



Touchstones Project

Small Group Discussion Guide

Balance & Repairing the World

Before You Gather

Read the following pieces prior to gathering.

1. *To Savor the World or Save It*

by Rev. Richard Gilbert

“It’s hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” E. B. White

I rise in the morning torn between the desire to save the world or to savor it—to serve life or to enjoy it; to savor the sweet taste of my own joy to share the bitter cup of my neighbor; to celebrate life with exuberant step. Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden. What am I to do when the guilt at my bounty clouds the sky of my vision; when the glow which lights my every day illumines the hurting world around me? To savor the world or save it? God of justice, if such there be, take from me the burden of my question. Let me praise my plenitude without limit; let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk! No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears to the cries of the hurt and the hungry; you will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted. What is that you say? To save, one must serve? To savor, one must save? The one will not stand without the other? Forgive me—in my preoccupation with myself, in my concern for my own life, I had forgotten. Forgive me, God of justice, forgive me, and make me whole.

2. *The Paradox of Balance*

by Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger

Two summers ago, our family went to see a performance of Cirque Shanghai at Navy Pier in Chicago. A young boy, perhaps 12 years old, suddenly appeared on stage. On the floor was a

piece of metal piping about 8 inches in diameter and a foot long. He rolled it back and forth, then took a board just big enough to stand on, placed it on top of the pipe and carefully stepped on top of the board. He waved his hands and the audience offered polite applause. Not bad for a 12-year-old.

Next, he took another metal pipe, placed it on top of the first at right angles, added the board and once again began to balance on top of these three moving parts. The applause grew. Not bad for a circus performer.

He jumped down, took another metal pipe, added it to the pile and somehow managed to look graceful as he stepped back onto this impossibly wobbly contraption. His concentration was showing but he remained in control and the audience became mesmerized.

I forget how many more times he upped the ante – but by the end of his act he had to use a ladder just to reach the top of his tower of moving parts. Impossible it should have been, even for a circus performer, especially a 12-year-old.

I love such displays of excellence. I find them inspiring, aesthetically pleasing, and somehow deeply satisfying. They seem to surpass ordinary life. Yet while I remain in awe of the balancing skills of this young artist, I recognize that he is not unique in what he is doing.

All of us are involved in many balancing acts each day. Life is at its core an attempt at balancing.

3. *Like pendulums we swing*

by Rev. Don W Vaughn-Foerster

Like pendulums we swing from hunger to hunger -- from hunger for the one great Truth (absolute, eternal, mystical) to hunger for simple, near-in, familiar truths that change as we change, grow as we grow. Like pendulums we swing from hunger for cosmic imperatives commanding us to expand ourselves, to hunger for immediate and

authentic inner promptings urging us to be ourselves.

We would be right with heaven, so we swing outward; we would fulfill our own heart, so we swing inward. We would grasp the holy and we would create ourselves. We have this dual hunger: to serve the cosmos that commands us to become more than we would and to be our genuine selves, content with what we are. So, we ride this pendulum in hunger for life. We ride from Truth that calls us out to truths that call us in.

And all because the gravity of life pulls across our hunger, never allowing us to stay on one side or the other, always moving us into new urgency for the wholeness that would bind both the cosmic and the personal.

And so life pulls us and we swing from Truth to truths, from cosmos to self, from mystery to clarity, from out to in. It is our state to swing and to be drawn ever into another swing. This is the motion that makes ours a human life.

May the great gravity of life which pulls us along an unknown, holy axis never let the pendulums we are cease swinging until the Truth we seek and the truths we are one.

4. ***To Stop Wobbling*** by Rev. Gary Kowalski

Keeping your balance is not easy. If you've ever tried standing on one foot, you realize that your body tends to sway and wobble. When I'm leading worship in my church, I sometimes ask the congregation to join me in an experiment. I invite all the children present to rise and stand on one leg, remaining motionless for several seconds. Few of them succeed.

Then comes the second part of the lesson. I ask the youngsters to stand on one foot again, but this time to hold the hand of someone nearby. It's much easier to remain upright when you feel that you're connected to a companion. We steady one another. Again, the earth and her creatures are like that. It's the diversity of life that gives the world its stability. When we have so many interconnections among the earth's varied species, the whole system is more likely to keep its equilibrium.

