was able to see them all the time. I flew down whenever I could.

During that visit in 1992, I went, as I always did, first to see my mother in the medical section of the nursing home, the section where she lay bedridden, fragile and blind, attached

to an oxygen hose. She would die within a few months, and I think both of us, she and I, knew that that was coming. Perhaps we were both in an odd way welcoming the idea of it; I know that on her 86th birthday, not long before, when I had read her the cards that had come, she chuckled and said, “Well, at least no one wished me happy returns!”

She was quite ready to leave life behind.

But she did not want to leave her memories untold. Her mind was quite intact, her memories quite clear, and during my visit she simply wanted to tell me the stories from her past. Inconsequential, some of them: a dog she had had as a child; a naughty escapade of her little brother; a summer evening walk with her father. But she went on as well to reminisce about her high school and college years, her meeting my father. Their marriage. The birth of her first child, my sister; and that memory diverted her to another, some years later, to the December morning when her first child, my sister Helen, died.

I knew that had been the saddest day of her life—it had been mine, as well, to that point (now, having lost a child of my own, I can no longer say that)—and I tried, sitting there by her bed, to move away from it, to direct her to other topics, other memories. But she lingered there, telling the details of it, needing to remember the anguish of it, for a long time.

When she tired and drifted off to sleep, I went to the other section of the nursing home, the assisted living wing

where my father was. He was up and about, shuffling a bit, leaning on a cane, but still teasing the nurses aides—one of them was named Patsy and he always called her Patsy Cline and sang a few phrases —“Crazy, Crazy fer feelin’ so loneleee”—to her, making her giggle. He always remembered me when I came. He showed me off: “This is my daughter, she writes books, she lives in Boston.” to people who could not have cared less.

But he had lost his own past. He didn’t remember his own childhood, his career, the places we had lived, the cars he had loved—he was a car guy—the travels, the war, any of it.

And he didn’t remember my sister. “What was her name?” he asked, when I mentioned her. “Helen,” I told him, and showed him a picture of the two little girls. He frowned at it and shook his head. “And you say she died? How did that happen?”

Driving my rental car back to the airport I began to think about all of that. What if there were a medication, maybe a shot, they could give Dad, and he would remember Helen?

*But how sad that would be, for him. He was there, too, with her when she died. Why make him remember that day?*

Well, then, I thought, not wanting to let go of the “what if” that makes a writer’s imagination ease into high gear: *What if there were a shot to give Mother? It wouldn’t take away all those happy memories she enjoys so much...but if it could just obliterate the day her daughter died?*

For a writer, the question is most often “what if...?”

And so, from the "what if" of my father's failing memory, and from my own musing about the compromises we make, I created a world—not a large one; a small community—set in the future, in a time when technology had advanced in ways that would make human existence comfortable and safe through the manipulation of memory.

But for me, because I write for a young audience, the questions that incite and inspire a book must always be presented through the consciousness of a young person. And so I created a boy, and I named him Jonas.

Here is how I create a character. He (or in many cases, she) appears, fully-formed, in my mind. I have a very visual imagination. I can *see* the character. Most often he or she tells me his or her name. That was true in this case.

I saw a boy, young, barely adolescent, ordinary in appearance. His name was Jonas.

I moved into him and looked out through his eyes. His world was pleasant and well-organized. He had family, friends, things to do.

But there was also a feeling (for me, the writer) of something amiss. I wasn't certain, myself, what it was. It was like being six, examining the drawing labeled "What's wrong with this picture?" on the back of the cereal box. Everything looks right. But then you find the little things: the shoe that has no laces, the cat with only one ear.

I knew something was wrong. I did not know yet, myself, what it was, when I began the book with this sentence: “It was almost December, and Jonas was beginning to be frightened.”

Then I forced myself to look very, very closely at the world this boy lived in. It was like picking up a rock in a swamp and seeing the toxic filth underneath, the oozing, slimy, squirming things that hide out of the daylight. The things that we don't want to see. The things we would like to turn away from.

