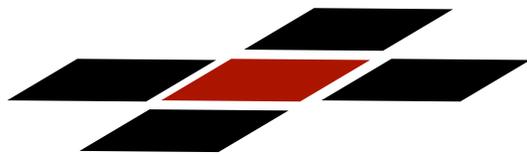


Fully Alive

Lent 2014

Participant Guide for Small Groups
Living fully human lives by centering on the divine within

St. Paul & the Redeemer



Fully Alive

Living fully human lives by centering on the divine within

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This guide has been initiated and led by Peter Lane, Rector, and written by Wendy Olmsted, Peter Lane, and William Olmsted.

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The glory of God is a human being **FULLY ALIVE.**

– St. Irenaeus

Participating in “Fully Alive”

Do you wonder how to turn from anxiety toward peace and from disturbance to joy and action?

Do you want to get past the past into a future made new?

Do you want to be a power for love and generosity in your life and our world?

We want to live whole lives, to act from the spirit within us rather than merely reacting to external circumstances.

We cultivate the gifts of new life that arise from “a love of the earth and existence so overflowing that it implies, or includes or even absolutely demands God.” (Christian Wiman, “Love Bade Me Welcome,” *Gazing Into the Abyss*).

Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God, grant that by the indwelling of your Holy Spirit we may be enlightened and strengthened for your service; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Collect of the Holy Spirit, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 251

Scripture

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Galatians 5:22

Participant Guide

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Session One Cultivating Joy

Session Contents

- A** What to Prepare Before the Meeting
- B** The Readings
- C** Agenda for the Meeting
- D** After the Meeting



A

What to Prepare Before the Meeting

Consider where you find overflowing joy.

In this guide, pages ...

READ Anne Lamott, "Mountain Birthday," *Traveling Mercies*. 7-12

READ "Reflection on Cultivating Joy" 13-14

THINK about your responses to the "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" 20

You're welcome to write about them if you like.

MOUNTAIN BIRTHDAY

Two days before his seventh birthday, Sam and I were in a town in Idaho, several thousand feet above sea level, where I was teaching at a writing conference. We were taking an early morning walk in a valley that was so majestic it made you feel patriotic, when Sam noticed half a dozen paragliders floating down off the jagged high mountain above us. His eyes radiated excitement, because a friend of ours routinely paraglides off the cliffs near Santa Cruz and had been promising him for a while now that he could go paragliding in a tandem harness when he was just a bit bigger—and here he was about to turn *seven*. So we stopped and looked skyward, in postures of reverence and awe. Partly we were blown away by the beauty of the mountain and the sky. And partly our mouths were hanging open because these fabulous silk-winged creatures—wings of aqua, lavender, rose, apricot, red—were hanging in the sky above us, like a little sky gang led by Icarus himself.

After a minute, when it became clear that they were going to land a few hundred feet away, Sam begged me to

The Readings

B

SESSION ONE | Lamott, Mountain Birthday

ANNE LAMOTT

run with him to their landing spot. "Please, please," he called over his shoulder as he ran toward them, "help me this *one* time. I've got to talk to them." So I followed along behind him.

This is what happened: a man landed at our feet a moment later. Sam stared up into his face like Jesus or Jim Carrey had just appeared, and the pilot smiled at him and shook his hand. "My birthday is in two days," said Sam, as the man gathered up the purple silk wing.

"Really!" said the pilot. "Well, what if I took you up in a harness with me, to celebrate? I've been taking my boy out since he was five. How about it, Mom?"

Now, first of all I hate being called "Mom" by grown men. Second, I am not the bravest mother on earth, and I was immediately torn about what to do. The man gave me his business card. He was the owner of a local paragliding outfit, as well as an instructor and, according to the card, a tandem specialist. He said he would love to take *both* of us on complimentary tandem paragliding rides two mornings later.

"Whoa, whoa, great," Sam said. "Whoa! Great!" But I told the instructor that we'd think about it, that he could tentatively save the early morning spot on August 29 for Sam, and we would get back to him. But I already knew that I didn't want to go. I do not have any illusions that I would make a good paraglider. What confused me, however, was how much freedom I was supposed to give Sam. I'm unclear about the fine line between good parenting and being overly protective. I get stumped by the easy test questions—like whether I should let Sam ride his two-

Mountain Birthday

wheeler for several blocks without me when I secretly want to run alongside him like a golden retriever. He wants to walk to a friend's house; I want him to stay inside and draw while I sit on the front porch with a shotgun across my lap like Granny Clampett.

Unfortunately, we have no front porch.

So what I needed to know up there in that beautiful valley was would a normal person—if there is such a thing as a normal person—feel that it was a good idea for a seven-year-old to paraglide in a harness with a tandem expert off a mountain fifteen hundred feet up.

Needless to say, there was no one around remotely fitting the description of a normal person: I was at a *writing* conference. Sam desperately wanted to go. He begged me to let him keep the appointment, to let him go up to that mountain, step off into thin air, and wait for the moment when the air underneath fills the wings of the paraglider and allows one to soar. And I kept thinking that maybe it was meant to be: the paraglide pilot had, after all, landed virtually—and successfully—at our feet and had offered Sam a spectacular present that would more than make up for the fact that Sam was a thousand miles away from home and all his friends on his birthday.

Later that afternoon, Sam looked up at me beseechingly and said, "It has always been a dream of mine to fly." I stared at him and thought, Oh, dear, he has begun channeling John Kennedy. Then I tried to figure out what to do. I would decide one thing—to let him fly, to give him his freedom, his wings. I'd remind myself that I usually feel deeply and philosophically that Sam is not mine, or at any rate,

that he is not my chattel—that he is on loan, he belongs to God, but for whatever reason, he has been entrusted to my care—entrusted, rather, to my clutches. Then I would decide that I was crazy, that the world is aquiver with menace as it is, and one does not need to exacerbate this state of affairs by flinging one’s own child off a mountain.

Later that afternoon I went to sit alone by the river. Cottonwood fluffs flocked upward through the sunbeams as if hearing a call, and children ran along the edge of the river like little bankers, gathering stones and pebbles, grasses and twigs. I prayed to know what to do, and I kept thinking I was hearing an answer, but it was like a one-woman Ping-Pong game: I decided he could go, I decided he couldn’t, I decided he could. I realized that I was getting crazier with every passing moment, and that since you can’t heal your own sick mind *with* your own sick mind, I needed to consult somebody else’s sick mind. So I called all of my smartest friends.

Half said I should let Sam go, half acted as if I were considering buying Sam a chain saw for his birthday. But all the ones who believe in God told me to pray, so I did. Here are the two best prayers I know: “Help me, help me, help me,” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” A woman I know says, for her morning prayer, “Whatever,” and then for the evening, “Oh, well,” but has conceded that these prayers are more palatable for people without children.

Needless to say, I still didn’t know what to do.

The next morning, the day before Sam’s birthday, I was still lying in bed when I remembered an anonymous poem I’ve seen several times over the years. It says that after

we jump into the darkness of the unknown, faith lets us believe that we will either land on solid ground, or we will be taught how to fly—and I spent some time trying to figure out whether this meant Sam would land safely or that after he crashed, his spirit would rise up out of the pile of mush he had become and fly off to be with Jesus and Pammy in heaven. Maybe it’s not really all that big a deal to him, I thought wishfully, but moments later Sam got out of his bed, came over to mine, and got down on his knees. He bowed down before me. “Pleeeeeeeassssse,” he moaned, “pleeeeeeeaaasssse.”

I told him I hadn’t made a decision. He sighed. “It’s not such a very big mountain,” he implored. Then he tried sweet talk. I became “wonderful perfect thin mother,” as in “Let me get you some water, wonderful perfect thin mother.” Next he tried guilt mongering: when I snapped at him to stop pestering me about it, he managed to look exactly like Stan Laurel for a moment and then said, “I wish I’d been given a mother who *liked* children.” After breakfast, he went off to swim with a friend, and I went outside to look at the mountain peak in daylight. Maybe Sam was right, I thought, it wasn’t such a very big mountain. But it was. I saw something very imposing, masculine, American—a craggy snow-covered peak. Hillsides swelled beneath it like well-defined muscles.

I remembered the old line that if you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans. But I also heard these words in my head: seek wise counsel.

So at dinner that night, on an expanse of lawn beneath the mountain, I sat down between two older people, a bril-

liant Zen adventure writer and his marvelous wife. I told them about the pilot's offer and how we had tentatively accepted. Even before I'd filled in all the details, the wife was shaking her head. She said, "This is a very bad idea. You must not do it. He is too small. He has a lifetime of adventures ahead of him." The husband listened to her respectfully, but then said, "Hearing you say that, I feel more strongly than ever that Annie *has* to go ahead and let Sam do this. You have to give your children their freedom, even if you do so with tremendous anxiety."

"No," said the wife. "This is a bad idea. He is too small. Don't do it." The husband responded, the wife responded to his response, I turned my head from side to side as each spoke as if I were watching a tennis match. My vision began to blur, and as they discussed my case with each other, I spaced out for a minute. A memory came to me then, of our pastor Veronica telling us just the week before how she gets direction from God in prayer; she said that when she prays for direction, one spot of illumination always appears just beyond her feet, a circle of light into which she can step. She moved away from the pulpit to demonstrate, stepping forward shyly—this big-boned African-American woman tramping like Charlie Chaplin into an imagined spotlight, and then, after standing there looking puzzled, she moved another step forward to where the light had gone, two feet ahead of where she had been standing, and then again. "We in our faith work," she said, stumble along toward where we think we're supposed to go, bumbling along, and here is what's so amazing—we end up getting exactly where we're supposed to be."

But I couldn't discern even what direction to face. And I didn't understand why as usual God couldn't give me a loud or obvious answer, through a megaphone or thunder, skywriting or stigmata. Why does God always use dreams, intuition, memory, phone calls, vague stirrings in my heart? I would say that this *really* doesn't work for me at all. Except that it does.

While the Zen adventurer and his wife engaged in a heated discussion on vision versus the sense one was born with, I imagined Sam floating down through the sky like a great dandelion fluff, weightless as the breeze, a marionette-boy with silky dark blonde hair, suspended by cords to a great wing of silk. I wanted to give him that lightness, but in the next moment I imagined him falling out of the sky, imagined the earth racing toward him. Oh, God, I said, inhaling loudly, tell me what to do—would it be so much skin off your nose just to give me a sign?

And then the music began.

Mandolin music. A folksy bluegrass trio began playing, the mandolin offering the quavering melody, then two guitars joined in, and then three voices singing. We turned slowly to look at the musicians. A woman got up from her table and began to dance on the lawn between us and the stage, all by herself, and I thought to myself, I wish I were the kind of person who could dance in public, not caring what everyone thought. And I wanted to be this way so badly that after a minute I just got up, moved closer to the music, toward the one woman dancing, and slowly and very shyly and without enormous visible grace, began to move in time to the music. I figured that once I stepped

forward into that spotlight, another would appear somewhere near my feet, and if it didn't, at least I'd have had the chance to dance.

So I did, dancing with my eyes closed so as not to be distracted. Nietzsche said that he could only believe in a God who would dance, and I feel the same way: not Jesus as John Travolta but Jesus as Judith Jamison, the great black dancer with Alvin Ailey, a shining, long-limbed, elegant crane.

Then out of nowhere a memory bobbed into my head of the most important conversation I have ever had, and I understood that this was the next circle of light into which I might step. Many years ago, I was walking beside the salt marsh with a minister I had met recently. I was two months pregnant and had scheduled an abortion because I was alone and so broke. But I was having second thoughts. I decided to let this minister in on this, and after listening quietly, he said he thought I should have the abortion; he pointed out that there was no safety net underneath me at the time—no family money, no expected windfall—that there was nothing between me and the streets or welfare.

But what about God? I asked. What about faith?

Well, yes, the priest conceded, there's that. "But I'd like you to try something," he said. "Get quiet for a moment, and then think about having the abortion: if you feel a deep and secret sense of relief, pay attention to that. But if you feel deeply grieved at the thought of it, *listen* to that."

I did what he said, thought about the abortion, which theoretically and politically I support. But I was stabbed with grief, and the grief did not pass, and I canceled the

abortion. And seven months later I gave birth to the little kid who now wanted to fly off the mountain.

So right then on the dance floor, dancing to the bluegrass music, I got very quiet. I thought about how I would feel if I let Sam jump: my heart leapt into my throat, as if to escape rising water. Then I thought about how I would feel if I called the paraglide pilot and canceled. I felt euphoric, like Zorba the Greek; I felt like getting everyone up on their feet so we could all dance the mazurka and clink steins full of root beer. Instead I went off to find a telephone, and cancel.

I really want my son to fly very high—in maybe ten years. But this time he wasn't going to get to hang in the air like a baby eagle.

He was a pretty good sport about it, though. He rolled his eyes at my conservative little decision, and crossed his arms, and growled, digging his heels in the dirt—it all lasted less than two minutes, and then he was done. I think he was secretly relieved. That night in the shadow of the mountain he would not be jumping off, we asked God to help us come up with a really exciting and safe way for Sam to celebrate his birthday. I felt the weight of the world lift off me. The moon rose so full and burned so yellow that night that it colored the sky green between itself and the snow-capped mountains.

The next day, out of the blue, a friend of ours called and asked Sam if he wanted to go inner-tubing, floating down a sleepy little creek at the foot of the mountain. Sleepy little creek I can do.

This is not to say that I didn't worry the rest of the after-

B

ANNE LAMOTT

noon about Sam drowning, or bashing his head against a rock in the stream, or being bitten by displaced water moccasins. But I only worried a little, and he had a fantastic day. Later, after dinner, after all the people from the conference sang him happy birthday and he'd opened all his presents, Sam and I stood outside in the moonlight that had turned the sky so green the night before. I no longer saw the mountain's muscles. I saw instead how lovely it was, delicate and feminine as Fuji. I did not know what any of this meant, only that I had asked for help and received it. Now I could say to God, Thank you for showing me I didn't have to toss my child off the mountain, and to my son, "Happy birthday, big boy, baby eagle, Sam," and he tucked his head in against his shoulder, closed his eyes, and smiled.

Reflection on Cultivating Joy

Many people today feel anxious at times because of pressures from demanding jobs, illnesses, or family conflicts. They may feel resentment at being badly treated by others, lack of wished-for success, or upsetting events in their lives. How do we turn from anxiety and disturbance toward joy and action?

“Cultivating Joy,” like the other sessions, explores how we can become fully alive and how the Holy Spirit empowers such life. The 2nd-century Christian Irenaeus was thought to have said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Such a life is marked by what Paul called the Fruit of the Spirit including joy, generosity, faithfulness, peace, and love. This fruit comes into being from grace, but it also requires cultivation by humans. Just as we do not supply the seed, the earth, the water, or the light for our garden, so we cannot, by ourselves, create joy and peace in our hearts. But the garden does not grow without being cultivated, nor does joy come into its fullness without being nurtured.

Our five sessions lead us to reflect on generous gifts from God including joy (Session One), gratitude and generosity (Session Two), faithful friendship (Session Three), peace (Session Four), and love for God and others (Session Five). We celebrate the

gifts of friendship and work by being faithful and trustworthy, peace keeps us rooted and grounded in love even during adversity, and nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Joy leads to the human being fully alive. In “Mountain Birthday,” Anne Lamott comes alive when she hears mandolin music and a woman begins to dance. She gets up, walks closer to the woman and begins to move in time to the music. She closes her eyes so she will not be distracted. Later, her joy magnifies ten-fold. She writes, “I felt euphoric, like Zorba the Greek; I felt like getting everyone up on their feet so we could all dance the mazurka and clink steins full of root beer.”