As we walk through the world, we can't always physically hold on to each other with our hands. But we can learn to hold each other in our hearts. The Native Americans do this through prayer. When

they turned toward the Great Spirit, they addressed their supplications to "all my relations."

...When we walk in balance, with gratitude in our hearts and knowledge of our interdependence, the daily requirements of living — like making syrup — become a blessing rather than a burden. Labor becomes a prayer and work is no longer empty toil but has a satisfying purpose. Because the gift of community sweetens every task.

5. ***Handling Balance*** by Derek Lin

Look at your hands. Western culture tends to favor the right over the left. The very word "right" is associated with correctness and goodness. A morally upright person is said to be "righteous;" a capable assistant is your "right hand." The word for being right-handed is "dexterous," which also means skillful.

Ancient Chinese culture was quite different in this regard. The sages noted that most people were right-handed, so they usually used the right hand to hurt or harm others. Thus, the right hand was most often associated with violence. This meant it was far from being correct, good or righteous.

The left hand was the complementary opposite of the right hand, so if the right was associated with violence, then the left must be associated with peace. The right hand wielded the sword, to attack; the left hand held the shield, to protect. This meant neither hand was more important than the other. Both hands must work together in order to achieve the best result.

Look at your hands again. Let your right hand symbolize your drive and your willingness to fight for what you deserve. Let your left hand symbolize your kindness, your compassion and your ability to give to people in need. In this view, there is no superior or inferior hand. Both hands contribute to your life in meaningful and significant ways. Find the best balance between the two.

6. ***Seeking Emotional Balance*** by Kristin Neff

It's important to distinguish self-compassion from self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to the degree to which we evaluate ourselves positively. It represents how much we like or value ourselves, and is often based on comparisons with others. In contrast, self-compassion is not based on positive judgments or evaluations, it is a way of relating to ourselves. People feel self-compassion because they

are human beings, not because they are special and above average. It emphasizes interconnection rather than separateness. This means that with self-compassion, you don't have to feel better than others to feel good about yourself. It also offers more emotional stability than self-esteem because it is always there for you – when you're on top of the world and when you fall flat on your face. Instead of endlessly chasing self-esteem as if it were the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, therefore, I would argue that we should encourage the development of self-compassion. That way, whether we're on top of the world or at the bottom of the heap, we can embrace ourselves with a sense a kindness, connectedness and emotional balance. We can provide the emotional safety needed to see ourselves clearly and make whatever changes are necessary to address our suffering. We can learn to feel good about ourselves not because we're special and above average, but because we're human beings intrinsically worthy of respect.

Gathering

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

Opening Words: *Everything begins on the verge of awareness* by Rev. George Kimmich Beach

Everything begins on the verge of awareness. The dawn is not and then is. Sleep is and then is not. In between is the awakening.

The passage of thin light, between, breaks open the day. The passage of thin sound, between, flows into the day. Too soon the numbing rumble of traffic swells, the day glares.

Let the soft haze hang again across the row of morning. Wait upon the narrow moment, the first awareness of being in between! Live days and seasons on the thin edge of dawn, in praise that every single thing begins now! [Therefore, balance is always within our grasp.]

Chalice Lighting: *Embrace the Night*

by Rev. Jennifer Leota Gray

Universal mystery,

Guide us away from the desire to

Shine light in all the corners.

Teach us to embrace the night,

For without the darkness,

We never see the stars.

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:

Restoring Balance by Alan Briskin

During a time of great drought, a Taoist master was asked by members of a village if he could help bring rain to their dry fields. They confessed trying many other approaches before reaching out to him, but with no success.

The master agreed to come and asked for a small hut with a garden that he could tend. For three days, he tended the garden, performing no special rituals or asking anything further from the villagers. On the fourth day, rain began to fall on the parched earth. When asked how he had achieved such a miracle, the master answered that he was not responsible for the rain. However, he explained, when he came to the village, he had sensed disharmony within himself. Each day, as he tended the garden, he returned a little more to himself. When he returned to balance, the rain came naturally.

