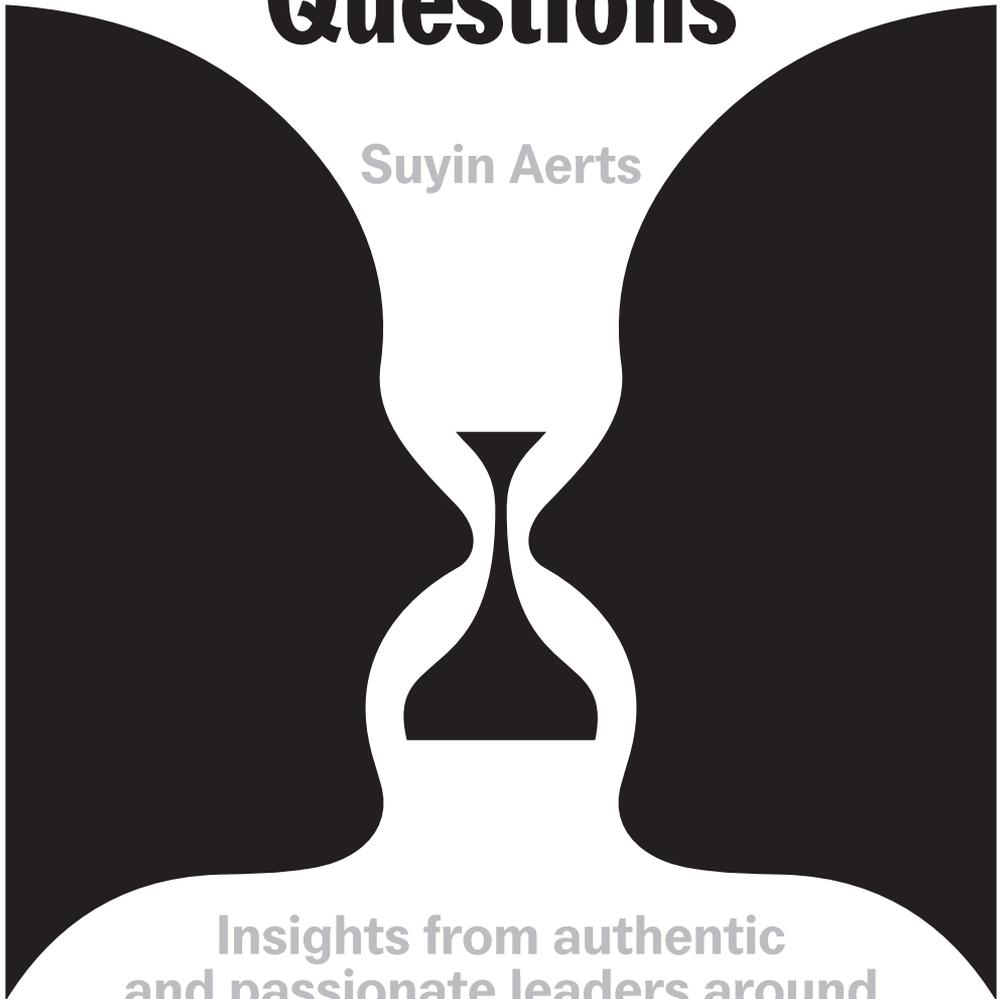




For Noa & Jade

10 Quintessential Questions

Suyin Aerts



Insights from authentic
and passionate leaders around
the world

Lannoo
Campus

D/2024/45/54 – ISBN 978 94 014 9578 3 – NUR 800

Cover design: Atelier Steve Reynders

Interior design: Keppie & Keppie bv

Drawings: Max D

Translation: Alanah Reynor

© Suyin Aerts & Lannoo Publishers nv, Tiel, 2024.

LannooCampus Publishers is a subsidiary of Lannoo Publishers,
the book and multimedia division of Lannoo Publishers nv.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced and/or made public,
by means of printing, photocopying, microfilm or any other means,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

LannooCampus Publishers

Vaartkom 41 box 01.02

3000 Leuven

Belgium

www.lannoocampus.com

P.O. Box 23202

1100 DS Amsterdam

The Netherlands

Table of Contents

Foreword	7
Preface	9
1 Do we all have a passion?	21
2 When did you realise choices aren't forever?	53
3 What's your non-negotiable?	79
4 What does vulnerability mean to you?	105
5 Do you have a role model?	139
6 How do you describe success?	169
7 What is innovation?	199
8 Can entrepreneurship be taught?	223
9 What does curiosity mean to you?	247
10 What question do you never want to get and will not answer?	271
Pure gold lies in between	293
Epilogue	313
Biographies	314
Photo Credits	335

“Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

—— RAINER MARIA RILKE, *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET* ——

Foreword



What is passion? What is innovation? Who is your role model? These are some of the 10 fundamental questions my friend, Suyin, asked 21 people of the most diverse origins.