Where does Anne’s joy come from? Is it stirred by the music? Partly. Does it come from her willingness to get into the dancing? Yes, but that is not all, and the dancing does not explain why her joy increases to euphoria.

How does Anne move from confusion and self-doubt to joy? She does not move immediately. She is confused about how much freedom she is supposed to give her son, Sam (p.81). She consults friends, goes back and forth, wonders if a “normal” person would “feel that it was a good idea for a seven-year-old to paraglide in a harness...off a mountain (p. 81). She feels that

she is “getting crazier with every passing moment” (p. 82). Consulting her colleagues and ruminating increase her anxiety.

How does she get from anxiety to joy?

First, in the middle of a heated conversation between conflicting advisors, Anne spaces out. (How can this help?) A memory comes to her of Pastor Veronica, who said that when she prays for direction, she asks for “one spot of illumination” that “always appears just beyond her feet, a circle of light into which she can step” (p. 84).

Anne prays. Not nicely but honestly and even desperately, she nudges God, “Oh, God, I said, inhaling loudly, tell me what to do—would it be so much skin off your nose just to give me a sign? (p. 85).”

Music begins.

Anne yields to the music. She is not a dancer but she figures that once she steps into one spotlight, another will appear. She concludes that she “could only believe in a God who would dance” (p. 86).

While she dances another memory appears of a priest who told her, when she was tormented by the question of whether to get an abortion, to get quiet for a moment. Think about having the abortion. Pay attention to how you feel and listen to that. Anne

does those things. She finds that although, “theoretically and politically,” she supports abortion, when she asks herself how she feels about getting one, she feels “stabbed with grief” (p. 86). The grief does not go away, so she calls and cancels her appointment. “And seven months later I gave birth to the little kid who now wanted to fly off the mountain.”

“So right then on the dance floor, dancing to the blue-grass music, I got very quiet. I thought about how I would feel if I let Sam jump: my heart leapt into my throat, as if to escape rising water. Then I thought about how I would feel if I called the paraglide pilot and canceled. I felt euphoric, like Zorba the Greek: I felt like getting everyone up on their feet so we could all dance the mazurka and clink steins full of root beer. Instead I went off to find a telephone and cancel” (p. 87).

We need the whole story to answer the question of how to turn from disturbance to joy. Joy comes spontaneously; in that sense it is a gift. But there is also a story to joy. Neither Anne nor Job initially felt joy.

B

SESSION ONE | Reflection on Cultivating Joy

BLANK FOR BINDING PURPOSES

C

Agenda for Meeting

Gather with Music

"Joyful, joyful, we adore thee." | Available at sp-r.org/fully-alive

Introductions

Contemplate an Image

Look at Archibald John Motley Jr., "Nightlife"

How does this image speak to joy? You may write or draw in the space below.





C

Review Guidelines for Discussion

Participants read aloud:

We extend hospitality to welcome one another with words and actions. We respect confidentiality. All that we hear and share stays within this room.

We attend every meeting.

We share, and we listen in quiet. Each one may decide to share or not at any moment. But we are present to one another.

We honor each voice and share from our unique individual story. None of us speaks for a whole group, profession, or way of life.

Each of us listens with the "ear of our heart." We listen and learn; we do not offer advice.

We respect differences, reserve judgment, and turn to wonder as we hear the stories of others.

After we leave, let us lift up one another's lives and stories to God in prayer.

Pray Together

Use Lectio Divina to contemplate this passage:

See p. 106 for instructions on doing
Lectio Divina.

Job 38:1-4;6-8

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me if you have understanding.

...

On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Reflection

Read by the facilitator:

Anne Lamott comes alive when she hears mandolin music and begins to dance. Although she is anxious because her seven-year-old son Sam has been invited to paraglide off a mountain, she eventually finds true joy. Initially, however, she feels crazy and confused, but ruminating and consulting others only increase her confusion. How does she get from anxiety to joy? First, when she hears music, she dares to dance even though she is not a dancer. She remembers Pastor Veronica, who said that when she prays for direction, she asks for "one spot of illumination" that "always appears just beyond her feet, a circle of light into which she can step" (84). Anne prays, the music begins, and she yields to it. She trusts that once she steps into the spotlight, another light will appear. As she dances, she remembers when she considered having an abortion and a priest told her to pay attention to how she feels when she thinks of it. So, right on the dance floor, she gets quiet and thinks about Sam paragliding. She writes, "My heart leapt into my throat, as if to escape rising water. Then I thought about how I would feel if I called the paraglide pilot and canceled. I felt euphoric, like Zorba the Greek...I called and cancelled."

Joy is a gift, but there is also a story to joy, a story of praying, yielding to a joyful environment that opens the heart, envisioning an outcome, and listening to one's deepest feelings.

C

Explore Together:

When in your life have you experienced joy as a gift, that is, as fruit of the Spirit?

How does Lamott experience joy as a fruit of faith?

What challenges to joy have you encountered?

What has helped you get beyond challenges to joy?

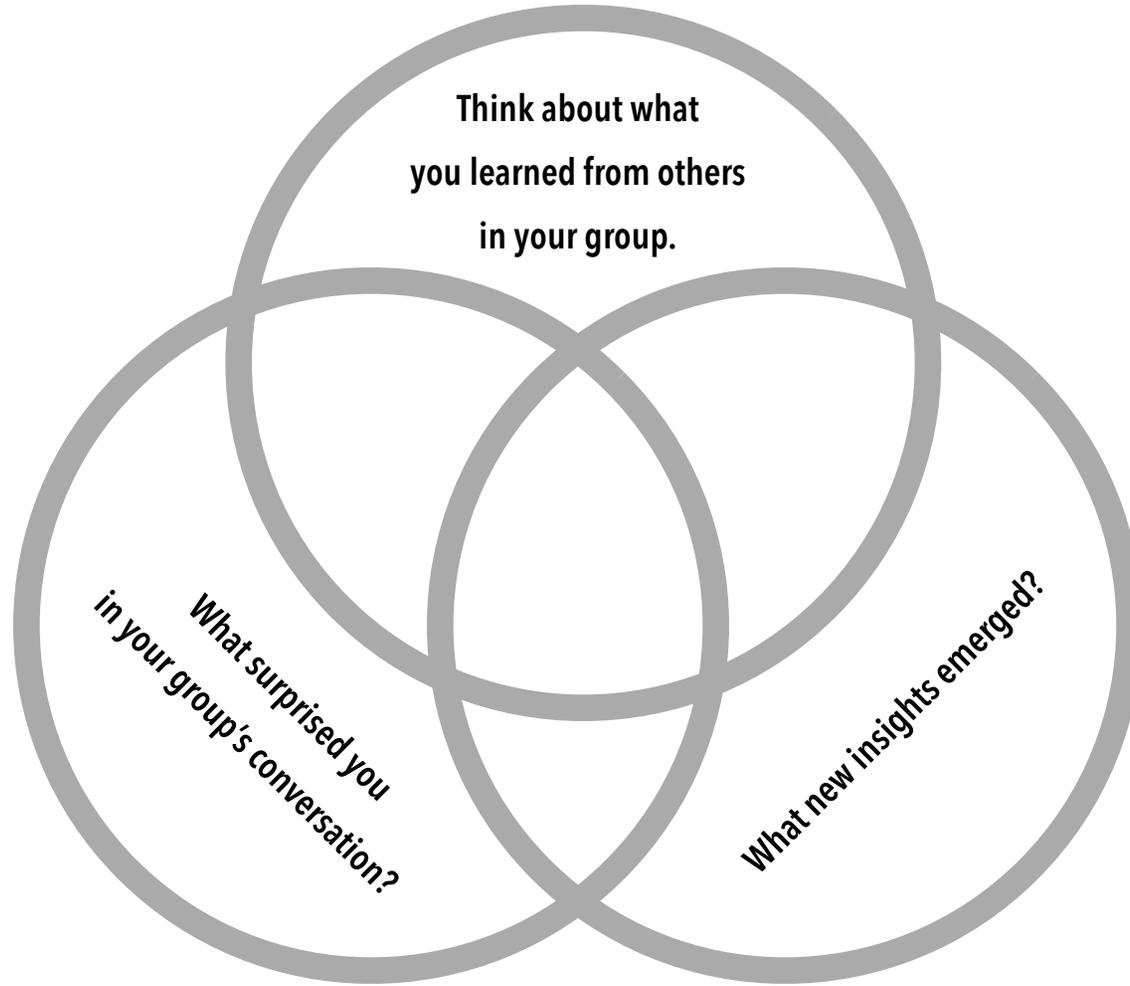
Blessings

Each participant reads one sentence to a neighbor.

- ✦ May joy be the source of your life in God.
- ✦ May the many joys in your life be centered in Christ.
- ✦ May the work you do be enlivened by joy.
- ✦ May your joy shine through how you live.
- ✦ May joy in God flow through what you do.
- ✦ May joy in God dwell in who you are.
- ✦ Follow your true joy, renounce your false self,
- ✦ Give your life to the gospel, and take up your gifts for the sake of others.
- ✦ When you feel anxious or confused, may you awaken to the Spirit.
- ✦ When you awaken to the Spirit, may you say yes to joy.
- ✦ When you say yes, may you follow faithfully.
- ✦ When you follow faithfully, may you give your life away.

D

SESSION ONE | After the Meeting



Session Two

Cultivating Generosity

Session Contents

- A** What to Prepare Before the Meeting
- B** The Readings
- C** Agenda for the Meeting
- D** After the Meeting



A

What to Prepare Before the Meeting

Consider where you find overflowing joy.

In this guide, pages ...

READ Wendell Berry, "Are You All Right?" from *Fidelity: Five Stories* 25-30

READ "Reflection on Cultivating Generosity" 31-32

THINK about your responses to the "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" 38

You're welcome to write about them if you like.

Are You All Right?

❁ The spring work had started, and I needed a long night's rest, or that was my opinion, and I was about to go to bed, but then the telephone rang. It was Elton. He had been getting ready for bed, too, I think, and it had occurred to him then that he was worried.

“Andy, when did you see the Rowanberrys?”

I knew what he had on his mind. The river was in flood. The backwater was over the bottoms, and Art and Mart would not be able to get out except by boat or on foot.

“Not since the river came up.”

“Well, neither have I. And their phone's out. Mary, when did Mart call up here?”

I heard Mary telling him, "Monday night," and then, "It was Monday night," Elton said to me. "I've tried to call every day since, and I can't get anybody. That's four days."

"Well, surely they're all right."

"Well, that's what Mary and I have been saying. Surely they are. They've been taking care of themselves a long time. But, then, you never know."

"The thing is, we *don't* know."

We knew what we were doing, and both of us were a little embarrassed about it. The Rowanberry Place had carried that name since the first deeds were recorded in the log cabin that was the first courthouse at Hargrave. Rowanberrys had been taking care of themselves there for the better part of two hundred years. We knew that Arthur and Martin Rowanberry required as little worrying about as anybody alive. But now, in venturing to worry about them, we had put them, so to speak, under the sign of mortality. They were, after all, the last of the Rowanberrys, and they were getting old. We were uneasy in being divided from them by the risen water and out of touch. It caused us to think of things that could happen.

Elton said, "It's not hard, you know, to think of things that could happen."

"Well," I said, "do you think we'd better go see about them?"

He laughed. "Well, we've thought, haven't we? I guess we'd better go."

"All right. I'll meet you at the mailbox."

I hung up and went to get my cap and jacket.

"Nobody's heard from Art and Mart for four days," I said to Flora. "Their phone's out."

"And you and Elton are going to see about them," Flora said. She had been eavesdropping.

"I guess we are."

Flora was inclined to be amused at the way Elton and I imagined the worst. She did not imagine the worst. She just dealt with mortality as it happened.

I picked up a flashlight as I went out the door, but it was not much needed. The moon was big, bright enough to put out most of the stars. I walked out to the mailbox and made myself comfortable, leaning against it. Elton and I had obliged ourselves to worry about the Rowanberrys, but I was glad all the same for the excuse to be out. The night was still, the country all silvery with moonlight, inlaid with bottomless shadows, and the air shimmered with the trilling of peepers from every stream and pond margin for miles, one full-throated sound filling the ears so that it seemed impossible that you could hear anything else.

And yet I heard Elton's pickup while it was still a long way off, and then light glowed in the air, and then I could see his headlights. He turned into the lane and stopped and pushed the door open for me. I made room for myself among a bundle of empty feed sacks, two buckets, and a chain saw.

"Fine night," he said. He had lit a cigarette, and the cab was fragrant with smoke.

"It couldn't be better, could it?"

"Well, the moon could be just a little brighter, and it could be a teensy bit warmer."

I could hear that he was grinning. He was in one of his companionable moods, making fun of himself.

I laughed, and we rode without talking up out of the Katy's Branch valley and turned onto the state road.

"It's awful the things that can get into your mind," Elton said. "I'd hate it if anything was to happen to them."

The Rowanberrys were Elton's friends, and because they were his, they were mine. Elton had known them ever since he was just a little half-orphan boy, living with his mother and older brothers on the next farm up the creek. He had got a lot of his raising by being underfoot and in the way at the Rowanberrys'. And in the time of his manhood, the Rowanberry Place had been one of his resting places.

Elton worked hard and worried hard, and he was often in need of rest. But he had a restless mind, which meant that he could not rest on his own place in the presence of his own work. If he rested there, first he would begin to think about what he had to do, and then he would begin to do it.

To rest, he needed to be in somebody else's place. We spent a lot of Sunday afternoons down at the Rowanberrys', on the porch looking out into the little valley in the summertime, inside by the stove if it was winter. Art and Mart batched there together after their mother died, and in spite of the electric lights and telephone and a few machines, they lived a life that would have been recognizable to Elias Rowanberry, who had marked his X in the county's first deed book—a life that involved hunting and fishing and foraging as conventionally as it involved farming. They practiced an old-fashioned independence,

an old-fashioned generosity, and an old-fashioned fidelity to their word and their friends. And they were hound men of the old correct school. They would not let a dog tree anywhere in earshot, day or night, workday or Sunday, without going to him. "It can be a nuisance," Art said, "but it don't hardly seem right to disappoint 'em."

Mart was the one Elton liked best to work with. Mart was not only a fine hand but had a gift for accommodating himself to the rhythms and ways of his partner. "He can think your thoughts," Elton said. Between the two of them was a sympathy of body and mind that they had worked out and that they trusted with an unshaken, unspoken trust. And so Elton was always at ease and quiet in Mart's company when they were at rest.

Art was the rememberer. He knew what he knew and what had been known by a lot of dead kinfolks and neighbors. They lived on in his mind and spoke there, reminding him and us of things that needed to be remembered. Art had a compound mind, as a daisy has a compound flower, and his mind had something of the unwary comeliness of a daisy. Something that happened would remind him of something that he remembered, which would remind him of something that his grandfather remembered. It was not that he "lived in his mind." He lived in the place, but the place was where the memories were, and he walked among them, tracing them out over the living ground. That was why we loved him.

We followed the state road along the ridges toward Port William and then at the edge of town turned down the Sand Ripple Road. We went down the hill through the woods, and as we came near the floor of the valley,

Elton went more carefully and we began to watch. We crossed a little board culvert that rattled under the wheels, eased around a bend, and there was the backwater, the headlights glancing off it into the treetops, the road disappearing into it.

