

Who Do You Think You Are, Robert Fulghum?

Mother: *Who do think you are?
What were you thinking?
What will you think of next?
What on earth have you done?*

Robert: Did your mother throw these questions at you? Or have you yourselves ever uttered them to your children?
I heard them many times growing up in the household of a devout Southern Baptist mother and a hardworking father.
Then one morning sitting in front of my house in Seattle I heard an angry mother parked with her son in front of the elementary school across from my house. And as I meditated on them, I realized that these questions are important ones that all of us should ask ourselves

Narrator: Let's take a look at the life of Robert Lee Fulghum, beginning with this scene in the Fulghum living room in Waco, Texas sometime in the 1950s.

Mother: Bobby, *what on earth have you done?* This is NOT a good report card!

Bobby: But, Mom, I passed everything.

Mother: Your father and I expect more than mere passing. You are a bright young man. And we've done everything in our power to lead you in the right direction.

Bobby: I know. We go to church 3 times a week, you read me Bible stories every night.

Mother: Well, none of it has apparently inspired you. Speak to him, Dad.

Father: You could do better, son.

Narrator: Now a scene one Sunday at a church in Waco in the 50s

Sunday School Teacher: *What on earth have you done, Bobby?* I was told that you went to your high school prom! That you, a good Southern Baptist boy, danced! Don't you know that dancing leads one right into the devil's den?

Bobby: Surely God has better things to do than to worry about people dancing.

Sunday School Teacher: Don't be flippant with me, young man. You need to be thinking about your soul! And now that you are graduating, what do you plan to do to start training that soul.

Bobby: I'm going to the University of Colorado.

Narrator: Mrs. Fulghum places a call to her son Bobby at the university.

Mother: When can we expect you home for the summer, Bobby?

Bobby: I'm not coming home, Mom.

Mother: And just why not? We don't have the money for you to be playing around in Colorado.

Bobby: Don't worry, Mom. I have a job. I'm going to be singing and playing my guitar at a dude ranch. They're going to pay me to do what I love to do!

Mother: I can't believe you can make enough money to support yourself as a musician.

Bobby: Believe it, Mom. And besides, I'll supplement that salary with what I'll get entering amateur rodeos.

Mother: How will that kind of activity help you in your study to be a minister? Surely, you won't disappoint me in my lifelong dream of seeing you leading people to Jesus!

Narrator: Mrs. Fulghum places another call to son Bobby.

Mother: Bobby, you are going to have to leave the University of Colorado. You have to come home to Waco. Your father is ill and he has lost his job. We can't continue to pay out of state tuition. You can go to school here. Baylor is where you belong anyway. There you can begin your study to be a minister.

Narrator: Two friends are talk on the campus of Baylor

Friend 1: I saw you talking to Robert Fulghum yesterday. Isn't nhe one of that group that is always protesting something?

Friend 2: Yes, he does seem disturbed about activities on campus and in our country.

Friend 1: He doesn't attend the Baptist Youth group you belong to, does he?

Friend 2: No, he goes around with that group that calls itself agnostic..

Narrator: It's 1957 and the graduation of Robert Lee Fulghum from Baylor. He and his father are talking.

Father: So what are your plans now, son? You haven't applied to theology school as your mother wants you to do.

Bobby: No, Dad. I just don't feel called to the ministry.

Father: Well, you need to have a job. I don't think you want to work at Sears as I've done all my life. I.B.M. is a good company. Why don't you see if you can be admitted to their management training program? They have one in Dallas.

Bobby: OK, Dad. I'll check into it.

Narrator: A year later Bobby and his dad talk again

Father: How's the training coming, Bobby?

Bobby: Not so well, Dad. I think business and I are a bad fit.

Father: Any ideas about other fields?

Bobby: I've been attending the First Unitarian Church here in Dallas. A minister and I talk frequently. He knows I care deeply about civil rights issues and the struggles that Negro people are going through.

Father: You know your mother still hopes that you'll go into the ministry.

Bobby: Believe it or not, I'm giving some thought to the ministry. I want to do something important with my life.

