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Other resources, including daily meditations, periodic podcasts, on-line seminars and discussions, and occasional on-line conversations about this week’s curriculum, are available at:

aspeninstitute.org/programs/executive-leadership-development/resources-for-living-and-leading/
Connected Learning in Times of Confinement is designed to support people and their families, neighborhoods, organizations, and networks by building upon the Aspen Institute’s unique expertise in facilitating meaningful conversations in a seminar setting.

We envisage a weekly curriculum that can be used in pieces, or all at once, or in various combinations. Our hope is that these readings and guidance will allow you and others to reflect on fundamental human questions in ways that nourish our hearts, minds, and fellowship in a time of confinement. A curriculum (from the Latin currere, to run) is a path, an exploration, not something to be mastered but an invitation to discovery and wonder. These materials are curated to intrigue and delight you, and we invite you to reflect upon them on your own, and to share them—with family, friends, neighbors, teams, networks. In this, the journey itself is the destination, a call to thought, dialogue, and action.

In a journey it is often helpful to have a guide, and in this curriculum you will find three guides:

First, the authors themselves— we do not need to follow the authors, but we do well to understand what they are saying;

Second, guiding questions— for each reading, there is a set of guiding questions designed for individual and collective reflection; they are not the only (or even most important) questions, but a way of getting started; these may be found at the back of the packet and are best read after you have read the texts;

Third, general guidance— for each discussion, participants and discussion leaders may want to remind themselves of some best practices; these may be found at the back of this packet.

We invite you to share these readings widely and encourage others to engage in conversation. As you do so, know that fellow seminar graduates and their families, friends, and colleagues are doing the same. We all contribute to a global chorus of conversation about ideas worth sharing and acting upon.

—Todd Breyfogle, PhD
Managing Director, Aspen Executive Leadership Seminars

About Aspen Institute Seminars

The Aspen Institute Executive Leadership Seminars Department drives change through reflection, dialogue, and action in service of a more free, just, and equitable society. We do this by: curating brave spaces of shared meaning which help people become more self-aware, more self-correcting, and more self-fulfilling; deepening participants’ humane sensibilities and capacities for moral judgment through an examination of the humanistic traditions; establishing meaningful connections among diverse people and organizations in service of a better society.

For more information, including information about customized programs for companies and other organizations, please contact Kalissa Hendrickson, PhD, Director, at Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspeninst.org or 202-736-3586. Learn more.
The Aspen Institute starts from an act of faith in the humanistic tradition: one must be reflective in order to insure that all human activity—political, scientific, economic, intellectual or artistic—will serve the needs of human beings and enrich and deepen their lives.

The Institute believes in the value both of the “Great Ideas” of the past as well as the importance of the sometimes inelegant and highly controversial ideas of the present.

The Institute is dedicated to the fundamental educational value of dialogue for mature men and women from different nations and cultures -- intercommunications between people of comparable competence from various backgrounds and specialized fields of experience.

The Aspen idea recognizes that the processes by which persons learn and develop or change their ideas are not mechanical or even purely rational. As there is a mystery at the edge of human thought, so there is a magic about human relationships, and the magic we attempt to invoke in Aspen is that of the sheer beauty of this area of the Rocky Mountains.

With Erasmus, we hold that “nothing human is alien” to the inquiring purposes of the Aspen Institute. The Institute intends to be, in sum, a place of excellence and excitement where men and women of the finest qualities of mind and spirit from all walks of life in the United States and abroad can meet to learn from one another through serious discussion of and work on significant problems facing society and the greatest ideas which have been expressed throughout history and today concerning these problems.

—J. E. Slater, President, The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1972
5  Binyavanga Wainaina, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*

9  Alice Walker, “New House Moves”

11  Black Elk/John Neihardt, “The Offering of the Pipe”

15  Luis Llorens Torres, “Valle de Collores”
It is afternoon. We are playing soccer near the clothesline behind the main house. Jimmy, my brother, is eleven, and my sister, Ciru, is five and a half. I am the goalie.

I am seven years old, and I still do not know why everybody seems to know what they are doing and why they are doing it.

“You are not fat.” That’s what Mum says to me all the time. “You are plump.”

Ciru has the ball. She is small and thin and golden. She has sharp elbows, and a smile as clean as a pencil drawing. It cuts evenly into her cheeks. She runs toward Jimmy, who is tall and fit and dark.