Elton stopped the truck. He turned off his headlights and the engine, and the quietness of the moonlight and the woods came down around us. I could hear the peepers again. It was wonderful what the road going under the water did to that place. It was not only that we could not go where we were used to going; it was as if a thought that we were used to thinking could not be thought.

"Listen!" Elton said. He had heard a barred owl off in the woods. He quietly rolled the window down.

And then, right overhead, an owl answered: "HOOOOOAWWW!"

And the far one said, "Hoo hoo hoohooaw!"

"Listen!" Elton said again. He was whispering.

The owls went through their whole repertory of hoots and clucks and cackles and gobbles.

"Listen to them!" Elton said. "They've got a lot on their minds." Being in the woods at night excited him. He was a hunter. And we were excited by the flood's interruption of the road. The rising of the wild water had moved us back in time.

Elton quietly opened his door and got out and then, instead of slamming the door, just pushed it to. I did the same and came around and followed him as he walked slowly down the road, looking for a place to climb out of the cut.

Once we had climbed the bank and stepped over the

fence and were walking among the big trees, we seemed already miles from the truck. The water gleamed over the bottomlands below us on our right; you could not see that there had ever been a road in that place. I followed Elton along the slope through the trees. Neither of us thought to use a flashlight, though we each had one, nor did we talk. The moon gave plenty of light. We could see everything—underfoot the blooms of twinleaf, bloodroot, rue anemone, the little stars of spring beauties, and overhead the littlest branches, even the blooms on the sugar maples. The ground was soft from the rain, and we hardly made a sound. The flowers around us seemed to float in the shadows so that we walked like waders among stars, uncertain how far down to put our feet. And over the broad shine of the backwater, the calling of the peepers rose like another flood, higher than the water flood, and thrilled and trembled in the air.

It was a long walk because we had to go around the inlets of the backwater that lay in every swag and hollow. Way off, now and again, we could hear the owls. Once we startled a deer and stood still while it plunged away into the shadows. And always we were walking among flowers. I wanted to keep thinking that they were like stars, but after a while I could not think so. They were not like stars. They did not have that hard, distant glitter. And yet in their pale, peaceful way, they shone. They collected their little share of light and gave it back. Now and then, when we came to an especially thick patch of them, Elton would point. Or he would raise his hand and we would stop a minute and listen to the owls.

I was wider awake than I had been since morning. I

would have been glad to go on walking all night long. Around us we could feel the year coming, as strong and wide and irresistible as a wind.

But we were thinking, too, of the Rowanberrys. That we were in a mood to loiter and did not loiter would have reminded us of them, if we had needed reminding. To go to their house, with the water up, would have required a long walk from any place we could have started. We were taking the shortest way, which left us with the problem that it was going to be a little too short. The best we could do, this way, would be to come down the valley until we would be across from the house but still divided from it by a quarter mile or more of backwater. We could call to them from there. But what if we got no answer? What if the answer was trouble? Well, they had a boat over there. If they needed us, one of them could set us over in the boat. But what if we got no answer? What if, to put the best construction upon silence, they could not hear us? Well, we could only go as near as we could get and call.

So if our walk had the feeling of a ramble, it was not one. We were going as straight to the Rowanberrys' house as the water and the lay of the land would allow. After a while we began to expect to see a light. And then we began to wonder if there was a light to see.

Elton stopped. "I thought we'd have seen their light by now."

I said, "They're probably asleep."

Those were the first words we had spoken since we left the truck. After so long, in so much quiet, our voices sounded small.

Elton went on among the trees and the shadows, and I followed him. We climbed over a little shoulder of the slope then and saw one window shining. It was the light of an oil lamp, so their electricity was out, too.

"And now we're found," Elton said. He sang it, just that much of the old hymn, almost in a whisper.

We went through a little more of the woods and climbed the fence into the Rowanberrys' hill pasture. We could see their big barn standing up black now against the moonlight on the other side of the road, which was on high ground at that place, clear of the backwater.

When we were on the gravel we could hear our steps. We walked side by side, Elton in one wheel track, I in the other, until the road went under the water again. We were as close to the house then as we could get without a boat. We stopped and considered the distance.

And then Elton cupped his hands around his mouth, and called, "Ohhhhh, Mart! Ohhhhh, Art!"

We waited, it seemed, while Art had time to say, "Did you hear somebody?" and Mart to answer, "Well, I *thought* so." We saw light come to another window, as somebody picked up a lamp and opened the hall door. We heard the front door open. And then Art's voice came across the water: "Yeeeaah?"

And Elton called back, "Are you aaalll riiight?"

I knew they were. They were all right, and we were free to go back through the woods and home to sleep.

But now I know that it was neither of the Rowanberrys who was under the sign of mortality that night. It was Elton. Before another April came he would be in his grave on the hill at Port William. Old Art Rowanberry, who

B

SESSION TWO | Berry, Are You All Right?

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

had held him on his lap, would survive him by a dozen years.

And now that both of them are dead, I love to think of them standing with the shining backwater between them, while Elton's voice goes out across the distance, is heard and answered, and the other voice travels back: "Yeeaaaah!"

Reflection on Cultivating Generosity

God has given us generous gifts of life, relationships, a beautiful world, and especially the Spirit that brings to life the fruit of joy.

We celebrate those gifts in gratitude and generosity. But when we try to cultivate these responses, we do not always succeed. Sometimes we try to give others the amount we think they deserve, and no more. Or we may resent giving up our time and material possessions. We may feel that generosity and gratitude are uncalled for because we deserve to keep what we have earned.

Wendell Berry gives us a beautiful example of what a life looks like when the grace of God is responded to with gratitude and generosity. Initially, Elton and the narrator (two characters in the story) feel worried and disconnected, but soon act generously. They “have obliged themselves to worry about Art and Mart Rowanberry,” because they are divided from them by floodwaters. They are also not at ease with their own worrying. Being uneasy “caused us to think of things that could happen” (192).

In contrast, the Rowanberrys (a rowanberry is the fruit of the mountain ash) did not worry. “They practiced an old-fashioned

independence, an old-fashioned generosity, and an old-fashioned fidelity to their word and their friends.” They had always been confident and self-sufficient. Likewise Flora, the narrator’s wife, operates with a sense of grace. She was “amused at the way Elton and he imagined the worst. She did not imagine the worst. She just dealt with mortality as it happened” (193).

As the story unfolds, Elton and the narrator find a similar generosity. In part they are driven by the strong sense of connection that Elton had felt with Mart Rowanberry. Elton had liked to work with Mart because he “had a gift for accommodating himself to the rhythms and ways of his partner. ‘He can think your thoughts,’ Elton said. Between the two of them was a sympathy of body and mind that they had worked out and that they trusted with an unshaken, unspoken trust.” We see them living through the resonances of their partnership, in touch with a deep sympathy and communion. And so the two men set out.

Although tired, they go out into the night to check on their friends. They go into a “fine night,” full of beauty, “all silvery with moonlight” with which they commune. Aware of the

B

SESSION TWO | Reflection on Cultivating Generosity

night's beauty, the two men become less worried; they begin responding with gratitude and generosity. They go straight to the Rowanberrys' house, but the water and land force them to ramble. Elton is worried when he doesn't see the Rowanberry's light. They climb among trees and shadows, lost in the woods and in their worries.

Then they climb over a small rise and see "one window shining."

We might think the Rowanberrys were found, but instead Elton says, "And now we're found.' ...He sang it, just that much of the old hymn ("Amazing Grace"), almost in a whisper."

They call out. Art calls "Yeeeaah?" And Elton called back, "Are you aaall riiight?"

Elton says, "I knew they were. They were all right."

The narrator, looking back, concludes, "And now that both of them are dead, I love to think of them standing with the shining backwater between them, while Elton's voice goes out across the distance, is heard and answered, and the other voice travels back: "Yeeeaah!"

Elton and Art resonate with one another. The narrator's beautiful words also express his gratitude and a communion with others that goes beyond the grave.

Generosity is a gift, but there is also a story to generosity. It begins with unease but shifts when two men go to their friends, experience the grace of a night's beauty, feel gratitude, and act generously until they find what had been lost... themselves.

B

SESSION TWO | Reflection on Cultivating Generosity

BLANK FOR BINDING PURPOSES

C

Agenda for Meeting

Gather with Music

"Amazing Grace" | Available at sp-r.org/fully-alive

Contemplate an Image

Look at Andrei Rublev's painting of Abraham and his unexpected visitors as an image of the Trinity. How does this image speak to joy? You may write or draw in the space below.





Review Guidelines for Discussion

Participants read aloud:

We extend hospitality to welcome one another with words and actions. We respect confidentiality. All that we hear and share stays within this room.

We attend every meeting.

We share, and we listen in quiet. Each one may decide to share or not at any moment. But we are present to one another.

We honor each voice and share from our unique individual story. None of us speaks for a whole group, profession, or way of life.

Each of us listens with the "ear of our heart." We listen and learn; we do not offer advice.

We respect differences, reserve judgment, and turn to wonder as we hear the stories of others.

After we leave, let us lift up one another's lives and stories to God in prayer.

Pray Together

Use Lectio Divina to contemplate this passage:

See p. 106 for instructions on doing Lectio Divina.

Luke 8:11-15

"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but, as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance."

Reflection

Read by the facilitator:

Generosity is a gift that comes to life as we cultivate it, but we do not always succeed in doing so. Sometimes we try to give others what we think they deserve and no more. We may resent others or feel entitled to our material possessions and calm way of life.

Wendell Berry gives us a beautiful story about what life looks like when the grace of God is responded to with gratitude and generosity. Initially, Elton and the narrator feel worried and disconnected. They “have obliged themselves to worry about Art and Mart Rowanberry,” because they are divided from them by floodwaters.

Soon, however, they act generously. Although tired, they go to check on their friends. They go into a “fine night,” full of beauty, “all silvery with moonlight” with which they commune. Aware of the night’s beauty, the two men become less worried; they begin responding with gratitude and generosity. They go straight to the Rowanberrys’ house, but the water and land force them to ramble. Elton is worried when he doesn’t see the Rowanberrys’ light. They climb among trees and shadows, lost again in the woods and their worries.

Then they climb over a small rise and see “one window shining.”

We might think the Rowanberrys were found, but instead Elton says, “And now we’re found”...He sang it, just that much of the old hymn (“Amazing Grace”), almost in a whisper.”

Elton calls out to Art Rowanberry, and Art calls back. Much later, after both of them are dead, the narrator, looking back, loves to think of them calling out to one another that they are all right.

Generosity is a gift, a response to God’s generosity. It does not spring from worry but from trust in the beauty and grace manifested in the world around us. Even when we feel lost, if we are generous to others, generosity will carry us through. Like Elton and the narrator, we may seek to find others only to discover that “now we’re found.”

C

Explore Together:

Where do you find gratitude or generosity in Berry's characters and why do you think what you find is important in the story?

Think of a time when generosity illuminated your everyday life and helped you find yourself.

Tell us about one way that false beliefs (or the "rocks" and "thorns" from the parable) have killed your generosity or distracted you from it.

Has a deeper sense of gratitude ever changed your life or the life of someone you know? How did gratitude change that life?

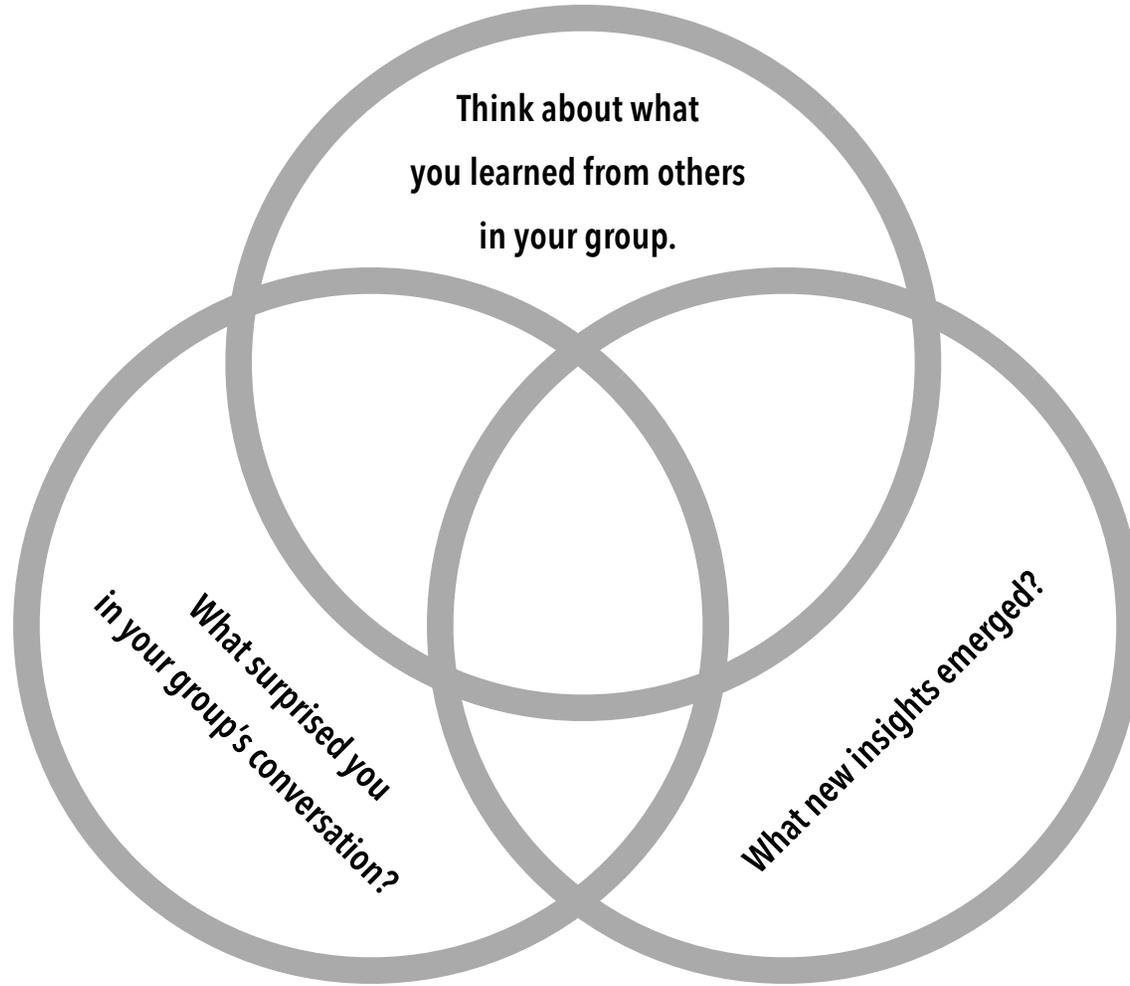
Blessings

Each participant reads one sentence to a neighbor.

- ✦ May God bless you with gratitude and generosity.
- ✦ May you follow Christ's gracious example.
- ✦ May you discern the Spirit's gifts showered upon you.
- ✦ May you live a life generous to others, in joy and love.
- ✦ May the ear of your heart discern the Holy Spirit.
- ✦ May you respond in gratitude for the life you lead.
- ✦ May you grow in grace, accepting change as it comes.
- ✦ May you trust that the Spirit moves through questions as well as clarity, through people as well as prayer, through closed doors as well as open paths.
- ✦ May the Holy Spirit open your ears and change your heart.
- ✦ When the Spirit moves you toward generosity and you say "maybe," may God nudge you closer to your true self.
- ✦ When grace calls and you say "yes," may you respond with generosity toward others.

