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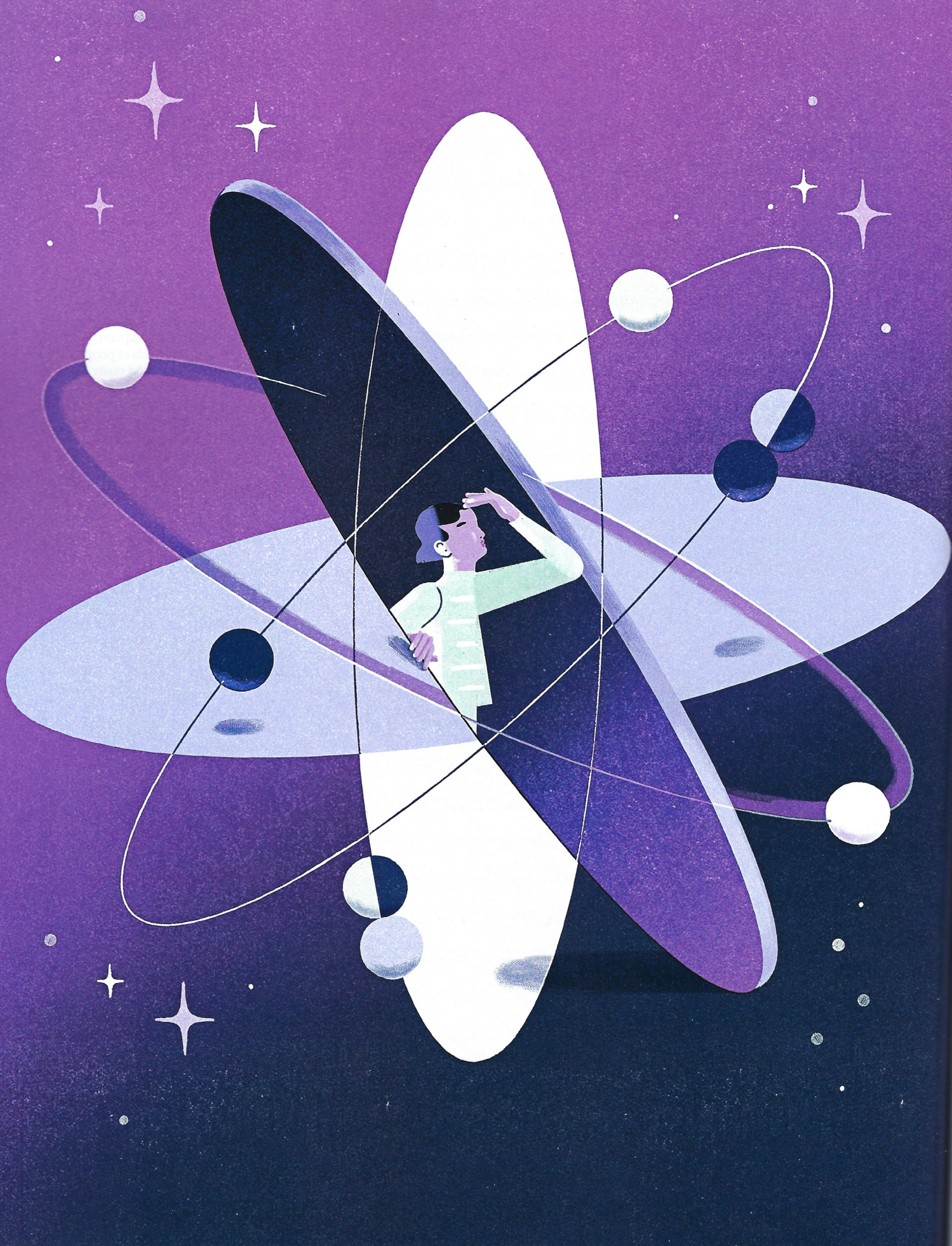
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# Wonder, WOMAN!

During trying times, we crave answers.  
But according to the growing field  
of philosophical counseling, the real  
power is in asking the questions.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

**TEN MONTHS INTO** quarantine, the passage of time began to confuse me. Life became smaller, and the graywash routine of it made the hours creep by. At the same time, I felt my “real” life was flashing by somewhere out there, a trail of missed opportunities in its wake. In December, my elderly in-laws died of Covid—one, two, a painful reminder of death’s inevitability. Sitting silently on my sofa, between slugs of warming wine, I pondered in earnest. Was I using my time here well? I had experienced depression before and been gratefully righted by therapy and medication. This was different; this stew felt more existential.

