Table of Contents

2 How to use this curriculum

3 Philosophical Basis

4 Readings
   5 Leon Trotsky, “The Struggle for Cultured Speech”
   9 Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence”
   11 Henri Nouwen, “The Journey from Despair to Hope”
   13 Sara Teasdale, “Silence”

15 Image of the Week
   Edvard Munch, The Scream (1893)

17 Guiding Questions, Week 12

28 Short Guide on Leading a Discussion
How to Use this Curriculum

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
Readings | Week 12

5  Leon Trotsky, “The Struggle for Cultured Speech”

9  Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence”

11 Henri Nouwen, “The Journey from Despair to Hope”

13 Sara Teasdale, “Silence”
The Struggle for Cultured Speech
by Leon Trotsky
(1879–1940)

I read lately in one of our papers that at a general meeting of the workers at the “Paris Commune” shoe factory, a resolution was carried to abstain from swearing, to impose fines for bad language, etc.

This is a small incident in the turmoil of the present day but a very telling small incident. Its importance, however, depends on the response the initiative of the shoe factory is going to meet with in the working class.

Abusive language and swearing are a legacy of slavery, humiliation, and disrespect for human dignity—one’s own and that of other people. This is particularly the case with swearing in Russia. I should like to hear from our philologists, our linguists and experts in folklore, whether they know of such loose, sticky, and low terms of abuse in any other language than Russian. As far as I know, there is nothing, or nearly nothing, of the kind outside Russia. Russian swearing in “the lower depths” was the result of despair, embitterment and, above all, slavery without hope, without escape. The swearing of the upper classes, on the other hand, the swearing that came out of the throats of the gentry, the authorities, was the outcome of class rule, slaveowner’s pride, unshakable power. Proverbs are supposed to contain the wisdom of the masses—Russian proverbs show besides the ignorant and the superstitious mind of the masses and their slavishness. “Abuse does not stick to the collar,” says an old Russian proverb, not only accepting slavery as a fact, but submitting to the humiliation of it. Two streams of Russian abuse—that of the masters, the officials, the police, replete and fatty, and the other, the hungry, desperate, tormented swearing of the masses—have colored the whole of Russian life with despicable patterns of abusive terms. Such was the legacy the revolution received among others from the past.

But the revolution is in the first place an awakening of human personality in the masses—who were supposed to possess no personality. In spite of occasional cruelty and the sanguinary relentlessness of its methods, the revolution is, before and above all, the awakening of humanity, its onward march, and is marked with a growing respect for the personal dignity of every individual.

with an ever-increasing concern for those who are weak. A revolution does not
deserve its name if, with all its might and all the means at its disposal, it does not
help the woman—twofold and threefold enslaved as she has been in the past—to get
out on the road of individual and social progress. A revolution does not deserve its
name, if it does not take the greatest care possible of the children—the future race
for whose benefit the revolution has been made. And how could one create day by
day, if only by little bits, a new life based on mutual consideration, on self respect,
on the real equality of women, looked upon as fellow-workers, on the efficient care
of the children—in an atmosphere poisoned with the roaring, rolling, ringing, and
resounding swearing of masters and slaves, that swearing which spares no one
and stops at nothing? The struggle against “bad language” is a condition of
intellectual culture, just as the fight against filth and vermin is a condition
of physical culture.

To do away radically with abusive speech is not an easy thing, considering
that unrestrained speech has psychological roots and is an outcome of uncultured
surroundings. We certainly welcome the initiative of the shoe factory, and above
all we wish the promoters of the new movement much perseverance. Psychological
habits which come down from generation to generation and saturate the whole
atmosphere of life are very tenacious, and on the other hand it often happens with
us in Russia that we just make a violent rush forward, strain our forces, and then
let things drift in the old way….

The fight against bad language is also a part of a struggle for the purity,
clearness, and beauty of Russian speech.

Reactionary blockheads maintain that the revolution, if it hasn’t altogether
ruined it, is in the process of spoiling the Russian language. There is actually an
enormous quantity of words in use now that have originated by chance, many
of them perfectly needless, provincial expressions, some contrary to the spirit of
our language. And yet the reactionary blockheads are quite mistaken about the
future of the Russian language—as about all the rest. Out of the revolutionary
turmoil our language will come strengthened, rejuvenated, with an increased
flexibility and delicacy. Our prerevolutionary, obviously ossified bureaucratic
and liberal press language is already considerably enriched by new descriptive
forms, by new, much more precise and dynamic expressions. But during all these
stormy years our language has certainly become greatly obstructed, and part of
our progress in culture will show, among other things, in our casting out of our
speech all useless words and expressions, and those which are not in keeping with
the spirit of the language, while preserving the unquestionable and invaluable
linguistic acquisitions of the revolutionary epoch.

