



TOUCHSTONES

Small Group Discussion Guide

Communion & Deepening Connections

Before You Gather

Read the following pieces prior to gathering.

1. *The Welcome Table*

by Rev. Dr. Robert M. Hardies

My question for us is this: what does it mean to be a people of the welcome table in an age of the wall? This is the question we will all face again and again in the years to come... In our resistance, we must not succumb to the temptations of self-righteousness. We must not succumb to the false belief that threats to the welcome table are solely external to us. Let us once and for all confess that the cultures of racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, and transphobia shape our souls too, even as we seek to resist them.... The welcome table calls us now not only to ministries of resistance but also ministries of reconciliation... beginning with the people that are closest to us... and begin the conversation with your story... and invite their story with openness....

Source: [no longer online](#)

2. *Communion with Otherness* by Maggie Ross

What we have most in common with the creation and other people is otherness: the mysterious otherness of the deep mind, the mysterious otherness of other people, and the mysterious otherness of creation. It is through otherness that we share the common center of the circle that is everywhere. This otherness calls forth from us a reverence, a humility and respect, an awe before ourselves, one another, and the creation that turns our gaze away from the comparisons of difference and finally relinquishes even the seductive metaphors of *difference*. Our most profound commonality with ourselves, with each other, with the creation, is not affected by what we can know, *but by what we cannot know*. Our communion is engagement with the mystery of otherness, our own, that of other people, the creation as a whole of

which we are a part, and the mysterious Other beyond all knowing.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28091>

3. *With Everything That Is* by Gunilla Norris

All true intimacies are gifts. They appear as if from behind us, beside us, above us, below us. We usually cannot see them coming. They take our whole attention, and, in the process, we have a chance to come face-to-face with something we did not know about the world and ourselves.

To commune, to discover and to be discovered, is deeply human. Real convergences are revelations that lift us out of ourselves, out of recoiling from any aspect of reality. We experience the self then — all possessive pronouns gone — the joy of existence, which is the light within everything, the light that burns for its own sake, declaring, ‘I am that I am.’

The Latin word for “intimate” is *intimus*, “inmost.” If we live in an “inmost” manner with our surroundings, we can see and know much more about ourselves and the world. We can experience that each being that dwells with us calls it home, too. To remember, to hold, and to venerate the life around us is to honor the holy in the place where we live. It is also a way to celebrate the earth — the first and primary intimacy from which all other intimacies develop.

...All places contain the sacred. They ask us to participate, to be fully here on earth. The fulcrum of this universe may ultimately be a passionate mutuality in which we surrender any separate definition of ourselves and discover that we are who we are together, in a fundamental relationship and communion with everything that is.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28003>

4. **Communion With What is Real**

by Lama Marut

...We all know that it is in those moments when we completely lose ourselves ...that we are truly happy. These experiences point to something extremely important: *Our greatest joy comes when we vacate ourselves and give ourselves over to something or someone else.* It is when we manage to “stand outside of ourselves” (*exstasis*) that we experience *ecstasy*.

True and deeply felt self-esteem comes not through the exhausting quest for more and more ego inflation. It comes only when the ego and its endless demands are quieted and quenched....

It is only when we stop narrating the play-by-play of our lives and actually start living in an unmediated and direct way that we become really present and fully engaged. It is only when that little voice inside our head finally shuts up that we ...become truly happy.

It is important to have a good, healthy sense of self-worth, and the point of being nobody is certainly not to become servile, a doormat on which others can trample. But thinking that we will feel fulfilled only if we become *more special than* others, leads to an increase, not a diminishing, of anxiety and dissatisfaction.

Wanting to be somebody unique — or somehow ‘more unique than others’ — is actually quite common: there’s nothing special about wanting to be special. But it is this very drive for radical individuality and superiority that keeps us feeling isolated and alone. In the end, the willingness to let go and *be nobody* is what’s really extraordinary, and it is the only means for real connection with others and communion with what is real.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/26644>

5. **From Supremacy to Communion**

by Brian McLaren

The road to faith after doubt is often lonely. But beyond the loneliness, you discover a place of solidarity where everything is sacred and everything belongs, including your doubts and including you. This replacement of supremacy with solidarity, I imagine, involves an actual rewiring or re-patterning of our brains.

...We surrender the supremacy of our ego, our self-centered demands for power, pleasure, prestige,

prominence. We surrender the supremacy of our group, whether that group is defined by religion, race, politics, nationality, economic class, social status, or whatever. We even surrender the supremacy of our species, realizing that humans can’t survive and thrive unless the plankton and trees, the soil and bees, and the climate and seas thrive too. We gladly shed supremacy to make room for solidarity. That gain, we discover is worth every cost.