D

SESSION TWO | After the Meeting



Session Three

Cultivating Faithfulness

Session Contents

- A** What to Prepare Before the Meeting
- B** The Readings
- C** Agenda for the Meeting
- D** After the Meeting



A

What to Prepare Before the Meeting

Consider where you find overflowing joy.

In this guide, pages ...

READ 1 Samuel 17: 55-58, 18:1-11, 19:1-10, 20:1-42 43-46

READ "Reflection on Cultivating Faithfulness" 47-49

THINK about your responses to the "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" 54

You're welcome to write about them if you like.

The First Book of Samuel

1 Samuel 17: 55-58, 18:1-11, 19:1-10, 20:1-42

⁵⁵When Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, “Abner, whose son is this young man?” Abner said, “As your soul lives, O king, I do not know.” ⁵⁶The king said, “Inquire whose son the stripling is.” ⁵⁷On David’s return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. ⁵⁸Saul said to him, “Whose son are you, young man?” And David answered, “I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.”

18:1 When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ²Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. ³Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. ⁵David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.

⁶As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. ⁷And the women sang to one another as they made merry, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” ⁸Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?” ⁹So Saul eyed David from that day on. ¹⁰The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand;¹¹and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David eluded him twice.

19:1 Saul spoke with his son Jonathan and with all his servants about killing David. But Saul’s son Jonathan took great delight in David.²Jonathan told David, “My father Saul is trying to kill you; therefore be on guard tomorrow morning; stay in a secret place and hide yourself. ³I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I

will speak to my father about you; if I learn anything I will tell you.”⁴Jonathan spoke well of David to his father Saul, saying to him, “The king should not sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have been of good service to you;⁵for he took his life in his hand when he attacked the Philistine, and the Lord brought about a great victory for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced; why then will you sin against an innocent person by killing David without cause?”⁶Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan; Saul swore, “As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death.”⁷So Jonathan called David and related all these things to him. Jonathan then brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before.

⁸Again there was war, and David went out to fight the Philistines. He launched a heavy attack on them, so that they fled before him. ⁹Then an evil spirit from the Lord came upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand, while David was playing music. ¹⁰Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear; but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. David fled and escaped that night.

20:1 David fled from Naioth in Ramah. He came before Jonathan and said, “What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin against your father that he is trying to take my life?”²He said to him, “Far from it! You shall not die. My father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me; and why should my father hide this from me? Never!”³But David also swore, “Your father knows well that you like me; and he thinks, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, or he will be grieved.’ But truly, as the Lord lives and as you yourself live, there is but a step between me and death.”⁴Then Jonathan said to David, “Whatever you say, I will do for you.”⁵David said to Jonathan, “Tomorrow is the new moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king at the meal; but let me go, so that I may hide in the field until the third evening. ⁶If your father misses me at all, then say, ‘David earnestly asked leave of me to run to Bethlehem his city; for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family.’ ⁷If he says, ‘Good!’ it will be well with your servant; but if he is angry, then know that evil has been determined by him. ⁸Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a sacred covenant with you. But if there is

guilt in me, kill me yourself; why should you bring me to your father?"

⁹Jonathan said, "Far be it from you! If I knew that it was decided by my father that evil should come upon you, would I not tell you?" ¹⁰Then David said to Jonathan, "Who will tell me if your father answers you harshly?" ¹¹Jonathan replied to David, "Come, let us go out into the field." So they both went out into the field. ¹²Jonathan said to David, "By the Lord, the God of Israel! When I have sounded out my father, about this time tomorrow, or on the third day, if he is well disposed toward David, shall I not then send and disclose it to you?" ¹³But if my father intends to do you harm, the Lord do so to Jonathan, and more also, if I do not disclose it to you, and send you away, so that you may go in safety. May the Lord be with you, as he has been with my father. ¹⁴If I am still alive, show me the faithful love of the Lord; but if I die, ¹⁵never cut off your faithful love from my house, even if the Lord were to cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." ¹⁶Thus Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the Lord seek out the enemies of David." ¹⁷Jonathan made David swear

again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life. ¹⁸Jonathan said to him, "Tomorrow is the new moon; you will be missed, because your place will be empty. ¹⁹On the day after tomorrow, you shall go a long way down; go to the place where you hid yourself earlier, and remain beside the stone there. ²⁰I will shoot three arrows to the side of it, as though I shot at a mark. ²¹Then I will send the boy, saying, 'Go, find the arrows.' If I say to the boy, 'Look, the arrows are on this side of you, collect them,' then you are to come, for, as the Lord lives, it is safe for you and there is no danger. ²²But if I say to the young man, 'Look, the arrows are beyond you,' then go; for the Lord has sent you away. ²³As for the matter about which you and I have spoken, the Lord is witness between you and me forever."

²⁴So David hid himself in the field. When the new moon came, the king sat at the feast to eat. ²⁵The king sat upon his seat, as at other times, upon the seat by the wall. Jonathan stood, while Abner sat by Saul's side; but David's place was empty. ²⁶Saul did not say anything that day; for he thought, "Something has befallen him; he is not clean, surely he is not clean." ²⁷But on the second day, the

day after the new moon, David's place was empty. And Saul said to his son Jonathan, "Why has the son of Jesse not come to the feast, either yesterday or today?"²⁸ Jonathan answered Saul, "David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem; ²⁹he said, 'Let me go; for our family is holding a sacrifice in the city, and my brother has commanded me to be there. So now, if I have found favor in your sight, let me get away, and see my brothers.' For this reason he has not come to the king's table."³⁰ Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness?"³¹ For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die."³² Then Jonathan answered his father Saul, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?"³³ But Saul threw his spear at him to strike him; so Jonathan knew that it was the decision of his father to put David to death.³⁴ Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food on the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, and because his father had disgraced him.

³⁵In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David, and with him was a little boy. ³⁶He said to the boy, "Run and find the arrows that I shoot." As the boy ran, he shot an arrow beyond him. ³⁷When the boy came to the place where Jonathan's arrow had fallen, Jonathan called after the boy and said, "Is the arrow not beyond you?"³⁸ Jonathan called after the boy, "Hurry, be quick, do not linger." So Jonathan's boy gathered up the arrows and came to his master. ³⁹But the boy knew nothing; only Jonathan and David knew the arrangement.⁴⁰ Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and said to him, "Go and carry them to the city."⁴¹ As soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more.⁴² Then Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.'" He got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city.

Reflection on Cultivating Faithfulness

In Session Three we read the story of David and Jonathan's friendship (I Samuel) to understand faithfulness as an indispensable aspect of the Fruit of the Spirit, indispensable because without it such gifts as joy, generosity, and love would neither last nor be stable. Like all aspects of the Spirit, faithfulness brings life to humans. It is a gift, but like the seeds in a garden it needs to be cultivated. Faithfulness strengthens friendship, marriage, and neighbor-love over time.

The story of David and Jonathan discloses the gift of friendship and tells how the faithful acts bring abundant life to them and to their children. The ancient story idealizes friendship as a powerfully affective, loyal relationship.

Ancient story dramatizes the beginning of friendship as a sudden event. Unlike modern friendships that usually take time to establish, Jonathan becomes bound to the soul of David as soon as David is introduced to Jonathan's father Saul:

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul...Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul (Samuel 18:1-3).

Jonathan immediately loves David as "his own soul" and, even more surprising, makes a covenant with him on the spot. To love someone as "his own soul" is to love him "as another self." ("Love your neighbor as yourself.") We will see that Jonathan wishes for and does what is good for his friend, that he is faithful in his actions and in sharing David's sorrows and joys.

Though we do not make formal covenants with our friends and may not use such idealized language as the biblical story-teller, in the ancient Mediterranean world, people treated friendship as a sacred bond sealed by God, one that illuminates our faithfulness to friends and how we bond with them in special ways.

The status of this bond in the ancient world becomes clear in the narrative of a similar action in Homer's Iliad. This story celebrates Hellenic and Trojan beliefs that friendship creates ties more important than the duty to fight in battle. Two enemies, Glaucus (a Trojan) and Diomedes (a Greek) meet on the battlefield. Loyalty to their cities dictates that they should try to kill each other. However, because of their fathers' friendship, they suspend hostilities and pledge to be friends, exchanging

their armor as a sign of their pledge (6. 230-31). They forge an unbreakable bond and turn their ferocity toward other enemies. By exchanging gifts of their defensive weapons, they seal a promise that they and their children will be friends and will extend hospitality to one another.

Similarly, the meaning of the bond in the story of Jonathan and David is not clear until we decode the description of Jonathan's gifts to David. Jonathan gives David his robe, his armor, "and even" the story says, his sword, bow, and belt. Why? In giving his clothing, he shares who he is, his identity. In giving the armor, he becomes vulnerable, surrendering his self-protective gear. He even puts his weapons in the hands of his friend. The objects become pledges of faithful friendship: Jonathan will never attack David, he is vulnerable to David, and there is trust between them.

These stories of ideal heroic friendships bring home to us the challenge friendship presents to other human commitments. This challenge confronts whoever has multiple faithful relationships, whether to country, place of work, spouse, children, other friends, or other callings. The question arises, how do the characters and how do we deal with possible conflicts? Jonathan has made a covenant with David but he has a responsibility to his father Saul, who wants to kill his friend David. What does faithfulness mean here?

The story unfolds the power of faithfulness while it dramatizes the tensions that can arise from multiple loyalties. Jonathan maintains his relationship with his father, but keeps faith with David by telling him Saul wants to kill him (19.2) He defends David to his father and exhorts Saul in terms of their common values, asking him why he "will sin against an innocent person by killing David without cause." When we are faithful to others, we are faithful to the shared values that bind us. But Saul, though he swears, "As the Lord lives, [David] shall not be put to death," tries to kill David. An oath in the ancient world is sacred, like marriage or friendship. But Saul is unfaithful to his God and his son. What is Jonathan to do?

First, David and Jonathan address conflict directly in strong language. David asks Jonathan "what is my guilt?" (20.1), that Saul should try to kill him. They test whether there is a moral basis for Saul's action in David's sin. Jonathan stays faithful to his friend's innocence, and swears, "You shall not die." Notice that he does not say I'll defend you no matter what; shared values and belief in God form the basis of their faithfulness. When David doubts that Saul will confide in David, Jonathan and David set up a test.

Second, when David challenges Jonathan by saying, "if there is guilt in me, kill me yourself," making an ultimate appeal to shared moral beliefs and his willingness to abide by them, Jonathan experiences a conflict of loyalties between his father's

wish to kill David and David's innocence and willingness to abide by the rules. He resolves the conflict by saying "'If I knew that it was decided by my father that evil should come upon you, would I not tell you?' That decision, by itself, could seem disloyal to the father. It raises the question 'How do we decide a conflict of loyalties that requires us to uphold the actions of one friend or family member over another?'"

Third, Jonathan and David set up a device to convey Saul's verdict to David. This device requires David's trust; he must wait in a field in see the sign. It requires Jonathan to be faithful to David in finding out what Saul intends and letting David know. The stakes have increased.

The conflict, instead of destroying the friendship, offers an opportunity for new commitment. In response to the conflict of loyalties, Jonathan goes deeper to articulate the very foundation of friendship when he swears, "If my father intends to do you harm, the Lord do so to Jonathan, and more also, if I do not disclose it to you, and send you away, so that you may go in safety. May the Lord be with you, as he has been with my father" (20. 13-14). Jonathan swears to God as the ultimate judge and arbiter of justice. Jonathan's love has also grown, so he makes a new commitment: "If I am still alive, show me the faithful love of the Lord; but if I die, never cut off your faithful love from my house" (20. 14-15). Friendship now extends to households and generations.

When the two friends part, after Jonathan warns David that he must leave, they kiss and weep with one another. They part, but their faithfulness does not break. "Then Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying,' The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever."

C

Agenda for Meeting

Gather with Music

"Great Is Thy Faithfulness" | Available at sp-r.org/fully-alive

Contemplate an Image

Look at Pieter Lastman's painting of Ruth and Naomi.
You may write or draw in the space below.





Pray Together

Use Lectio Divina to contemplate this passage:

Ruth 1:15-17

So [Naomi] said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said,

‘Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;

Where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you.”

Reflection

Read by the facilitator:

The story of Jonathan and David helps to us to think about faithfulness in friendship. Because Jonathan loves David "as his own soul" (love your neighbor as yourself) he makes a covenant with him, a sacred bond sealed by God. Loving David as himself, he wishes for and does what is good for his friend, and he is faithful in his actions and in sharing David's sorrows and joys. He even gives David his armor and weapons, becoming vulnerable by surrendering his self-protective gear. The story also dramatizes the tensions that can arise from multiple loyalties. Jonathan is faithful to his father until his father unjustly tries to kill David.

We are not kings or potential kings, but, like David and Jonathan, we have friendships that last through separations, even final ones.

C

Explore Together:

To what or to whom are you faithful and how do you live out this faithfulness?

Have there been times when being faithful to one person has conflicted with other commitments? Tell a story about that and about how you resolved the conflict if you did.

When you or someone else experienced difficulty, loss, or challenge were you able to be faithful? How or how not?

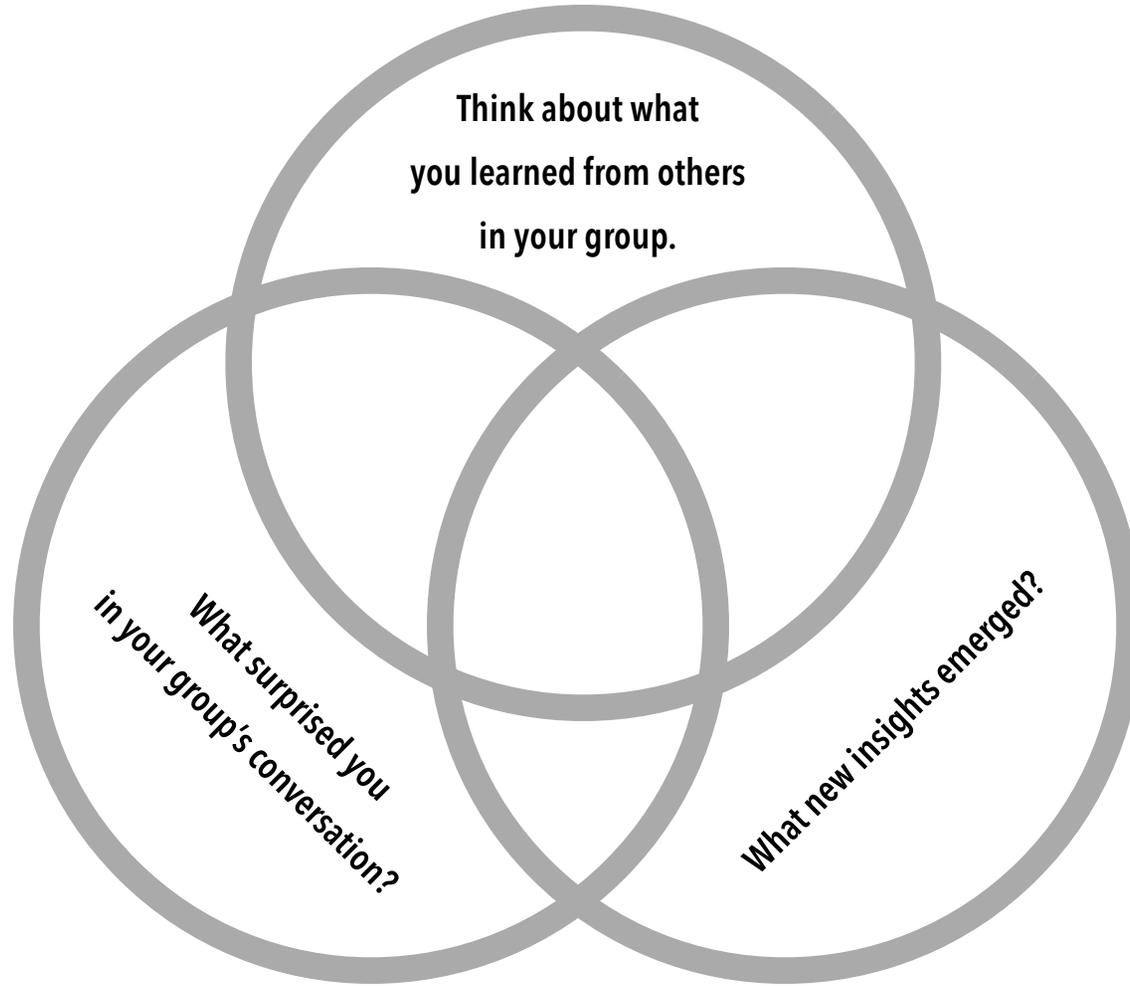
What has faithfulness added to your life?