I decided to consult a philosophical counselor. I’d come across the concept during some 2 a.m. doomscrolling. A newish breed of helpers, philosophical counselors may have a master’s or a PhD in philosophy but have stepped out of the lecture hall to use their insights in helping clients work through thorny life issues,

such as midlife crises, relationship dilemmas, career crossroads. Some are certified through the American Philosophical Practitioners Association (APPA) or the National Philosophical Counseling Association (NPCA), but because there is no legal regulation of the field, anyone with a philosophy background could call herself a philosophical counselor. Unlike psychotherapists, they don’t diagnose or treat mental health conditions, like clinical depression or panic disorder, or prescribe medication, and most don’t take insurance. Instead, they lead you through sessions to whip your thinking into shape, like personal trainers for the mind and soul.

Having first appeared in the U.S. in the 1990s, philosophical counselors use a variety of approaches. Most engage you in deep conversation, pulling from their training to help you question the logic and assumptions behind your thinking. Some practitioners might suggest you read a little

Jean-Paul Sartre or Lao Tzu, or quote tidbits from philosophy’s great minds who, over the millennia, have worried about the same problems troubling you today. If you’re struggling with feeling disconnected from a friend, for example, they may share Aristotle’s views on friendship so you can see your own situation in a different light.

Philosophy has a rep as navel-gazing: It’s seen as a series of rarefied brain teasers about the sound of one hand clapping or the number of angels that fit on the end of a pin. But Skye Cleary, PhD, a lecturer of philosophy at Barnard College and coeditor of *How to Live a Good Life: A Guide to Choosing Your Personal Philosophy*, begs to differ. “For thousands of years, philosophy—which means ‘love of wisdom’—wasn’t confined to the ivory tower,” she says. “It was happening on the streets.” Socrates and company led pupils through dialogues to coax greater self-understanding. Asking “Why are we here? How should we live?”



was not just an intellectual exercise: Epicurus believed philosophy was essentially medicine for the soul, a practice with useful applications for solving the problems of everyday life.

Today, philosophical counseling is still a niche field. But it's growing steadily, according to Lou Marinoff, PhD, a professor of philosophy at the City College of New York and president of APPA. Not surprisingly, "Demand for philosophical counselors, and for APPA training programs, has increased during the pandemic," he reports.

According to Cleary, that's because "we tend to go through life on autopilot—busy with work, family, our phones—and we don't stop and reflect on the big picture until we run into a crisis." But while crises can be scary, they're also opportunities for growth. "As adults, we get out of the habit of asking questions," says Cleary. "But if we stop doing so, we become passive; things happen

to us rather than us seizing our own destiny."

Seeking help with my own questions, I met my modern-day Socrates via Zoom. Monica Vilhauer, PhD, is the founder of Curious Soul Philosophy in Portland, Oregon. Half a continent apart, we bonded over the fear our dogs would interrupt—she had bribed hers with a mini jar of peanut butter. Vilhauer asked me background questions much like a therapist would. What was I concerned about? I told her about my quarantine-induced ennui, how I felt stuck in *Groundhog Day*, fretting I wasn't making use of my time well. Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* during the plague, right? Like the rest of the planet, I was missing spending time with friends and faraway family and generally felt unmoored.

She listened attentively, then guided me to question my thinking. Has all this solitude perhaps been a time of opportunity, too? While spending lots of time alone, are there

ways to feel connected to something outside yourself? I reflected that long walks by the river had been a pleasure, renewing my appreciation of nature. Come to think of it, I had picked up journaling. Vilhauer shared a few of her experiences, too, giving our session the feel of a conversation. "I love Thoreau's ideas about the freedoms of solitude," she offered. "To paraphrase, he said, when you travel by yourself, you can start anytime."

Thoreau seemed like good company to be in. Maybe I could view my house as my Walden. As I hung up, I felt like a window had been thrown open in my brain and fresh air had entered. Afterward, I kept mulling over the unlikely positives of this difficult year. I'd tried seeing the bright side before, but somehow, knowing that great thinkers endorsed silver linings made it stick.

Unpacking my concerns about my mortality would take additional sessions—and more peanut butter. But not all clients seek out philosophical counselors, Hamlet-style, to ponder life's big to-be-or-not-to-be questions. Many come for one session to discuss a specific personal problem, such as a decision to move or an ethical conflict. "A client may say her parents expect her to be a lawyer, but she wants to be an artist," says Sean Holland, PhD, a philosophical counselor and consultant in New York City. "The expectations of family sit in tension with what she feels, causing her distress. I might ask her to consider, 'On what grounds do you believe making a lot of money is the measure of success?' Philosophical counseling is about reaching down and challenging your deepest assumptions."

With or without philosophical counseling, learning to step back and ask questions can be a powerful tool in difficult times. Diana Wu David, author of *Future Proof: Reinventing Work in the Age of Acceleration*, did just that when she learned that her mother, who had been suffering from breast cancer for three years, was about to die. "Rather than labeling the experience as devastating—and it was—I committed to being curious about it," she says. "I thought about the concept of a good death, what role I could play in helping my mother have one, and if I could learn anything that would eventually help me make that passage, too."

