

I Just Have **1** Question

What Do You Know for Sure?



by Doug Carpenter

In the interest of full disclosure, I'll admit right up front that if something about the column title above seems vaguely familiar, it's probably because — well — *I stole it*. O.K. "Stole" may be a little harsh. [Accurate, but harsh.]

How about if we say that I "borrowed" it? Yeah. That sounds a lot better [...not to mention less unethical.] As for who I stole it *from*, that would be [...deep breath...] Oprah Winfrey. Yes. *The Oprah*.

Hey. They say if you're *going* to steal, steal from the *best*. And as interviewers and interview strategies go, in my humble estimation both she and that question are *unquestionably* exceptional, thus explaining my hopefully-forgivable phrase-filching. But in all fairness, I'm only doing the same thing *she* did.

The story behind the origin of the question in question dates back to 1998,

when Lady O was being interviewed by the late, great *Chicago Tribune* journalist and popular syndicated TV film critic Gene Siskel about her movie project, *Beloved*.

Nearing the end of the segment, Siskel casually posed a simple yet disarming question that left Winfrey — herself a broadcasting legend famous for being able to talk to virtually *anybody* about virtually *anything* — as close to totally speechless as I imagine was possible.

Relevant in no apparent way to her personal life, her distinguished career, or for that matter to even a *single thing* they had touched on during the interview, he subtly asked her "What do you know *for sure*?" — which, trust me, is an absolutely *awesome* interview question. And Oprah clearly agreed.

So much so that, while unerringly acknowledging Siskel as its source, she would in subsequent years embrace it as her own — parlaying it into everything from magazine articles and best-selling books to, not surprisingly, incorporating it into her personal interviewing repertoire, with memorable results.

I can't *tell* you how many times I've noticed that one of her always-stimulating TV one-on-ones is on and



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a good answer. Or at the very least an *interesting* one. [They *were*, after all, on national television.]

But what I think they were *most* hoping to find was an answer that responded truly honestly to the "for *sure*" part of the question. One they could share with confidence and conviction, as I'm sure even the temporarily-flustered Oprah tried *her* best to do.

And frankly, who *wouldn't* — assuming, that is, that you *could*? Because even when you know the question is coming [...and don't say I didn't warn you...], it's likely to be both the *easiest* and the *hardest* question you'll ever be asked.

What makes it *easy* is that *you're* the only person in the *world* who will — or for that matter could — both *know* the answer *and* whether it's *true* [...just in case you can't resist trying to "fudge" your way out of the interrogation.]

As for *hard*? Well, how could it *not* be? I mean, when was the last time *you* got to the end of a day feeling like things

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made *more sense* than they did when that day *began*? Probably, I imagine, when you were still in school — which if we turned back the clock would coincidentally have been starting just about *now*.

That, of course, was back when “New Year’s Day” was celebrated not on January 1st but in September on whatever date right after Labor Day the new *school* year kicked off — an occasion we marked as festively as we could considering that it didn’t come with noisemakers [...unless you count school bus horns and that annoying squeaking new shoes would sometimes make.]

I’m sure, though, that it was still a holidaylike event in the minds of many parents — who undoubtedly welcomed it with a joy dampened only by the accompanying expense of back-to-school shopping. But whatever it cost, to grade-schoolers inhaling their first blissful whiff of “New-Pencil-Case Smell,” it was worth *every penny*.

So for 13 Septembers, give or take, our lives basically consisted of lugging bookbags [...full of supplies that our parents trustingly assumed we needed...] off to classrooms where we’d spend the day learning things that *we* just as trustingly assumed were *true* — as in fact most of them, at the time at least, *were*. Until they *weren’t*.

You see, that’s the funny thing about “conventional wisdom.” It has a decidedly *unconventional* tendency to reinvent itself on a recurring basis, leaving it to *us* to update our *brains* to keep pace with our ever-changing understanding of the world. [Apparently *talking* about something and actually *knowing* anything about it don’t automatically come as a “matched set.”]

