



# Touchstones Project

## Small Group Discussion Guide

### Power & Repairing the World

#### Before You Gather

Read the following pieces prior to gathering.

#### 1. *The Sky Cracked Open*

from Scott Russell Sanders

In his book *A Private History of Awe*, Scott Russell Sanders remembers a spring day when he was a young boy, old enough to run around and small enough to be carried in his father's arms. The wind was booming; lightning flashed everywhere as a heavy rain fell. His father carried him out on to the porch, held him against his chest, and hummed as the thunder rumbled. They looked out at the trees and the huge oak which was the tallest thing the child knew. The oak swayed in the storm. Suddenly a flash and boom split the air. Everything became a white glare. "Sweet Jesus," his father cried out, grabbing him and pulling him close. Lightning had struck the oak and it snapped like a stick. Its top shattered onto the ground and a charred streak ran down the trunk.

One moment the great tree was there as solid as the father, bigger than anything Scott knew, and the next moment it was gone.

Fifty years later that day still haunts Scott. That was the day when power, energy, wildness that surges through everything was revealed in a flash. Scott writes, "The sky cracked open to reveal a world where even grownups were tiny and houses were toys and wood and skin and everything was made of light."

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/life/workshop4/159225.shtml>

#### 2. *Power-Over is Not Invincible* by Starhawk

Power-over, or domination, is the power we're all familiar with, the power of a small group to control the resources or to limit the choices of others. Ultimately, it stems from violence and force and is generally backed by the police and military

power of the state. But the word "power" itself comes from a root that means "ability." We each have a different kind of power: the power that comes from within; our ability to dare, to do, and to dream; our creativity. Power from within is unlimited. If I have the power to write, it doesn't diminish your power: in fact, my writing might inspire you or illuminate your thinking.

Power-over seems invincible, but ultimately it rests upon the compliance of those it controls. No system of power can afford to use force to enforce its every decree. Instead, the fear of that force causes us to repress and police ourselves. If we refuse to comply, if we call the legitimacy of the system itself into question, ultimately the system cannot stand.

Power from within is akin to what many cultures call "spirit." The global justice movement challenges the greatest amassing of police, military, political and economic power the world has ever seen. To do so requires great courage, and the faith that ultimately creativity must triumph over violence.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28619>

#### 3. *Power* by George Orwell, 1984

Now I will tell you the answer to my question. It is this. The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just around the

corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now you begin to understand me.

Source:

<https://www.abhafoundation.org/assets/books/html/1984/173.html>

#### 4. *The Miseducation of Justice-Making*

by Rev. Nathan Walker

What does justice-making look like, feel like, when we receive hostile communication? Are we hostile in return? Or is something else required of us?

What we choose to do is a reflection of who we believe ourselves to be. It all depends on what kind of power we value.

I once believed it to be powerful to condemn wrongdoers. I believed it right to tear down another's unexamined assumptions and vaporize those whose presence was not worthy of my attention.

I have spent far too much energy using the public forum as a battlefield. I have spent far too much energy using the public forum to annihilate those perceived to be my enemy. I believed that others were the cause of my aggression: others were to blame for my feelings of despair, disappointment, and righteousness indignation.

I used to believe that being feared was powerful. I used to believe it was my duty to free the oppressed, but when reacting with righteous anger, guess who became the oppressor?

So, come, lovers of justice and keepers of the dream; come, justified tyrants and suppressers of screams: you are all welcome here. None of us are exempt. We have all played the parts: the peacemaker, the warmonger. They live within.

This is why we, as seekers of freedom, are required to make justice not simply a product but a process: just actions are the means by which to achieve a justice society.

...Don't get me wrong—stand we must; stand strong and bold. But, let us choose a new way to

balance the scales: rather than shoving our foot on the oppressor's neck let us instead reach out a hand, offer a gift, and show them, and even ourselves, a new way of justice-making.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/miseducation-justice-making>

#### 5. *Claim Your Power* by Walter Wink

As long as the disciples were enthralled by Jesus' powers, however, they would not be able to find those powers in themselves. ...