Father: Your mother will be thrilled.

Bobby: Probably not, Dad. I just can't buy her kind of religion. It's too narrow, too restrictive. I think I'm going to apply to Starr King in Berkeley, California.

Narrator: It's 1958 and Robert Fulghum is in San Francisco and encounters a high school friend from Waco

Friend: Is that you, Bobby Fulghum?

Robert: Yes, but I go by Robert now.

Friend: I'd never have believed that I would see Bobby, er Robert, in a black turtleneck and sandals. What would your mother think? And sitting here, listening to jazz and drinking this cheap wine!

Robert: Yep, that's me. I'm far away from the sounds of my mother and dad fighting, from the pressure of attending church 3 times a week.

Friend: How did you ever get your parents to let you come out to California?

Robert: They didn't let me. I'm 21 and I can do as I please. They aren't supporting me. I have several jobs in addition to going to school. Several days a week I counsel patients in a mental hospital. Then I paint in the afternoons. I've set up a cottage industry producing made-to-order motel art.

Friend: What is motel art?

Robert: Oh, it has Italian scenes. You know, people walking along tree-lined streets, sitting at cafes on the sidewalk,

Friend: Does that pay well?

Robert: Not enough to get by on. I also tend bar several nights a week. There I'm getting training as a minister. I learn more in a bar listening to clients than I do in my college classes. That's a perfect setting for hearing about marital issues.

Friend: That sounds like good preparation for the counseling sessions you'll have as a minister. Any interesting classes?

Robert: I enjoy my credo class. It inspired me to write an essay entitled "Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." I have given copies of it to friends. Some suggest that I try publishing it.

Friend: Sounds like you have many ideas for making money.

Robert: Oh, anyone can make money. Making a life worth living is the real test.

Narrator: In 1972 Robert went to Japan for a summer to study at a Zen Buddhist monastery. There he meets with the master of the temple.

Japanese student: So why did you travel all the way to Japan?

Robert: I came here to become very holy.

Japanese student: I see that you've shaved your head and are wearing robes of a monk.

Robert: Yes, I want to stay here at this temple. I have an interview tomorrow with the master of the temple.

Japanese student: Oh, you are very lucky. Do you know that not many would-be monks get to meet him?

Robert: Yes, I know. It's like a stockboy being asked to have lunch with the CEO of a company.

Japanese student: Here comes the master of the temple

Robert: (*bowing to the master*) I'm very honored to meet with someone who has written so many books. I know that you have been an adviser to captains of industry so, for me, an American who just wants to become a monk, to get to speak with a great teacher makes me very humble indeed

Master: Yes, I can speak with you. English is just one of my 7 languages.

Robert: I know that you have "it" all figured out. I didn't get enough answers in theology school. I'd be very honored if you'd share some answers to man's universal questions with me.

Master: (*scratching his behind*) I have hemorrhoids. They hurt and itch. One gets hemorrhoids from stress, you know.

Robert: But, sir, how can one so holy have stress in life?

Master: You can't even imagine all the stress that I have. For one thing, I'm constantly worried that a tourist might burn down this firetrap of a temple. And then I despair over the quality of the the would-be priests that come here; for the most part they are just lazy young fools.

Robert: Oh, I hope you don't put me in that category.

Master: No, I see you as a thirsty man looking for a drink unaware that you are standing knee-deep in a flowing stream. Let me read you the words on this scroll:

*There is really nothing you must be
And there is nothing you must do.
There is really nothing you must have,
And there is nothing you must know.
There is really nothing you must become.
However, it helps to understand that fire burns,
and when it rains, the earth gets wet. . .*

Narrator: Robert returns home to Seattle with a Japanese American as his wife. He calls his parents in Waco.

Robert: Hello, Mom.

Mother: Where on earth have you been? In Japan? Whatever for?

Robert: It's a long story, Mom. I want to tell you about my wife.

Mother: You can't have married a foreigner! Who do think you are?

Robert: I'm a beatnik with a beard. I'm an artist. And I'm married to a Japanese American who is going to be a doctor.

