

# I Just Have **1** Question

What Are You Doing Here?  
What Are You *Doing* Here?  
What Are You Doing *Here*?

[Seriously. What Are You Doing Here?]



by Doug Carpenter

Why am *I* here? For pretty much the same reason *you* are, I suppose. To enjoy the mental stimulation we've shared as we've kicked around what I hope have been thought-provoking ideas in the pages of *After 50*, something that — with the publication of this issue — we have now officially been doing for 18 rewarding years.

At least that's been the goal of the well-intentioned [...if sometimes slightly off-the-wall...] ramblings I've offered in my columns during that time —

with the above title clearly demonstrating that *this* one is no exception. As usual, however, there's meaning behind my monthly madness.

So, to illuminate that, do me a favor. Read the title up there again, this time out loud. Go ahead. Don't worry. No one is going to hear you and think you're talking to yourself. [Well, you obviously *will* be, but I'm sure it won't be the first time.]

Actually, I wish that I *could* hear you, so that I could hear exactly how the words sound as you speak them. Because although the title's strangely-repetitive main question may only be five words long, there are at *least* that many different ways to *say* it and — knowing



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human nature — probably even *more* ways to *take* it... more often than not, unfortunately, the *wrong* way.

You'd think that listening and hearing would be a fairly simple process, wouldn't you? And it *would* be, if it weren't for the pesky part where we also have to *understand* what was *said* to us. [That will get you in trouble almost every time.]

The art of communication, of course, has never *been* nor will ever *be* easy. If it were, then the following legendarily-oblique observation *about* it would only be oddly confusing rather than ironically hysterical. It goes like this.

“I know you think you understand what you thought I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.” [And no, I did *not* make that up.]

I should mention that, when they're quoted, those words are often attributed to the former Chair of the United States' Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan — a monetary policy power player whose most off-the-cuff utterance could send international currency values bouncing around like [...if you'll forgive the irresistible economic imagery...] an overinflated middle school gym class dodge ball.

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But along with the column title, it illustrates an important point — specifically, in this context, an “inflection point.” It was, in fact, noticing the recent increased use of that phrase in media coverage of developing world events that put the idea for this month’s column in my head.

Similar to its function as a geometric term describing transitions from one mathematical state to another, *human* “inflection points” — whether at the level of personal life experiences or world-shaping events — can literally alter destinies and determine what comes next.

It would be difficult not to see how the recent global pandemic as well as the horrifying hit list of geopolitical hot messes currently approaching their boiling points near and far could easily have the power to change the direction of the world’s fate. That’s the very *definition* of an “inflection point.”

It’s much like the way that changing the tone of your *voice* when speaking a single word in,

say, a simple five-word question can totally transform its meaning and its effect on those who hear it — assuming they’re paying attention, that is. [It helps a lot if they’re listening.]

“What are *you* doing here?” can instantly make you feel extremely unwelcome, while “What are *you* *doing* here?” disparagingly calls into question your motives for even coming. [“How *dare* you show your face here? The *nerve!*”]

And if “What are you doing *here?*” doesn’t trigger a massive wave of anxiety that you’ve *disastrously* screwed up and are supposed to be somewhere else *entirely* at that exact moment, you clearly have far more faith in *your* phone’s calendar app than I have in *mine*.

It’s not that I see the way we’ve learned to cope with constant stress, as we largely have, as a bad thing. Confidence in your ability to overcome adversity is unquestionably an indispensable asset when you’re striving to survive the kind of unprecedented craziness we’re up against today.

I’m just worried that our eager optimism may have desensitized us to the reality that “inflection points” like the ones we’re now experiencing can and do have lasting — and often *permanent*

— consequences.

Just as we so often like to say — usually with not-always-justified bravado — that “failure is not an option,” neither are *do-overs*. Not any more. Mediation and compromise may still resolve some conflicts, but not everything is negotiable. *Some* situations, like some *people*, just won’t *budge*.

Which is why *we* — as individuals, as nations, as a civilization — can no longer afford to be verbally “tone” deaf. And being more self-aware would be a good place to start.

If, for example, you begin a conversation with “I hope you don’t take this the wrong way,” the odds are pretty good that you’re about to say something they *will* — particularly if


they’re really *listening*.

The downside of this, of course, is that when you experience the passionate pushback of someone who took *exception* to what you said because they actually *heard* and *understood* what you said, you can no longer conveniently dismiss their displeasure as them having “just not gotten it.”

That’s why it’s more important than ever that we pay genuine attention to exactly what’s being said and the *way* it’s being said — both *to* us and *by* us. Because if we keep making the kind of tragic, future-transforming mistakes we’ve already begun making, it won’t *matter* if history warns us by “repeating itself.”

Because we won’t hear it.

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