

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUESTIONS

By Principal Tyler C. Tingley '48, '64, '68, '01 (Hon.); P'99

“Wait, Mr. Tingley, we aren’t ready for that question!” Allison stated, as she took momentary control of the class. That wasn’t how I had envisioned my Fellowship and Fantasy: J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis class going on that morning last spring. In fact, I had spent several hours pondering just the right question, the one that would stimulate a lively and productive Harkness conversation about a passage in *The Lord of the Rings*. Allison asked her own question—one so superior to mine that it sparked a lively, 20-minute discussion.

The previous year, I had tackled the same passage, in which Tolkien, usually a stealth narrator, pulls the curtain aside to reveal something of himself to the reader. In that class, I had been unable to form a question that engaged the students or helped them discover the importance of the episode. It had not gone well.

I have spent decades in more traditional high school classrooms, but I consider myself a beginner in Harkness teaching despite my 12 years at Exeter. Every rookie to the Harkness table hears the stories of the legendary teachers who could begin class with a single question and never say another word for the duration of the class. Those who have not observed the Harkness table in action will, therefore, sometimes suggest that being a Harkness teacher must be easy. In response, I tell them that my own efforts to find the right question have been part of the most challenging and most rewarding teaching I’ve ever done.

In my pre-Exeter experience,

if the principal asked a question, students would fall all over themselves to provide the answer they thought the principal was seeking. I doubt they gave much thought to the quality of the question and whether it might lead to a profitable discussion. What is so striking about the Harkness approach is that students are themselves looking for the right questions—not just a series of correct answers.

In a 1930 letter to Principal Lewis Perry '46 (Hon.); P'32, Edward Harkness wrote, “What I have in mind is a classroom where students could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and instruct them by a sort of tutorial or conference method, where each student would feel encouraged to speak up. This would be a real revolution in methods.” Harkness could not have known then how integral to his vision questions would become.

By participating in Harkness discussions, our students come to trust the process of searching for the right question. When they leave Exeter, they have discovered that asking the right question is the most important part of any intellectual pursuit.

I watched Allison and her classmates streak through *The Lord of the Rings*, racing down the track of her question. I bit my tongue and held back from entering the discussion. This was a problem they were going to solve themselves.

The privilege of participating in that process of discovery provides some of my fondest memories of 12 years at Exeter. I often tell people that being principal of the Academy is the second best job in the world. The *best* job is to be a Harkness teacher. ●



Principal Ty Tingley believes that learning to ask the right questions can be more revelatory for students than simply finding the correct answers.