Mother: Well, I hope you at least married her in our church!

Robert: No, Mom. I'm a Unitarian now. In fact, I'm a Unitarian minister.

Mother: Oh, my son, I can't believe you've let the devil take your life.

Robert: I'm not just a minister. I also teach art in a day school. I'm working these two jobs while my wife finishes medical school.

Mother: Well, I certainly hope you aren't going to produce any bi-racial children.

Robert: No, not for now. I'm too busy with my two jobs. And then I've had to take time off to help with the civil rights movement; I've been marching in Selma. But that hasn't stopped us from adoption. We now have a beautiful daughter, half Swedish and half Senegalese.

Mother: You do all these horrible things and after all my care for you when you were a child. Why, I even had you baptized in the river, the river named *Brazos de Dios*. That means “the Arms of God, you know. I thought you were saved and now you’ve gone and lost your mind!

Robert: I don’t believe one can save one’s soul or that of one’s child. I believe one can only live one’s own life, saving nothing, spending it well.

Narrator: This phone conversation takes Robert back to his home in Waco. He remembers the annual confrontation between his mother and father just before Christmas.

Mother: You could help me with these decorations, you know.

Father: Why should I get involved in your competition to outdo the neighbors?

Mother: We are celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Father: Oh, Jesus was a Jew. He wasn’t a Christian, dear. And he wasn’t born on December twenty-fifth, dear. Jesus is dead, dear. And he isn’t coming back, dear.

Mother: I don’t see why you refuse to recognize him as your Lord and Savior. I just want you to be born again!

Father: Being born once was enough for me.

Mother: Then I don’t see why you go every Christmas season to stand by a big black iron soup kettle and ring a bell! And you always insist on taking Bobby.

Father: You’ve never listened to my story. When my sister and I were little, our house burned down. My family was destitute. The Salvation Army came to our rescue.

Mother: Then why don’t you believe in . . .

Father: It doesn’t matter what you say you believe, it only matters what you do.

Narrator: At the end of the twentieth century Robert Fulghum speaks in an interview following the phenomenal success of his first book.

Interviewer: Your first book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thought on Common Things* sold over seven million copies and remained on the *New York list of best-sellers for two straight years*.

Robert: No one was more surprised at its success than I. I was just writing my personal credo and thinking of my father’s admonition, “you could do better.”

Interviewer: Yet you’ve written quite a few more books since 1988. There are currently more than 16 million copies of your books in print, published in 27 languages in 103 countries. What’s your writing secret?

Robert: Sometimes I think of myself as a literary oenologist—a wine maker. First, there's the soil and the planting and the care taking of the vines. After the harvest and crushing, the juice of the grapes is left to ferment in barrels in another place. And some wines are said to improve by being shipped on long journeys and bottled at a final destination. Along the way, many minds and hands are involved before the juice of the grape is finally consumed as the daily table wine it's meant to be. Likewise, many sensibilities affect my essays and stories—family, friends, and editors—each adding a creative step along the way. But it is the reader who finally completes the process with the additive of self.

Interviewer: You've made quite a living for yourself. Far better than a wine maker, I would say.

Robert: My writing is an unfinished manifesto. I don't write to make a living. I write to make living worthwhile. I often think of Epictetus who said, Why worry about being a nobody when what matters is being a somebody in those areas of your life over which you have control, and in which you can make a difference?

Narrator: Another interview pinpoints the humor in Fulghum's writings.

Robert: Yes, we humans are the only creatures that both laugh and weep. I believe that the person who laughs, lasts.

Interviewer: I understand you are quite a practical joker.

Robert: Yes, I do enjoy PLAY. To play, to be amused, to enjoy the moment without judgments is to have access to the child within

Interviewer: Give me some examples of your *Play*.

Robert: Okay, I'll tell you about a time in a grocery store when I met a lady standing in front of the cheese counter. I said, "I like the groceries in your cart better than mine. Want to trade?" She smiled and replied, "You've got a deal."

Interviewer: Was the lady amused?