Faith after doubt, we might say, means living beyond supremacy.

...As we release our desperate grasp on supremacy, as the desire to dominate slips through our fingers, something in us dies. Much is lost or forgotten, deemed not worth remembering. But in the letting go, something new comes, is born, begins, grows: a sense of connection, of not-aloneness, of communion and union and belonging. We descend from the ladders and pedestals we have erected, and we rejoin the community of creation, the network of shalom, the ecosystem of harmony. The loss is no small thing, ...but the gain is incomparably greater.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28653>

6. **A Communion with the Earth: Gardening and Gratitude** by Catherine Ann Lombard

It took me a long time and a good deal of sweat to understand it—just how much our Earth is a sanctuary for our souls.

...It wasn’t until I too had this *esperienza* of hoeing, planting, composting, weeding, watering, and finally reaping the harvest of my own garden did I come to understand how holy the Earth really is.

...My retired neighbor Angelo ...once told me that gardening was the most humble of tasks: “Your head is always bowed and sometimes you have to go down on your knees.”

...As the gardener creates, so does the garden transform the inner life of its creator. The garden’s cycle mirrors our own growth....

...In our deeper psyche we tend to our life’s garden of sorrows and joys. We pull out, cut back, dig up, bury, sow, support, and nourish hoping one day to harvest our life’s experiences into wisdom. Without all this soul/gardening work, our spirits are

swamped under the weeds, our creative gifts choked, our true selves unable to flourish.

...There is communion with our Earth, the holy connection between us and the planet. What better way to participate in this than by eating a cherry tomato or snap pea that we have grown in relationship with the Earth? This replenishment of our bodies with what the Earth offers us through our own labor aided by nature's gifts of sun and rain creates a circular relationship of spiritual unity. Perhaps this is the true meaning of Eucharist, which comes from the Greek for gratitude. By receiving the garden's bounty into our bodies, we gain the strength, energy, and respect to continue our lives in tandem with it.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/a-communion-with-the-earth-gardening-and-gratitude/>

Gathering

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: *The Forming Edge of Our Lives* by Rev. Kathleen McTigue

We come together ...to remind one another

To rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives,

To resist the headlong tumble into the next moment,
Until we claim for ourselves

Awareness and gratitude,

Taking the time to look into one another's faces

And see there communion: the reflection of our own eyes.

This community of laughter and silence, memory and hope,

Is hallowed by our presence together.

Source: SLT #435

Chalice Lighting: *A Communion of Heart and Soul* by Rev. Bruce Southworth

For the gift of this day and for our community of spiritual nurture and compassion, we give thanks.

We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith. May our many sparks meet and merge in communion of heart and soul.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/communion-heart-and-soul>

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Invite someone to read aloud the following wisdom story.

The Soup Stone by Anthony de Mello, SJ

A woman in a village ...[found] a ...stranger at her door asking for something to eat. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have nothing..."

"Not to worry," said the ...stranger. "I have a soup stone...; if you will let me put it in a pot of boiling water, I'll make the most delicious soup in the world."

...She put the pot on the fire.... By the time the water began to boil all the neighbors had gathered... The stranger dropped the stone into the water then tasted a teaspoonful with relish and exclaimed, "Ah, delicious! All it needs is some potatoes."

"I have potatoes in my kitchen," shouted one woman. ...Sliced potatoes ...were thrown into the pot. "Excellent!" he said. But added..., "If we only had some meat..."

Another housewife [brought some] meat that the stranger accepted graciously and flung into the pot. ... "If we had some vegetables, it would be perfect, absolutely perfect."

One of the neighbors ...returned with ...carrots and onions. ...The stranger tasted the mixture, he said..., "Salt and sauce." "Right here," said the housewife. ... "Bowls for everyone." People [brought] ...bowls. Some even brought back bread and fruit.

Then they all sat down to a delicious meal.... Everyone felt strangely happy as they laughed and talked and shared their very first common meal. In the middle of the merriment, the stranger quietly slipped away, leaving behind the miraculous soup stone that they could use any time they wanted to make the loveliest soup in the world.

Source: <http://ateneo.edu/ateneoishome/article/generosity>

Readings from the Common Bowl: Invite group members to read the following selections aloud. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite

reflection on the meaning of the words.