Blessings

- ✦ When grace calls you, may you awaken to its power.
- ✦ When you awaken to divine love, may you say yes.
- ✦ When you say yes, may you follow faithfully.
- ✦ When you follow faithfully, may you give your life away.
- ✦ When you give your life away, may the community be blessed.
- ✦ May God bless you with the heart to hear the whisperings of the Holy Spirit.
- ✦ May you discern the Spirit's bountiful gifts showered upon you.
- ✦ And may you live a life of faithfulness to others.
- ✦ May the ear of your heart be open to others.
- ✦ May you be faithful toward family and friends.
- ✦ May you be faithful to your work and your colleagues.
- ✦ May you grow in faithfulness through all the days of your life,
- ✦ Trusting that God is faithful in all things.

D

SESSION THREE | After the Meeting



Session Four

Cultivating Peace

Session Contents

- A** What to Prepare Before the Meeting
- B** The Readings
- C** Agenda for the Meeting
- D** After the Meeting



A

What to Prepare Before the Meeting

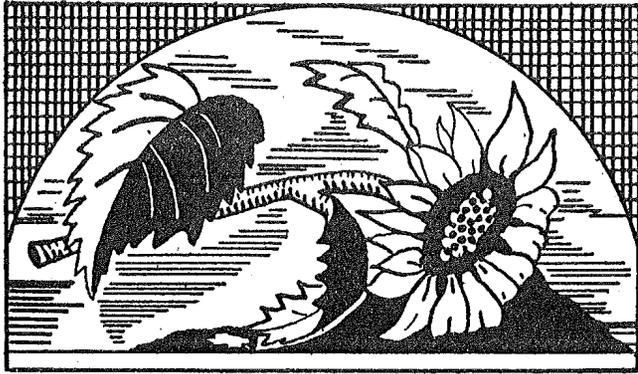
Consider where you find overflowing joy.

In this guide, pages ...

READ Willa Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky" from
Obscure Destinies: Three Stories of the West 59-75

READ "Reflection on Cultivating Peace" 76-78

THINK about your responses to the "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" 84
You're welcome to write about them if you like.



NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

I

When Doctor Burleigh told neighbour Rosicky he had a bad heart, Rosicky protested.

“So? No, I guess my heart was always pretty good. I got a little asthma, maybe. Just a awful short breath when I was pitchin’ hay last summer, dat’s all.”

The Readings

B

SESSION FOUR | Cather, Neighbour Rosicky

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

“Well now, Rosicky, if you know more about it than I do, what did you come to me for? It’s your heart that makes you short of breath, I tell you. You’re sixty-five years old, and you’ve always worked hard, and your heart’s tired. You’ve got to be careful from now on, and you can’t do heavy work any more. You’ve got five boys at home to do it for you.”

The old farmer looked up at the Doctor with a gleam of amusement in his queer triangular-shaped eyes. His eyes were large and lively, but the lids were caught up in the middle in a curious way, so that they formed a triangle. He did not look like a sick man. His brown face was creased but not wrinkled, he had a ruddy colour in his smooth-shaven cheeks and in his lips, under his long brown moustache. His hair was thin and ragged around his ears, but very little grey. His forehead, naturally high and crossed by deep parallel lines, now ran all the way up to his pointed crown. Rosicky’s face had the habit of looking interested, — suggested a contented disposi-

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

tion and a reflective quality that was gay rather than grave. This gave him a certain detachment, the easy manner of an onlooker and observer.

“Well, I guess you ain’t got no pills fur a bad heart, Doctor Ed. I guess the only thing is fur me to git me a new one.”

Doctor Burleigh swung round in his desk-chair and frowned at the old farmer. “I think if I were you I’d take a little care of the old one, Rosicky.”

Rosicky shrugged. “Maybe I don’t know how. I expect you mean fur me not to drink my coffee no more.”

“I wouldn’t, in your place. But you’ll do as you choose about that. I’ve never yet been able to separate a Bohemian from his coffee or his pipe. I’ve quit trying. But the sure thing is you’ve got to cut out farm work. You can feed the stock and do chores about the barn, but you can’t do anything in the fields that makes you short of breath.”

“How about shelling corn?”

“Of course not!”

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

Rosicky considered with puckered brows.

"I can't make my heart go no longer'n it wants to, can I, Doctor Ed?"

"I think it's good for five or six years yet, maybe more, if you'll take the strain off it. Sit around the house and help Mary. If I had a good wife like yours, I'd want to stay around the house."

His patient chuckled. "It ain't no place fur a man. I don't like no old man hanging round the kitchen too much. An' my wife, she's a awful hard worker her own self."

"That's it; you can help her a little. My Lord, Rosicky, you are one of the few men I know who has a family he can get some comfort out of; happy dispositions, never quarrel among themselves, and they treat you right. I want to see you live a few years and enjoy them."

"Oh, they're good kids, all right," Rosicky assented.

The Doctor wrote him a prescription and asked him how his oldest son, Rudolph, who had married in the spring, was getting on.

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

Rudolph had struck out for himself, on rented land. "And how's Polly? I was afraid Mary mightn't like an American daughter-in-law, but it seems to be working out all right."

"Yes, she's a fine girl. Dat widder woman bring her daughters up very nice. Polly got lots of spunk, an' she got some style, too. Da's nice, for young folks to have some style." Rosicky inclined his head gallantly. His voice and his twinkly smile were an affectionate compliment to his daughter-in-law.

"It looks like a storm, and you'd better be getting home before it comes. In town in the car?" Doctor Burleigh rose.

"No, I'm in de wagon. When you got five boys, you ain't got much chance to ride round in de Ford. I ain't much for cars, noway."

"Well, it's a good road out to your place; but I don't want you bumping around in a wagon much. And never again on a hay-rake, remember!"

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

When Rosicky went out to his wagon, it was beginning to snow, — the first snow of the season, and he was glad to see it. He rattled out of town and along the highway through a wonderfully rich stretch of country, the finest farms in the county. He admired this High Prairie, as it was called, and always liked to drive through it. His own place lay in a rougher territory, where there was some clay in the soil and it was not so productive. When he bought his land, he hadn't the money to buy on High Prairie; so he told his boys, when they grumbled, that if their land hadn't some clay in it, they wouldn't own it at all. All the same, he enjoyed looking at these fine farms, as he enjoyed looking at a prize bull.

After he had gone eight miles, he came to the graveyard, which lay just at the edge of his own hay-land. There he stopped his horses and sat still on his wagon seat, looking about at the snowfall. Over yonder on the hill he could see

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

his own house, crouching low, with the clump of orchard behind and the windmill before, and all down the gentle hill-slope the rows of pale gold cornstalks stood out against the white field. The snow was falling over the cornfield and the pasture and the hay-land, steadily, with very little wind, — a nice dry snow. The graveyard had only a light wire fence about it and was all overgrown with long red grass. The fine snow, settling into this red grass and upon the few little evergreens and the headstones, looked very pretty.

It was a nice graveyard, Rosicky reflected, sort of snug and homelike, not cramped or mournful, — a big sweep all round it. A man could lie down in the long grass and see the complete arch of the sky over him, hear the wagons go by; in summer the mowing-machine rattled right up to the wire fence. And it was so near home. Over there across the cornstalks his own roof and windmill looked so good to him that he promised himself to mind the Doctor and take care of himself. He was awful fond of his place, he admitted. He wasn't

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

anxious to leave it. And it was a comfort to think that he would never have to go farther than the edge of his own hayfield. The snow, falling over his barnyard and the graveyard, seemed to draw things together like. And they were all old neighbours in the graveyard, most of them friends; there was nothing to feel awkward or embarrassed about. Embarrassment was the most disagreeable feeling Rosicky knew. He didn't often have it, — only with certain people whom he didn't understand at all.

Well, it was a nice snowstorm; a fine sight to see the snow falling so quietly and graciously over so much open country. On his cap and shoulders, on the horses' backs and manes, light, delicate, mysterious it fell; and with it a dry cool fragrance was released into the air. It meant rest for vegetation and men and beasts, for the ground itself; a season of long nights for sleep, leisurely breakfasts, peace by the fire. This and much more went through Rosicky's mind, but he merely told himself that winter was coming, clucked to his horses, and drove on.

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

When he reached home, John, the youngest boy, ran out to put away his team for him, and he met Mary coming up from the outside cellar with her apron full of carrots. They went into the house together. On the table, covered with oilcloth figured with clusters of blue grapes, a place was set, and he smelled hot coffee-cake of some kind. Anton never lunched in town; he thought that extravagant, and anyhow he didn't like the food. So Mary always had something ready for him when he got home.

After he was settled in his chair, stirring his coffee in a big cup, Mary took out of the oven a pan of *kolache* stuffed with apricots, examined them anxiously to see whether they had got too dry, put them beside his plate, and then sat down opposite him.

Rosicky asked her in Czech if she wasn't going to have any coffee.

She replied in English, as being somehow the right language for transacting business: "Now what did Doctor Ed say, Anton? You tell me just what."

"He said I was to tell you some compli-

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

ments, but I forgot 'em." Rosicky's eyes twinkled.

"About you, I mean. What did he say about your asthma?"

"He says I ain't got no asthma." Rosicky took one of the little rolls in his broad brown fingers. The thickened nail of his right thumb told the story of his past.

"Well, what is the matter? And don't try to put me off."

"He don't say nothing much, only I'm a little older, and my heart ain't so good like it used to be."

Mary started and brushed her hair back from her temples with both hands as if she were a little out of her mind. From the way she glared, she might have been in a rage with him.

"He says there's something the matter with your heart? Doctor Ed says so?"

"Now don't yell at me like I was a hog in de garden, Mary. You know I always did like to hear a woman talk soft. He didn't say anything de matter wid my heart, only it ain't so young

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

like it used to be, an' he tell me not to pitch hay or run de corn-sheller."

Mary wanted to jump up, but she sat still. She admired the way he never under any circumstances raised his voice or spoke roughly. He was city-bred, and she was country-bred; she often said she wanted her boys to have their papa's nice ways.

"You never have no pain there, do you? It's your breathing and your stomach that's been wrong. I wouldn't believe nobody but Doctor Ed about it. I guess I'll go see him myself. Didn't he give you no advice?"

"Chust to take it easy like, an' stay round de house dis winter. I guess you got some carpenter work for me to do. I kin make some new shelves for you, and I want dis long time to build a closet in de boys' room and make dem two little fellers keep dere clo'es hung up."

Rosicky drank his coffee from time to time, while he considered. His moustache was of the soft long variety and came down over his mouth like the teeth of a buggy-rake over a bundle of hay. Each time he put down his cup,

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

he ran his blue handkerchief over his lips. When he took a drink of water, he managed very neatly with the back of his hand.

Mary sat watching him intently, trying to find any change in his face. It is hard to see anyone who has become like your own body to you. Yes, his hair had got thin, and his high forehead had deep lines running from left to right. But his neck, always clean shaved except in the busiest seasons, was not loose or baggy. It was burned a dark reddish brown, and there were deep creases in it, but it looked firm and full of blood. His cheeks had a good colour. On either side of his mouth there was a half-moon down the length of his cheek, not wrinkles, but two lines that had come there from his habitual expression. He was shorter and broader than when she married him; his back had grown broad and curved, a good deal like the shell of an old turtle, and his arms and legs were short.

He was fifteen years older than Mary, but she had hardly ever thought about it before. He was her man, and the kind of man she liked. She was rough, and he was gentle, — city-bred,

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

as she always said. They had been shipmates on a rough voyage and had stood by each other in trying times. Life had gone well with them because, at bottom, they had the same ideas about life. They agreed, without discussion, as to what was most important and what was secondary. They didn't often exchange opinions, even in Czech, — it was as if they had thought the same thought together. A good deal had to be sacrificed and thrown overboard in a hard life like theirs, and they had never disagreed as to the things that could go. It had been a hard life, and a soft life, too. There wasn't anything brutal in the short, broad-backed man with the three-cornered eyes and the forehead that went on to the top of his skull. He was a city man, a gentle man, and though he had married a rough farm girl, he had never touched her without gentleness.

They had been at one accord not to hurry through life, not to be always skimping and saving. They saw their neighbours buy more land and feed more stock than they did, without discontent. Once when the creamery

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

agent came to the Rosickys to persuade them to sell him their cream, he told them how much money the Fasslers, their nearest neighbours, had made on their cream last year.

“Yes,” said Mary, “and look at them Fassler children! Pale, pinched little things, they look like skimmed milk. I'd rather put some colour into my children's faces than put money into the bank.”

The agent shrugged and turned to Anton.

“I guess we'll do like she says,” said Rosicky.

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

It was still early when the old farmer put aside his sewing and his recollections. The sky had been a dark grey all day, with not a gleam of sun, and the light failed at four o'clock. He went to shave and change his shirt while the

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

turkey was roasting. Rudolph and Polly were coming over for supper.

After supper they sat round in the kitchen, and the younger boys were saying how sorry they were it hadn't snowed. Everybody was sorry. They wanted a deep snow that would lie long and keep the wheat warm, and leave the ground soaked when it melted.

"Yes, sir!" Rudolph broke out fiercely; "if we have another dry year like last year, there's going to be hard times in this country."

Rosicky filled his pipe. "You boys don't know what hard times is. You don't owe nobody, you got plenty to eat an' keep warm, an' plenty water to keep clean. When you got them, you can't have it very hard."

Rudolph frowned, opened and shut his big right hand, and dropped it clenched upon his knee. "I've got to have a good deal more than that, Father, or I'll quit this farming gamble. I can always make good wages rail-roading, or at the packing house, and be sure of my money."

"Maybe so," his father answered dryly.

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

Mary, who had just come in from the pantry and was wiping her hands on the roller towel, thought Rudy and his father were getting too serious. She brought her darning-basket and sat down in the middle of the group.

“I ain’t much afraid of hard times, Rudy,” she said heartily. “We’ve had a plenty, but we’ve always come through. Your father wouldn’t never take nothing very hard, not even hard times. I got a mind to tell you a story on him. Maybe you boys can’t hardly remember the year we had that terrible hot wind, that burned everything up on the Fourth of July? All the corn an’ the gardens. An’ that was in the days when we didn’t have alfalfa yet, — I guess it wasn’t invented.

“Well, that very day your father was out cultivatin’ corn, and I was here in the kitchen makin’ plum preserves. We had bushels of plums that year. I noticed it was terrible hot, but it’s always hot in the kitchen when you’re preservin’, an’ I was too busy with my plums to mind. Anton come in from the field about

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

three o’clock, an’ I asked him what was the matter.