She is the star of her class. It is 1978, and we are all in Lena Moi Primary School. Last term, Ciru was moved a year forward. Now she is in standard two, like me, in the class next door. Her first term in standard two, she beat everybody and topped the class. She is the youngest in her class. Everybody else is seven.

I stand between the metal poles we use as a makeshift goalmouth watching Ciru and Jim play. Warm breath pushes down my nostrils past my mouth and divides my chin. I can see the pink shining flesh of my eyelids. Random sounds fall into my ears: cars, birds, black mamba bicycle bells, distant children, dogs, crows, and afternoon national radio music. Congo rumba. People outside our compound are talking, in languages I know the sounds of, but do not understand or speak, Luhya, Gikuyu.

My laugh is far away inside, like the morning car not starting when they key turns. In school, it is always Ciru number one, blue and red and yellow stars on every page. It is always Ciru in a white dress giving flowers to the guest of honor—Mr. Ben Methu—on Parents’ Day. If I am washing with her, we are splashing and laughing and fighting and soon we are in a fever of tears or giggles.

She twists past Jimmy, the ball ahead of her feet, heading for me. I am ready. I am sharp, and springy. I am waiting for the ball. Jimmy runs to intercept her; they tangle and pant. A few moments ago the sun was one single white beam. Now it has fallen into the trees. All over the garden there are a thousand tiny suns, poking
through gaps, all of them spherical, all of them shooting thousands of beams. The beams fall onto branches and leaves and splinter into thousands of smaller perfect suns.

I laugh when Ciru laughs and I find myself inside her laugh, and we fall down holding each other. I can feel her laughter swelling, even before it comes out, and it swells in me too.

I know how to move with her patterns, and to move with Jimmy’s patterns. My patterns are always tripping on each other in public. They are only safe when I am alone, or when I am daydreaming.

Ciru laughs loud, her mouth wide and red. The sound jumps toward me, flapping sheets of sound, but I am lost. Arms and legs and ball are forgotten. The thousand suns are breathing. They inhale, dim and cool into the leaves, and I let myself breathe with them; then they puff light forward and exhale, warming my body. I am about to let myself soak inside this completely when I am captured by an idea.

The sun does not break up into pieces.
It does not break up into disembodied parts when it falls into trees and things. Each piece of the sun is always a complete little sun.

I am coming back into my arms and legs and the goalmouth, ready to explain the thousand suns to Jimmy and Ciru. I am excited. They will believe me this time. It won’t seem stupid when I speak it, like it often does, and then they look at me, rolling their eyes and telling me that my marbles are lost. That I can say that again. They are coming close. Jimmy is shouting. Before I fully return to myself, a hole in my ear rips open. The football hits the center of my face. I fall.

Goaaaaal. A thousand suns erupt with wet laughter; even the radio is laughing. I look up and see them both leaning over me, dripping sweat, arms akimbo.

Jimmy rolls his eyes and says, “You’ve lost your marbles.”
“I’m thirsty,” says Ciru.

“Me too,” says Jim, and they run, and I want to stand and run with them. My face hurts. Juma, our dog, is licking my face. I lean into his stomach; my nose pushes into his fur. The sun is below the trees, the sky is clear, and I am no longer broken up and distributed. I scramble and jump to my feet. Juma whines, like a car winding down. I pump my feet forward, pulling my voice out and throwing it forward to grab hold of their Thirst Revolution.

“Hey!” I shrill. “Even me I am thirsty!”

They don’t hear me.

They are headed away from the kitchen, and I follow them into the long clumps of uncut grass at the top of the garden, Juma at my heels, as they weave in and out of Baba’s tractors swerve to avoid dog shit, run through shade and fading sun, past little eruptions of termites in Kikuyu grass, and forgotten heaps of farm spare parts piled behind the hedge that separates the main house from the servants’ quarters. Then they turn, shouting hi to Zablon, the cook who is washing dishes outside in his white vest and blue trousers and Lifebuoy soap and charcoal smell.
I shout hi too, now flowing well into their movements. They stop, then turn to our regular racetrack down the path from the servants’ quarters to the kitchen. I find them there, Juma’s nose nudging Jim’s leg, and I watch them pour the cool liquid down their throats, from glasses, see it spill off the sides of their cheeks. Jimmy has learned to pull the whole glass of water down in one move. It streams down the pipe, marble-bubbles running down a soft translucent tube of sound, like a frog.

