

The Three Questions
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(Three Questions was written for a publication intended to raise funds for the victims of an anti-Jewish pogrom in Kishinev. Tolstoy had written an open letter to the tsar accusing his government of being directly responsible for the massacre.)

When is the right time?

Who are the right people?

What is the most important thing to do?

It once occurred to a certain king that if he always knew just when to undertake everything he did, and which were the right and which the wrong people to deal with, and, above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do, he would never fail in anything.

Having thus thought, the king proclaimed throughout his realm that he would bestow a large reward on anyone who would teach him *how to know the proper moment for every deed, how to know which were the most essential people, and how not to err in deciding which pursuits were of the greatest importance*. Learned men began coming to the king, but they all gave different answers to his questions.

In reply to the first question some said that in order to know the right time for every action one must draw up a schedule of days, months, and years, and strictly adhere to it. Only in this way, they said, could everything be done at the proper time.

Others said it was not possible to decide in advance what to do and when to do it; that one must not allow himself to be distracted by vain amusements, but must be attentive to everything that happens and do whatever is required.

A third group said that no matter how attentive the king might be to what was going on, it was impossible for one man rightly to decide the time for every action, and that he ought to have a council of wise men, and act according to their advice.

A fourth group said that there were certain matters which required immediate decision, leaving no time to determine by means of consultation whether or not it was the right time to undertake them. In order to know this, one would have to know in advance what was going to happen, which is something that only a magician can know; therefore, in order to know the right time for every action, one must consult the magicians.

The answers to the second question also varied. Some said that the people the king most needed were his administrators; some said the priests, and some the physicians, while others said the warriors were the most essential.

The answers to the third question, as to what was the most important pursuit, were equally diverse. Some said that science was the most important thing in the world, some said military skill, and others religious worship. The answers were all different, therefore the king agreed with none of them and rewarded no one.

In order to find the true answer to the questions, he decided to consult a hermit who was famous for his wisdom. The hermit never left the forest where he lived, and there he received none but simple folk. The king therefore dressed himself as one of the people, and dismounting before he reached the hermit's dwelling, he left his knights behind and went on alone.

The king found the hermit digging a garden in front of his hut. When he saw the king, the hermit greeted him and immediately returned to his digging. He was thin and frail, and each time he thrust his spade into the ground and turned a little clod of earth, he breathed heavily.

The king approached him and said: "I have come to you, wise hermit, to ask you for the answers to three questions: *How can I know which is the time I ought to heed, not allowing it to slip by only to be regretted later? Who are the most essential people, those to whom I ought to give the greatest attention? And what are the most important pursuits, which therefore ought to be undertaken first?*"

The hermit listened to the king, but gave him no answer; he merely spat on his hands and started digging again.

"You have exhausted yourself," the king said. "Give me the spade. I'll work for a while." "Thanks," said the hermit. He handed him the spade and sat down on the ground. After digging two beds, the king stopped and repeated his question. The hermit did not answer, but got up and held out his hand for the spade, saying: "No you rest and I'll work." But the king did not give him the spade; he went on digging.

An hour passed, then another; the sun had begun to sink behind the trees when the king stuck the spade into the ground and said: "I came to you, wise man, for answers to my questions. If you can give me none, tell me so and I shall return home."

"Here comes someone running," said the hermit. "Let us see who it is."

The king looked around and saw a bearded man running out of the woods. The man held his hands pressed to his stomach and blood flowed from between his fingers. He ran up to the king and fell fainting to the ground, where he lay motionless, weakly moaning.

The king and the hermit opened the man's clothing. There was a large wound in his stomach. The king washed it as well as he could and bandaged it with his own handkerchief and the hermit's towel; but the flow of blood did not abate. Again and again the king removed the bandage soaked with warm blood, washed it, and rebandaged the wound. When the blood at least ceased flowing, the wounded man revived and asked for water. The king brought fresh water and gave him a drink.

Meanwhile the sun had set and it grew cool. The king, with the hermit's help, carried the wounded man into the hut and laid him on the bed. He closed his eyes and grew still. The king was so tired from his walk and the work he had done that he lay down on the threshold and fell asleep. And he slept so soundly through the short summer night that when he woke up in the morning it was some time before he realized where he was and recalled the bearded stranger lying on the bed, who was now gazing intently at him with luminous eyes.

"Forgive me," said the bearded man in a faint voice, when he saw that the king was awake and looking at him.

"I do not know you and have nothing to forgive you," replied the king.

"You do not know me, but I know you. I am your enemy, and I swore to take vengeance on you for killing my brother and seizing my property. I knew you had come alone to see the hermit, and I resolved to kill you on your way back. But when the whole day passed and you did not return, I left my ambush to seek you out, and came upon your knights instead. They recognized me, fell upon me, and wounded me. I escaped from them, but I should have bled to death if you had not cared for my wound. I intended to kill you, and you have saved my life. Now, if I live, and if you wish it, I will serve you as your most faithful slave, and bid my sons to do the same. Forgive me!" The king was happy to be so easily reconciled with his enemy, and he not only forgave him but promised to return his property and send his own physician and servants to attend him.

Having taken leave of the wounded man, the king went out to look for the hermit. Before leaving him he wished for the last time to ask him to answer his questions. The hermit was on his knees in the yard sowing seeds in the beds that had been dug the day before. The king approached him and said: "For the last time, wise man, I ask you to answer my questions."

"But you have already been answered," said the hermit, squatting on his thin calves and looking up at the king who stood before him. "How have I been answered?" asked the king.

"How?" repeated the hermit. "Had you not taken pity on my weakness yesterday and dug these beds for me, instead of turning back alone, that fellow would have assaulted you, and you would have regretted not staying with me. Therefore, the most important time was when you were digging the beds; I was the most important man; and the most important pursuit was to do good to me. And later, when that man came running to us, the most important time was when you were taking care of him, for if you had not bound up his wounds, he would have died without having made peace with you; therefore he was the most important man, and what you did for him was the most important deed. Remember then: there is only one important time – *Now*. And it is important because it is the only time we have dominion over ourselves; and the most important man is *he with whom you are*, for no one can know whether or not he will ever have dealings with any other man; and the most important pursuit is *to do good to him*, since it is for that purpose alone that man was sent into this life."