

## Learning To Pause

Sometimes, when I sit in a crowded room or walk down a busy hallway, I am suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that every person around me is living a life just as complex as my own. Each face I pass holds thoughts, struggles, and stories I may never fully understand. This realization can feel overwhelming, but it also creates a sense of responsibility to treat others with care. This feeling, known as sonder, has changed the way I look at the people around me and the choices I make. In a similar way, the Rotary Four-Way Test encourages individuals to pause and consider how their actions affect others by asking four guiding questions: Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned? By connecting the idea of sonder with the Rotary Four-Way Test, I have learned how thinking beyond myself can help me make more thoughtful, ethical, and compassionate decisions in my everyday life.

Understanding sonder has taught me that the truth matters more than I realized, because every person around me has their own story that I might not fully know. At first, I sometimes assume I know why someone is upset or why they act a certain way. One day, I noticed that a classmate seemed irritated during a school project. My first thought was that I had done something wrong. But after taking a moment to consider what I didn't know, I realized they were frustrated about a family issue. In situations like this, telling the truth feels risky because it exposes vulnerability. There is always the fear of being judged, misunderstood, or facing consequences that could have been avoided. However, sonder reminds me that the other people involved are also navigating their own pressures and emotions, even if I cannot see them. Recognizing this makes

honesty feel less like a personal burden and more like a shared responsibility. This moment taught me that seeking the truth helps me respond with understanding instead of reacting impulsively. It showed me that the truth is not just about facts, but also about respecting the hidden stories that shape people's actions. This question forces me to reflect not only on what is true, but on whether I am being truthful with myself. Avoiding the truth may provide temporary comfort, but it often leads to confusion and regret later on. By choosing honesty early, I allow situations to be addressed with clarity rather than allowing them to grow more complicated over time. By questioning what I believe to be true, I become more aware of my own biases and limitations. By focusing on the truth, I am able to approach others with empathy instead of judgment, respecting the complexity of their lives that I might never fully see. Once I learned to prioritize truth, I also realized that considering fairness in every choice became easier, because honesty helps me weigh how my actions affect everyone involved.

The question "Is it fair to all concerned?" challenges me to look beyond my own feelings and consider how my choices affect people whose struggles I may never fully understand. I have learned that what feels fair in the moment is not always fair to everyone involved, especially when I only see the situation from my own perspective. There have been times when I felt hurt by a friend who seemed distant or uninterested, and my first instinct was to pull away or assume they no longer cared. However, after reflecting on the idea of *sonder*, I realized that their behavior might have had nothing to do with me and could have been influenced by stress, personal struggles, or emotions I could not see. Instead of reacting defensively, I chose to be patient and understanding. Asking whether my reaction would be fair to all concerned helped me recognize that

judging someone based on limited information would ignore the complexity of their experience. This shift allowed me to respond with empathy rather than resentment. Fairness does not always mean treating everyone the same, but rather responding to people's individual circumstances. By asking whether a decision is fair to all concerned, I am reminded that true fairness requires empathy, not just personal satisfaction. When I choose fairness rooted in understanding, it not only resolves conflict but also opens the door to stronger relationships and mutual respect.

The question "Will it build goodwill and better friendships?" encourages me to think about how my actions shape my relationships and how small choices can either strengthen or damage connections with others. When I'm upset or hurt, my first instinct is often to defend myself or pull away, rather than consider how my response might affect the relationship. There have been many times when I chose silence or patience instead of responding sharply during a disagreement with a friend. Although speaking my mind immediately may have felt satisfying, I realized that reacting out of emotion can often cause lasting damage. Remembering that my friend had their own struggles helped me pause and choose a calmer response. By prioritizing goodwill, I have learned that friendships are built through the act of understanding rather than winning arguments. Sonder reminds me that kindness can matter more than being right, and the Four-Way Test helps guide me toward actions that preserve trust and connection. Choosing goodwill requires emotional maturity and the willingness to let go of immediate satisfaction. Choosing actions that build goodwill allows relationships to grow stronger, even during moments of tension or misunderstanding. When goodwill is

prioritized, it becomes easier to see how thoughtful choices can benefit not just one person, but everyone involved in the long run.

The final question, "Will it be beneficial to all concerned?" pushes me to think past immediate reactions and consider the lasting effects my choices may have on others and myself. Often, the most beneficial choices are not the easiest ones, because they require patience, empathy, and self-control. There have been moments when I chose to be kind or understanding even when I felt unappreciated or misunderstood. Instead of responding with frustration, I reminded myself that everyone carries emotions and struggles that are invisible to others. Although this choice did not instantly fix the situation, it prevented further conflict and allowed space for understanding to grow. Applying this principle helped me realize that benefits are not always immediate or personal. Sonder encourages me to recognize the quiet impact of my actions, while the Four-Way Test reminds me that doing what is right often leads to healthier relationships and inner peace over time. Sonder helps me understand that even small actions can create ripple effects in ways I may never see. By focusing on what benefits all concerned, I am able to make decisions that promote empathy, respect, and long-term understanding. Together, these four questions have reshaped the way I approach everyday decisions and view the people around me.

The feeling of sonder has changed the way I view the people around me and the choices I make, especially when I apply the principles of the Rotary Four-Way Test to my everyday decisions. This shift has made my decisions feel more intentional rather than automatic. Instead of reacting quickly or thinking only about myself, I now pause to consider the unseen stories that shape the people around me. By asking whether my

actions are truthful, fair, able to build goodwill, and beneficial to all concerned, I have learned to slow down and think beyond myself. This process has taught me that ethical decisions are rarely simple or convenient, but they are almost always meaningful. Even when the right choice is uncomfortable, these questions help ground me in values that extend beyond the moment. Each question reminds me that every person carries a life full of experiences I may never fully understand, yet still deserve respect and empathy. Recognizing this has made me more patient in moments of frustration and more open-minded in moments of disagreement. It reminds me that everyone I encounter is navigating struggles, hopes, and responsibilities that are invisible to me. Sonder turns everyday interactions into quiet reminders of shared humanity. While sonder does not give me all the answers, the Four-Way Test provides a guide for responding with honesty, compassion, and care. As I continue to grow, these principles will remain relevant in new and more complex situations. As my world expands and my responsibilities increase, the choices I face will become more complex and impactful. Having a moral framework rooted in empathy and honesty gives me confidence in navigating those moments with integrity. In a world where it is easy to overlook others, these principles encourage me to choose understanding, leaving a lasting impact not only on my decisions, but on the people around me. Ultimately, sonder and the Four-Way Test remind me that even small choices can carry significance, shaping not only who I am, but how I treat the lives unfolding quietly beside my own.