Doing so, of course, means occasionally having to part with certain pieces of information — among them things that we may have known “for sure” for what might seem like a rather *long* time and which a lot of *other* people appear to have believed right along *with us*.

It may surprise you to discover, for example, that the following “facts” are

not — or perhaps more correctly are *no longer* — *true*. [And if you’re at all skeptical of that, I can assure you that these are *Encyclopaedia Britannica* –level fact-checked.]

For starters — although I suspect you may’ve heard about this one, Pluto is *no longer* a *planet*. Astronomers’ announcement of that status change triggered a fuss *almost* furious enough to make them change it *back* [...which they may yet do. The intergalactic jury of public resistance is still deliberating.]

Back on Earth, meanwhile — contrary to animal lore, camels’ humps do *not* contain water. [They’re made of fat from which these “ships of the desert” draw nourishment on their long treks across the hot, swirling sands.]

And despite what your no doubt *adoring* Kindergarten teacher may have told you, chameleons do *not* always — or, in fact, completely — change color to disappear into their surroundings. In fact, there are *some* colors they couldn’t emulate even if they *wanted* to. [*Today’s life lesson*, boys and girls? *We all* have limitations.]

Now on to setting hogwash history straight. Standing up for his beloved country and countrymen at a full *5 feet 7 inches*, the widely-held belief that France’s notorious Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was embarrassingly short was little more than a tall tale.

And elsewhere back in colonial days, *not a single accused witch was ever burned* in Massachusetts’ olde Salem town. They *hanged* the poor dears. Nineteen, to be exact. [A *so* much more civilized way of dispatching alleged wicked wenches, don’t you think?]

If you’re wondering if I invented these “facts,” I *swear* I *didn’t*. Just like Thomas Alva Edison, long considered the “father” of the electric light bulb, didn’t really invent *that*, either — given that so many other just-as-inspired inventors had their *own* incandescent “aha” moments well before Menlo Park’s “Wiz” had *his*.

Then again, even if Thomas Edison *wasn’t* the first to electrically light the night, the 8 billion or so bulbs now burning 24/7 worldwide *are* descended from *his* original design. So in a way, I suppose he *did* invent something that has uniquely impacted everyone’s lives — the absurdly-high *electric bill*. [Thanks a *HEAP* for that, Tom.]

Finally, while you hopefully enjoyed the latest long Independence Day weekend, please don’t go all *wiggy* when I tell you that, rather than courageously putting quill pen to parchment

on July 4th of 1776, America’s Founding Fathers didn’t actually “John Hancock” their finally-finished Declaration until *August 2nd*. [Maybe they were on Summer hours.]

In fact, some signatories didn’t do the daring deed until as late as the following year, while some actually *never* got around to signing it. And that doesn’t even address the conspicuous absence of the often-overlooked *14th* and *15th* North American British colonies that *also* existed at the time of the revolution — *West and East Florida*, neither of which participated at all in the quest for American independence.

Although it’s unlikely that any of these revelations will revolutionize your thinking about our nation’s roots, it’s still good to be reminded that — no matter how “*sure*” you are about what you *think* you know — there’s a lot out there that you *don’t*, with more headed your way *every day*.

What I didn’t know was how long it would be before I’d be cornered by someone who’d insist on hearing *my* answer to my beloved hand-me-down Oprah question. And when they finally

did, here’s what I told them.

“All I know for sure is that I’ve *never known* as much as I *thought* I knew, and that I’ll *never know* as much as I *need* to know.”

That was the best I could come up with. And based purely on what I know today, I can’t really say for sure if it was a *good* answer, or even an *interesting* one. But that’s *O.K.* Hopefully I’ll know more tomorrow.

I’m certainly going to try, anyway.

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Throughout *After 50’s* first 16 years, veteran WNY writer and columnist Doug Carpenter regularly shared his wry generational observations with readers as *Everyboomer*. He has now returned to write a uniquely-named new monthly humor/opinion column called *I Just Have 1 Question* — which he says he’ll ask and then bravely try to answer... without, he fervently hopes, looking excessively foolish in the process. [We wish him luck.]



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