He slams his glass on the countertop, burps, and turns to look at me. What is thirst? The word splits up into a hundred small suns. I lift my glass and look up. Ciru is looking at me, her glass already empty as she wipes her lips on her forearm.
New House Moves
by Alice Walker
(1944–)

I dreamed
Last night
That I had moved
Into a roomy new house.

How many new houses
Have I moved into?
And isn’t there
Something always
Behind
These new house
Moves?

When I was a child
We moved each year
My parents
Working hard
Making nothing
For themselves
Except decency
That went
To the bone.

Now
In and out of dreams
I am always
Moving.

Finding shacks
& rundown
Houses
Fixing them up
& then moving
On.

In the dream
I said
To the silver-haired professor
Who introduced me
To the Communist Manifesto:
In this new house
I am going to paint
One of the rooms
Red!

It will probably be
A small room
He said
Laughing. In such a large
House.

How am I to live
In such prosperity?

Sharing everything
Still
My cup
Overflows
& I receive more
It appears to me
Than I ever give.

Poverty never prepared me
For this wealth.

Or to live
In the houses
My parents
Stubbornly
Dreamed.
Black Elk Speaks:

My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow? So many other men have lived and shall live that story, to be grass upon the hills.

It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit.

This, then, is not that tale of a great hunter or of a great warrior, or of a great traveler, although I have made much meat in my time and fought for my people both as boy and man, and have gone far and seen strange lands and men. So also have many others done, and better than I. These things I shall remember by the way, and often they may seem to be the very tale itself, as when I was living them in happiness and sorrow. But now that I can see it all from a lonely hilltop, I know it was the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it; of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people’s heart with flowers and singing birds, and now is withered; and of a people’s dream that died in bloody snow.

But if the vision was true and mighty, as I know, it is true and mighty yet; for such things are of the spirit, and it is in the darkness of their eyes that men get lost.

So I know that it is a good thing I am going to do; and because no good thing can be done by any man alone, I will first make an offering and send a voice to the Spirit of the World, that it may help me to be true. See, I fill this sacred pipe with the bark of the red willow; but before we smoke it, you must see how it is made and what it means. These four ribbons hanging here on the stem are the four quarters of the universe. The black one is for the west where the thunder beings live to send us rain; the white one for the north, whence comes the great white cleansing wind; the red one for the east, whence springs the light and where the morning star lives to give men wisdom; the yellow for the south, whence comes the summer and power to grow.

But these four spirits are only one Spirit after all, and this eagle feather here is for that One, which is like a father, and also it is for the thoughts of men that should rise as high as eagles do. Is not the sky a father and the earth a mother,

From Black Elk, John G. Niehardt, Black Elk Speaks (University of Nebraska Press, 1979), pp. 1-6.
and are not all living things with feet or wings or roots their children? And this hide upon the mouthpiece here, which should be bison hide, is for the earth, from whence we came and at whose breast we suck as babies all our lives, along with all the animals and birds and trees and grasses. And because it means all this, and more than any man can understand, the pipe is holy.

There is a story about the way the pipe first came to us. A very long time ago, they say, two scouts were out looking for bison; and when they came to the top of a high hill and looked north, they saw something coming a long way off, and when it came closer they cried out, “It is a woman!,” and it was. Then one of the scouts, being foolish, had bad thoughts and spoke them; but the other said: “That is a sacred woman; throw all bad thoughts away.” When she came still closer, they saw that she wore a fine white buckskin dress, that her hair was very long and that she was young and very beautiful. And she knew their thoughts and said in a voice that was like singing: “You do not know me, but if you want to do as you think, you may come.” And the foolish one went; but just as he stood before her, there was a white cloud that came and covered them. And the beautiful young woman came out of the cloud, and when it blew away the foolish man was a skeleton covered with worms.

Then the woman spoke to the one who was not foolish: “You shall go home and tell your people that I am coming and that a big tepee shall be built for me in the center of the nation.” And the man, who was very much afraid, went quickly and told the people, who did at once as they were told; and there around the big tepee they waited for the sacred woman. And after a while she came, very beautiful and singing, and as she went into the tepee this is what she sang.

“With visible breath I am walking,
A voice I am sending as I walk.
In a sacred manner I am walking.
With visible tracks I am walking.
In a sacred manner I walk.”