The result is a fascinating book that takes you on a journey through the human experience. I have known Suyin for many years. She was one of my first clients and is one of my good friends. She is a generalist jack-of-all-trades who is passionate and talented about dance, journalism, moderation, interviewing and entrepreneurship. I have always admired her curiosity, openness and creativity.

When she told me she was going to write a new book, I was filled with excitement straightaway. I couldn't wait to read it and hear her views on life's big questions. I was also curious about the unique concept of the book: a creative game of tic-tac-toe where the author alternates her opinions with those of her interviewees and then transposes their answers to herself.

This book is not only a collection of answers, but also an invitation to ask questions. It is a book that makes you think and dream. It's a book you don't want to miss!

Enjoy

Daan De Wever

Preface

I'm a multipassionate person. I'm a dancer, actor, journalist, moderator, interviewer and entrepreneur. I may not be dancing or acting anymore but they're still a part of me, a part of the person I am every day.

My first book was about being a multipassionate person, a generalist rather than a specialist. It was about my journey to realise that I don't need to find just one passion or specialisation, but that I can develop and nurture many different passions. It was a journey to finding and accepting who I truly am.

This book is also a journey. Professionally, I wear two hats. I'm an interviewer, journalist and moderator but I'm also an entrepreneur. In both roles I have to ask questions. As an interviewer, I ask other people questions to find out more about them, to get to the root of what they're saying, to tell a story. But questions are equally as important as an entrepreneur.

When I joined my husband, Dan, at X-Treme Creations more than 15 years ago, I had several options before me: starting my own business in fashion (the sector I was working in), joining Dan or starting something completely different. Dan has also faced choices; he used to have plans to expand the company into other countries, like South Africa and Russia, but it was too soon. Whatever the scenario, as entrepreneurs we are always looking at new situations. Things never stop, they're always changing. That's why you need to be able to ask yourself the right questions. If we were to explore expansion opportunities again, would we just remember our bad experience? Or would we learn from our mistakes?

It's the same with partners and teams. You could think you have the perfect team but things can easily change. You need to accept that people change, partnerships change, priorities change. The world is in constant evolution, just like you as an individual. There are so many moving parts within a company. It keeps you on your toes. It keeps you questioning.

My guests in interviews and panels often tell me that they enjoy the experience of being interviewed by me because I ask different questions to other journalists. This is part of the reason why I'm writing this book. It is so important to ask the right questions, whether as an interviewer, moderator, entrepreneur, parent or just any person. If we continue asking ourselves the right questions, we will be able to forge a better path forward.

Have you ever led yourself down the wrong path because you forgot to ask the right questions?

The emphasis on the *right* questions is key, but there is no magic formula for the right question. A good question is one that takes into account who you're asking, where you are, what situation you're in and many other factors. Sometimes it's an open question, sometimes it's a closed question. Whatever the type of question, what matters is how you frame it and why you're asking it. I'm sure we've all already felt like we focused on the wrong thing, most likely because we asked ourselves the wrong question; we just didn't know it at the time. If you ask the wrong question, you are going to get the wrong answer.

To be a good leader or a good interviewer or a good entrepreneur or a strong person, you need to ask the right questions. Don't wait for a crisis to question yourself or what you're doing. Don't wait until it could be too late; dare to ask the right questions early

enough. But you also need to know that it's not the question that matters, it's the answer. The answer will dictate the next portion of your interview, the next step for your company or your next big life decision. But be careful. If you ask the wrong question, you will head off on the wrong path and make a wrong decision.

In this book, I want to share with you how I ask questions and why I ask the questions I ask. To do so, I have selected 10 questions and 21 people to answer these questions. My 10 questions came from a very long list of questions, but I think that these 10 tell us a lot about a person and their journey. Are they the 10 quintessential questions you should always be asking? No, of course not. No such thing exists. The questions we ask will always evolve. My next book will probably include a different set of questions.

As for the 21 people I interviewed, I could have chosen any number of people. Trust me, the list was long. The only thing they all have in common is that they have inspired me. Some I have known for many years; others I met shortly before writing this book. They come from all walks of life, all ages, all professions. But all of them have inspired me through who they are because they have all shared a part of themselves. If you want to find out more about the people I interviewed, the internet is your best friend. But if you want to know why I chose them, why they inspire me, check out the pages at the back of the book where you can meet each person I interviewed.

You'll notice throughout the book that I've given my interviewees a lot of space. I didn't extract short snippets or snappy quotes from our conversations. I could have but I didn't want to take their words out of context. The explanations, the why, the reasoning are just as valuable as the point they make.

Who answered my questions?