“‘Nothin’,’ he says, ‘but it’s pretty hot, an’ I think I won’t work no more today.’ He stood round for a few minutes, an’ then he says: ‘Ain’t you near through? I want you should git up a nice supper for us tonight. It’s Fourth of July.’

“I told him to git along, that I was right in the middle of preservin’, but the plums would taste good on hot biscuit. ‘I’m goin’ to have fried chicken, too,’ he says, and he went off an’ killed a couple. You three oldest boys was little fellers, playin’ round outside, real hot an’ sweaty, an’ your father took you to the horse tank down by the windmill an’ took off your clothes an’ put you in. Them two box-elder trees was little then, but they made shade over the tank. Then he took off all his own clothes, an’ got in with you. While he was playin’ in the water with you, the Methodist preacher drove into our place to say how all the neighbours was goin’ to meet at the schoolhouse that night, to pray for rain. He drove right to the windmill,

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

of course, and there was your father and you three with no clothes on. I was in the kitchen door, an' I had to laugh, for the preacher acted like he ain't never seen a naked man before. He surely was embarrassed, an' your father couldn't git to his clothes; they was all hangin' up on the windmill to let the sweat dry out of 'em. So he laid in the tank where he was, an' put one of you boys on top of him to cover him up a little, an' talked to the preacher.

"When you got through playin' in the water, he put clean clothes on you and a clean shirt on himself, an' by that time I'd begun to get supper. He says: 'It's too hot in here to eat comfortable. Let's have a picnic in the orchard. We'll eat our supper behind the mulberry hedge, under them linden trees.'

"So he carried our supper down, an' a bottle of my wild-grape wine, an' everything tasted good, I can tell you. The wind got cooler as the sun was goin' down, and it turned out pleasant, only I noticed how the leaves was curled up on the linden trees. That made me think, an' I asked your father if that hot wind

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

all day hadn't been terrible hard on the gardens an' the corn.

"'Corn,' he says, 'there ain't no corn.'

"'What you talkin' about?' I said. 'Ain't we got forty acres?'

"'We ain't got an ear,' he says, 'nor nobody else ain't got none. All the corn in this country was cooked by three o'clock today, like you'd roasted it in an oven.'

"'You mean you won't get no crop at all?' I asked him. I couldn't believe it, after he'd worked so hard.

"'No crop this year,' he says. 'That's why we're havin' a picnic. We might as well enjoy what we got.'

"An' that's how your father behaved, when all the neighbours was so discouraged they couldn't look you in the face. An' we enjoyed ourselves that year, poor as we was, an' our neighbours wasn't a bit better off for bein' miserable. Some of 'em grieved till they got poor digestions and couldn't relish what they did have."

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

The spring came warm, with blue skies, — but dry, dry as a bone. The boys began ploughing up the wheat-fields to plant them over in corn. Rosicky would stand at the fence corner and watch them, and the earth was so dry it blew up in clouds of brown dust that hid the horses and the sulky plough and the driver. It was a bad outlook.

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

The big alfalfa-field that lay between the home place and Rudolph's came up green, but Rosicky was worried because during that open windy winter a great many Russian thistle plants had blown in there and lodged. He kept asking the boys to rake them out; he was afraid their seed would root and "take the alfalfa." Rudolph said that was nonsense. The boys were working so hard planting corn, their father felt he couldn't insist about the thistles, but he set great store by that big alfalfa field. It was a feed you could depend on, — and there was some deeper reason, vague, but strong. The peculiar green of that clover woke early memories in old Rosicky, went back to something in his childhood in the old world. When he was a little boy, he had played in fields of that strong blue-green colour.

One morning, when Rudolph had gone to town in the car, leaving a work-team idle in his barn, Rosicky went over to his son's place, put the horses to the buggy-rake, and set about quietly raking up those thistles. He behaved with guilty caution, and rather enjoyed steal-

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

ing a march on Doctor Ed, who was just then taking his first vacation in seven years of practice and was attending a clinic in Chicago. Rosicky got the thistles raked up, but did not stop to burn them. That would take some time, and his breath was pretty short, so he thought he had better get the horses back to the barn.

He got them into the barn and to their stalls, but the pain had come on so sharp in his chest that he didn't try to take the harness off. He started for the house, bending lower with every step. The cramp in his chest was shutting him up like a jack-knife. When he reached the windmill, he swayed and caught at the ladder. He saw Polly coming down the hill, running with the swiftness of a slim greyhound. In a flash she had her shoulder under his armpit.

"Lean on me, Father, hard! Don't be afraid. We can get to the house all right."

Somehow they did, though Rosicky became blind with pain; he could keep on his legs, but he couldn't steer his course. The next thing he was conscious of was lying on Polly's bed, and

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

Polly bending over him wringing out bath towels in hot water and putting them on his chest. She stopped only to throw coal into the stove, and she kept the tea-kettle and the black pot going. She put these hot applications on him for nearly an hour, she told him afterwards, and all that time he was drawn up stiff and blue, with the sweat pouring off him.

As the pain gradually loosed its grip, the stiffness went out of his jaws, the black circles round his eyes disappeared, and a little of his natural colour came back. When his daughter-in-law buttoned his shirt over his chest at last, he sighed.

“Da’s fine, de way I feel now, Polly. It was a awful bad spell, an’ I was so sorry it all come on you like it did.”

Polly was flushed and excited. “Is the pain really gone? Can I leave you long enough to telephone over to your place?”

Rosicky’s eyelids fluttered. “Don’t telephone, Polly. It ain’t no use to scare my wife. It’s nice and quiet here, an’ if I ain’t too much trouble to you, just let me lay still till I feel

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

like myself. I ain’t got no pain now. It’s nice here.”

Polly bent over him and wiped the moisture from his face. “Oh, I’m so glad it’s over!” she broke out impulsively. “It just broke my heart to see you suffer so, Father.”

Rosicky motioned her to sit down on the chair where the tea-kettle had been, and looked up at her with that lively affectionate gleam in his eyes. “You was awful good to me, I won’t never forgit dat. I hate it to be sick on you like dis. Down at de barn I say to myself, dat young girl ain’t had much experience in sickness, I don’t want to scare her, an’ maybe she’s got a baby comin’ or somet’ing.”

Polly took his hand. He was looking at her so intently and affectionately and confidingly; his eyes seemed to caress her face, to regard it with pleasure. She frowned with her funny streaks of eyebrows, and then smiled back at him.

“I guess maybe there is something of that kind going to happen. But I haven’t told anyone yet, not my mother or Rudolph. You’ll be the first to know.”

 NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

His hand pressed hers. She noticed that it was warm again. The twinkle in his yellow-brown eyes seemed to come nearer.

"I like mighty well to see dat little child, Polly," was all he said. Then he closed his eyes and lay half-smiling. But Polly sat still, thinking hard. She had a sudden feeling that nobody in the world, not her mother, not Rudolph, or anyone, really loved her as much as old Rosicky did. It perplexed her. She sat frowning and trying to puzzle it out. It was as if Rosicky had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for colour. It was quiet, unobtrusive; it was merely there. You saw it in his eyes, — perhaps that was why they were merry. You felt it in his hands, too. After he dropped off to sleep, she sat holding his warm, broad, flexible brown hand. She had never seen another in the least like it. She wondered if it wasn't a kind of gypsy hand, it was so alive and quick and light in its communications, — very strange in a farmer. Nearly all the farmers she knew had huge lumps of fists, like mauls, or they were

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knotty and bony and uncomfortable-looking, with stiff fingers. But Rosicky's was like quick-silver, flexible, muscular, about the colour of a pale cigar, with deep, deep creases across the palm. It wasn't nervous, it wasn't a stupid lump; it was a warm brown human hand, with some cleverness in it, a great deal of generosity, and something else which Polly could only call "gypsy-like," — something nimble and lively and sure, in the way that animals are.

Polly remembered that hour long afterwards; it had been like an awakening to her. It seemed to her that she had never learned so much about life from anything as from old Rosicky's hand. It brought her to herself; it communicated some direct and untranslatable message. X

When she heard Rudolph coming in the car, she ran out to meet him.

"Oh, Rudy, your father's been awful sick! He raked up those thistles he's been worrying about, and afterwards he could hardly get to the house. He suffered so I was afraid he was going to die."

NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY

Rudolph jumped to the ground. "Where is he now?"

"On the bed. He's asleep. I was terribly scared, because, you know, I'm so fond of your father." She slipped her arm through his and they went into the house. That afternoon they took Rosicky home and put him to bed, though he protested that he was quite well again.

The next morning he got up and dressed and sat down to breakfast with his family. He told Mary that his coffee tasted better than usual to him, and he warned the boys not to bear any tales to Doctor Ed when he got home. After breakfast he sat down by his window to do some patching and asked Mary to thread several needles for him before she went to feed her chickens, — her eyes were better than his, and her hands steadier. He lit his pipe and took up John's overalls. Mary had been watching him anxiously all morning, and as she went out of the door with her bucket of scraps, she saw that he was smiling. He was thinking, indeed, about Polly, and how he might never have known what a tender heart she had if he hadn't got

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sick over there. Girls nowadays didn't wear their heart on their sleeve. But now he knew Polly would make a fine woman after the foolishness wore off. Either a woman had that sweetness at her heart or she hadn't. You couldn't always tell by the look of them; but if they had that, everything came out right in the end.

After he had taken a few stitches, the cramp began in his chest, like yesterday. He put his pipe cautiously down on the window-sill and bent over to ease the pull. No use, — he had better try to get to his bed if he could. He rose and groped his way across the familiar floor, which was rising and falling like the deck of a ship. At the door he fell. When Mary came in, she found him lying there, and the moment she touched him she knew that he was gone.

Doctor Ed was away when Rosicky died, and for the first few weeks after he got home he was hard driven. Every day he said to himself that he must get out to see that family that had lost their father. One soft, warm

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moonlight night in early summer he started for the farm. His mind was on other things, and not until his road ran by the graveyard did he realize that Rosicky wasn't over there on the hill where the red lamplight shone, but here, in the moonlight. He stopped his car, shut off the engine, and sat there for a while.

A sudden hush had fallen on his soul. Everything here seemed strangely moving and significant, though signifying what, he did not know. Close by the wire fence stood Rosicky's mowing-machine, where one of the boys had been cutting hay that afternoon; his own work-horses had been going up and down there. The new-cut hay perfumed all the night air. The moonlight silvered the long, billowy grass that grew over the graves and hid the fence; the few little evergreens stood out black in it, like shadows in a pool. The sky was very blue and soft, the stars rather faint because the moon was full.

For the first time it struck Doctor Ed that this was really a beautiful graveyard. He thought of city cemeteries; acres of shrubbery and heavy stone, so arranged and lonely and

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unlike anything in the living world. Cities of the dead, indeed; cities of the forgotten, of the "put away." But this was open and free, this little square of long grass which the wind for ever stirred. Nothing but the sky overhead, and the many-coloured fields running on until they met that sky. The horses worked here in summer; the neighbours passed on their way to town; and over yonder, in the cornfield, Rosicky's own cattle would be eating fodder as winter came on. Nothing could be more un-deathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful.

New York, 1928

Reflection on Cultivating Peace

In Session Three, we read a Bible story that helped us to understand how faithfulness strengthens love and generosity. Now in Session Four we read a naturalistic story about an ordinary man, remarkable for contentment and love throughout his life. Not that he is a perfect man, but like us he shifts back and forth from accepting what life brings and struggling against it. We can better understand his peace and ours by observing how he cultivates (or does not cultivate) a peace that passes understanding because it does not depend on external events. There are hints in the story that Rosicky has a peaceful but hard-working approach to life:

Rosicky's face had the habit of looking interested--suggested a contented disposition and a reflective quality that was gay rather than grave. This gave him a certain detachment, the easy manner of an onlooker and observer (pp. 4-5).

His wife, Mary, tells the children: 'Your father wouldn't never take nothing very hard, not even hard times' (p. 46).

Rosicky is fond of the graveyard near his house: 'And it was a comfort to think that he would never have to go farther than the edge of his own hayfield' to be buried' (p. 19).

He and Mary, his wife, 'saw their neighbours buy more land and feed more stock than they did, without discontent' (p. 24).

Likewise, Saint Paul tells the Philippians, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have' (4. 11).

How is this sense of peace grounded? Certainly it does not involve an acceptance of everything. Rosicky and Mary choose to feed their children well and see them healthy instead of investing all their money in land. They are not at peace with raising sickly children. Likewise, Saint Paul chose to be content sometimes with little food, but he was never content that others not hear of the gospel.

How do we know what to accept and what to change in our lives? If we surrender our highest values in favor of contentment, we will not be at peace.

The Serenity Prayer, originally composed by Reinhold Niebuhr, offers a way to find peace even in tumultuous circumstances. With the Serenity Prayer as a guide, let us look at how and when Rosicky cultivates genuine peace. The prayer has four parts:

God, grant me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

The first thing to notice about the prayer is that we cannot give peace to ourselves. Those who have tried may have found themselves tied in knots. Serenity is a gift. But it is a gift that has to be cultivated. The first obstacle to serenity lies in our attempting to change things we cannot change. Rosicky cannot change his bad heart, the drought that dries up his corn, the prosperity of his neighbors, or the thistles that grow in his son's field. (Thistles may reference Jesus's parable of the sower who sowed seed "and the thorns grew up and choked them" Matthew 13:7). In resisting his doctor and, perhaps, by raking the thistles, Rosicky seems not to accept circumstances he cannot change. I say "seems" because acceptance is not always easy or immediate. Accepting can be a process. And we are in no position to judge absolutely when another has fully accepted something. Perhaps Rosicky accepts that he cares so much about his son's land that he chooses to try raking it gently. We do not know for sure. However, we ourselves can accept the things we cannot change (sometimes after a struggle), seeking the wisdom to know the difference between what we can change and what we cannot.

When Doctor Burleigh first tells Rosicky that he has a bad heart, Rosicky does not accept the news. He believes that maybe he has a little asthma from pitching hay. He diminishes the importance of his condition, almost denying it. His response, though normal and human, cannot be called accepting. He and the doctor negotiate about what he can and cannot do. At one point, Rosicky considers his situation "with puckered brows. 'I can't make my heart go no longer'n it wants to, can I, Doctor Ed?'" That sounds like acceptance, but is it a full acceptance of his actual situation or is Rosicky too resigned? Resignation does not grant peace because it is hopeless. For example, I might blindly resign myself to authority without thinking about my options. In doing so, I would not be embracing someone's leadership; I would be going along grudgingly. I would have neither the serenity to accept it nor the courage to change it. Rosicky's refusal to accept the reality of an illness, if it lasted, would prevent him from taking care of it. The refusal to accept reality does not lead to peace.

As he drives home Rosicky seems to accept and even embrace circumstances he cannot change (see p. 17). He is glad to see the snow and drives through "a wonderfully rich stretch of country, the finest farms in the county. He admired this High Prairie...and always liked to drive through it." Although his farm is on less productive clay land, "he enjoyed looking at these fine farms." His acceptance of his own poorer land gives

B

SESSION FOUR | Reflection on Cultivating Peace

him not only peace, but also joy. And he passes on wisdom to his sons. The story tells us, "When he bought his land, he hadn't the money to buy on High Prairie; so he told his boys, when they grumbled, that if their land hadn't some clay in it, they wouldn't own it all." He teaches them acceptance and even gratitude. In fact, as he drives past a view of his home, "over there across the cornstalks his own roof and windmill looked so good to him that he promised himself to mind the Doctor and take care of himself. He was awful fond of his place, he admitted. He wasn't anxious to leave it" (pp. 18-19). As he becomes aware of his highest values, he gains insight into what to accept (his illness) and what to change (his attitude toward taking care of himself). His wisdom encompasses all three aspects.