“Everything we present to kids should be positive...” the woman in Kansas City said.

I got an email this morning (Wednesday morning, March 9th, is when I am writing this part) from a 26-year-old woman who wrote:

I read  
the book *The Giver* when I was about 18 years old  
and I really identified with the message of  
how ... when we become so afraid of experiencing pain  
and difficulty, we become afraid of life itself.

She went on to tell me things about her experiences and about decisions she had made based on what she had learned from reading that book years before. Her decisions had

to do with facing pain. She had, in essence, chosen not to turn away.

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Sixty eight years ago this month, in March of 1937, I was born in Honolulu. My father, though he was an oral surgeon by profession, was also a very fine photographer, a collector of cameras. My mother always complained that every time we moved (and we moved often, he being a career Army officer) he would stake out a place for his darkroom before she had figured out where she could set up her sewing machine.

My first photograph...or the first photograph of me...was taken, by my father, when I was 36 hours old. My name was different then. They had named me Sena, for my Norwegian grandmother, and that was my name until she was notified; then she sent a telegram insisting that they give me an American name, and so I was renamed Lois Ann for my father's two sisters.

And there were countless photographs thereafter. Movies, too. In the same years that *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* were being filmed, my father was filming ...quite professionally in quality...my sister and me toddling in the gardens surrounding our home in Wailua, on the island of Oahu.

It seems laughable now, in the world of TV and computers and VCRs, but throughout my childhood, it was

always an exciting night when we could talk Dad into showing the home movies. Look: there's Daddy on a horse! And here's mother pouring milk for the two little girls. (We always wheedled Dad into showing that scene backwards, so that the milk amazingly jumped back into the pitcher). Look: there's Lois on the beach at Waikiki, with a pail and shovel.

I want you to hold this picture in your mind: a small blonde girl, new to the world, on a tropical beach, laughing as the breeze blows her sun hat, and she reaches up to hold it on her own head. Behind her the turquoise water laps gently at the white sand.

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Are you able to see the little girl on the beach? Keep her there, in your mind.

Now turn your visual imagination into a split screen because I want you to hold onto the image of the little girl but I want you to see another scene as well.

This is a scene of a town, a fictional town called "Omelas" from a story by Ursula LeGuin. I can't do it justice and I wish I had time to read you her words. She describes a town beside a bay, and it is vibrant with color: flags on the boats in the harbor, red roofs on the houses, painted walls, gardens and



parks...and processions on the day of celebration she describes: people moving, wearing robes; music playing, people with tambourines and flutes; children calling to one another, birds flying above; broad green meadows beyond the town, and joyous clanging of bells. Horses with their manes braided with flowers. Young people dancing and singing. Prosperity and abundance.

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Split your screen again. Move your mind to a different place and time. Picture now, as well, an eleven year old girl on a green bike. She is wearing boys' high-top sneakers because she yearns, secretly, to be a boy, and she looks for ways to make herself seem boyish and brave,

It is 1948. I have just finished sixth grade, and my father...the career military man...has now moved his family to post-war Japan. We go by ship from New York, down through Panama, across the Pacific, a journey of many weeks, and my father is waiting for us in Japan, and the green bike is waiting there for me, too.

He moves us into an American style house (to my disappointment, because I had envisioned a house with sliding walls and straw-matted floors) surrounded by other Western-style houses and all of it encircled by a wall.

But the bike is my freedom. I ride the green bike again and again through the gate of the compound's wall into the bustling section of Tokyo called Shibuya.

I slow my bike when I discover a school, and I linger there, watching, when the children in their dark blue uniforms play in the schoolyard. One boy, just about my age, stares back at me. We look intently at each other.

Then I mount my bike again and ride away.

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Now you should have three images. One, a little girl on a beach in 1940. Second, an amazing place, a place of vibrant celebration—an imaginary town called Omelas, created and described by Ursula Le Guin. And finally, a gawky seventh-grader on a green bike in 1949.

I want to show each of them to you again.