In ...*Stilling of the Storm* (Mark 4:35-41 par.), Jesus sleeps in the stern of a fishing boat as he and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee. When a sudden storm threatens to swamp the boat, the disciples wake him, shouting, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' Jesus condescends; he bears their projections and rebukes the wind.... They had no doubt exercised heroism countless times before in storms — the Sea of Galilee was notorious for such. Where had their courage fled this time? Jesus had stolen it. More accurately, they had given up their courage by entering into dependency on Jesus. ...

Jesus chastises them: 'Why are you such cowards (deiloi)? Have you still no faith? ...

Apparently, Jesus thinks (as the story has it) that the disciples should have been able to deal with this crisis themselves. ...

... Leaders do not want empowered people; they want trustworthy followers. How interesting that Jesus has chosen disciples from the margins of society, people not caught up in the power game. He wants to be the torch to their tinder, to set them on fire....

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/13692>

#### 6. *Whiteness and "Power-Over"*

by Austin Channing Brown

My faith was born in the Black church, but growing up I also was constantly surrounded by white Evangelicalism. I've been around whiteness a long time, and in all kinds of different denominations. I've seen them all.

I learned the hard way that there is a deep difference between the Jesus that Black folks worship and the Jesus that white Christians worship.

The Jesus that Black folks worship doesn't ask questions like, "But does the Gospel really have anything to do with race and justice?"

Black Jesus doesn't hesitate to say, "Black Lives Matter."

Black Jesus stands for the oppressed; cares about those who are most marginalized—and not just cares: sits with; lives with; fights for; is angered by the mistreatment; protests with.

White Jesus is primarily interested in self, in money, in capitalism; in self. "How much can I get? How much power can I hoard?" It's all about self, and it's all about the preservation of self, of ego... mostly power: a deep desire to wield power over others. Power-over is white Jesus. Power over is a Christianity that would say, "Slavery is the way God intended things to be."

My experience as a Black woman who has grown up in the era post-the Civil Rights movement and post-perceived Integration; my experience is that white folks want just a pinch of Blackness—just a splash, a smattering, a little toss of confetti of Blackness—in order to affirm itself; in order to affirm its own goodness; in order to affirm its rightness; in order to get rid of any feelings of guilt; in order to keep itself comfortable so that it can continue to practice power-over.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/whiteness-and-power-over>

## Gathering

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

### Opening Words: *Do Not Be Alone Right Now*

by Rev. Karen G. Johnston

Do not be alone right now. Gather together.

Gathering together grows courage: in ourselves and in others who see the numbers swelling. It is a small thing, but right now it is an important thing.

Great sources of wisdom remind us: just because you cannot stem the tide of all hate, it is still right to do the thing you can do. These things add up: your one thing & my one thing; his one thing & their one thing & her one thing. Together it becomes a BIG thing.

Do not be alone right now. Any liberation—all liberation—is collective liberation. My freedom is

bound with yours and yours with mine. Inextricably.

Let us together cast our lots doing this BIG thing: bending the moral arc of the universe towards justice.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/affirmation/do-not-be-alone-right-now>

### Chalice Lighting: *The Sacred Power of Justice*

by Rev. Jami A. Yandle

We light this flame to ignite the sacred power of justice.

We light this flame so that it may be a beacon of hope in moments of uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and the unknown.

We light this flame, and are emboldened by its blaze, knowing our strength as a prophetic and powerful people is rooted in the diverse ways we answer the call to love.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/sacred-power-justice>

**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: *The Power of Respect*

by Caroline Myss

Years ago, I had a conversation with a man who told me that the most important truth he had learned was to be kind. He learned this, he recounted, during a cab ride in New York City. As he was paying the driver, he said, "Thank you, sir." At this, the driver leaped, ran around the back of the cab, and opened the door for his passenger. Startled, the man got out and said to the cab driver, "You didn't have to do that," to which the driver responded, "I wanted to. You are the first person in this country to honor me by calling me sir, and I thank you for that respect." The man had never before considered the power inherent in a respectful gesture, but from them on, kindness became the pillar on which he

built his life and the legacy he hoped to pass on to his children. That exchange, he said, changed his life.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14501/invisible-acts-of-power>

**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.

To most of us, power is something that exists outside of ourselves, and no one seems to have control over the events and conditions of his or her life. It can be an internal condition, a relationship, a chain of events, an organization . . . there is always something out of control.