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.

The life of the ...[thoughtful] human being is a sort of high wire act in which one goes forward unsteadily, but goes forward, trying out a balance which can only be sustained if life is in movement; a balance between life within and life without; a balance between looking within and measuring the danger and the height from the ground; a balance between the distance to be covered and the distance covered, and going on. *Mary Luke Tobin*

Taoism teaches of the need to bring yin and yang together without erasing one or the other, to find the one in the other yet keep one distinct from the other.

To be unbalanced is to be either/or, to insist on this and not that, to be overly committed to one's particular tribe or worldview. It is to interfere with the flow of togetherness and union that so many energies, from sexuality to art and imagination, require. The word for imbalance in the West is injustice, for justice is a kind of balance.

Matthew Fox

Profound stillness is not just the territory of the ancient mystics and sages. There are times when each of us needs to seclude ourselves and turn our attention within. We may not be drawn to the cloisters of a monastic cell or to a mountain cave, but we can learn the art of creating sacred spaces, times of listening, and moments of pause. This is where we rediscover ourselves, renew ourselves, and find the balance and wisdom to reenter our life with a heart filled with compassion and balance. Heeding the invitation of silence, we discover profound psychological and spiritual realities, and understand that we are part of the lineage of silence that transcends the barriers of time and tradition.

Christina Feldman

Capitalists argue that private enterprise guarantees the most efficient use of scarce commodities. But regarding water—or any other living system—purely as a commodity subverts our relationship with nature. Gaia has her own economy and keeps her own balance sheet. The bottom line is that we cannot take more than our share without eventually suffering the consequences.

Gary Kowalski

Saying yes to what feeds you emotionally and spiritually is essential for inner peace and well-being. Saying no to what drains your energy or pulls you off center is requisite for inner balance. Make your "yes" and "no" lists. Post them where you can see them easily—by the phone, perhaps—and update them frequently. They'll serve as an instant reminder whenever you're tempted to stray from your commitment to serenity.

Joan Duncan Oliver

I had to face into my over-doneness. I had been baked too long in my legitimate activist hopes and lost the sense of balance and humor that were my only way of negotiating my work/family conflict. Where had it gone? It had gone to overwork, conceit, indispensability, and the other usual traits

of ineffective activists. When things come to be "all up to us," an insidious dependency has tied us up in knots. We are prisoners, not the servants, of our activism.

Donna Schaper

Soen Roshi, former abbot of Ryutakaji monastery in Japan and great twentieth-century Zen Master, used to say that when most of us want to see beauty in a room, we bring in fancy paintings, furniture, precious objects. In Zen, when you want to see beauty in a room, you take everything out, one thing after another. When the room is empty, you can see its original nature. Its beauty shines by itself. In Zen practice you do the same. You take everything out of your life that causes clutter, static, confusion, and greed. You take out plush furniture and people to lean on. As you do this, you naturally find your own inner balance and strength.

Brenda Shoshanna

The tragedy of human history lies in the enormous potential for destruction in rare acts of evil, not in the high frequency of evil people. Complex systems can only be built step by step, whereas destruction requires but an instant. Thus, in what I like to call the Great Asymmetry, every spectacular incident of evil will be balanced by 10,000 acts of kindness, too often unnoted and invisible as the "ordinary" efforts of a vast majority.

Stephen Jay Gould

Shalom: the eternal verity, the poet's muse, the prophet's grail, the lover's glint, the pilgrim's lighted trail. A word so rich in meaning, it loses a little something of itself in its mere utterance, as though no set of letters, however artfully strung together or reverently spoken, is ever capable of adequately conveying the power of the ideal that lies behind them.... To speak of peace is to speak of completeness, proportion, and balance. In the words of Emily Dickinson, it is "to comprehend the whole." Peace is the Zen paradox whereby we can lack everything and still want for nothing, because wholeness is not a function of meeting our desires but of releasing ourselves from their power.