I have the actual film at home, transferred from my father's old movie film to a video. It was someone else, watching the video once in my living room, who pointed out what was in it, what had always been there. As the child plays blissfully in that sunshine, with the Pacific lapping against the sand near her feet, as she laughs and reaches for the bonnet that has been

lifted by the breeze....behind her, small on the horizon, moves slowly across, blurred in the distance, a battleship. It is the Arizona, headed into port at Pearl Harbor.

It contains 1,100 men who will be dead soon.

It was a tragedy unfolding, and the three year old child plays as children will, and how was she to know? But as an adult, watching the film again and again...I simply focused only on myself. The bloneness of me. The happiness of me. I never looked beyond.

“You have the capacity to see beyond, “The Giver tells the boy.

And perhaps we all do. But *beyond* is where the hard things are.

How everything turns away.

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What do we look away from in the second scene? This time I am going to use Ursula LeGuin’s actual words:

**In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little**

light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes--the child has no understanding of time or interval--sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child

to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships,

the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

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They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms.

The people view the child, know that it is there ache for it.

But their comfort depends upon the child's misery, and so they find a way to live with that knowledge.

They do so by turning away. To do otherwise would cost them too much.

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Finally, there is the girl on the bike. She left Japan when she was fourteen. She grew up here and there, went to college, married, had children, eventually grandchildren. She became a writer.

It's not true to say that I thought often about the Japanese boy, the one from whom I had turned away, to whom I had been afraid to say hello. But from time to time, remembering my childhood, his face, his solemn look, swam into my memory.

In 1994, when "The Giver" was awarded the Newbery Medal, a picture book called "Grandfather's Journey" was awarded the Caldecott. Its author/illustrator was Allen Say. Allen is Japanese, though he has lived in the USA since he was a young man.

He gave me a copy of "Grandfather's Journey" and inscribed it to me. In return, I signed "The Giver" to him, writing my name in Japanese below my usual signature. He chuckled, looking at it, and asked me how I happened to be able to do that.

You can picture the ensuing conversation.

"I lived in Japan when I was eleven, twelve, thirteen," I explain.

"What years?" asks Allen Say.

"1948,49,50. I was born in 1937."

“Me too. We’re the same age. Where did you live?”

“Tokyo,” I tell him.

“Me too,” he says. “What part?”

“Shibuya.”

“So did I! Where do you go to school?” Allen asks me.

“Meguro. I went by bus each day.”

“I went to school in Shibuya.”

“I remember a school there,” I tell him. “I used to ride my bike past it.”

Silence. Then: “*Were you the girl on the green bike?*”

Allen and I are close friends now. But we had lost 57 years of friendship because we had both turned away. To do otherwise—in that place and that time—would have been *too hard*.

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More and more, in the alienated and frightening world we live in now, I think it is essential that we enter the dark places, and to face what is too painful, too hard, what costs too much. We have to look at what is in the distance, on the horizon. To listen to the language we don’t understand. And to face the horrible thing in the locked room..



I think we...and by we I mean you and me, and the young people whom I address in my books...we must look at and ask questions about poverty and pain and injustice, about hunger and genocide and ignorance, about greed and power. It all, I think, comes down to one question and that is the one that we should know, always, to ask. We should ask it of the chained child in the basement, of the young men on the slow-moving ship, of the one who speaks another language. We should ask, "In what way are we connected to one another?"

One of the reasons they have been debating The Giver in Kansas City (where, incidentally, the school board finally voted unanimously to retain the book in the schools) is because of what it says about the story on the inside of the book jacket:

*In the telling it questions every value we have taken for granted and reexamines our most deeply held beliefs.*

Why, I wonder, are people so afraid to do that?

I feel very strongly that we should question our own beliefs and rethink our values every single day, with open minds and open hearts.

We should ask ourselves again and again how we are connected to each other.

Lois Lowry  
University of Richmond  
March 2005

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And we should teach our children to do so, and not to  
turn away.

Thank you.