Robert: Yes, she was a player like me. We quietly exchanged carts again at the checkout counter, smiled and went about our business.

Interviewer: Do you also **play** with children?

Robert: Oh, most certainly. The other day I watched children in our neighborhood playing "Hide and Seek." One little boy hid too well; his friends grew tired of looking for him and left for another game. I went out and taught them a new game which I called "Sardines." In *Sardines* the person who is It goes and hides, and everybody goes looking for him. When you find him, you get in with him and hide there with him. Pretty soon everybody is hiding together, all stacked in a small space like puppies in a pile. And pretty soon somebody giggles and somebody laughs and everybody gets found.

Interviewer: Your game sounds like a lot more fun than the old one. I'm going to teach my child to play it. I like your stories about frustrating experiences that we all have, like the one about using the Self-Checkout.

Robert: That really happened to me. I was in a hurry, so I chose to go to Self-Checkout. I found that those machines are only slightly less complicated than the control room of a nuclear submarine, and about as intimidating. Moreover, you are guided through the checkout steps by the voice of a midget passive aggressive dental hygienist who knows you are not to be trusted with your own teeth, with electronic devices, or groceries.

Interviewer: What was the problem that you had in following directions?

Robert: After her annoying command to push buttons to declare if you have coupons, how you are going to pay, your IQ, and your next of kin, you have to find the bar code on items, swipe them across the reader, and put them in a shopping bag, I had too many big items to place in the bag. The voice didn't care. She kept repeating, "PLACE THE ITEMS IN THE BAG."

Interviewer: So what did you do?

Robert: I didn't scream or cry or fall on the floor in a fit, but if I'd had an axe with me, I might have assaulted the midget and the machine she hides in. But I was rescued by the emergency checkout clerk who is also a psychiatric nurse, trained in dealing with special needs people like me.

Narrator: In this interview the questions dealt with the common themes that permeate Mr. Fulghum's essays.

Interviewer: You have an uncanny number of stories about laundry, a task we all have. It's amazing that you can make a story out of something so ordinary! I remember reading your first essay in your first book saying you were in charge of laundry at your house.

Robert: You know that we've all had the common experience of "The washer ate one of my socks." I had a friend visiting me once who gave me another outlook. "Look," he said. Your dryer made an extra sock for you. When it makes another one, you'll have a new pair. You're not behind, you're ahead!"

Interviewer: It's amazing that you can see a bright outlook in such a mundane experience.

Robert: Doing laundry gives me a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of competence. Put in the dirty clothes, add detergent, push one button. Washed. Put the clothes in the dryer, push one button. Dried. Fold neatly. Done. A task completed — a need fulfilled. For a moment, at least, life seems tidy and neat.

Interviewer: You even add a religious tone to laundry.

Robert: Doing the laundry connects me to the elemental aspects of existence. Water, earth, fire—polarities of wet and dry, hot and cold, dirty and clean. Round and around and around it all goes. . . Small cycles as a metaphor for The Great Cycles of Being.

Interviewer: I think another reason readers like to read your essays is that they get philosophy in everyday language.

Robert: In studying philosophy, I found Korzybski, founder of modern semantics. He taught me how to stay afloat in the deep sea of philosophy. He said, “The map is not the territory. . . there is no rain or traffic delay or potholes on maps.” Thus, words are not the things for which they stand; that is, the word *dog* is not a dog, it is a word. Likewise, *God* is not the correct name of the ultimate mystery of the universe—it is a word, one of many metaphors for that which is beyond names.

Narrator: The next interview has to do with rituals that Mr. Fulghum says we are all involved with.

Interviewer: What do you mean by rituals?

Robert: Rituals are repeated patterns of meaningful acts. Everyone leads a ritualized life. If you are mindful of your actions, you will see the ritual patterns. Seeing and understanding the patterns, you may enrich them. And in this way, the habits of a lifetime become sacred.

Interviewer: Give me an example of a ritual.