Erik Kolbell

Equanimity is the ability to experience the changes in our lives, circumstances, and feelings and still remain calm, centered and unmoved. The image most often used to illustrate the quality of equanimity is that of a mountain. The mountain sits

there as the sun shines on it, the rain drenches it, it is covered with snow and struck by lightning. Through it all, through all the changing conditions, the mountain remains unwavering. As we cultivate equanimity within ourselves, we learn to be more like the mountain, finding that place of strength and courage within ourselves that enables us to withstand the slings and arrows of being human without feeling overwhelmed by fear.

Wayne Muller

Reading

7. *Cosmic Bowling* by Rev. Christopher Buice

I think about the Buddha when I am bowling. A bowling ball that goes too far to the right ends up in the gutter. One that drifts to the left experiences a similar fate. And so, when bowling I am aware that I am seeking the Middle Way. The Buddha sought the Middle Way between body-destroying asceticism and gluttonous indulgence of the appetites and cravings. Either extreme took him away from spiritual growth. I, too, realize that it is important to seek a middle way between the extremes of life: between firmness and flexibility, realism and hope, charity and empowerment.

The Middle Way is a difficult path to tread. The Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, warn us that the path to salvation is as thin and narrow as a razor's edge. Fortunately, a bowling lane is somewhat wider.

Finding the middle way is often difficult. On some occasions I feel as if bowling lanes are far too narrow. I long for a wider margin of error. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. Sure, I can have kiddy bumpers placed in the gutters, but that feels like cheating. I find that my greatest satisfaction comes not from trying to change the game but from changing myself. By centering my ball to glide down the lane, I find that my life becomes more centered with the Larger Life of which I am a part. By focusing my energies toward a central goal, I find a sense of precision and balance in my life.

And yet, the way to live a centered or balanced life is not always obvious. It is not always easy to find the middle way between two extremes. That is why I sometimes wish for a wider lane in my bowling alley. I roll a lot of gutter balls when I bowl. But I find that it is by accepting life on life's terms that I truly begin to enjoy the game. History

tells us that it took many, many years for the Buddha to achieve enlightenment. While I am waiting, I might as well continue bowling.

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, Richard Gilbert writes about the conflict between saving the world and savoring it, to serving and enjoying. How do you savor life? How do you serve life? Have these come into conflict? How? When that happens, how do you balance them? Can we become so preoccupied with our own needs that we forget the needs of others and the world? Are there links between savoring and serving? What are they?
2. In reading #2, Michael Leuchtenberger recounts that amazing balancing act performed by a 12-year-old circus performer who eventually balanced on top of a huge tower of moving parts. He notes, "All of us are involved in many balancing acts each day," and concludes, "Life is at its core an attempt at balancing." Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the things that you find the hardest to balance? Why?
3. In reading #3, Don Vaughn-Foerster, suggests that we swing like a pendulum between the idea of one great Truth and simpler, familiar truths that evolve over time. The challenge occurs when the desire to go beyond oneself, to grow, if you will, conflicts with the desire to simply be content with who we are. Have you felt that struggle in your life? What were the circumstances? Were you able to resolve the tension? How? What did you learn about maintaining balance in your life?
4. In reading #4, Gary Kowalski writes about how hard it can be, especially for younger children, to stand on one foot. When it is hard to balance, we wobble. He then explains that it is easier to do when we can hold the hand of someone else. Who has helped you from wobbling, especially when you were young? What does the opportunity to be supported and balanced by someone else say about the importance of our interconnections and interdependence?