And as she sang, there came from her mouth a white cloud that was good to smell. Then she gave something to the chief, and it was a pipe with a bison calf carved on one side to mean the earth that bears and feeds us, and with twelve eagle feathers hanging from the stem to mean the sky and the twelve moons, and these were tied with a grass that never breaks. “Behold!” she said. “With this you shall multiply and be a good nation. Nothing but good shall come from it. Only the hands of the good shall take care of it and the bad shall not even see it.” Then she sang again and went out of the tepee; and as the people watched her going, suddenly it was a white bison galloping away and snorting, and soon it was gone.

This they tell, and whether it happened so or not I do not know; but if you think about it, you can see that it is true.
Now I light the pipe, and after I have offered it to the powers that are one Power, and sent forth a voice to them, we shall smoke together. Offering the mouthpiece first of all to the One above – so – I send a voice:

Hey hey! hey hey! hey hey! hey hey!

Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have been always, and before you no one has been. There is no other one to pray to but you. You yourself, everything that you see, everything that has been made by you. The star nations all over the universe you have finished. The four quarters of the earth you have finished. The day, and in that day, everything you have finished. Grandfather, Great Spirit, lean close to the earth that you may hear the voice I send. You towards where the sun goes down, behold me; Thunder Beings, behold me! You where the White Giant lives in power, behold me! You where the sun shines continually, whence come the day-break star and the day, behold me! You where the summer lives, behold me! You in the depths of the heavens, an eagle of power, behold! And you, Mother Earth, the only Mother, you who have shown mercy to your children!

Hear me, four quarters of the world – a relative I am! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is! Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand that I may be like you. With your power only can I face the winds. Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. With tenderness have these come up out of the ground. Look upon these faces of children without number and with children in their arms that they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet.

This is my prayer; hear me! The voice I have sent is weak, yet with earnestness I have sent it. Hear me!

It is finished. Hetchetu aloh!

Now, my friend, let us smoke together so that there may be only good between us.
Valle de Collores (Valley of Collores)
by Luis Llorens Torres (1876–1944)

When I left Collores it was on a faded little donkey, by a path between the fences enveloped by flowered vines.

Adiós, wilderness and flowers of the ravine by the river, and the nights of my thatched hut, and that peaceful calm, and the old folks of my soul, and my little siblings.

What grief, the one I felt when I looked back, and a house was being left in the distance, and that house was mine!

The last time I turned my eyes, I saw the white flight of that maternal handkerchief soaked in the juice of pain. Further beyond, smoke disappearing in the sky.

The rural flora was sad, opaque, wilted. And everything, like anguish Gripped my heart.

The donkey, at his discretion, moved at a lazy pace. The wind blew, aromatic of honeysuckle and pine. And the banyans along the way resembled weeping willows.

1 Cuando salí de collores fue en una jaquita baya, por un sendero entre mayas arropás de cundiamores.

2 Adiós, malezas y flores de la barranca del río, y mis noches del bohío, y aquella apacible calma, y los viejos de mi alma, y los hermanitos míos.

3 ¡Qué pena la que sentía, cuando hacía atrás yo miraba, y una casa se alejaba, y esa casa era la mía!

4 La última vez que volvía los ojos, vi el blanco vuelo de aquel maternal pañuelo empapado con el zumo del dolor. Mas allá, humo esfumándose en el cielo.

5 La campestre floración era triste, opaca, mustia. y todo, como una angustia, me apretaba el corazón. La jaca a su discreción, iba a paso perezoso.

10 Zumbaba el viento, oloroso a madreselvas y a pinos. Y las ceibas del camino parecían sauces llorosos.

15 ¡Qué pena la que sentía, cuando hacía atrás yo miraba, y una casa se alejaba, y esa casa era la mía!

20 The last time I turned my eyes, I saw the white flight of that maternal handkerchief soaked in the juice of pain. Further beyond, smoke disappearing in the sky.

25 The rural flora was sad, opaque, wilted. And everything, like anguish Gripped my heart.

30 The donkey, at his discretion, moved at a lazy pace. The wind blew, aromatic of honeysuckle and pine. And the banyans along the way resembled weeping willows.
No recuerdo como fue
(aquí la memoria pierdo)
Más en mi oro de recuerdos,
recuerdo que al fin llegué,
la urbe, el teatro, el café,
la plaza, el parque, a la acera...
Y en una novia hechicera,
hallé el ramaje encendido,
donde colgué el primer nido
de mi primera quimera.

Después, en pos de ideales.
Entonces, me hirió la envidia.
Y la calumnia y la insidia
y el odio de los mortales.
Y urdiendo sueños triunfales,
vi otra vez el blanco vuelo
de aquel maternal pañuelo
empapado con el zumo
del dolor. Lo demás, humo
esfumándose en el cielo.

