

The Question That Started It All

The question had me vexed for two solid years. You probably know the type: questions like these keep you up at night, distract you when you're trying to stay focused on tackling other challenges, and cling to your last good nerve until they somehow get their answers. Here was the one that had disrupted my world for all that time:

What is it that motivates people to work where they work, volunteer their time to the groups they serve, and donate money to the causes they support?

That's it. That was my "vexing" question.

To put it simply, *Why do people do what they do?*

For starters, let's take the issue of vocation. Have you ever wondered why builders build, why writers write, why teachers teach, or why painters paint? I mean, what is it that

Where to Find Your Holy Discontent

compels people to give the vast majority of their waking hours to occupations such as these? Frankly, I think the answer is more substantive than merely “to get a paycheck” because an astounding number of us are also pouring time and energy into roles and responsibilities that don’t pay a single dime.

In a given year it’s estimated that American adults volunteer roughly 20 billion hours of their time. I have scores of friends in senior leadership positions with hospitals, ministry programs, nonprofit groups, schools, charities, and other worthwhile endeavors, and they all attest to the fact that their whole deal would crumble were it not for volunteer involvement. The annual dollar value on all that donated time, in case you’re wondering, is about \$225 billion¹—roughly the total GNP of a country the size of Austria.² Add to that figure the many hundreds of millions in cold, hard cash that is given to worthy causes year after year after year, and things get pretty interesting.

With so many people engaging in so much positive, world-enhancing activity, the insatiably inquisitive part of my personality just wants to know one thing: *Why?*

As I mentioned, issues such as this one bounced around my brain unanswered for twenty-four long months. I started to wonder if I’d ever find resolution to it, but then came the welcomed breakthrough.

Moses’ Underlying Motivation

Many people I know rely on various disciplines to help them gain a sense of peace or purpose as they get going

The Question That Started It All

each day. You probably have a few of your own, but one that I've tried to practice for several decades now is to read a small section of the Bible every morning. Admittedly, I don't always experience immediate dividends; on some days, I dutifully get through my fifteen minutes and then go about my life seemingly unchanged.

Then there are times when engaging in that simple practice serves to stretch my mind, infuse my heart with encouragement, and lift my spirit. The words seem to *leap* off the page!

This was one of those days.

I was making my way through the book of Exodus when I came upon an interesting passage about Moses, one of the greatest leaders the ancient world ever knew. You're probably well acquainted with his story; I thought I was too, actually, but what gripped me this time around was that I finally figured out the *underlying motivation* that fueled Moses' primary achievement in life—leading his people out of captivity and into the Promised Land.

Let me back up to the actual account, which begins in Exodus 2:11. The text says that “one day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor.”³ (Quick note for context: Moses had been raised in Egypt by the pharaoh's adult daughter and was undoubtedly accustomed to the wealth, education, and freedom that accompanied such a privileged setting. Despite his posh Egyptian surroundings, though, Moses always knew that he was not *really* an Egyptian. He was Hebrew by birth—a Jew who was

Where to Find Your Holy Discontent

only living the Egyptian life “accidentally.” So when the text refers to him seeing his “own people” working hard, it means his Hebrew countrymen, a group that at that time had been held captive by the Egyptians for more than four hundred years.)

Essentially, Pharaoh and his lieutenants were building a thriving economy on the weary backs of their Hebrew slave labor. The work ethic mandated by Egyptian overlords was merciless—day after day, Hebrew men with no rights and little hope for future freedom were pushed past the point of exhaustion in the sweltering midday sun as they made bricks for Pharaoh’s vast construction programs. Moses’ people had come to accept their plight as “the norm,” believing there was nothing they could do to impact change.

It is in this context that we find Moses scoping things out around town, his heart understandably heavy as he sees firsthand the repulsive oppression his people were being forced to deal with. An already troubling situation takes a turn for the worse, though, when Moses looks up to find an Egyptian beating a Hebrew—one of his *own* people. Being treated as slaves was bad enough, but now his countrymen were being *physically* abused too? This level of injustice wasn’t about to prevail on his watch! Moses has to do *something*.



Let me push Pause on the scene for a moment to ask you to consider the last time you saw a physical beating. I’m not

The Question That Started It All

talking about something you see in the movies that's been staged and scripted. I'm talking about a *real* fight ... up close and personal.

I hope you've never witnessed one; I've only seen one in my entire life, and I wish to this day I could kick the gruesome memory out of my mind. I was a teenager at the time, standing in front of my locker in the hallway of my high school in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Suddenly I heard some activity a few lockers down and looked up right as the awful situation unfolded. A young kid—probably a freshman—was minding his own business when a senior twice his size started to pick a fight with him. The senior was bulked up and had a snide grin on his face. He knocked the kid's books out of his hands and then totally humiliated him by yelling, "Pick 'em up ... NOW ! Pick 'em up!!"

He shouted loudly enough for the gathering crowd of students to hear, and when the tormented kid bent over to collect his scattered books, the bully started calling him terrible names, questioning his masculinity, and ridiculing him, his family, his upbringing, and whatever else he could think of. When the younger guy stood back up, his arms restrained by the heavy books he'd just retrieved, the bully wound up his right arm and threw punch after punch into the middle of the kid's face.