Robert: Saying a blessing before a meal. Why do people need to bow their head or close their eyes? I ask people to keep their heads up, their eyes open so that they can take notice of those who are with you. The finest blessing a meal can have is great companionship. Consider that you have the honor to break bread with them. Know that the meal and each person is abundantly blessed.

Interviewer: So you’re saying that we need to look at rituals in a new way, that we shouldn’t just follow traditions without any thought.

Robert: Right. One fall afternoon recently I was walking and considering myself as a self-appointed inspector of deciduous trees, making sure those trees that were supposed to be turning their leaves from green to yellow and orange and red were doing so. I approached a neighborhood flower stand with buckets of tulips and daffodils out on the sidewalk for sale.

Interviewer: In autumn?

Robert: Yes, I thought to myself: Selling tulips and daffodils now must be illegal or immoral or just plain wrong.

Interviewer: Did you accost the salesperson?

Robert: No, just then a shaky old man walked slowly up to the stand. He picked up a bowl of almost-blooming daffodils and said he'd take them—gift wrapped, please. "My wife of 57 years is dying in the hospital," he explained. "She's 90. Terminal cancer. Last night she said how sad she was about not living long enough to see just one more spring. She's a gardener. Loves flowers. Loves spring. Wonderful to find these daffodils. Now I can give her spring for Thanksgiving."

Interviewer: What an unusual way to think of Thanksgiving! I bet you have similar stories about Christmas.

Robert: As a Unitarian minister I once asked my congregation to send me their favorite stories of Christmas. The one I chose for my Christmas Eve sermon was from a member whose Norse ancestors had migrated to the province of Alberta to settle near the town of Medicine Hat. They dug in on raw land, built a sod house, and went to work farming. Harsh country. Mean winters. Hot summers. Relentless winds. Drought. Tough life. The worse Christmas of all came after a week of heavy snow. Firewood was scarce. The family was burning dried cow pies for heat and huddling together in a heap under all the blankets in the house and all their clothes to keep from freezing to death. They were living off boiled potatoes and turnips. On that Christmas morning the father got up and made a fire as usual. His family knew he loved them, but he didn't express his feelings openly. It took all he had just to keep everyone alive. But he did that with all his heart and soul and strength. The mother was ill—too sick to get up or eat. When the father called the kids to the fire, they didn't expect much — least of all any presents. But as they approached the table, there in the dim light they saw an ORANGE. A single orange on a white napkin. Out there in the middle of nowhere in the middle of winter, an honest-to-God orange, glowing in the dim light like a golden ball.

Interviewer: That must have seemed like a miracle to the children.

Robert: Indeed it did. The father said, "Merry Christmas, the orange is for you." The children sat still as he so carefully peeled the orange and divided the sections to give each child an equal share, along with pieces of the peel. The smell filled the room. The children's mouths watered in anticipation. Then the oldest boy suddenly said, "Wait." He pointed at Dad. The children saw that Dad had given all of of the orange to them, none for him. So the boy took a knife and cut a piece of his orange and placed it in front of his father. The others did the same. The father divided his share in two parts. "These are for your mother when she's better." Then the children watched as, slowly, like a man taking holy communion, he ate his share of the orange.

Interviewer: What a beautiful story!

Robert: I tell another one related to the Christmas season. It's about John Pierpont who died a failure. In 1866 at age 81, he came to the end of his days as a government clerk in Washington, D.C.. He had graduated from Yale, which his grandfather had helped found, chose education as his profession. He was a failure at schoolteaching. Then he turned to the legal world. He was a failure as a lawyer.

The next career he took up was that of dry-goods merchant. He was a failure as a businessman. Then in turn he failed as a poet, as a minister, as a politician. He finished out the last five years of his life as a menial file clerk.

Yet every year, come December, we celebrate the success of John Pierpont. We carry in our hearts and minds a lifelong memorial to him for he wrote a song that stands for the simplest joys, about something most have never done but can imagine: Dashing through the snow on a one-horse open sleigh. . . jingle bells, jingle bells.

Narrator: After the stories he has told about Christmas, Mr. Fulghum gives some of his thoughts about the celebration of New Year's.