I invite you to consider one or more of three other episodes. Where does Rosicky accept (or not accept) things he cannot change and where does he show courage to change them? Does he have wisdom in knowing the difference?

Mary tells a story about Rosicky's approach to hard times. He comes into the house while Mary is canning plums and tells her he wants her to make a nice supper. (If he seems a little dictatorial, remember that after his heart attack, he sits in the kitchen and sews the children's clothes.) He quits work, gives himself and his boys a nice swim in the horse tank, and eats a

feast with his family. It turns out that he could quit work because the whole corn crop has burned up (pp. 46-49).

B

SESSION FOUR | Reflection on Cultivating Peace

BLANK FOR BINDING PURPOSES

C

Agenda for Meeting

Gather with Music

John Coltrane, Fourth Movement of "a love supreme" for a few minutes. | Available at sp-r.org/fully-alive

Contemplate an Image

Look at Edward Hooper's painting "Nighthawks"
You may write or draw in the space below.





C

Pray Together

Use Lectio Divina to contemplate this prayer:

The Serenity Prayer

Dear God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference. Amen

Reflection

Read by the facilitator:

In Session Four we read the story of an ordinary man named Rosicky, remarkable for contentment and love through his life. Not that he is a perfect man, but like us he shifts back and forth from accepting what life brings and struggling against it. He, like us, needs to cultivate a peace that passes understanding because it does not depend on external events. This peace does not involve an acceptance of everything. Rosicky and Mary choose to feed their children well and see them healthy instead of investing all their money in land. They are not at peace with raising sickly children. Likewise, Saint Paul chose to be content with little food or plentiful food, whichever came his way, but he was not content that others never hear of the gospel. How do we know what to accept and what to change in our lives?

If we surrender our highest values in favor of a spurious contentment, we will not be at peace. The Serenity Prayer can help us find genuine peace. The first thing to notice about the prayer is that we cannot give peace to ourselves. Those who have tried may have found themselves tied in knots. Serenity is a gift. But it has to be cultivated. The first obstacle to serenity lies in our attempt to change things we cannot change. Rosicky cannot change his bad heart, for example, and he goes through a struggle in facing his illness. Yet, when his corn crop fails, he accepts it. Because he accepts it, he is free to create something new. He and his boys bathe in the horse tank, and he and Mary prepare a feast. They enjoy themselves and their family.

C

Explore Together:

Consider Rosicky's response to his illness, to the drought, or to the help he receives from Polly. To what extent does he accept things he cannot change? When does he have the courage to change something?

Consider Rosicky's attempts to weed out the thistles from his son's field. Do you ever try to weed out the "thistles" in your head or life?

Is there a time when you were able to accept what you could not change? How did you find a path to acceptance?

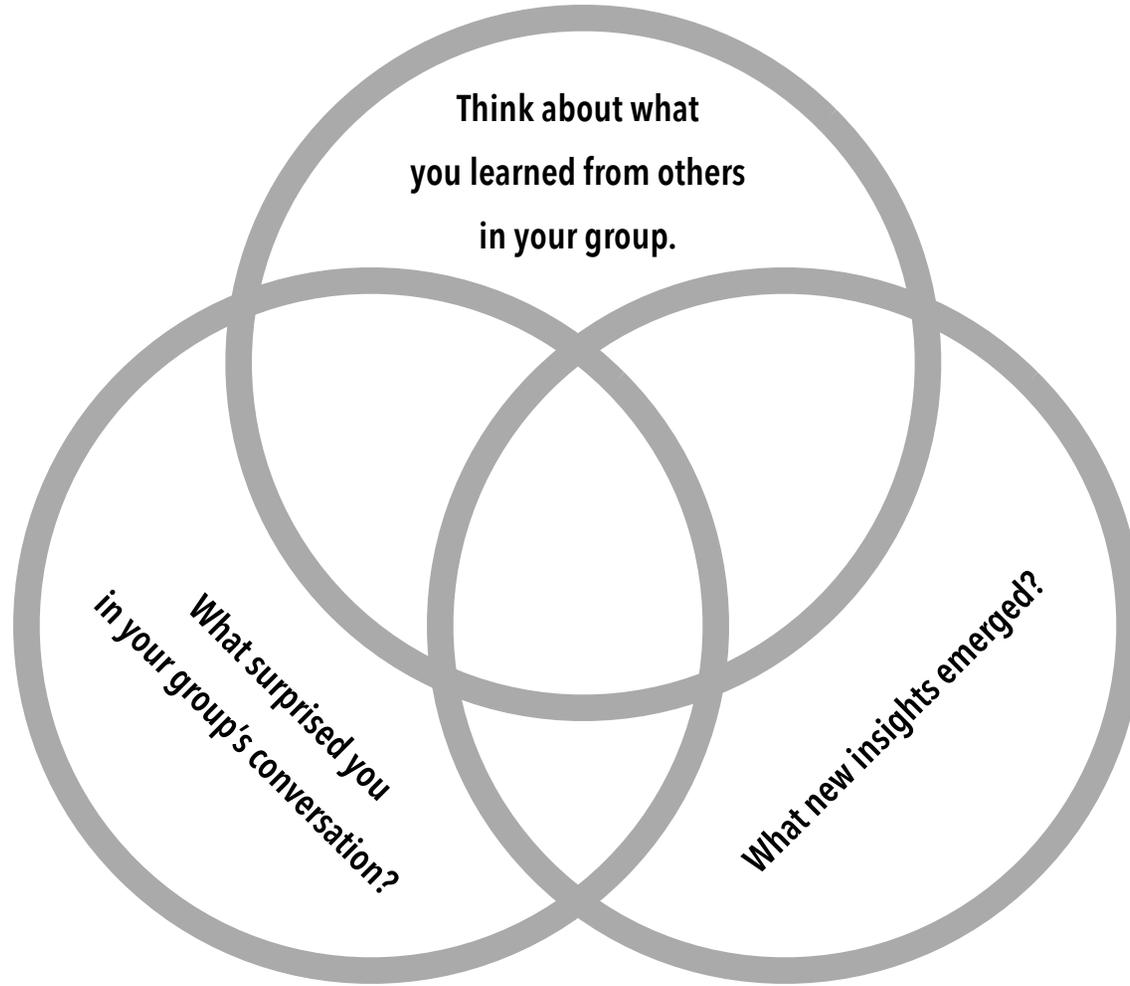
Tell a story about a time you found the wisdom to know the difference between what to accept and what to change and then made some import

Blessings

- ✦ May peace be a source of your life in God.
- ✦ May your serenity be centered in Christ.
- ✦ May the work you do be done in peace.
- ✦ May your serenity shine through how you live.
- ✦ May your serenity centered in God flow through what you do.
- ✦ May trust in God dwell in you.
- ✦ May you find what to accept and what to change.
- ✦ When you feel anxious or confused, may you awaken to the Spirit.
- ✦ When you awaken to the Spirit, may you say yes to serenity.
- ✦ When you say yes, may you follow faithfully.
- ✦ When you follow faithfully, may you give your life away.

D

SESSION FOUR | After the Meeting



Session Five



Cultivating Love

Session Contents

- A** What to Prepare Before the Meeting
- B** The Readings
- C** Agenda for the Meeting
- D** After the Meeting



A

What to Prepare Before the Meeting

Consider where you find overflowing joy.

In this guide, pages ...

READ Christian Wiman, "Gazing Into the Abyss" 89-94

READ "Reflection on Cultivating Love" 95-96

THINK about your responses to the "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" 102

You're welcome to write about them if you like.

Gazing into the Abyss *by Christian Wiman*

Though I was raised in a very religious household, until about a year ago I hadn't been to church in any serious way in more than 20 years. It would be inaccurate to say that I have been indifferent to God in all that time. If I look back on the things I have written in the past two decades, it's clear to me not only how thoroughly the forms and language of Christianity have shaped my imagination, but also how deep and persistent my existential anxiety has been. I don't know whether this is all attributable to the century into which I was born, some genetic glitch, or a late reverberation of the Fall of Man. What I do know is that I have not been at ease in this world.

Poetry, for me, has always been bound up with this unease, fueled by contingency toward forms that will transcend it, as involved with silence as it is with sound. I don't have much sympathy for the Arnoldian notion of poetry replacing religion. It seems not simply quaint but dangerous to make that assumption, even implicitly, perhaps especially implicitly. I do think, though, that poetry is how religious feeling has survived in me. Partly this is because I have at times experienced in the writing of a poem some access to a power that feels greater

than I am, and it seems reductive, even somehow a deep betrayal, to attribute that power merely to the unconscious or to the dynamism of language itself. But also, if I look back on the poems I've written in the past two decades, it almost seems as if the one constant is God. Or, rather, His absence.

There is a passage in the writings of Simone Weil that has long been important to me. In the passage, Weil describes two prisoners who are in solitary confinement next to each other. Between them is a stone wall. Over a period of time — and I think we have to imagine it as a very long time — they find a way to communicate using taps and scratches. The wall is what separates them, but it is also the only means they have of communicating. “It is the same with us and God,” she says. “Every separation is a link.”

It's probably obvious why this metaphor would appeal to me. If you never quite feel at home in your life, if being conscious means primarily being conscious of your own separation from the world and from divinity (and perhaps any sentient person after modernism has to feel these things) then any idea or image that can translate that depletion into

energy, those absences into presences, is going to be powerful. And then there are those taps and scratches: what are they but language, and if language is the way we communicate with the divine, well, what kind of language is more refined and transcendent than poetry? You could almost embrace this vision of life — if, that is, there were any actual life to embrace: Weil’s image for the human condition is a person in solitary confinement. There is real hope in the image, but still, in human terms, it is a bare and lonely hope.

It has taken three events, each shattering in its way, for me to recognize both the full beauty, and the final insufficiency, of Weil’s image. The events are radically different, but so closely linked in time, and so inextricable from one another in their consequences, that there is an uncanny feeling of unity to them. There is definitely some wisdom in learning to see our moments of necessity and glory and tragedy not as disparate experiences but as facets of the single experience that is a life. The pity, at least for some of us, is that we cannot truly have this knowledge of life, can only feel it as some sort of abstract “wisdom,” until we come very close to death.

First, necessity: four years ago, after making poetry the central purpose of my life for almost two decades, I stopped writing. Partly this was a conscious decision. I told myself that I had exhausted one way of writing, and I do think there was truth in that. The deeper truth, though, is that I myself was exhausted. To believe that being conscious means primarily being conscious of loss, to find life authentic only in the apprehension of death, is to pitch your tent at the edge of an abyss, “and when you gaze long into the abyss,” Nietzsche says, “the abyss also gazes into you.” I blinked.

On another level, though, the decision to stop writing wasn’t mine. Whatever connection I had long experienced between word and world, whatever charge in the former I had relied on to let me feel the latter, went dead. Did I give up poetry, or was it taken from me? I’m not sure, and in any event the effect was the same: I stumbled through the months, even thrived in some ways. Indeed — and there is something almost diabolical about this common phenomenon — it sometimes seemed like my career in poetry began to flourish just as poetry died in me. I finally found a reliable publisher for my work (the work I’d written earlier, I mean), moved into a good

teaching job, and then quickly left that for the editorship of Poetry. But there wasn't a scrap of excitement in any of this for me. It felt like I was watching a movie of my life rather than living it, an old silent movie, no color, no sound, no one in the audience but me.

Then I fell in love. I say it suddenly, and there was certainly an element of radical intrusion and transformation to it, but the sense I have is of color slowly aching into things, the world coming brilliantly, abradingly alive. I remember tiny Albert's Café on Elm Street in Chicago where we first met, a pastry case like a Pollock in the corner of my eye, sunlight suddenly more itself on an empty plate, a piece of silver. I think of walking together along Lake Michigan a couple of months later talking about a particular poem of Dickinson's ("A loss of something ever felt I"), clouds finding and failing to keep one form after another, the lake booming its blue into everything; of lying in bed in my highrise apartment downtown watching the little blazes in the distance that were the planes at Midway, so numerous and endless that all those safe departures and homecomings seemed a kind of secular miracle. We usually think of falling in love as being possessed

by another person, and like anyone else I was completely consumed and did some daffy things. But it also felt, for the first time in my life, like I was being fully possessed by being itself. "Joy is the overflowing consciousness of reality," Weil writes, and that's what I had, a joy that was at once so overflowing that it enlarged existence, and yet so rooted in actual things that, again for the first time, that's what I began to feel: rootedness.

I don't mean to suggest that all my old anxieties were gone. There were still no poems, and this ate at me constantly. There was still no God, and the closer I came to reality, the more I longed for divinity — or, more accurately perhaps, the more divinity seemed so obviously apart of reality. I wasn't alone in this: we began to say a kind of prayer before our evening meals — jokingly at first, awkwardly, but then with intensifying seriousness and deliberation, trying to name each thing that we were thankful for, and in so doing, praise the thing we could not name. On most Sundays we would even briefly entertain — again, half-jokingly, — the idea of going to church. The very morning after we got engaged, in fact, we paused for a long time outside a church on Michigan Avenue. The service was just about to start, organ

music pouring out of the wide open doors into the late May sun, and we stood there holding each other and debating whether or not to walk inside. In the end it was I who resisted.

I wish I could slow things down at this point, could linger a bit in those months after our marriage. I wish I could feel again that blissful sense of immediacy and expansiveness at once, when every moment implied another, and the future suddenly seemed to offer some counterbalance to the solitary fever I had lived in for so long. I think most writers live at some strange adjacency to experience, that they feel life most intensely in their recreation of it. For once, for me, this wasn't the case. I could not possibly have been paying closer attention to those days. Which is why I was caught so off-guard.

I got the news that I was sick on the afternoon of my 39th birthday. It took a bit of time, travel, and a series of wretched tests to get the specific diagnosis, but by then the main blow had been delivered, and that main blow is what matters. I have an incurable cancer in my blood. The disease is as rare as it is mysterious, killing some people quickly and sparing others for decades, afflicting some with all manner of miseries and disabilities and leaving others relatively

healthy until the end. Of all the doctors I have seen, not one has been willing to venture even a vague prognosis.

Conventional wisdom says that tragedy will cause either extreme closeness or estrangement in a couple. We'd been married less than a year when we got the news of the cancer. It stands to reason we should have been especially vulnerable to such a blow, and in some ways love did make things much worse. If I had gotten the diagnosis some years earlier — and it seems weirdly providential that I didn't, since I had symptoms and went to several doctors about them — I'm not sure I would have reacted very strongly. It would have seemed a fatalistic confirmation of everything I had always thought about existence, and my response, I think, would have been equally fatalistic. It would have been the bearable oblivion of despair, not the unbearable, and therefore galvanizing, pain of particular grief. In those early days after the diagnosis, when we mostly just sat on the couch and cried, I alone was dying, but we were mourning very much together. And what we were mourning was not my death, exactly, but the death of the life we had imagined with each other.