ITAY TALGAM

Itay was born and raised in Israel. After a successful international career as a conductor, he now travels the world as a keynote speaker on leadership.



DARIA NASHAT

Born and raised in Berlin, Daria was a teenager when the Berlin Wall came down. She believes that we are stuck in cubicles, boxes and power pyramids that disconnect us from our life force and true power, which is why she's a resilience coach, trainer and facilitator. I interviewed Daria together with her daughter, Jasmina.



JASMINA VERMEULEN

Jasmina is a teenager and student, not yet 18. With the incredible support and leadership of her mother Daria, Jasmina decided to go on a trip sailing the oceans with the *School at Sea* project in 2022.



HASSAN AL HILOU

Hassan was born and raised in the Netherlands before he came to Belgium and became a serial entrepreneur, advisor and keynote speaker on the topics of radical innovation, leadership and the impact of all things digital on society and business. At the age of 15, he was the youngest entrepreneur in the country.



ANGELIQUE VAN OMBERGEN

Angelique has a PhD in medical sciences and is currently the Discipline Lead for Life Sciences at the European Space Agency. In 2019, Angelique made the Forbes 30 under 30 Europe list in the science and healthcare category. A mother of two, Angelique has also written and published several books, including three non-fiction children's books.



PHILIPPE BAILLEUR

Philippe is a pioneer in systemic coaching. He guides organisations on topics such as communication, leadership, teamwork, group dynamics, creativity, self-management and coaching. Philippe has written several books and has a collection of the most beautiful guitars (which he knows how to play).



PIET GODDAER (OZARK HENRY)

Piet, better known by his stage name Ozark Henry, is a Belgian singer, songwriter, record producer and arranger. He is also a pioneer in the field of 3D audio or immersive sound.



RUDI VRANCKX

Rudi is a Belgian war correspondent. Thanks to his career of over 30 years reporting on international conflicts, Rudi has contributed to a culture of peace and justice and has won several international prizes as a result.



MATHIEU GRAM

Inspired by his Olympic endeavours, Mathieu has developed a powerful vision on how to achieve sustainable human performance by elevating one's quality of life experience. Thanks to his expertise and unique skill set, he has successfully guided Olympic athletes towards their medals, and captains of industry and society towards their impact.



ELKE VAN HOOF

Elke is an entrepreneurial innovator who gets things done. For nearly 25 years, Elke combined an academic position with entrepreneurship where she bridged theory and practice. She has one goal in mind: teaching as many people as possible how to become the best version of themselves, regardless of the context. At the time of the interview, Elke was subject to a trial by media which was affecting her deeply, both personally and professionally.



DAN VANDEVOORDE

Dan is not only my business partner, but also my husband and the father of our two teenage daughters. After studying law and an international MBA, Dan served Belgium as a paratrooper in Rwanda and Somalia before founding his own company *X-Treme Creations* in 1994. I joined the company as managing partner and co-owner in 2008.



ANN WAUTERS

Ann is a former Belgian professional basketball player and coach, currently serving as an assistant coach for the Chicago Sky in the American Women's National Basketball Association. Throughout her career, Ann gained more overseas experience than any other female player. She is a mother of three and keynote speaker, transforming her years of experience in getting results as a team into valuable lessons for team leaders.



ISABELLA LENARDUZZI

Isabella is a trainer, consultant and key opinion leader in gender equality, diversity and inclusion. She is the owner of JUMP and an Ashoka Fellow. A leading social entrepreneur for 35 years, Isabella is known for her innovative solutions to social problems and her potential to change patterns across society.



KEVIN KARENA

Kevin is a young changemaker who is passionate about poetry and public speaking. He loves Brussels and believes it has the potential to become the next New York, something he would love to contribute to. He believes in politics and positive debates to make a difference and create a better future for young people.



JOSEPH OUBELKAS

Joseph is a Dutch speaker and author who became famous for his book *400 letters from my mother* about dealing with setbacks and change, based on his true story. Joseph was wrongly convicted of drug smuggling at the age of 24 and sentenced to 10 years in prison in Morocco. He speaks about freedom of choice and perseverance.



IHSANE HAOUACH

Ihsane is a social entrepreneur, author, board member, trainer and advisor working on sustainable transformations in diversity, equality and inclusion, and the energy transition. In 2023, she shared her vision on inclusive leadership in her book *Open Up Your Organisation*. Ihsane is also a mother and loves to play the piano.



RACHID HAEVELAERTS

Rachid is a former karate athlete who competed at the highest level, winning national and international titles including Belgian champion, European champion and WIKF world champion. As a coach, Rachid combines his commitment and passion with a holistic approach to create a connection on both a physical and cognitive level with his athletes. Supported by Mathieu Gram, Rachid was my coach during the writing of this book.