5. In reading #5, Derek Lin asks that we look at our hands and what they symbolize. The typical meanings in the West are different in the East, yet both hands are necessary. When you look at your hands, what story do they tell of your life? In what ways would your hands symbolize Yin and Yang? In what ways do your hands “contribute to your life in meaningful and significant ways?” As metaphor, how do you balance your two hands?
6. In reading #6, Kristin Neff contrasts self-compassion and self-esteem. She suggests that self-esteem “is often based on comparisons with others,” while self-compassion is based on being, not doing. What do you think is the value of self-esteem? What do you think is the value of compassion? How do you think the two should be balanced?
7. In reading #7, Christopher Buice compares the Buddhist Middle Way to bowling. As he writes, “I roll a lot of gutter balls when I bowl.” If the goal of bowling is to seek the Middle Way, many try to do the same thing in life. What is the “Middle Way” for you? What helps you in finding and keeping balance in life?
The following questions are related to the Readings from the Common Bowl.
8. Mary Luke Tobin compares life to a high wire act. For her, part of the challenge is balancing “between life within and life without.” How do you navigate this balance? What are the challenges of spending time in the life within? What are the benefits? In what ways is your life a high-wire act?
9. Matthew Fox writes that, “To be unbalanced is to be either/or...,” and “to be overly committed to one’s particular tribe or worldview.” We know that imbalance can be deadly. Fox concludes, “The word for imbalance in the West is injustice, for justice is a kind of balance.” Do agree that imbalance is injustice? Solzhenitsyn wrote that, “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” How do you balance these competing impulses in yourself and others in order to work for justice?
10. Christina Feldman writes about “the art of creating sacred spaces, times of listening, and moments of pause,” in order to “find the balance and wisdom to reenter our life...” What approaches do you use when your life is out of balance? What value do you place on stillness and silence to go within? Does time spent in stillness and silence help you rebalance yourself? How?
11. Gary Kowalski writes that, “Gaia has her own economy and keeps her own balance sheet.” Where do you see evidence that Gaia’s balance sheet is out of balance? How can we better respect nature and seek to address how humans have imbalanced Gaia’s living systems? As he suggests, there are examples where water has been converted into a commodity, when, in fact, it is and should be treated as a precious resource available to all. What does water symbolize to you? What does water justice mean to you?
12. Joan Duncan Oliver writes about the power of saying “yes” and no.” As is often the case, a thoughtful “no” is far more powerful than a careless “yes.” Have you been able to balance “yes” and “no” in your life? If you have, how? If not, what challenges have you encountered? If you were to make a “yes” list and a “no” list, what two examples would be on each list? Why?
13. Donna Schaper, an activist, writes about the difficulties she faced when she lost her “sense of balance and humor.” Often, losing a sense of humor, is a clue to also being out of balance. How can laughter re-center and re-balance us? Have you ever been a prisoner rather than a servant of your activism? What does the loss of balance do to the legitimate hopes of activism? What can help keep things in balance in the pursuit of justice?
14. As Brenda Shoshanna writes, Soen Roshi taught that to find beauty in a room, it is necessary to remove all of the furnishings and decorations to reveal its original nature. How can too much stuff and clutter affect the balance of your living space? What can make it difficult to declutter, especially those things that you clearly no longer need? According to Shoshanna, in Zen, “You take everything out of your life that causes clutter, static, confusion, and greed.” Share an example of removing something that did/would bring more balance to your life?
15. Stephen Jay Gould wrote that the tragedy of human history is to be found in the destruction

found in rare acts of evil. We are witnessing that in Putin's war on Ukraine. As Gould noted, "Complex systems can only be built step by step," like the country and culture of Ukraine. He continued, "whereas destruction requires but an instant." For Gould, the Great Asymmetry requires "10,000 acts of kindness" to balance a "spectacular incident of evil." Do you agree with his formula? Why or why not? Have you used kindness to balance or redress unjust actions? What were the circumstances? As you have followed the news reports from Ukraine, what acts of kindness have moved you?

16. Erik Kolbell writes about Shalom, noting that the richness of the word is difficult to convey. It means peace, but so much more. He explains, "To speak of peace is to speak of completeness, proportion, and balance." How can Shalom add to the experience of balance? How can we achieve Shalom in our lives and in our communities?

17. Wayne Muller writes about equanimity. In Buddhism, it is the word that is used to convey the idea of balance. As he notes, "Equanimity is the ability to experience the changes in our lives, circumstances, and feelings, and still remain calm, centered, and unmoved." He likens equanimity to a mountain, which, through it all, remains unwavering. What human qualities would you use to describe his mountain metaphor? What helps you, in times of stress, to regain your balance in order to not "feeling overwhelmed by fear?"

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: *Only one thing required of us*
by Rev. Kendyl Gibbons

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth [and balance].

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.