I can still hear the sound of the senior's fist cracking the nose and shattering the teeth of that young boy who was standing only a few feet from me. I can feel the hostility and rage in the air. I can see the thick blood splattering

Where to Find Your Holy Discontent

onto the light brown locker behind him and dripping onto the white terrazzo floor.

Although the whole thing seemed to have moved in slow motion, in reality it happened so quickly that none of us could do anything to stop it. Finally, three of my schoolmates lunged toward the bully and peeled him away before he could do any permanent damage to the freshman kid. It was a sickening experience—and unfortunately one I’ll never forget.

Helping to Fix a Broken World

Beatings are *impossibly* tough to watch, and normal people don’t soon forget the gruesome sights and evil sounds that accompany them. This is exactly the type of stomach-churning event that Moses is exposed to in Exodus 2 as he watches an Egyptian guy beat up a fellow Hebrew. He just can’t bear the terrible sights, the heart-wrenching sounds, the splattering blood. The injustice of the situation is far too much for Moses to take, and suddenly, something inside him snaps.

The text says that upon “glancing this way and that”⁴ and seeing no one around, Moses raced to the defense of his countryman. He grabbed the Egyptian and pulled him off his fellow Hebrew, which incited a fight of its own . . . to the death. No doubt horrified by his capacity for violence, Moses buried the Egyptian in the sand and ran away.

The very next day, Moses went out to observe the plight of his people once again. What he saw must have shaken

The Question That Started It All

him to the core: now two Hebrews were fighting *each other!* Fists were flying, teeth were shattering, noses were breaking—these were the same sights and sounds as before! I bet Moses screamed at the top of his lungs, “Why are you beating up a fellow *Hebrew?* Did it ever occur to you that he’s one of us? What are you *thinking?* Our people are in forced labor and are getting beaten up regularly by the Egyptians, and now, you’re fighting with each *other?!*”

It was obvious to Moses that his people were imploding. They’d been exposed to such hatred and violence for so long that they’d probably just wipe *each other* out if left to their own devices. The appalling abuse and oppression and exploitation they had suffered under Egyptian rule had escalated to the level of total insanity, and Moses found himself on the extreme edge of his emotional limits. “*That’s it!*” he must have cried. “*I’ve absolutely had it! I just can’t stand this anymore!*”



Later in the book of Exodus, there is a famous exchange between Moses and God, which takes place beside a burning bush. Moses comes across a shrub that is on fire, but he notices that although it is burning, it’s somehow not being consumed. Things become stranger still when he hears the booming voice of God calling his name. “Moses! Take off your sandals. The place where you are standing is ‘holy ground.’”

As a kid in Sunday school, I had the distinct impression that the shocking sight of the burning bush that day utterly

Where to Find Your Holy Discontent

scared Moses into helping to free his people from Pharaoh's control. After closer study and reflection over the years, though, I've come to believe that the burning bush was simply an attention-grabber to get Moses to slow down long enough to hear God convey a level of empathy most of us never think to ascribe to him.

Suffice it to say, the bush-on-fire tactic worked, Moses cooled his jets, and God got the chance to be heard. I think his words to Moses went something like this: "Moses, I completely understand the rage you feel. I too have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I too have heard them crying out. I too have felt their anguish as they suffer. What you saw when the Egyptian guy was beating the living day-lights out of the Hebrew slave, and what you saw and heard when the two Hebrew guys were so frustrated, angry, and hopeless that they started beating each other—I saw those things too! And for what it's worth, I hate the sorrow and suffering as much as you do! More, actually.

"I am so stirred in my spirit, Moses, that I've decided to intervene from heaven," God probably continued. "I have chosen to rescue them, and I want to use *you* to help me!¹⁵ I've been looking high and low for someone *exactly* like you. If you will participate in my plan, then I will harness the internal firestorm that rages inside you and channel it into positive action—action that will help set my people free from their slavery.

"I'm going to assign you to a *specific* role because I see that you are as stirred up on earth as I am in heaven about this issue. I can see what this is doing to you on the inside! I

The Question That Started It All

see in you a passion for your people. In your raw emotion, I see a man with a *tremendous* capacity for activism—a man who refuses to stand by idly while his people are being so dreadfully mistreated. Your frustration can forge leadership mettle and fortitude in you, Moses, if you will let it.”

That’s All I Can Stands!

Keeping the Moses account in mind, I want to come at the dynamic I’ve been describing from an entirely different angle in hopes of anchoring a couple of key ideas in your brain.

I’m part of a generation that grew up watching a short, balding, mischievous cartoon character on television. His name was Popeye—Popeye the Sailor Man, to be precise, and if you’re ten years on either side of me, you’re probably humming the tune right now. Kids crowded onto family room couches every Saturday morning with rapt attention as the sailor with a corncob pipe and one good eye engaged in his next exciting adventure.

