



Return to the Root

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

reflections on the inner life

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An Invitation 1

January 2

February 3

March 4

April 5

May 6

June 7

July 8

August 9

September 10

October 11

November 12

December 13



AN INVITATION

The dialogue prompts throughout this guide ask for a comfortableness in sharing personal insights and awareness. Rather than the discussion of ideas, they lend themselves more aptly for reflection on individual experiences. The prompts can assist a study group who meets once per month to discuss that month's content, or they can be used for personal reflection and journaling.

The following prompts apply to all twelve months. They can be used to open the dialogue for each month's conversation or to begin personal reflection.

- What have been your experiences during this month of your life?
- Summarize the overall effect of the content and focus of the month for you as it was presented in *Return to the Root*.
- Was there something that especially resonated with you? If so, what?
- Is there anything you disagreed with, questioned, or wished to know more about?



JANUARY

Opening

The leader reads “Stay, My Heart, Stay.” The group responds to the following: **“Have you had an experience like that which the author describes? What does ‘Yin space’ suggest to you? Who or what encourages you to ‘stay’ with what is stirring in you?”**

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. Describe your sense of “rootedness.” How could “rootedness” assist you as you enter a new year?
2. What are some ways that you “lived life fully” in the past year?
3. Review Tagore’s letter to a friend. If you were writing to a friend about the past year, what would you include in your letter?
4. If you knew you had just one day to live, how would you live it?
5. How do you view “making resolutions” at the start of a new year? Have you ever made a resolution that had a significant impact on your life?
6. With which of the “stretchings” listed do you most relate? Is there another “stretching” that you would add?

Closing

The leader directs the group: **“Pause to imagine yourself as a root in the wintered ground. Listen for the ‘murmuring of life’ within yourself.”** Then the group prays “*A Winter Prayer*.” Each participant reads one of the sections until the last section, which is read by all present.

FEBRUARY

Opening

The leader reads the poem *"Love Received, Love Released."* Each member of the group is then invited to hold one of their hands to their heart and to extend the other hand outward toward the group. Everyone closes their eyes and intentionally moves love out from their heart to those in the group. At the same time, they also receive love into their hearts from those present. The leader concludes by rereading the last five lines of the poem, beginning:

"I sit holding memories . . ."

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, "An Invitation," the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. Describe your sense of "rootedness." How could "rootedness" assist you as you enter a new year?
2. What are some ways that you "lived life fully" in the past year?
3. What is the "costly perfume" that loving generously requires of you? How have you known kindness?
4. When have you felt the need to lean on someone for support? What was it like for you when you did this?
5. Share your thoughts and feelings about the scene in the garden of Gethsemane. Have you had an experience that reflects this type of situation?
6. Summarize what it means for you to be vulnerable. What holds you back from activating this quality of yours?
7. Review Rabbi Rami Shapiro's statement in "Please Forgive Me." Do you agree? Disagree? Are there missing aspects you'd want to include?
8. What have you learned from the times when you forgave or were forgiven?

Closing

The leader directs the group: **"Pause to recall those persons who are central to your love."** Then, going around the circle, each individual speaks the names of those persons aloud. After a minute of quiet gratitude, the group prays together "Enticing My Heart."



MARCH

Opening

The group reads “Burdens” aloud by going around the circle with each person reading until coming to the end of a sentence. After this, the leader directs the group: **“Describe what you consider to be some of the burdens of life for yourself and for society.”**

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. What are some of the “costs” you’ve had to pay for the good that came your way?
2. How do you perceive “human nature?” In what way has this perception influenced your approach to life?
3. What do you think about having more focus on goodness rather than on sinfulness in your spiritual life?
4. Who or what has helped you in becoming your “best and truest” self?
5. Recall a time when someone “opened the door a crack” for you. How did that change the way you looked at your situation?
6. What central teaching does the good Samaritan story hold for you? Have you ever applied it to your own transformation process?
7. When you look back on your life, what are some ways you have grown spiritually? How are you with being patient?

Closing

With a lit candle and a cross in the center of the circle, the group sits quietly. The leader directs the group: **“Bring to mind people you know who are especially burdened. Quietly unite them with the divine Companion of hurting hearts.”** Then the group prays “Hold My Hand” by going around the circle with each person reading one of the sections. All read the last section together.



APRIL

Opening

The leader reads “April Arrival.” Participants then share one thing about April that they enjoy.

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. Where do you most find joy in your life?
2. Have you ever allowed someone to steal your joy? If so, how did this happen?
3. What are the resistances that keep you from “having the chains broken”? Recall a time when inner freedom occurred for you.
4. What does the term *mudita* suggest for your way of being with others?
5. Do you agree with the quote from Narayan Helen Liebenson?
6. In what way have you noticed the consequences of envy?
7. Have you ever planned for something to take place that turned out quite differently than you envisioned? How did you respond?
8. Describe one of your unexpected “God-moments” or “little Easters.”
9. When do you experience “being happy?” Who or what influences your happiness?

