

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Conversation—The Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction

Diane M. Millis, PhD

When we reach our innermost heart we reach a realm where we are not only intimately at home with ourselves, but intimately united with others, all others.

—**Brother David Steindl-Rast**, *Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer*

Guidelines for Discussion Sessions

Centering: Begin each discussion with some time in shared silence.

Sacred Reading: Ask a participant to read the given quotation one or more times. Pause in silence after the reading has ended.

Storytelling: Invite one person to begin sharing his or her responses or wait until a person volunteers to do so. Allow each person time to respond to each of the questions without interruption.

Compassionate Listening and Responding: After each person responds to the reflection questions, invite him or her to explore the theme further by asking contemplative questions.

Pause: Take time to honor what has been shared before inviting another person to speak.

Collective Reflection: After all participants have had a turn responding to the questions, take some time to reflect upon your shared experience:

What did you notice in today's conversation?

What stirred you or moved you deeply?

What did you learn about yourself or others in today's conversation?

Some groups may also choose to conclude the conversation with a closing prayer. Whether or not a prayer is used, allow some time for shared silence. The facilitator may ring a chime to signal the close of the session. However, some participants may prefer to continue to sit in silence while others take leave.

Add to the following set of conversation starters by bringing one or more of your favorite inspirational quotations to share with others in a future conversation.

Always stay in your own movie.

—**Ken Kesey**

On a scale of one to ten (one being difficult and ten being easy), which number best describes how you feel about “staying in your own movie”? Talk about your reasons for selecting the number you did.

What title best describes the movie you are currently in?

If you could snap your fingers and cast yourself in a different movie, what would you name your feature film? Where would you be living? What would you be doing? With whom would you share your time?

What does imagining this alternative movie show you about potential next scenes as you “stay in your own movie”?

~

Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.

—**Henri Nouwen**

Can you recall a time in your life when joy simply happened to you? If so, tell a story about your experience.

Have you ever chosen joy? If so, what did you do?

How, if at all, would your life be different if you chose joy every day?

~

If the only prayer we could say is “thank you,” that would be enough.

—**Meister Eckhart**

Who are the persons in your life for whom you are especially thankful?

To what extent have you been able to convey your gratitude to them?

Select one person to whom you haven’t yet conveyed your gratitude. What did this person do for you and what have you learned from him or her? How might you create an occasion to thank the person for what he or she has contributed to your life?

~

People try to get away from it all—to the country, to the beach, to the mountains. You always wish you could too. Which is idiotic: you can get away from it anytime you like. By going within. Nowhere you can go is more peaceful—more free of interruptions—than your own soul.... Renew yourself. But keep it brief and basic. A quick visit should be enough to ward off all ... and send you back ready to face what awaits you.

—**Marcus Aurelius**

When do you most want to escape your life?

Where do you dream of going?

Have you ever experienced getting away from it all by going within?

What helps you or hinders you from going within?

~

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

—**Viktor Frankl**

Tell a story about a time in your life when you exercised the freedom to choose your attitude in a difficult set of circumstances. Who was involved? What happened? What did you learn from this experience?

Who in your life has exercised the freedom to choose his or her attitude in a difficult set of circumstances? What have you learned from the person?

~

The new culture is created by those people who are not afraid to be insecure.

—**Rudolph Bahro**

Tell a story about a time in your life when you experienced insecurity.

What action would you take in your life right now if you could do so with full awareness of your insecurity(ies)?

~

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement ... [to]get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

—**Abraham Joshua Heschel**

What are you finding most incredible and phenomenal in your life at this time?

What, if anything, do you take for granted?

What single change could you make in your life to live it with a greater sense of amazement?

~

Die before you die.

—**Muhammad**

Tell a story about a time in your life when you experienced dying to your own needs in order to more fully respond to others' needs. Who was involved? What happened?

What helps you die to, or let go of, your own concerns, ambitions, and need for control?

~

You must always keep in mind that a path is only a path: If you feel you should not follow it, you must not stay with it under any conditions. To have such clarity you must lead a disciplined life.

Only then will you know that any path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you do to. But your decision to keep on the path or leave it must be free of fear or ambition ... look at every path closely and deliberately.

Try it as many times as you think necessary.

—**Don Juan's advice to Carlos Castaneda**

What is your path at this time in your life?

What paths have you dropped because your heart told you to do so?

What helps or will help you look at a path deliberately?