Robert: My ritual at New Year's is the purchase of a new broom. The new broom is a symbol of an existential need to clean house mentally and spiritually. To sweep away small sorrows, to throw out small grievances, to clear off the clutter of irrelevant things-to-do lists from the workshop of life.

Interviewer: I like that idea. It puts making resolutions in a new light.

Robert: I also look at a scroll I purchased in Japan— a calligraphic painting of a circle made with a single stroke of the brush with an inscription: Emptiness, an inexhaustible treasure. I treasure it as a reminder of the yet unfulfilled possibilities in the next 12 months. It's a Zen greeting—Happy New Year.

Narrator: In today's world we hear a lot of conversation about religion. Many are despairing about the declining church attendance. As a Unitarian minister, Mr. Fulghum was, of course, involved with church traditions.

Interviewer: You write about rituals in churches. I remember you have a new take on communion.

Robert: I consider communion an act of community. So I have church members say as a covenant with each other:

We pledge to sustain, support, encourage, and love one another. We need each other, and so we come to this place—To work and dance and laugh and cry and think. We call ourselves a religious community—Not because this place is in itself holy ground, But because what we do here and say here and are here make it so.

Interviewer: As a writer, you don't stay exclusively on one subject. I'm particularly interested in your study of astronomy and of the writings of Einstein that you mention in your book *What On Earth Have I Done*. How did such study influenced your thinking?

Robert: From astronomy magazines I have learned of the immensity of the universe. From Einstein who died thinking that the universe was ultimately incomprehensible, I realized I could scratch off my list, the problem of figuring out a Unified Theory of Everything. I could go back to focusing on the few things I do comprehend.

Interviewer: Would you call yourself an agnostic?

Robert: Perhaps. I've certainly learned that *agnostic* is not a bad word. A limitation of tools and intelligence is not proof of anything except a limitation of tools and intelligence. The Theory of Intelligent Design says that creation is too immense and so complex that a point is reached where its very incomprehensibility is evidence that a Being beyond us must have designed it. Which is like saying that since barnacles on the side of a cruise ship can't possibly ever comprehend the complexities or purpose of the great passenger liner they're riding on, there must be a God of the Barnacles who made it. And put it there just for the barnacles. And takes care of it for their benefit.

Narrator: Knowing that besides having homes in Seattle, Washington and Moab, Utah, he also has one in Crete.

Interviewer: Why do you have a home in Crete?

Robert: I love the island and the people there. I go as often as I can. Let me tell you a story I heard from a doctor of philosophy, teacher, politician, citizen of the world I met there. His name is Alexander Papaderos. When asked what is the meaning of life?, Dr. Papaderos took out of his wallet a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter.

Interviewer: Did he tell you right away the meaning of the mirror?

Robert: He told me that when he was a small child, during World War II, his family was very poor and they lived in a remote mountain village. One day, on the road, he found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. He kept the largest piece. And by scratching it on a stone he made it round. He began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that he could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine. It became a game for him to get light into the most inaccessible places he could find.

Interviewer: So he kept this small mirror even as an adult?

Robert: Yes, he says that he grew to understand that this was not just child's play but a metaphor for what he might do with his life. He came to understand that he is not the light or the source of light. But light—the light of truth, understanding, and knowledge—is there, and that light would only shine in many dark places if he reflected it.

Interviewer: He no doubt has shone his light in many dark places of the world.

Robert: He has been an example for many. Just as he has done, I hope I have done and will continue to do with my life and I hope that my writings will help others to find their light.

Interviewer: *Who do think you are?*

Robert: I'm *Robert Lee Fulghum*.

Interviewer: What were you thinking?

Robert: Read my books. You can find them on line.

Interviewer: What will you think of next

Robert: Go to my website. I write journals daily.

Interviewer: What on earth have you done?

Robert: On my website you'll see a list of my plays and books and a look at my artwork.

Interviewer: Thank you, Robert Fulghum, for making this appearance today. Come visit again. After all, this is where your Unitarian journey began.

Yvonne Norfleet, First Unitarian Church of Dallas, TX

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