

## What Do You Do? The American Question

By Molly Stranahan

**“SO,** what do you do?”

For most of my life, I have dreaded that question. I have generally interpreted it as meaning, “What work do you get paid to do?” It seems to show up everywhere: in the occupation line on tax returns, on doctor’s office forms, even on *The New York Times* web site when I want to look up an article. That’s not so bad—after all, I can fill those out in privacy—but when it shows up in social situations, it presents a challenge.

As someone in my *More Than Money Journal* discussion group pointed out, the question is distinctly American. In many other cultures, to ask such a question is considered a breach of etiquette, akin to inquiring about someone’s net worth. But in the United States, we ask it of people we’ve just met—at parties, meetings, even on airplanes. When it is asked of me, I often feel as if the questioner is using my answer to make judgments about my value to society or to them. Do I make a lot of money? Am I powerful? Am I somebody they want to talk to? Am I important enough? Am I successful by their standards? Those are the questions I suspect they are *really* asking me when they say, “What do you do?” I know that some people, at least, make assumptions about me based on my answers because sometimes I do it, too.

I also know I’m not the only one for whom the question is uncomfortable. It’s uncomfortable for many: inheritors who, like me, don’t need to work for a living and who don’t have a “regular job”; those whose jobs obviously don’t pay for their lifestyles; sometimes homemakers or early retirees; people in low-status jobs who feel they may be discounted as insignificant based on

their answer; even people whose work is illegal or may be considered immoral.

For many of us who don’t have a paying job that explains what we do with our time or how we acquire the money we live on—or who don’t want our worth judged by what we are paid to do—the question leads us to feel shame. We figure out ways to spin our answers (“I’m in the hotel industry” instead of “I’m a housekeeper at the Hilton”) and we feel uncomfortable about the assumptions we believe people may make about our answers. (“Was he downsized?” “Her children are grown; she must be lazy not to be working.”) My own fears over the years about the judgments I have imagined that others were making led me to dread the ubiquitous question. After I left my job in banking (easy answer: “I’m a trust officer”), I “did some consulting” until I decided to go to graduate school. While I could answer *the question* with, “I’m getting a doctorate in psychology,” the unasked question was, “How do you live alone in a four-



*Molly Stranahan strives to be loving, open, respectful, accepting and non-judgmental. The legacy she hopes to leave is that those whose paths crossed hers found that she brought a smile to their face, or their load was lightened, or they learned a new way to think about themselves and their lives that brought them peace and serenity.*

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bedroom house in an expensive zip code if you are a graduate student?”

During those years, a friend (who I’m sure was curious about how I supported myself) told me that her children—who had volunteered as subjects for various psychological tests I was learning to administer, and who I sometimes

employed to paint the fence or mow the lawn—asked her, “What does Ms. Stranahan do? Is she in the witness protection program?” I still laugh when I think of it. It points out the assumptions people can make when we don’t explain ourselves—and the innocent curiosity people have about how others make the

money to support their lifestyles, how they occupy their time, what they care about, and what they know about.

In our journal discussion group [See sidebar], we have also talked about the importance of trying to figure out what the *underlying* question is. What does this person *really* want to know? So I began to try an experiment. I stopped assuming that people are asking me what I do so that they can judge how much value I have as a person. Instead, I substitute the belief that they are curious about me and want to know what I do

I conclude that they may be interested in knowing whether I might be a resource for them or someone they know. Or perhaps they just want to find out more about my areas of interest.

When I perceive that the underlying question is about how I spend my time, I may talk about whatever project I am excited about at the time, or some activity of mine that I think might interest the questioner. I might say that I spend a lot of time as a volunteer for a family foundation, or that I co-create a four-day program for inheritors of wealth for

down stereotypes about inheritors and people with wealth. I've found that by getting to know people who are from a category of people about whom we have made judgments, we begin to see that they are not so different from us.

Revealing my true self in this way has improved my self-esteem and increased the connections I make with people. I'm working on not feeling ashamed that I don't get paid for what I do, but being proud of myself and my work (which includes enjoying my life).

Now, when I hear the question "What do you do?" I no longer assume that I have to prove myself worthy of the questioner's interest or explain how I support my lifestyle. I think of the question as a sign of their interest in me, or, more generally, in what people do with their time. I also see it as an opportunity to share who I am and what I care about. And it is a chance to educate people about alternative choices—choices that affirm that our lives aren't defined by what we "do."

I've lately begun to think about other questions we *could* be asking—questions that would help us know each other better, connect with one another, and discover the things we really want to know about each other. *What do you want to contribute to the world? How do you spend your time? What is your passion?* These are a few I've thought of.

What question do you wish people would ask *you*? How can you answer the question they are used to asking (*What do you do?*) with the answer to the question you would like to be asked? ■



"Supposedly he's some kind of a person in his own right."

with my time, what is important to me, what we might have in common, and how we might connect. This shift in perspective has produced a wonderful result: I no longer feel my self-esteem being threatened by the question.

Now, I have a variety of answers I give to the question, and I am developing more. Because I have a degree in psychology, I can answer, "I'm a psychologist"—but it often leads to follow-up questions. The good news is that the next question can give me a clue about the underlying reason for the inquiry. If the follow-up is "Are you in private practice?" or "What kind of practice do you have?"

the Summer Institute.

The foundation answer often leads to "What do you fund?" So then I talk about community organizing for social change or about investing our endowment in alignment with our mission and values.

Sometimes it becomes clear that the underlying question is, "How do you support the lifestyle you lead?" (although people rarely ask that directly). I am becoming more comfortable saying that I was lucky enough to inherit enough money not to have to work to support myself. I see that conversation as an opportunity to break

*More Than Money Journal* discussion groups meet regularly in people's homes to talk about ideas raised in the journal. To find a discussion group near you, where you can discuss this and other articles, please call us at 617-864-8200, ext. 201, or send an email to [discuss@morethanmoney.org](mailto:discuss@morethanmoney.org).