“...In the West, we are not at all accustomed to the idea of having a personal force or power. ...In fact, in the West we are faced with a de facto conditioning that all power is really external to the individual.” *Thomas Ashley-Farrand*

“What happens to people living in a society where everyone in power is lying, stealing, cheating and killing, and in our hearts we all know this, but the consequences of facing all these lies are so monstrous, we keep on hoping that maybe the corporate government administration and media are on the level with us this time. Americans remind me of survivors of domestic abuse. This is always the hope that this is the very, very, very last time one’s ribs get re-broken again.” *Inga Muscio*

Truly powerful people have great humility. They do not try to impress; they do not try to be influential. They simply are. People are magnetically drawn to them. They are most often very silent and focused, aware of their core selves. ... They never persuade, nor do they use manipulation or aggressiveness to get their way. They listen. If there is anything they can offer to assist you, they offer it; if not, they are silent. *Sanaya Roman*

“Today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups.... So, I ask, in my writing, ‘What is real?’ Because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by

very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives; I distrust their power. They have a lot of it. And it is an astonishing power: that of creating whole universes, universes of the mind. I ought to know. I do the same thing.” *Philip Dick*

“By definition, microaggressions are subtle, often nuanced, verbal or behavioral slights, snubs, or insults that can be intentional, but are often unintentional. They communicate negative, pejorative, and sometimes hostile messages to others solely based on their membership in a marginalized group. Microaggressions may devalue another individual’s sense of dignity and worth, may demean them on a personal or group level, and communicate that this individual is in some way “less than.” People are so embedded in context, and microaggressions reflect this, that the perpetrator may have no consciousness about what he or she has said, and the painful consequences of his or her unintended behaviors or words. These are everyday slights in conversation and behavior, but they sting. ...Do not think that because micro means small, the cumulative impact of these common slights is any less substantive.” *Simmons University Blog*

“Don’t give over all of your critical faculties to people in power, no matter how admirable those people may appear to be. Beneath the hero’s facade you will find a human being who makes human mistakes. Enormous problems arise when human mistakes are made on the grand scale available to a superhero. And sometimes you run into another problem. It is demonstrable that power structures tend to attract people who want power for the sake of power and that a significant proportion of such people are imbalanced — in a word, insane.” *Frank Herbert*

“Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest—forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries. It is as though mankind had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence (who think that everything is possible if one knows how to organize masses for it) and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of



their lives.” *Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism*

“Machine men, with machine minds and machine hearts! You are not machines, you are not cattle, you are men! You have the love of humanity in your hearts. You don’t hate: only the unloved hate, the unloved and the unnatural. Soldiers, don’t fight for slavery, fight for liberty! You the people have the power, the power to create machines, the power to create happiness! You the people have the power to make this life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure! Then, in the name of democracy, let us use that power. Let us all unite! Let us fight for a new world, a decent world . . .”  
*Charles Chaplin, from the speech concluding the 1940 film, The Great Dictator*

“Despite all the positive psychological attributes of hatred we have outlined, hatred destroys finally the core of the life of the hater. While it lasts, burning in white heat, its effect seems positive and dynamic. But at last, it turns to ash, for it guarantees a final isolation from one’s fellows. It blinds the individual to all values of worth, even as they apply to himself and to his fellows. Hatred bears deadly and bitter fruit. It is blind and non-discriminating.”  
*Howard Thurman*

“In fact, you couldn’t even be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black, unfettered self—the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass—had been freely chosen by you. At best, these things were a refuge; at worst, a trap. Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat. And the final irony: Should you refuse this defeat and lash out at your captors, they would have a name for that, too, a name that could cage you just as good. Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.” *Barack Obama*

## Reading

### 7. *If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress* by Frederick Douglass

The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle.

...Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North and held and flogged at the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.

Source: <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/>

**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, Scott Russell Sanders recalls a childhood memory of nature’s power. Lightning struck an old oak tree and snapped it like a stick. Sanders writes, “The sky cracked open to reveal a world where even grownups were tiny and houses were toys and wood and skin and everything was made of light.” What memories from childhood do you have of nature’s power? What did those experiences evoke in you: surprise, awe, fear, or something else?
2. In reading #2, Starhawk writes, “Power-over seems invincible, but ultimately it rests upon the compliance of those it controls.” Have you been the object of power-over, even reaching back to childhood? If yes, how did it feel? How did you

respond? If no, what do you imagine it feels like to be dominated by another's will or power? Have you witnessed someone else exercising power-over another? What do you think motivates that kind of domination? What can we do to access and use power from within to resist power-over?

3. In reading #3, George Orwell writes, "Power is not a means; it is an end," and "The object of power is power." This view of power is associated with authoritarianism, which is power-over. Have you witnessed this use/abuse of power? What aids this use of power? What hinders it? What historical or cotemporary examples are most illustrative for you? Why?
4. In reading #4, Rev. Nathan Walker describes his own misuse of power in responding to opponents. How can our own passion push us too far at times? How can we recognize this impulse and moderate it? To paraphrase Orwell, Walker would say "Power is a means that must be used with extreme care," and "The object of power is justice." What does the thoughtful, rather than brutish, exercise of power look like? What discipline is required to exercise power in this way?
5. In reading #5, Walter Wink suggests that Jesus, unlike so many leaders who just want trustworthy followers, wanted to empower his disciples. As Wink concludes, Jesus wanted "to be the torch to their tinder, to set them on fire..." What motivates so many leaders to hoard their power, as if it were a finite resource? Is it greed, fear, or other factors? Does their outward display of power mask an inward weakness? Why or why not? How can leaders, in the spirit of Jesus, empower people? How can you empower others?
6. In reading #6, Austin Channing Brown makes a distinction between Black Jesus and White Jesus. She writes, "Black Jesus stands for the oppressed; cares about those who are most marginalized—and not just cares: sits with; lives with; fights for; is angered by the mistreatment; protests with." She then notes, "White Jesus is primarily interested in self, in money, in capitalism; in self." How do these two expressions of power differ? For Brown, too many white people "want just a pinch of Blackness—just a splash, a smattering, a little

toss of confetti of Blackness—in order to affirm itself." How is this racist? How does it enable these white folks to exercise power-over, while even feeling good about it? What outcomes may occur as states and school districts ban books about racism, LBGTQ, etc. in the United States to ensure that neither students, nor their parents are made uneasy about their exercise of power-over?

7. In reading # 7, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), who escaped slavery in Maryland and went on to become a national leader in the abolitionist movement, talked about the nature of power. This excerpt is from his August 1857 speech, *West India Emancipation*, delivered at Canandaigua, New York, on the 23rd anniversary of the emancipation. Douglass wrote, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." He counseled that power-over and oppression must be met with power. Do you agree? Why or why not? He contended that freedom was not free? Do you agree? Why or why not? In the face of power-over and oppression, how can power be used to counter them?

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

8. Thomas Ashley-Farrand writes that, "To most of us, power is something that exists outside of ourselves..." What is your sense of power? It has been said that power can be offered, but not conferred. If power that is offered is not taken, the intended recipient can remain powerless. Do you have personal power? If yes, are you comfortable with the power that you have? Why or why not? If no, what are the circumstances that deny you of personal power? How can people increase their personal power?
9. Inga Muscio suggests that too often people simply acquiesce when those in power lie, steal, and cheat. She writes that, "Americans remind me of survivors of domestic abuse," because they hope that this is the very last time they will be lied to. Do you agree with her? Why or why not? Why do so many people seem to relinquish their power to tyrants?
10. Sanaya Roman wrote about true power by saying that it involved great humility while rejecting manipulation and aggression. Have you known truly powerful people as she

defined them? What qualities did they have that you admired? By contrast, have you known pretenders to power who, while having a position of power, did not possess authentic personal power? What was the disconnect between positional power and personal power?