Then one morning we found ourselves going to church. Found ourselves. That's exactly what it felt like, in both senses of the phrase, as if some impulse in each of us had finally been catalyzed into action, so that we were casting aside the Sunday paper and moving toward the door with barely a word between us; and as if, once inside the church, we were discovering exactly where and who we were meant to be. That first service was excruciating, in that it seemed to tear all wounds wide open, and it was profoundly comforting, in that it seemed to offer the only possible balm. What I remember of that Sunday, though, and of the Sundays that immediately followed, is less the services themselves than the walks we took afterwards, and less the specifics of the conversations we had about God, always about God, than the moments of silent, and what felt like sacred, attentiveness those conversations led to: an iron sky and the lake so calm it seemed thickened; the El blasting past with its rain of sparks and brief, lost faces; the broad leaves and white blooms of a catalpa on our street, Grace Street, and under the tree a seethe of something that was just barely still a bird, quick with life beyond its own.

I was brought up with the poisonous notion that you had to renounce love of the earth in order to receive the love of God. My experience has been just the opposite: a love of the earth and existence so overflowing that it implied, or included, or even absolutely demanded, God. Love did not deliver me from the earth, but into it. And by some miracle I do not find that this experience is crushed or even lessened by the knowledge that, in all likelihood, I will be leaving the earth sooner than I had thought. Quite the contrary, I find life thriving in me, and not in an aestheticizing Death-is-the-mother-of-beauty sort of way either, for what extreme grief has given me is the very thing it seemed at first to obliterate: a sense of life beyond the moment, a sense of hope. This is not simply hope for my own life, though I do have that. It is not a hope for heaven or any sort of explainable afterlife, unless by those things one means simply the ghost of wholeness that our inborn sense of brokenness creates and sustains, some ultimate love that our truest temporal ones goad us toward. This I do believe in, and by this I live, in what the apostle Paul called "hope toward God."

"It is necessary to have had a revelation of reality through joy," Weil writes, "in order to find reality

through suffering.” This is certainly true to my own experience. I was not wrong all those years to believe that suffering is at the very center of our existence, and that there can be no untranquilized life that does not fully confront this fact. The mistake lay in thinking grief the means of confrontation, rather than love. To come to this realization is not to be suddenly “at ease in the world.” I don’t really think it’s possible for humans to be at the same time conscious and comfortable. Though we may be moved by nature to thoughts of grace, though art can tease our minds toward eternity and love’s abundance make us dream a love that does not end, these intuitions come only through the earth, and the earth we know only in passing, and only by passing. I would qualify Weil’s statement somewhat, then, by saying that reality, be it of this world or another, is not something one finds and then retains for good. It must be newly discovered daily, and newly lost.

So now I bow my head and try to pray in the mornings, not because I don’t doubt the reality of what I have experienced, but because I do, and with an intensity that, because to once feel the presence of God is to feel His absence all the more acutely, is actually more anguishing and difficult than any

“existential anxiety” I have ever known. I go to church on Sundays, not to dispel this doubt but to expend its energy, because faith is not a state of mind but an action in the world, a movement toward the world. How charged this one hour of the week is for me, and how I cherish it, though not one whit more than the hours I have with my wife, with friends, or in solitude, trying to learn how to inhabit time so completely that there might be no distinction between life and belief, attention and devotion. And out of all these efforts at faith and love, out of my own inevitable failures at both, I have begun to write poems again. But the language I have now to call on God is not only language, and the wall on which I make my taps and scratches is no longer a cell but this whole prodigal and all too perishable world in which I find myself, very much alive, and not at all alone. As I approach the first anniversary of my diagnosis, as I approach whatever pain is ahead of me, I am trying to get as close to this wall as possible. And I am listening with all I am.

Reflection on Cultivating Love

Session Five confronts the uncertainty many sometimes feel about the meaning of life, the existence of God, and the presence of God in our lives. Some of us, like the poet Christian Wiman, have not been “at ease in this world.” Wiman writes of pitching his “tent at the edge of an abyss,” and of “feeling like I was watching a movie of my life rather than living it, an old silent movie, no color, no sound, no one in the audience but me.” Though he felt confused and cut off, eventually the gift of love made his world come alive. Session Five explores ways that love, the greatest fruit of the Spirit, leads beyond itself to “an overflowing consciousness of reality.” Wiman describes his falling in love as the first time he felt like he was “fully possessed by being itself.” He felt “a joy that was at once so overflowing that it enlarged existence, and yet so rooted in actual things” that for the first time he himself felt rooted. Love rooted and grounded him in reality while it moved him beyond himself.

This love is a many-sided gift. Initially, Wiman simply “falls in love” and, after his diagnosis of incurable cancer, he and his wife find themselves going to church. The phrase “find themselves” implies that they do not will themselves to go. There is something spontaneous about it, something gracious.

They also discover “exactly where and who we were meant to be.” They cultivate these gifts by continuing to go to church and by walking afterwards, talking about God, and sharing moments of silent attentiveness to the palpable external world, seeing “an iron sky and the lake so calm it seemed thickened.” They find themselves more deeply rooted and more open to the infinite.

Falling in love does not by itself lead them to that place. After a year of marriage, they discovered that Wiman had cancer. He believes that if he had discovered the disease before falling in love, the incurable illness would have been the “fatalistic confirmation of everything” he had always thought. But, paradoxically, the love of Wiman and his wife for each other intensifies their grief and causes extreme closeness. Why was that the case? Why in feeling grief, did love grow? Wiman mentions two reasons. First, he writes, “I alone was dying, but we were mourning very much together.” Second, they mourned not his “death, exactly, but the death of the life we had imagined with each other.” Just as love had opened them to an enlarged existence, so it made possible their grief for something beyond themselves.

B

SESSION FIVE | Reflection on Cultivating Love

It was then that they found themselves going to church, where they were discovering where and who they were meant to be. Church was painful and yet also “profoundly comforting, in that it seemed to offer the only possible balm.” Afterwards they walked. Feeling “the moment of silent, and what felt like sacred, attentiveness” their conversations led to deep perceptions of simple things: “the broad leaves and white blooms of a catalpa on our street, Grace street, and under the tree a seethe of something that was just barely still a bird, quick with life beyond its own.”

Love is not a feeling that allows one to escape or transcend the world. It does not lead to the renunciation of the world. We love God and neighbor as the Gospel of Mark puts it. Wiman’s faith was brought to earth by love:

I was brought up with the poisonous notion that you had to renounce love of the earth in order to receive the love of God. My experience has been just the opposite: a love of the earth and existence so overflowing that it implied, or included, or even absolutely demanded God. Love did not deliver me from the earth, but into it. And by some miracle I do not find that this experience is crushed or even lessened by the knowledge that, in all likelihood, I will be leaving the earth sooner than I thought. Quite the contrary, I find life thriving in me. For what

extreme grief has given me [is]...a sense of life beyond the moment, a sense of hope...This I do believe in, and by this I live, in what the apostle Paul called ‘hope toward God’.

Love leads to God and so to other fruits of the Spirit: to hope, joy, generosity, faithfulness, and peace. It is not a state of mind but a movement toward the earth and toward “a sense of life beyond the moment” in God.

B

SESSION FIVE | Reflection on Cultivating Love

BLANK FOR BINDING PURPOSES

C

Agenda for Meeting

Gather with Music

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" | Available at sp-r.org/fully-alive

Contemplate an Image

Look at Mary Cassatt's painting, "The Child's Bath"

You may write or draw in the space below.





Pray Together

Use Lectio Divina to contemplate this prayer:

Mark 12:28-31

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength’, and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Reflection

Read by the facilitator:

Session Five confronts the uncertainty many of us sometimes feel about the meaning of life or our relationship to God. Some of us, like the poet, Christian Wiman, have not been "at ease in this world." However, the gift of love made the world come alive for him and it can do the same for us. Love, the greatest fruit of the Spirit, leads us beyond ourselves to what Wiman calls "a joy that was at once so overflowing that it enlarged existence, and yet so rooted in actual things" that we too can feel rooted. Love is a gift in the sense that we "fall in love" but also in the sense that Wiman and his wife "found themselves" going to church. It happened spontaneously, and they discovered "exactly where and who" they were meant to be. They also cultivated the gift of love by walking, talking about God, and sharing moments of quiet attentiveness to the beautiful world around them. Paradoxically, their love was intensified by grief when they mourned together for Wiman's lost health, and when, having opened themselves to an enlarged existence made possible by love, they grieved for something beyond themselves.

Love, then is not a feeling that allows one to escape or transcend the world. Nor does it lead to the renunciation of the world. We love God and neighbor as the Gospel of Mark puts it. Wiman was brought to earth by love. His love of the earth and existence was so overflowing that "it implied, or included, or even absolutely demanded God."

C

Explore Together:

What struck you about love's power to change Wiman's attitudes toward reality, himself, or his life?

Have you ever felt depleted or exhausted to the point where you wondered about the meaning of life? What happened to change your feelings (if they changed)?

Is there a time when an experienced of love made your world come alive, or led beyond itself to something that enlarged your existence? Tell a story about this experience of love.

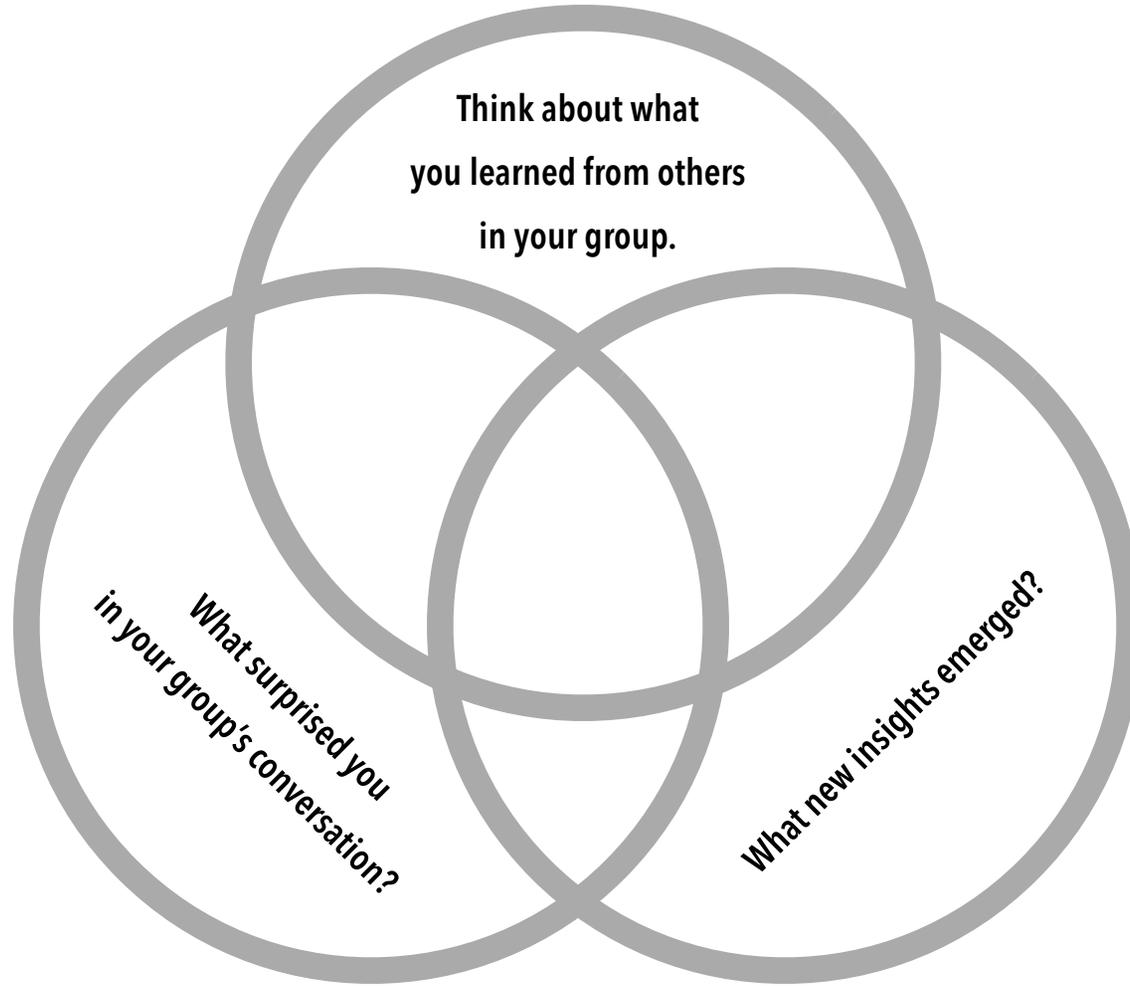
How do you cultivate love that that moves you beyond yourself toward the world and God? What difference does that activity make in your life? (Wiman began to write poetry, converse with his wife, pray, and go to church).

Blessings

- ✦ May God bless you with love for family, friends, and neighbours.
- ✦ May you follow Christ's gracious example.
- ✦ May you discern the gift of love showered upon you.
- ✦ And may love make your world come alive.
- ✦ May the ear of your heart discern the Holy Spirit.
- ✦ May you respond by loving the life you lead.
- ✦ May you grow in grace, accepting change as it comes.
- ✦ And may you trust that the Spirit moves in love, through questions as well as clarity,
- ✦ ... through people as well as prayer, ...
- ✦ ... through closed doors as well as open paths.
- ✦ May the Holy Spirit open your ears and change your heart.
- ✦ When the Spirit moves you toward love and you say "maybe," may God nudge you closer to your true self.
- ✦ When grace calls and you say "yes," may you respond with love toward others and toward God.

D

SESSION FIVE | After the Meeting



APPENDIX

Guidelines for Discussion with One Another

We extend hospitality to welcome one another with words and actions. We respect confidentiality. All that we hear and share stays within this room.

We attend every meeting.

We share, and we listen in quiet. Each one may decide to share or not at any moment. But we are present to one another.

We honor each voice and share from our unique individual story. None of us speaks for a whole group, profession, or way of life.

Each of us listens with the "ear of our heart." We listen and learn; we do not offer advice.

We respect differences, reserve judgment, and turn to wonder as we hear the stories of others.

After we leave, let us lift up one another's lives and stories to God in prayer.

APPENDIX

Lectio Divina: An Introduction

Lectio divina or “holy reading” is an ancient practice from the Christian tradition. Saint Benedict described the process of lectio divina in his “Rule of Saint Benedict” written around the year 500. Lectio divina is a slow, quiet, and thoughtful encounter with Scripture.

Reading and reflecting on the biblical passage three times provides time and space for God’s Word to move from our lips, into our minds, and finally into our hearts.

Find a quiet place for your reflection. Begin in prayer:

Lord, open my heart to reflect on your call in my life and for my life. Amen.

Read the Scripture passage aloud. Spend a few moments in silence thinking about the passage. What word or phrase strikes you? Hold that word or phrase in your mind as you spend a few moments in quiet reflection.

Read the Scripture passage aloud a second time. What might God be saying to you through this word or phrase? Again take some time to reflect.

Read the Scripture passage aloud a third and final time. How does your word or phrase lead to action?

Sit with the Scripture passage for another minute in quiet reflection and thanksgiving. Then close with a final prayer:

Lord, open my heart to reflect on your call in my life and for my life. Amen.



Your Feedback

Thank you for your participation in "Fully Alive." We hope your group's reflections and conversations were meaningful for you. As you think back on the questions raised by "Fully Alive," we ask you to consider your experience as part of this group. We welcome your feedback and suggestions as we continue to develop this program. You can also reply online at sp-r.org/fully-alive

1. How did your understanding of ways to move from anxiety, fear, egoism, or depression to joy, generosity, faithfulness, peace, and love change over the course of the meetings?

Your Leader _____

Your Name (optional) _____

2. How did your awareness of "living fully" change?

3. What do you think were the most meaningful aspects of the meetings?

4. What one thing would you change?



Fully Alive

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