“We don’t come to the table to fight or to defend. We don’t come to prove or to conquer, to draw lines in the sand or to stir up trouble. We come to the table because our hunger brings us there. We come with a need, with fragility, with an admission of our humanity. The table is the great equalizer, the level playing field many of us have been looking everywhere for. The table is the place where the doing stops, the trying stops, the masks are removed, and we allow ourselves to be nourished, like children. We allow someone else to meet our need. In a world that prides people on not having needs, ongoing longer and faster, ongoing without, on powering through, the table is a place of safety and rest and humanity, where we are allowed to be as fragile as we feel.” *Shauna Niequist*

“Recognize that the very molecules that make up your body, the atoms that construct the molecules, are traceable to the crucibles that were once the centers of high mass stars that exploded their chemically rich guts into the galaxy, enriching pristine gas clouds with the chemistry of life. So that we are all connected to each other biologically, to the earth chemically and to the rest of the universe atomically. ...It’s not that we are better than the universe, we are part of the universe. We are in the universe and the universe is in us.” *Neil deGrasse Tyson*

“The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless, it is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity.... We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.” *Tom Ryan*

“Previous technologies have expanded communication. But the last round may be contracting it. The eloquence of letters has turned into the nuanced spareness of texts; the intimacy of phone conversations has turned into the missed signals of mobile phone chat. I think of that lost world, the way we lived before these new networking technologies, as having two poles: solitude and communion. The new chatter puts us

somewhere in between, assuaging fears of being alone without risking real connection. It is a shallow between two deeper zones, a safe spot between the dangers of contact with ourselves, with others.” *Rebecca Solnit*

“I’ve often thought of the forest as a living cathedral, but this might diminish what it truly is. If I have understood Koyukon [i.e., Alaskan Native Athabascan people] teachings, the forest is not merely an expression or representation of sacredness, nor a place to invoke the sacred; the forest is sacredness itself. Nature is not merely created by God; nature is God. Whoever moves within the forest can partake directly of sacredness, experience sacredness with his entire body, breathe sacredness and contain it within himself, drink the sacred water as a living communion, bury his feet in sacredness, touch the living branch and feel the sacredness, open his eyes and witness the burning beauty of sacredness.” *Richard Nelson*

“We flourish in communion with each other.... There are no donors or receivers.... There are no relationships that are not reciprocal.... But freedom isn’t something that is given. It is something very arduous, because nobody gives freedom to anyone else, no one frees another, nobody can even free himself all alone; ...[people] free themselves only in concert, in communion, collaborating on something wrong that they want to correct. There is an interesting theological parallel to this: no one saves ...[themselves] alone, because only in communion can we save ourselves—or not save ourselves.” *Paulo Freire*

“We have to be educated by the other. My heart cannot be educated by myself. It can only come out of a relationship with others. And if we accept being educated by others, to let them explain to us what happens to them, and to let yourself be immersed in their world so that they can get into our world, then you begin to share something very deep. You will never be the person in front of you, but you will have created what we call communion.” *Krista Tippett*

“An apology is supposed to be a communion—a coming together. For someone to make an apology, someone has to be listening. They listen and you

speak and there's an exchange. That's why we have a thing about accepting apologies." *Jon Ronson*

"The secret of a full life is to live and relate to others as if they might not be there tomorrow, as if you might not be there tomorrow. It eliminates the vice of procrastination, the sin of postponement, failed communications, failed communions."

Anaïs Nin

"When men live huddled together without true communication, there seems to be a greater sharing, and a more genuine communion. But this is not communion, only immersion in the general meaninglessness of countless slogans and clichés repeated over and over again so that in the end one listens without hearing and responds without thinking. The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible...."

Thomas Merton

Reading

7. *The Communion of Ubuntu* by Mark Nepo

The African ethic of ubuntu is often translated as *I am because you are, you are because I am*. It implies that we find our humanity in each other. *Ubuntu* literally means *a person is a person through other persons*. This heartfelt tradition concentrates on the irrevocable connectedness that exists between people. Based on this fundamental commitment to human kinship, there is no word for orphan in the African continent, because each tribe automatically assumes a lost child as part of its larger family.

At work here is the belief that in our very nature, we rely on each other to grow. As quarks combine to form protons and neutrons, which then form atoms, which then form molecules, individuals innately form families, which then form tribes, which then form nations. Our strong need to interact stems from the irreducible nature of love. In fact, all the worldviews we're discussing are manifestations of our innate need to join. The practice that comes from the notion of ubuntu is the vow to water our common roots by which we all grow and to honor our strong need to join.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28338>

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time and interest allow. Fully explore one question before moving to the next. The questions do not need to be discussed in order.

