

In this issue of the Dispatch, Lance writes about one of our Ag Progress team, Dr. Bill Long. Dr. Long has been in Lance's life ever since Lance walked into his history classroom at Sterling (KS) College in 1990. Bill has just come out with a new book—an introduction to Chinese love poetry—which may interest some of you. Then, Bill and Davon banter back and forth both recalling and commenting on a memorable saying—whether there really is such a thing as a bad or stupid question. That issue has received fresh attention in the last few days as we remember the 74th anniversary of dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One scholar now suggests that someone failed to ask a “bad” question in a crucial time (see article in sidebar). We hope you enjoy this month's offering. As usual, let us know what you are thinking!

Love not (Trade) War: A Different Side of China

By [Lance Woodbury](#)

[Dr. Bill Long](#) is a regular contributor to the *Dispatch* and serves as Ag Progress' Editor-In-Chief. He's written more than 20 books, including co-writing [Family Business: Genesis 37-50 and the Family of Joseph](#) with me. He's studied religion, history and law, led workshops and taught college-level and law school courses, and has been a pastor, professor and lawyer. Recently Bill added another chapter to his many areas of interest and expertise: Chinese Poetry.

Co-written with Eurydice Chen, [25 Classic Chinese Love Poems, Translated and Interpreted](#) is a short read at 107 pages. And while I received a few second glances when reading the book at the lake and pool on my recent vacation, I found the book fascinating from both an artistic and historical perspective.

The Chinese have an incredibly long history; some of the poems, arranged chronologically in the book, date to several hundred years before Christ. Long and Chen include poems from different Chinese dynasties spanning 1100 BCE to the 18th century, offering comments to help ground the reader in historical context. Additionally, they tell us about each poem's author (when known) and their place in the artistic structure of the dynasty in which they lived.

They also provide background on, and analysis of, each poem, which was quite helpful as I don't consider myself a student of poetry. For example, several poems reference red beans, and Long and Chen tell us that the red bean in China is associated with the [myth of a woman's tears](#) and symbolizes lovers' longing for one another. There are tens of thousands of Chinese characters, and in many of the poems the authors literally show the reader the characters for certain words, helping us to better understand the structure of the poem and intent of the poem's original author.

Long and Chen not only help us better understand Chinese poetry; they offer a framework for thinking about love. The poems attempt to explain the “full range of the experience of loving,” from wooing the other person to missing out on love, from experiencing absence or distance in a relationship to losing a partner.

Notwithstanding the curious onlookers at the pool, I finished the book with a greater appreciation for the Chinese language, a respect for their history, and a better understanding of poetry. Order [your copy](#) today!

Are There Bad or Stupid Questions?

By [Dr. Bill Long](#)

Over coffee last week a friend of mine, from a devout Mennonite background, told me that when he was growing up his father had a saying: “If you have your health...you have EVERYTHING!” My friend said, “This nerve disease I have had for 16 years has completely altered my life; sometimes I can barely walk; I am exhausted a good deal of the time. In a word, I don't have my health. Yet, as I age and look at my life, I actually believe that I have EVERYTHING. I guess I disagree with my (late) dad.”



This candid conversation highlighted to me how we all hear, and sometimes pass on, clichés or sayings from a variety of sources, many of which may be popular but simply not true. One of these statements, coming out of an education environment that wanted to encourage more student participation, was “There is no such thing as a bad question.”

For years I believed that was true. Every question, I believed, could open up new worlds. Even if a query was inarticulately spoken or was unfocused, I believed that it could be the means for unlocking a student’s curiosity and even for helping me see a subject in new ways. But I don’t believe anymore that there is “No such thing as a bad question.”

How did I change my mind? I changed my mind not because I said to myself, “X student asks good questions and Y student asks poor questions,” but because I saw the effect of *my* questions on students. Sometimes I would ask them about a reading assignment and there would be dead silence. Other times there was animated discussion. I ultimately decided that the difference lay in my ability to figure out what the right or best question was, the question that either touched their lives or their aspirations.

I have tried to bring that insight into all kinds of interactions. I seek the question that opens up a heart or might yield an insight. I ask questions that play to the knowledge, rather than prejudice, of another person. I feel I am richer because I no longer believe, “There is no such thing as a bad question.”

There’s No Such Thing as a Stupid Question

By [Davon Cook](#)

When I was a child, my father encouraged our learning and curiosity by often saying, “There’s no such thing as a stupid question.” I took him up on that with many questions, to my siblings’ chagrin!

But that approach has served me well. Throughout my career, I’ve worked in situations where I must get up to speed on a new industry, process, culture, or group of people quickly. People are generally receptive to answering my questions when the intention is good. They appreciate my interest in a subject they are passionate about or appreciate my wanting to learn about them. Far too often I see others miss opportunities to learn or to connect or to broach the elephant in the room because they are afraid their question will sound stupid or be judged.

But like Bill, with time and experience I have amended my thinking. I acknowledge there is wisdom in discerning *when* and *how* and *to whom* to ask questions. And when that discernment is missing, there can indeed be non-productive questions (although still not “stupid”)! These concepts apply whether I’m tackling the tricky interpersonal dynamics of family business, mastering a new topic, or negotiating.

When: I can learn a lot by listening first. If it’s a new technical topic or a negotiation, before I advertise my lack of knowledge, I listen to see what I can infer to research later and be able to ask more nuanced follow-up questions. If it’s a tricky family topic, I try to be intentional about finding a time when others will be receptive to discuss and have the opportunity to be prepared also.

How: In family business situations, I try to resist the temptation to ask a question with an assumed answer or an implied accusation. Do a gut check. Are you asking in a way that is truly seeking to understand, or seeking to prove your point? And physically how: for a difficult topic, discuss in person or on the phone. For a content question that may need documentation, email may be more appropriate.

To whom: Some people are passionate teachers, some are not. Some can be trusted with the touchy topics, some cannot.

So like my dad, I share the same coaching with my children, trying to teach the nuance along the way.