Popeye had a special girl in his life named Olive Oyl. She was a real traffic-stopper, as I recall. Flat chest, pickle-shaped nose, spaghetti-thin arms—quite the looker! Whenever someone cramped the style of his special “goil” as he called her, Popeye typically took it all in stride. He had a long fuse, and on most occasions, he was the epitome of calm, cool, and collected. But if things took on a menacing tone—if it looked like something *really terrible* might befall his beloved Olive Oyl, then Popeye the Sailor Man’s

Where to Find Your Holy Discontent

pulse would race, his blood pressure would skyrocket, and his anger would begin to boil. He'd take it as long as he could, but once his long fuse burned up, Popeye would blurt out the words that an entire generation had branded into their psyche: "That's all I can stands, and I can't stands no more!" (Dubious grammar, I know ... what else would you expect from a sailor?)

The now-enraged Popeye would rip open a can of spinach and swallow the green lump in one giant gulp. Immediately, a stream of supernatural strength flowed into his body—mostly into his forearms. They'd instantly bulk up to quadruple their normal size, giving Popeye the strength to be an unstoppable force for good in the world. He'd crush the opposition in no time and save his precious Olive Oyl from all sorts of distress. Then, once life had returned to its steady state, he'd sing himself off the screen, "I'm strong to the finich, 'cause I eats me spinach ... I'm Popeye the Sailor Man!"

What a show!



As you'd imagine, people started eating a lot of spinach after that cartoon came out. But I think Popeye left behind a much more significant legacy than that, and it has to do with his key line, "That's all I can stands, and I can't stands no more!"

Friends, this is an *extremely* important line to think about!

The Question That Started It All

What happens when we reach the point where we can't "stand no more"? Well, for our Old Testament friend Moses, he could no longer tolerate his fellow Hebrews being oppressed and beaten. He just couldn't *stand* it! It was his "Popeye moment," if you will—the final ounce of frustration that flung Moses right over the edge. Because God couldn't stand the Israelites' mistreatment either, he used what I call a "firestorm of frustration" that was brewing in Moses' soul to launch this unlikely leader into a prominent role that resulted in the nation of Israel eventually inhabiting the Promised Land.

Certainly, Moses is not the only person in history who was motivated by a Popeye moment to make a difference in the world. In recent days, I've asked loads of people I know to reflect on how *they* got involved in the things that now consume their time, their money, and their energy. What were the experiences that compelled them to pursue the passions they are now pursuing? Those interactions, along with some personal study and reflection, led me to craft a theory in my mind about this subject.

Here is what emerged: I believe the motivating reason why millions of people choose to do good in the world around them is because there is something *wrong* in that world. In fact, there is something so wrong that they just can't *stand* it. Like Popeye, they too experience a firestorm-of-frustration moment when they grow so completely incensed by the present state of affairs that they throw their hands up in the air and shout, "That's all I can stand, and I can't stand no more!" As a result, they devote their

Where to Find Your Holy Discontent

vocational lives, their volunteer energies, and their hard-earned money to making sure it gets fixed.

In my little straw-poll survey, the catalysts I uncovered that thrust people into their Popeye moments ran the gamut. A corporate executive I know had visited a ravaged third-world village teeming with starving kids and came away with an extra dose of compassion . . . as well as fire in his gut to effect change. A young mom had battled through the pain of losing a baby and resurfaced determined to speak into the lives of other despondent women. A newly married couple had soaked up a news report on TV one night about an entire country filled with people who suffer under a corrupt political regime. Staring into the eyes of those who have no voice caused them to find their own in advocating individuals' rights in their spheres of influence.

The point is, the irresistible attraction to a specific cause that compelled these people to invest joyfully of their time, their money, and their energies always linked back to a single spark of frustration that fueled what is now a raging fire in their souls.

What Puts the “Holy” in Holy Discontent

I should clarify that the gory Egyptian murder scene and the wild burning bush episode weren't exactly why the words leaped off the page the morning I was doing my devotional reading in Exodus. I think the real reason I was so fired up that day was because I finally had some supernatural sustenance to feed the vexing question I'd wrestled with for

The Question That Started It All

two years. Based on the Moses account, my “firestorm of frustration” theory was starting to hold water. I mean, here you have a massive, history-altering turn of events that gets the Hebrew people freed from hundreds of years of spirit-squelching slavery, and yet the whole deal can be traced back to a simple alliance between God and one normal, everyday, earth-bound human being who happened to find himself stirred up by the exact same thing that stirred the heart of his Creator.

I’ve come to refer to the powerful, spiritual congruence that connected Moses’ priorities to the priorities of God as his “holy discontent,” and it’s a concept that works in our modern world as well. Still today, what wrecks the heart of someone who loves God is often the *very thing* God wants to use to fire them up to do something that, under normal circumstances, they would never attempt to do. Whether you’re a high-powered marketplace person, a stay-at-home mom, a full-time student, or something altogether different, you (yes *you*) can join God in making what is wrong in this world right! And it all starts with you finding your holy discontent; it begins with you determining what it is that you just can’t stand.



Even the most optimistic people I know agree that there is plenty wrong in our world today—and the Bible would support them. Passages like Romans 8:20–21 tell us that the entire creation is frustrated, but that by God’s power,