MARC NOPPEN

Marc is a pulmonologist and has been at the helm of UZ Brussel since 2006. He is regarded as one of the most authoritative voices in the hospital sector and in tackling the COVID-19 crisis. Coincidentally, he was the supervisor of pneumology when I suffered a pulmonary embolism, although we didn't know each other at the time.



MARION DEBRUYNE

Marion loves bridging the worlds of academia and business. With a background in engineering and marketing, she has always been passionate about understanding the impact of technology and innovation on markets. Marion is the Dean of Vlerick Business School, the first woman in this role.



MALENE BIRGER

Malene founded and led two of Denmark's most internationally successful fashion brands: *DAY Birger et Mikkelsen* and *By Malene Birger*. She is a multiple award-winning designer, who has honed her creative craft on numerous projects across interior design, fashion, art and jewellery. As a self-proclaimed nomad, Malene has spent the last 17 years renovating, designing and living in homes all over the world.



MAX D

Max is a talented young man studying graphics and digital media, design and applied science. We met when Max was in high school and working as an intern at our company. Max is on the autism spectrum.

Are you brave enough to ask the right questions?

People often tell me that I come across as strong and some might think I offend people. I may be blunt and direct, but I have never offended anyone. Asking questions requires bravery. You need to be a bit of a rebel to ask the difficult questions; sometimes you even need to be a little cheeky. However, to ask those questions and get a good answer, you need to show a little colour yourself. You need to open up, to be vulnerable.

During my conversation with Hassan Al Hilou, he gave an example of a young boy asking someone – a well-known TV personality – a question straight-up. He simply said: “I don’t know you. What do you do?” His question, the way he asked it, came across as arrogant. That’s not the goal. By asking questions interrogation-style – by which I mean with very little contextualisation – you will probably only get short superficial answers, especially if it comes across as untoward. It’s important to know when you can dare to ask these types of blunt, off-the-cuff questions; you don’t want to offend like the boy in Hassan’s example. But, I think, by framing it and giving a bit of yourself and your own opinion you allow your guest to go deeper.

Before asking a question, ask yourself if you’re prepared to answer that question yourself. If you’re not, don’t ask that question. You need to take care of the other person and their emotions. An interview doesn’t just expose the person you’re interviewing, it exposes you.

I’ll admit that I was anxious about asking these 10 questions, only these 10 questions, in every interview I did for the book. I was worried that I would feel trapped, like I’d been put in a straight-jacket. Truly this was a test for both myself and the questions. If

those 10 questions hadn't worked, they wouldn't be the 10 questions included in this book. And if I weren't a good interviewer, I wouldn't have known how to frame each question for each person. I didn't stick to the order of the questions in the book; I went where the conversation took us. But the questions themselves were the same.

As you will see throughout the book, I received very different answers to the same questions. Some of them challenged my perspective. Some of the questions even challenged me to re-evaluate what I thought to be true. That's what it is all about. Your opinion should be able to change with every person you meet. That doesn't mean that other people compromise your vision; rather they help shape how *you* see things. Our stories, our lives, the good and bad things that have happened to us shape how we see things and who we are. But we are also shaped by the people we meet, the books we read and the conversations we have.

When I conduct an interview, I want to learn more about the person I'm interviewing. These 10 questions are a great starting point but there are always so many more questions I want to ask. For the duration of the interview, I am walking with my guest on a journey. I hope to never reach the point of no return, the point when I have to say "no further questions". (Incidentally, this was the working title of this book for that very reason.) A lack of time usually obliges me to say these dreaded words, but I never want to get to a point where this is how I feel, where I truly have no further questions for this person. If that were to happen, maybe I would have been asking the wrong questions.

Is it time for you to dare to ask the right questions?

As children, we are naturally inquisitive. We start asking questions at a young age. Usually, these questions start out quite simple but they become more and more complex as we grow up. I believe that it is crucial to teach young people to maintain this curiosity, to educate children with an open mind and encourage them to ask questions. Parents may not always have the right answer straight-away, and their answers may change from one day to the next, but that's what it's all about. As human beings, we need to be asking ourselves the right questions and daring to ask other people the right questions. Never stop asking questions in life; never stop questioning your life.

This book is not going to give you all the answers. If that's what you're looking for, you may as well close it now and go run a marathon or something. No, in this book I want you to trust me – just a girl raised in Belgium – to guide you. I want you to investigate with me how to ask the right questions. I hope that these conversations will give you some inspiration, both by reading the answers and by encouraging you to ask questions yourself. Like in my interviews, I want you to join me for the journey. You can dip in and out of this book, but I would recommend that you read it from beginning to end. And you should know by now that the end is probably not the end.

I hope you learn something, but I don't want to teach. While you read, don't make assumptions. Stay open and listen carefully.