Ay, la gloria es sueño vano.
Y el placer, tan sólo viento.
Y la riqueza, tormento.
Y el poder, hosco gusano.
Ay, si estuviera en mis manos
borrar mis triunfos mayores,
y a mi bohío de Collores
volver en la jaca baya
por el sendero entre mayas
arropás de cundiamores.

I don’t remember how it went
(here I lose my memory)
Yet in the gold of my memories,
I remember that I finally arrived,
The city, the theater, the café,
The square, the park, the sidewalk...
And in a bewitching girlfriend,
I found a burning branch,
Where I hung the first nest
Of my first chimera.

Later, in the pursuit of my ideals.
Then, I was wounded by envy,
And the slander and the insidiousness
and the hatred of mortals.
and in sifting through triumphant
dreams, again I saw the white flight
of that maternal handkerchief
soaked in the juice
of pain. The rest, smoke
disappearing in the sky.

Oh, glory is but a vain dream.
And pleasure, all but wind.
And riches, torment.
And power, a coarse worm.
Oh, if it was in my hands
to erase my major triumphs,
and to my thatched hut in Collores
return in that faded donkey
by the path between the fences
enveloped by flowered vines.
Image of the Week

Jordan Casteel, Noelle (2019)
Guiding Questions

The best questions arise from careful listening (to the author, oneself, and others), and from the spontaneity of wonder

Binyavanga Wainaina, One Day I Will Write About This Place

• How does the narrator feel about his circumstances? About his siblings? Are his experience and feelings at all familiar?
• “I know how to move with her patterns…My patterns are always tripping over each other in public”? What might this mean?
• What does he learn about the sun? What do you understand from his revelation?
• Are home and belonging the same?

Alice Walker, “New House Moves”

• Read the poem aloud: What images and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
• What does it mean to make nothing but decency?
• Have you ever moved and felt out of place? What contributed to that feeling?
• To what extent are home and hearth a function of time as well as place?

Black Elk/John Neihardt, “The Offering of the Pipe”

• Why does Black Elk decide to tell his story?
• What does his description of the sky and earth and living things suggest about our earthly home?
• What do you understand about his vision?
• What are the core stories we tell at our hearths about who we are as a society? What are the core stories you tell about yourself?

Luis Llorens Torres, “Valle de Collores”

• Read the poem aloud: What images does his departure from Collores bring to your mind?
• What does the poem suggest about our dreams?
• Have you ever considered abandoning your current path for a different one? What stops you?
• Looking back in your life, is home something that anchors you or something that you flee?

Jordan Casteel, Noelle (2019)

• Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes. What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
• Is the figure at home in this room?
• What do you imagine is on her mind?
• Is she moving with her patterns or are they tripping over themselves?

General questions for the week

• What does “home” mean for you now?
• Have your circles of belonging shifted? If yes, how?
• What anchors you most these days?
• As you consider moving further from home and hearth, do you have concerns? What are they? Why?

Connected Learning in a Time of Confinement
General Principles for Participants

• Read the text(s) to be discussed in their entirety (ideally twice)
• Make notes about what you understand, don’t understand, agree or disagree with
• Focus comments and conversation on the ideas expressed in the shared text(s), not on outside knowledge
• Seek to understand your fellow participants, not to persuade them
• Be freely authentic and morally present
• Listen to the text, to others, and to yourself

General principles for discussion leaders:

• Hold the space for honesty and vulnerability: be honest and vulnerable yourself
• Ask questions, don’t teach: the aim is shared understanding and meaning, not agreement
• Be attached to the conversation: avoid rigidly following your planned order of questions
• Make sure every voice is heard: don’t move too quickly to fill the silence
• Start and end on time: end not with conclusions but with questions you’re taking away

Format:

• Match the texts to the time allotted (Each text can productively stimulate 20-40 minutes of discussion, and can be read discussed individually or together in one sitting, depending on the time available; it is better to end with more to be said, rather than straining to fill the time)
• Begin with introductions:
  • name (if not everyone is well known to one another)

Some helpful tips to keep the conversation going (for discussion leaders and participants):

• “say more about that”
• “where do you see that in the text?“
• “how is that related to what N said earlier?”
• “do you think that’s true?”
• “do others see it the same way?”
• “what did you see in the text that we haven’t addressed?”
Visit aspeninstitute.org/programs/executive-leadership-development/ to learn more