To that end, David and her mother read Atul Gawande's book *Being Mortal* together.

## HOW TO FIND YOUR PERSONAL PHILOSOPHER

"If you think of a dialogue as a dance with ideas, then finding a philosophical counselor is like finding a dance partner," says Lou Marinoff, PhD. "You may need to try a few to meet the right one for you." A good place to start is by scrolling through the practitioner directories at the American Philosophical Practitioners Association ([appa.edu](http://appa.edu)) and the National Philosophical Counseling Association ([npcassoc.org](http://npcassoc.org)). Counselors draw from a wide range of approaches and styles, so once you have some names, check out a practitioner's website to get a sense of their methods, then reach out to see if the issue you'd like to think about is a good fit for their style of counseling.

"In one of her final days, I brought oranges from the tree in her yard to the hospital for her nurses. Surprisingly, my mother was able to eat one, too," recalls David. "The smell, the taste, the feel of it. I remember it so vividly. It made me realize how important these small moments are. They *are* life."

The experience didn't just change how David perceived her mother's death, but how she approaches her own day-to-day existence. "When difficult things happen, we can try to hide them in a dark corner of our minds, or we can look closely and see what we can learn," she says. "I now bring this attitude to everything. When someone is doing something that bothers me, I step back to say to myself, 'That's interesting....' That pause, combined with curiosity, expands the possibilities of how I can react."

While asking philosophical questions can be revolutionary in responding to challenges, the practitioners I talked to emphasized that the approach has its limits. Working through childhood trauma is not necessarily in their wheelhouse, for example. Ryan Howes, PhD, a psychologist in Pasadena, California, and the author of *Mental Health Journal for Men*, sees it as a useful complement to his field. "I am all for philosophy being used as a starting point for trying to make sense of your life—concepts from philosophy were the basis of cognitive behavioral therapy," he says. "But if you're suffering from a psychological disorder, you should be under the care of a physician or psychotherapist." And Marinoff notes, "A reputable philosophical counselor will be able to tell you, after an initial consultation, whether the issues you raise can best be addressed philosophically or not."

Ultimately, philosophy helps you ask the right questions, but won't supply easy answers. "There's no secret answer key," says Vilhauer. Still, the act of questioning helps you consider new perspectives. Cleary told me Simone de Beauvoir believed we are never fully formed, but a series of evolving selves. That may be a philosophical truth, but it's also a practical reminder that we're all works in progress—and that life is a series of new possibilities.

**JENNIFER KING LINDLEY** is the author of *Find Your Joy: A Powerful Self-Care Journal to Help You Thrive*.

## Why Ask Why

Cori Wong, PhD, a feminist philosopher and founder of Positive Philosophy Consulting, explains why philosophy can be a powerful force for both personal and political change.

### Philosophy can inspire societal shifts as well as individual growth.

"Good philosophy can offer tools to think critically, question whole systems. Why does society treat some people unfairly? What is my role in that? We can't address a problem if we don't understand it."

### Our assumptions can divide us.

"For instance, a parent with rigid beliefs about how boys and girls should act may struggle to support their child whose gender is fluid and dynamic. The parent may feel conflicted: *I can't make sense of their gender identity because it doesn't align with what I believe. But I love my child.* Identifying basic assumptions—What messages about gender have I learned from society and taken for granted? Who benefits

from them, and who is harmed?—can pave the way for reconnection."

### Resilience happens collectively.

"We think better together; that's why philosophy is often a dialogue. It means sharing and listening to see how things like racial and sexual violence stay embedded in our culture and what we can do about it. As philosopher and revolutionary Angela Davis said, 'Radical simply means "grasping things at the root."'"

### There's a thrill in asking big questions.

"I still revel in the excitement of having my mind blown. There's joy when we encounter new possibilities for how to live. It's energizing, life-giving, and healing for us to better understand each other, our experiences, and place in the world."

## The Examined Life

Ponder these biggies for a DIY existential tune-up.

### "He who has a why in life can bear almost any how." —NIETZSCHE

Reflect on your own *why* to discover your purpose. What's your reason to get up in the morning? "It could be appreciating beauty, caring for others, being creative, fighting for social change," says Cleary. "The answer will be different for everyone."

### "The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control."

—EPICTETUS, from *The Daily Stoic* by Ryan Holiday

The Stoic philosophers believed this distinction—between what we can change and that which we cannot—was crucial to a good life. "There is so much not in our control. An illness. A job loss. Other people's actions. A pandemic," says Holland. "What we do have control over is our perspectives about it and the actions we take in response."

### "Our freedoms support each other like the stones in an arch." —SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

"We don't exist in isolation. Our well-being is interconnected with that of others," says Cleary. "It is critical we push ourselves to connect with others. We need to be nurturing our friendships like gardens."