Language is the instrument of thought. Precision and correctness of speech
are indispensable conditions of correct and precise thinking. In our country,
the working class has come to power for the first time in history. The working
class possesses a rich store of work and life experience and a language based
on that experience. But our proletariat has not had sufficient schooling in
elementary reading and writing, not to speak of literary education. And this is the reason that the now governing working class, which is in itself and by its social nature a powerful safeguard of the integrity and greatness of the Russian language in the future, does not, nevertheless, stand up now with the necessary energy against the intrusion of needless, corrupt, and sometimes hideous new words and expressions. When people say, “a pair of weeks,” “a pair of months” (instead of several weeks, several months), this is stupid and ugly. Instead of enriching the language it impoverishes it: the word “pair” loses in the process its real meaning (in the sense of “a pair of shoes”). Faulty words and expressions have come into use because of the intrusion of mispronounced foreign words. Proletarian speakers, even those who should know better, say, for instance, “incindent” instead of “incident” or they say “instice instead of “instinct” or “legularly” instead of “regularly. Such misspellings were not infrequent also in the past, before the revolution. But now they seem to acquire a sort of right of citizenship.

No one corrects such defective expressions out of a sort of false pride. That is wrong. The struggle for education and culture will provide the advanced elements of the working class with all the resources of the Russian language in its extreme richness, subtlety and refinement. To preserve the greatness of the language, all faulty words and expressions must be weeded out of daily speech. Speech is also in need of hygiene. And the working class needs a healthy language not less but rather more than the other classes: for the first time in history it begins to think independently about nature, about life, and its foundations—and to do the thinking it needs the instrument of a clear incisive language.
I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been. Less than two months ago, I was told by my two doctors, one female and one male, that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that the tumor was malignant. Between the telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the agony of and involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.

But within those three weeks, I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me still shaken but much stronger. This is a situation faced by many women. Some of what I experienced during that time has helped elucidate for me much of what I feel concerning the transformation of silence into language and action. In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my own mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for in my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I ever been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed would have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else’s words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and

The women who sustained me through that period were black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence. They all gave me a strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge—within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not—I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.

What are the words you do not have yet? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am a woman, because I am black, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?

And, of course, I am afraid—you can hear it in my voice—because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, “tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always that one little piece inside of you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth.”

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.
Sometimes it seems that we prefer the security of death to the insecurity of life. Death is fixed. It is definitive. It is sure. Life is unpredictable, open-ended. You never know where it will go. Something in us is tempted to choose death because at least we know what we are getting. I have seen people who live as if they were balancing on the edge of an abyss. They are nervous, unsure whether they are going to make it. Finally, they solve the dilemma by jumping. At least it is over; the tension is relieved. In a world like ours with so many tensions and insecurities, too many of us choose the security of death….

Almost always, these small deaths begin with judging. In judging, we deal with our own fears by putting other people into little boxes and, in effect, declaring them dead. “Oh, I know him,” we say. “I know that type. He’s not worth talking to.” In doing this, we take the position that new life is no longer possible in our relationships with people. We have already decided who they are. We don’t want to be bothered any more. That is why Jesus says, “Do not judge.” Labeling people prevents us from seeing them as brothers and sisters and from developing community with them.

We must also stop judging ourselves. We put ourselves in boxes, too. “I have lived fifty years,” we say. “Don’t expect me to change. I can’t do anything new or different.” This self-rejection is really a step toward death. It can lead to suicide—physical, psychological, or spiritual.

This kind of judging goes on in ourselves, in others, in our communities, even among nations. We have already decided what the communists are up to. We have already decided what Nicaragua is all about. We deal with other nations as if we knew for certain that they are not to be trusted. It is decided by us ahead of time. And the same process goes on in the hearts of our “enemies.”

Living without judgment is very difficult. It means trusting that new life can emerge even in a world full of distrust, violence, destruction, and war.

