**A Whack on the Side of the Head (an excerpt)**

**by Roger Van Oche**

***Children enter school as question marks and leave as periods.***

**- Neil Postman**

Life can be like a big noisy party with people talking, music playing and glasses clinking. But even with all this noise, it’s possible for you to understand the person across the room. That’s because our attention is selective – we can tune in certain things and tune out others.

See for yourself. Take a look around where you’re sitting and find four things that have red in them. With a red mindset, you’ll find that red jumps right out at you. Similarly, when you learn a new word, you hear it eight times in the next three days. That’s because people find what they are looking for. If you look for beauty, you’ll find beauty. If you look for conspiracies, you’ll find conspiracies. It’s all a matter of setting your mental channel.

Where do you learn to set your mental channel? One important source is your formal education. There you learn what is appropriate and what is not. You learn many of the questions you use to probe your surroundings. You learn where to search for information, which ideas to pay attention to, and how to think about these ideas. Your educational training gives you many of the concepts you use to order and understand the world.

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Much of our educational system is geared toward teaching people to find the “right answer.” By the time the average person finishes college, he or she will have taken over 2600 tests, quizzes and exams. The right answer approach becomes deeply ingrained in our thinking. This may be fine for some mathematical problems where there is in fact only one right answer. The difficulty is that most of life isn’t that way. Life is ambiguous; there are many right answers – all depending on what you are looking for. But if you think there is only one right answer, then you will stop looking as soon as you find one.

When I was in sophomore school, my teacher put a small chalk dot on the blackboard. She asked the class what it was. A few seconds passed and then someone said, “A chalk dot on the board.” The rest of the class seemed relieved that the obvious had been stated, and no one else had anything more to say. “I’m surprised at you,” the teacher told the class. “I did the same exercise yesterday with a group of kindergartners, and they thought of fifty things it could be: an owl’s eye, a cigar butt, a rotten egg, and so on.”

In the ten-year period between kindergarten and high school, not only had we learned to find the right answer, we had also lost the ability to look for more than one right answer. We had learned how to be specific, but we had lost much of our imaginative power. I can’t overstate the danger in this. If you have only one idea, you have only one course of action open to you, and this is quite risky in a world where flexibility is a requirement for survival.

An idea is like a musical note. In the same way that a musical note can only be understood in relation to other notes, an idea is best understood in context of other ideas. If you have only one idea, you don’t have anything to compare it to. For more effective thinking, we need different points of view. Otherwise, we’ll get stuck looking at the same things and miss seeing things outside our focus.

One technique for finding the second right answer is to change the questions you use to probe the problem. How many times have you heard someone say, “What is the answer?” or “What is the result?” These people are looking for the one answer. And that’s all they’ll find – just one. If you train yourself to ask questions that solicit plural answers like “What are the answers?” or “What are the results?” you will find that people will think more deeply and offer more than one idea.

***The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas.***

**- Linus Pauling**

You may not be able to use all of them, but out of the number you generate you may find a few that are worthwhile. This is why professional photographers take so many pictures. They’ll change the exposure and the filters, because they know that out of all the pictures they take, there may be only a few that capture what they’re looking for. It’s the same thing with thinking: you need to generate a lot of ideas to get some good ones.

Another technique for finding more answers is to change the wording in your questions. If an architect looks at an opening between two rooms and thinks, “What type of door should I use to connect the two rooms?” that’s what she’ll design – a door. But if she thinks, “What sort of passageway should I put here?” she may design something like a hallway or a courtyard. Different words bring in different assumptions.

Here’s an example of how such a strategy can work. Several centuries ago, a curious but deadly plague appeared in a small village in Lithuania. What was curious about this disease was its grip on the victim; as soon as a person contracted it, he’d go into a deep, almost death-like coma. Most died within a day, but occasionally a hardy sole would make it back to health. The problem was that since 18C medical technology wasn’t very advanced, the unafflicted had a difficult time telling whether a victim was dead or alive.

Then one day it was discovered that someone had been buried alive. This alarmed the townspeople, so they called a town meeting to decide what should be done to prevent such a situation from happening again. After much discussion, most people agreed on the following solution. They decided to put food and water in every casket next to the body. They would even put an air hole from the casket up to the earth’s surface. These procedures would be expensive, but they would be more than worthwhile if they would save people’s lives.

Another group came up with a second, less expensive, right answer. They proposed implanting a twelve-inch long stake in every coffin lid directly over where the victim’s heart would be. Then whatever doubts there were about whether the person was dead or alive would be eliminated as soon as the coffin lid was closed.

What differentiated the two solutions were the questions used to find them. Whereas the first group asked, “What should we do if we bury somebody alive?” the second group wondered, “How can we make sure everyone we bury is dead?”

Much of our educational system has taught us to look for one right answer. This approach is fine for some situations, but many of us have a tendency to stop looking for alternative right answers after the first answer has been found. There are many ways to find the second right answer, but if you don’t look for them, you won’t find them.