1. In reading #1, Rob Hardies asks, "My question for us is this: what does it mean to be a people of the welcome table in an age of the wall?" The welcome table is a communion table, a table of hospitality. It is not the table of the Last Supper, but all of the tables of the dispossessed where Jesus shared a meal. What is your image of a welcome table? Who would you invite to the table? What would be your hopes for that gathering, for that People's Supper?
2. In reading #2, Maggie Ross writes that we are bound together by otherness, "the mysterious otherness of the deep mind, the mysterious otherness of other people, and the mysterious otherness of creation." Do you know yourself completely, or are there still undiscovered regions within yourself? Norman Maclean wrote, "It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us." How have you experienced otherness in loved ones and friends? Ross writes that our commonality is not grounded by "what we can know, *but by what we cannot know*." She continues, "Our communion is engagement with the mystery of otherness...." Do you agree? Why or why not? Can our "not knowing" soften the hard edges of our certainty so that we can reach out to others and create a deep connection that otherwise would be impossible? Why or why not?
3. In reading #3, Gunilla Norris writes, "The fulcrum of this universe may ultimately be a passionate mutuality in which we surrender any separate definition of ourselves and discover that we are who we are together, in a fundamental relationship and communion with everything that is." A key to this is our experience of intimacy which evokes a reverence for life. In what ways can a reverence for life create a sense of "communion with everything that is?" When have you experienced a deep connection with Life? What meaning has that had for you?
4. In reading #4, Lama Marut (a.k.a. Brian K. Smith) writes that we can become truly happy

“when we manage to ‘stand outside of ourselves’ (*exstasis*) ...[and] experience *ecstasy*.” Have you ever experienced ecstasy? What were the circumstances that led to it? What meaning has that experience played in your life? For Marut, “*Our greatest joy comes when we vacate ourselves and give ourselves over to something or someone else.*” Do you agree? Why or why not? Marut writes that it is the “drive for radical individuality and superiority that keeps us feeling isolated and alone.” How does the drive for superiority undermine connection with others? He concludes, “the willingness to let go and *be nobody* is what’s really extraordinary, and it is the only means for real connection with others and communion with what is real.” What do you need to shed to “be nobody?” What would doing this mean? How can this choice enhance connection/communion with others who are very different from yourself?

5. Brian McLaren builds on Marut’s line of reasoning in reading #5 with a sustained argument against superiority as a barrier to connection and communion. McLaren states that we must surrender the supremacy of our ego, our group, and our species. How does the supremacy of ego, group, and species, the desire for domination harm us and others? McLaren writes that when we do this, “We descend from the ladders and pedestals we have erected, and we rejoin the community of creation, the network of shalom, the ecosystem of harmony.” Do you agree? If yes, why is this important? If no, what concerns do you have about McLaren’s observations? McLaren concludes, “The loss is no small thing, ...but the gain is incomparably greater.” What is the loss? What is the gain?
6. In reading #6, Catherine Ann Lombard extols gardening as a spiritual practice as we tend a flower or vegetable garden as well as the interior garden of the self. If you have done gardening, what has the experience been like? If you have not, does gardening have any appeal to you? Why or why not? Does gardening, or simply partaking of food bring you into communion with the earth? Why or why not? Importantly, Lombard concludes, “Perhaps this is the true meaning of Eucharist, which comes from the Greek for gratitude. By receiving the garden’s bounty into

our bodies, we gain the strength, energy, and respect to continue our lives in tandem with it.” Is communion with the Earth and/or others important to you? Why or why not? What is your sense of gratitude to the Earth and to meaningful others? What do they mean to you?

7. In reading #7, Mark Nepo writes about the meaning and implications of the African ethic and philosophy of *ubuntu*, which is often expressed as “*I am because you are, you are because I am.*” How does this radical concept of interdependence/communion contrast with Western individualism? Nepo notes that there is no word for orphan in Africa because a child who lost her or his parents is assumed as belonging to the tribe. How could *ubuntu* change the way we value others, how we participate in community?
8. Anthony de Mello’s retelling of *Stone Soup* follows the plot of a stranger coaxing reluctant people to share ingredients to make a delicious soup and to create community. (The earliest known version of the story was in French by Madame de Noyer. It was published in 1720, a year after her death. It was entitled *Soupe au Caillou*. See <https://stonesoup.com/about-the-childrens-art-foundation-and-stone-soup-magazine/history-of-the-stone-soup-story-from-1720-to-now/>). When did you first hear the story of Stone Soup? What did you think of the story? What lessons does it offer? How can those lessons be applied in life? How does food promote communion?