Closing

The leader directs the group: **“Pause for a few minutes in silence and allow joy to find a home in you.”** Then the group forms two sides and alternates in reading the prayer “Hearken, Hope, Hearken.”



MAY

Opening

Begin with four group members each reading a verse of “A Wing and a Hand.” Then the leader asks individuals to share what they consider to be the poem’s main message.

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. What most caught your attention in the essay, “The Wild Flow of Energy”?
2. How has the Spirit’s “wild flow of energy” visited and influenced you?
3. How would you define grace? How has grace been a part of your life?
4. What insights resonated with you in “Listen to the Echo”?
5. Is there a central idea or thought that has been echoing in you in recent days or weeks?
6. How does music affect your spirit? What are some of your favorite songs?
7. “You are the music,” wrote Br. David Stiendl Rast. What kind of song reflects how you are now feeling?
8. When have you felt the greatest peace?
9. Describe a peace-creator whom you have known personally or through history.

Closing

In Roman Catholicism, the month of May is dedicated to Mary of Nazareth, mother of Jesus. Luke’s gospel tells of Mary pondering the mystery of what was unfolding in her life. The leader directs the group: **“Pause to ponder what you have just reflected on in your discussion. How do you want it to influence you in the coming weeks?”** Then the group prays the Hail Mary together.



JUNE

Opening

The leader invites the group: **“Sit quietly for several minutes. Be attentive to your breath. Notice how naturally you breathe in and out. As you breathe out, imagine that each breath is bringing peace to the persons who are with you.”** Conclude with each person extending a sign of peace to the others who are present.

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. What is one “drab brown thing” that you value?
2. How has the notion of “being perfect” been a factor in how you think and act?
3. With what part of “Finding Feathers” did you most identify?
4. What do you associate with the phrase “a feather on the breath of God”?
5. How would you differentiate between gawking and gazing? Which of these is more natural for you to do?
6. Have you ever contemplated your food with awe?
7. What rhythms of life are you most aware of?
8. Which rhythms of life have greatest significance for you?
9. How are you affected by the faces of others?
10. Imagine you are Rose in the packed commuter train as described in “The Face Reveals the Soul.” How might you have responded if you were in that situation?

Closing

All present read the last verse of “Frail Beauty.” The group then stands in a circle. The leader blesses one person in the group with this adapted blessing from Numbers 6:24–26: **“The Holy One bless you and keep you. May the Holy One’s face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Holy One give you peace.”** That person then turns and blesses the next person with the same words. This continues around the circle until all have been blessed.



JULY

Opening

Begin with the prayer in the essay “Where Does My Heart Belong?” Each person reads a line to the end of a sentence. All read the last line together.

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. Describe your awareness and experience of light.
2. Did the description of bioluminescence remind you of an experience in your life?
If so, in what way?
3. What is it like for you to recognize your own or another’s inner radiance?
4. What supports and strengthens you to trust your implicit wisdom?
5. When has your heart known “the way to go”? What was that like for you?
6. Name some of the “countless things that distract” you from “heading toward the Source.”
7. When do you feel “a wistful longing to slip into that amazing Center where the soul is at home with God”?
8. Share one “hidden thing” in your life that has influenced your spiritual growth.
9. How at home are you with “mystery” and the unknown or uncertain parts of your life?
10. Recall a situation where you have laughed at yourself about something you said or did.
11. What conclusions do you draw about the benefits of laughter?

Closing

The leader passes a lit candle around the group. Each person holds the candle while remembering their indwelling, radiant Light. Then the group forms two sides and alternates in reading the prayer “Love Lights the Heart’s Lantern.”



AUGUST

Opening

Each person chooses an object from nature that the leader has gathered and placed in a basket or bowl (a leaf, flower, stone, pine cone, shell, feather, piece of bark, or something similar). Quietly reflect on how this piece of creation could be your teacher. After this reflection, each group member shares the “teachings” of their chosen object.

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. Describe any experience of an “Upaguru” that showed up in your life. What did you learn?
2. Mark Nepo writes, “God is an infinite secret hiding in the open.” What aspect of divinity have you found “hiding in the open?”
3. What part of the essay on the sunflower field most spoke to you?
4. Do some of the “lessons” from the sunflower field relate to the way your life has evolved?
5. In a few sentences, how would you identify who you now are?
6. Review the quote by Margaret Silf. Are there “walls that seem to enclose you” when it comes to your personal growth? How might those walls help you to make a necessary change?
7. What part of your personality do you especially appreciate?
8. Is there a part of your personality that you would like to change?
9. How have you experienced equanimity?
10. What is of most help to you in finding calm “in the midst of chaos”?

