Life’s 5 Essential Questions
—Plus a Bonus Question

From *Wait, What?* by James E. Ryan, Dean of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education

**QUESTION 1: *Wait, What?* — The Root of All Understanding**

“Wait, what?” is first on the list because it is an effective way of asking for clarification, and clarification is the first step toward truly understanding something—whether it is an idea, an opinion, a belief, or a business proposal.

**QUESTION 2: *I Wonder...?* — The Heart of All Curiosity**

Asking “I wonder why?” allows you to remain curious about the world. Asking “I wonder if?” allows you to remain engaged with the world—to try something new and to begin thinking about how you might improve the world, or at least your corner of it.

**QUESTION 3: *Couldn’t We at Least...?* — The Beginning of All Progress**

Regardless of the variety of ways this question can be posed, at its core, asking “Couldn’t we at least...?” is a good way to get unstuck—a way to get past disagreement (as in, “Couldn’t we at least agree?”) and a way to get started even when you’re not entirely sure where you will finish (as in, “Couldn’t we at least begin?”)

**QUESTION 4: *How Can I Help?* — The Base of All Good Relationships**

By asking, “How can I help?”, you are asking, with humility, for direction. You are recognizing that others are experts in their own lives, and you are affording them the opportunity to remain in charge, even if you are providing some help.

**QUESTION 5: *What Truly Matters?* — The Heart of Life**

Asking “What truly matters?” can just as effectively guide you through a meeting with colleagues as it can guide you through the biggest decisions of your life. It forces you to get to the heart of issues at work or school, and to the heart of your own convictions, beliefs, and goals in life.

**BONUS QUESTION:**

*And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?*

This line from Raymond Carver’s poem “Late Fragment” is likely the most important question any of us will ever face. The “even so” at the end of the question perfectly captures the reality that pain and disappointment are inevitably a part of a full life, but also the hope that life, even so, offers the possibility of joy and contentment.