The following questions are related to the Readings from the Common Bowl.

9. Shauna Niequist focuses on the way a table is a place of support and nurture. Her comments add a great deal to understanding the welcome table. As she writes, “The table is the great equalizer, the level playing field many of us have been looking everywhere for.” To be sure some tables can be dysfunctional if families are dysfunctional, but tables draw upon our better angels. What tables were especially meaningful to you? Why? Niequist concludes, “the table is a place of safety and rest and humanity, where we are allowed to be as fragile as we feel.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Niequist’s comments call to mind Rachel Naomi Remen’s 1996 book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. The subtitle was, *Stories that Heal*. Remen writes, “Facts bring us to

knowledge, but stories lead to wisdom.” For many families, the table is also the story center. What stories were especially important to you growing up? Why?

10. Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson writes, “we are all connected to each other biologically, to the earth chemically, and to the rest of the universe atomically.” This assertion goes well beyond the idea that we are all made of stardust. In what ways is his comment in support of the idea of “reverence for life?” How can his assertion awaken people to love the earth and to work to address climate change?
11. Tom Ryan writes that, “The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion.” What might he mean by this? Do you agree that our task is “to recover our original unity?” Why or why not? What gets in the way of doing this?
12. Rebecca Solnit suggests that our ability to communicate has withered because of technology. In place of letters, we communicate via hashtags. Email has succumbed to tweets. What are the consequences of this loss of breadth and depth? We exist, she says, between the poles of solitude and communion. Which of these two do you value most? Why? How is communion compromised when we no longer risk real connection?
13. Richard Nelson extols the forest as being sacred. What value do you place on the forest, on nature? The air is sacred. The water is sacred. The food we eat is sacred. To paraphrase James Baldwin who wrote, “What will happen to all of that beauty,” what will happen to “the burning beauty of sacredness” if we ignore the fact that the forest and the planet are sacred? Have you experienced a “living communion” with nature? If yes, share one experience. What did it mean to you?
14. Paulo Freire wrote about a communion of freedom; insisting that freedom is won and defended in concert, in communion, in collaboration. While we often don’t consider it, democracy is a communion, something that we share with other citizens. In place of the communion table, we have the ballot box. Each vote is a resurrection of the body politic. In what ways is democracy sacred to you? Why? What happens when increasing numbers of people in a country withdraw from the communion of democracy? Freire concluded, “only in communion can we save ourselves—or not save ourselves.” What do you think he meant? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
15. “Krista Tippett writes, “if we accept being educated by others, to let them explain to us what happens to them, and to let yourself be immersed in their world so that they can get into our world, then you begin to share something very deep.” She gets at the core of what communion is. When have you entered into the world of someone else? What was the experience like? What did you learn? What did the experience mean to you?
16. Jon Ronson writes, “An apology is supposed to be a communion....” How can this be true? Of course, there is no communion if an apology is not made, if an apology is not accepted. If an apology is a communion, forgiveness is a deeper communion, a more healing communion. During the Jewish High Holy Days, the Days of Awe a compelling custom is to apologize to people that you have harmed in the past year and seek their forgiveness. The importance of this custom is highlighted by the fact that if a person apologizes and seeks your forgiveness three times because you refuse forgiveness each time, then you have harmed them and must seek their forgiveness. What has it meant to you when you sought forgiveness and it was given? Denied? Can we really live without this kind of communion? Why or why not?
17. Anaïs Nin wrote, “The secret of a full life is to live and relate to others as if they might not be there tomorrow, as if you might not be there tomorrow.” In a similar manner, Betty Smith counseled, “Look at everything as though you were seeing it for the first time or the last time. Then your time on earth will be filled with glory.” What are the challenges of living this way? The rewards?
18. Thomas Merton wrote that true communion with others depends on true communication. He concluded, “The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible....” In our present time, lies, alternative facts, the claims of fake news, and

more make “true communication and true communion almost impossible.” Talking to others with opposing views seems to bear little fruit. What if true listening, as Krista Tippett above suggests, was a way to be educated, to restore true communication and true communion. Listening deep enough to hear the worry, the anxiety, the fear, the insecurity, and the loss of hope. Have you ever “listened” someone into a new understanding about life? What was required? How long did it take? What did you learn?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice: (Elizabeth Selle Jones) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words: *Ours is a Communion*

by Rev. Robin F. Gray

Ours is a communion borne of words and welcome. Our communion finds expression in caring and commitment to our highest ideals. Our communion lives on in our hearts though this sacred hour is ended.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/chalice-extinguishing-0>