11. Philip Dick is concerned about power that is used and abused to create pseudo-realities to manipulate people. This has been added by fake news, alternative facts, and lies. In the United States, the Big Lie has millions on the right enthralled. In Canada and the United States, anti-vaxxers advance conspiracies and false information that result in people dying needlessly. While it is tempting to focus on the motives of the manipulators, why do people who are clearly being manipulated surrender their personal power by completely buying into pseudo-realities? Is it the case that these pseudo-realities are creating cults that people blindly follow? Why or why not
12. The quote about microaggressions illustrates how pervasive power-over can be, whether microaggressions are intentional or unintentional. Have you observed or experienced microaggressions? What was the context and impact? Do you understand how the cumulative impact of microaggressions can be quite harmful? While microaggressions are often associated with racism, they can also be sexist. Have you observed microaggressions as an expression of sexism? What was the context and impact? Have you observed or experienced microaggressions associated with ageism, ableism, classism, or xenophobia? How do these further inform your understanding of microaggressions?
13. Frank Herbert writes “that power structures tend to attract people who want power for the sake of power and that a significant proportion of such people are imbalanced — in a word, insane.” Are there some people in power who seem unbalanced, especially some current or previous national leaders? Herbert admonishes us writing, “Don’t give over all of your critical faculties to people in power....” How do power mongers garner popular support? Do too many of their followers lack critical faculties? Why or why not?
14. Hannah Arendt, who escaped Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s and eventually made her way through Europe to the United States in 1941, continues Herbert’s concern regarding insanity. She wrote in 1951, “Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest—forces that look like sheer insanity....” She compares a belief in human omnipotence with the powerlessness of the masses. Do we see this same contrast in wealth disparities, the influence of money in elections, lobbying, and other examples of the exercise of near omnipotent power? What is the point of such amassing of power? How does such power corrupt? How and what does it destroy?
15. Charles Chaplin’s speech concluding the film, *The Great Dictator*, stated that we are neither machines nor cattle. We have free will and power even if we doubt it. Are we again involved in the “fight for a new world, a decent world?” Does this struggle ever end? Why or why not? He contrasts the choice between slavery and liberty? Is the choice facing many countries that stark? Why or why not?
16. Black theologian Howard Thurman wrote about the false power of hate that animates the expression of real or imagined grievances and, while it “seems positive and dynamic,” it “blinds the individual to all values of worth” and “destroys ...the core of the life of the hater.” Is the power of hatred real or illusory? Who has the real power, the hater or those who ignite, stoke, and direct that hatred? Given the increase of hate crimes in the United States and Canada, what can be done to oppose this kind of power?
17. In *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama writes about the reality of being black and powerless. The choices, he states, is to accept your powerlessness or lash out at your captors and enter the cage called “Paranoid. Militant. Violent. Nigger.” How can Blacks acknowledge and accept legitimate personal and political power if they are expected to be docile and nice (per Austin Channing Brown through “a little toss of confetti of Blackness”) to protect white fragility? What power is implicit and explicit in Black Lives Matter?

What power is implicit and explicit in White Supremacy? What exercise of power is inherent in banning books, passing legislation to suppress votes and rig vote counts, forbid discussion of racism in classrooms, and other examples of White backlash in the United States?

**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** by 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.

Source: [SLT #456](#)

**Closing Words: *A Power at Work in the Universe***

by Rev. Tom Schade

My friends,

There is a power at work in the universe.

It works through human hands, but it was not made by human hands.

It is a creative, sustaining, and transforming power and we can trust that power with our lives.

...

It will sustain us whenever we take a stand on the side of love; whenever we take a stand for peace and justice; whenever we take a risk.

Trust in that power. We are, together, held by that power.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/benediction/power-at-work>