Life is always small. It is always vulnerable. It never shouts or screams. It always needs protection and guidance. Saying “yes” to it means being willing to look at the small life that seeks to be born in your heart, in your body, in your

mind, among people. Death is always glamorous. Death shines; it is always big and noisy. Death goes bang, bang! Because life is very small, you can never see it happening. Have you every seen a tree actually grow? Can you see a child grow? Growth is too gentle, too tender. Life is basically hidden. It is small and begs for constant care and protection. If you are committed to always saying “yes” to life, you are going to have to become a person who chooses it when it is hidden.

I have a case in point from my own life. I live in a community with handicapped adults. Just after I moved in they asked me if I would be willing to take care of Adam. Adam cannot speak. Adam cannot walk. Adam is what some people might call “a vegetable.” “Would you be willing to wash Adam?” they asked. “Would you be willing to dress him and give him breakfast?”

As I began to take care of Adam, I slowly discovered what life is about. Adam began to teach me about the smallness of living. As I bathed this twenty-five-year-old-man, washed his face, combed his hair, fed him and dressed him, I began to realize what an incredible gift life is. Adam spoke to me in a language I didn’t know he could speak. He told me how hidden, vulnerable, and deep life is. Being with him gave me a sense of being closely in touch with living. After a while I felt an enormous desire to leave my office and my books and to be with Adam, because he would tell me what life was about.

I began to realize that every time people say “yes” to life in whatever form—the unborn life, life on death row, the life of the severely handicapped, the life of the broken and the homeless—they start to give hope to each other. I had never experienced hope so concretely until I began to wash Adam. Adam strengthened my hope. It wasn’t optimism. Adam is never going to get better. But he offers hope. This hope can form a very strong bond among people who are willing to go where life is fragile and hidden.
Silence
by Sara Teasdale
(1884–1933)

(To Eleonora Duse)

We are anhungered after solitude,
Deep stillness pure of any speech or sound,
Soft quiet hovering over pools profound,
The silences that on the desert brood,
Above a windless hush of empty seas,
The broad unfurling banners of the dawn,
A faery forest where there sleeps a Faun;
Our souls are fain of solitudes like these.
O woman who divined our weariness,
And set the crown of silence on your art,
From what undreamed-of depth within your heart
Have you sent forth the hush that makes us free
To hear an instant, high above earth’s stress,
The silent music of infinity?

Image of the Week

Edvard Munch, *The Scream* (1893)
The best questions arise from careful listening (to the author, oneself, and others), and from the spontaneity of wonder.

### Leon Trotsky, “The Struggle for Cultured Speech”
- What connections does Trotsky draw between swearing and oppression?
- How does Trotsky understanding the relationship between language and intellectual culture?
- To what extent does the language we use reflect or influence our political culture, for good or for ill?
- What does Adam’s story tell us about vulnerability? About silence?

### Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence”
- “…what is most important to me must be spoken….” How does Lorde view her drive to speak? Do you feel similarly, viz., that what is important must be spoken?
- What does Lorde identify as the consequences of silence?
- Which is the more powerful fear—speech or silence?
- What, for Lorde, is “the transformation of silence”?
- What is the more powerful fear—speech or silence?
- What is “the silent music of infinity”?

### Henri Nouwen, “The Journey from Despair to Hope”
- How does Nouwen view the relationship between death and judging? Is his position accurate in your view, or does he draw the connection unduly strongly?
- What is the relationship between judging and speaking?
- What is the story of Adam?

### Sara Teasdale, “Silence”
- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- Is this a poem of sadness or relief?
- Is there a silence that “makes us free”?
- What is “the silent music of infinity”?

### Edvard Munch, The Scream (1893)
- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- Does the image prompt in you outrage or withdrawal?

### General questions for the week
- About what are you compelled to be more vocal?
- When is silence more powerful than speech? More intimate? More dangerous?
- When do you feel heard?
- In what silence do you find solace?
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)
- Set the frame:
  - remind participants to enjoy the gift of time and conversation by avoiding other distractions
  - revisit the key general principles above
- It always helps to read a passage aloud
- Layer your questions: be patient, each layer builds upon the next
- What does the text say? (sometimes we read the same thing different ways)
- What does the text mean? (sometimes we interpret the text differently)
- What does the text mean to me? (sometimes we apply the texts to ourselves differently)
- What does the text mean for us? (we may have different understandings of what the text means for living in community)
- What does the text mean for society? (we may have different approaches to what the text implies for action in society)

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