



EMBODY

By Sossity Chiricuzio

Perspectives

Embody - How are you doing?

by Sossity Chiricuzio, PQ Monthly

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The dental assistant comes to escort me to the exam room, and asks me “How are you doing?” I respond honestly, which is all my current mood and nerves will allow, and ask her “do you want the genuine answer, or the short one?” After a moments pause she opts for the short one, which ends up genuine regardless. “I'm feeling extremely anxious about this appointment.”

Not only is this important info for her, as we're about to literally be sharing personal space, but it's the only answer I can bring myself to give. A genuine one. I wonder how often this question, which gets asked probably millions of times a day in our society, is answered genuinely. I wonder how often it is asked in a way meant to prompt a genuine response. I wonder when and how it became standard practice to extend the facade of interest in someone's well being which is most often just meant to be another cog in the gears of social politeness.

I genuinely want to answer. I genuinely ask.

These days, that question feels more important than ever, and more loaded. If I ask someone how they are doing, and the answer is vulnerable or intimate or scary, am I helping by asking, or am I putting them on the spot? If someone asks me how I'm doing and I answer genuinely, am I making a connection, or taking up too much of their own energy reserves? Do those answers change if I, as a white, cisgendered, employed, US citizen ask for or share information with someone who is a person of color or transgendered or homeless or an immigrant? Power often plays out in the sharing of information, and we often don't know nearly enough about how to make that equitable, and respectful.

I genuinely want to know and be known. I genuinely want to help.

I spend my day behind a desk, greeting people who are seeking medical care, and who have often been gaslit and disrespected and ignored. People who are often abused or misgendered or patronized out in the world. People whose vulnerable and intimate details I already have access to, simply by being part of their care team. Theoretically, I should maintain a professional distance, keep everything as light as possible, avoid sharing intimate details of my own life. I walk a fine line between engaging with them as a member of my own community, and working for them as a representative of the medical system.

I genuinely want to be my own self. I genuinely want to know them.

Just as important as figuring out how to ask, is how to ask without pressure. Expressing interest without assumptions, or an agenda. What it means to actively listen, and to safeguard what is shared as precious, and sacred. Figuring out how to stay present. To sit in discomfort, and make of it a learning opportunity without making it someone else's job to educate. To not presume upon their privacy, or intrude upon their lived experience like a clumsy tourist. It's vital to examine our incentive

in inquiring, and check any feelings of entitlement to an answer. Not to insist on access to someone's thought process or privacy or emotional labor.

I've been having conversations about this with many people lately, and a common thread is trying to figure out what to ask instead, or how to frame that ask, so that it's clearly genuine and not assumptive. Is it even an ask, or is it meant to be an offer? Is it less about the language and more about taking the time to get clear in our intentions? Is it figuring out the difference between acknowledging and engaging? Is it possible to be more direct and less intrusive all at once?

I don't know the answer, though I'm sure it's not just one answer. I don't know a better question, either, though I'm sure the same is true for that. I do know that I'm going to continue to examine this interaction, and keep trying to find genuine ways to acknowledge others and be mindful of their needs, to actively listen, and to respectfully respond. To make sure that if I say "How are you doing?" that I'm actually available to hear the answer, or to hear that they don't want to answer that. To avoid making assumptions, or making it about me. To make sure it's based in connection, and not empty courtesy.

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