Closing

Group members mention one comment from the session that they have found especially insightful. Then the group prays the “Elderhood Sunflower Prayer,” with each individual reading a section and all reading the last part together.



SEPTEMBER

Opening

The leader reads “Standing Beneath the Cross” and then invites the group to a few minutes of quiet prayer as they imagine standing beneath the cross of someone who is suffering. The leader concludes by reading the words of Caryl Houselander at the end of the essay “Devoted Service.”

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. If you were to list the most vital elements of devoted service, what would you include?
2. Recall and describe several persons you’ve known who are examples of providing devoted care for others.
3. When did someone listen to you in a way that helped you make it through a tough time?
4. What most enables you to be a good listener? What keeps you from this?
5. Does anything prevent you from considering yourself as a “temple without walls”?
6. How might your life be different if you developed a daily awareness that you are a dwelling place of the Holy One?
7. Regarding Thomas R. Kelly’s quote that opens “Small Seed, Big Harvest,” what tends to choke the “seed stirring to life” within you?
8. Describe a “one-seed-action” that made a difference for yourself or others.
9. How has trust influenced the way you go about your life?

Closing

The group sits for a time of silence. Following this, the leader directs the group: “**Recall an experience when someone’s small deed of kindness was just what you needed.**” Then the group prays “A Prayer for Caregivers.” Each person reads one full sentence. All read the last sentence together.



OCTOBER

Opening

The group alternates with the leader in reading every other verse of “Yielding.”

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. If you were to list the most vital elements of devoted service, what would you include?
2. How or where do you find inspiration and courage to relinquish what you must in order to continue to be transformed?
3. What do you consider to be troublesome about personal relinquishment?
4. When does your soul especially need strength and support?
5. How have you managed to “hang on” or “let go” when it was necessary to do so?
6. Review the quote by Patrick Fleming in “Sipping from Mud Puddles.” How does this relate to your experience when you’ve gone through difficult, heart-aching times?
7. Describe a person whose “soul resilience” is especially apparent to you.
8. As you look back at your life, what is one of the hardest things you’ve had to do?
9. What keeps you from giving up when you face what appears to be insurmountable obstacles?
10. When has a “dove of hope” shown up in your life?

Closing

The leader reads Hebrews 6:18–19 at the top of “A Prayer of Anchoring,” then pauses for a few minutes of stillness. The leader then reads the first paragraph of the prayer. Individuals each read one of the sections after that.



NOVEMBER

Opening

The leader reads “The Power of Fragrance.” The group pauses to reflect on the poem. Following this, group members describe a fragrance and the memory it elicits for them.

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. How can a strong memory be a catalyst for personal transformation?
2. If you have had a memory that brought about eventual change, describe how this happened and the outcome of it.
3. Do you remember when you first learned to read? How has being literate influenced your life?
4. What might some of your “forgotten gifts” be?
5. How would you define spiritual kinship? Name some of its qualities.
6. How have these qualities of spiritual kinship been present in your experiences?
7. Write the names of several persons who have left footprints on your heart. In what way have they left their loving imprint?
8. How do you respond when you are feeling like “November”—nonproductive, empty, and stripped of good feelings?
9. What has been the result when you’ve had an emptying season of your enthusiasm?

Closing

The leader directs the group: **“Pause to remember with gratitude those with whom you’ve known spiritual kinship and those who have left footprints on your heart.”** Then the group prays together the prayer that concludes the essay “Footprints on Our Hearts.”



DECEMBER

Opening

The group quietly reads and reflects on “Receiving from the Taproot.” Then the leader asks the group to respond to the question: **“What have you received from the divine Taproot?”**

Journaling and Dialogue

After the group discusses the general prompts from the first chapter in this guide, “An Invitation,” the group members are invited to share their reflections on the following questions.

1. What images does the term *living sanctuary* evoke?
2. Has someone been a shelter for you? Have you ever offered to be that for another person?
3. “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly.” What does this mean to you? Who or what has encouraged you in doing this?
4. What is it like for you when someone gazes into your eyes?
5. Setting aside the option of material gifts, what are you asking for this Christmas? If you could only have one of those gifts, which one would you most want to have?
6. Recall an experience in which your heart expanded. What would assist your heart to expand more fully during Advent?
7. Is there a “Jacob” in your life who needs to be met with forgiveness?
8. Where and how might you find stillness during this hurried, active season?
9. What helps you detect and welcome the presence of the Holy One in your midst?

Closing

The group prays “Three Prayers to Carry You through Advent.” The leader reads the quote preceding the prayers, and then the group members read the three prayers together. After each prayer, the group pauses for a minute to be still, to absorb what has just been prayed. After the last prayer and a pause for stillness, the group stands in a circle and joins hands. One by one, each person speaks her or his name. After each name is spoken, all respond: **“The Holy One dwells among us.”**