Connected Learning in a Time of Confinement

Week 4: Resilience and Flexibility

April 24, 2020
This anthology has been prepared in draft form for use in a special seminar curriculum and are provided for private, non-commercial use in extraordinary times. Additional information about the seminar and this volume is available from The Aspen Institute, 2300 N Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20037.

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
© 2020 The Aspen Institute

Published in the United States of America
by The Aspen Institute

All rights reserved
Table of Contents

2 How to use this curriculum
3 Philosophical Basis
4 Readings
   5 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dear Ijeawele, selections
   7 Ralph Ellison, Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary, 1972, selections
   9 Idries Shah, “The Golden Fortune”
   11 Gloria Anzaldúa, To Live in the Borderlands
13 Image of the Week
   José Roosevelt, Autumn Story
15 Guiding Questions, Week 4
16 Short Guide on Leading a Discussion

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/
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
5  Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, selections
7  Ralph Ellison, *Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary, 1972*, selections
9  Idries Shah, “The Golden Fortune”
11  Gloria Anzaldúa, *To Live in the Borderlands*
Dear Ijeawele

by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

(1977–)

FIFTEENTH SUGGESTION

Teach [Chizalum] about difference. Make difference ordinary. Make difference normal. Teach her not to attach value to difference. And the reason for this is not to be fair or to be nice, but merely to be human and practical. Because difference is the reality of our world. And by teaching her about difference, you are equipping her to survive in a diverse world.

She must know and understand that people walk different paths in the world, and that as long as those paths do no harm to others, they are valid paths that she must respect. Teach her that we do not know—we cannot know everything about life. Both religion and science have spaces for the things we do not know, and it is enough to make peace with that.

Teach her never to universalize her own standards or experiences. Teach her that her standards are for her alone, and not for other people. This is the only necessary form of humility: the realization that difference is normal.

Tell her that some people are gay, and some are not. A little child has two daddies or two mommies because some people just do. Tell her that some people go to mosque and others go to church and others go to different places of worship and still others don’t worship at all, because that is just the way it is for some people.

You say to her: You like palm oil but some people don’t like palm oil.

She says to you: Why?

You say to her: I don’t know. It’s just the way the world is.

Please note that I am not suggesting that you raise her to be “non-judgmental,” which is a commonly used expression these days, and which slightly worries me. The general sentiment behind the idea is a fine one, but “non-judgmental” can easily devolve into meaning “don’t have an opinion about anything” or “I keep my opinions to myself.” And so, instead of that, what I hope for Chizalum is this: that she will be full of opinions, and that her opinions will come from an informed, humane, and broad-minded place.

May she be healthy and happy. May her life be whatever she wants it to be.

From Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (Knopf, 2017) pp. 61-63.
Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary, 1972

by Ralph Ellison
(1914–1994)

...Americans are known as a people without memory. Americans are known as a people who take things lightly, just as we tend to take such ceremonies as this in which we are engaged as one of reward. It is assumed that you are being paid off for having completed certain necessary work, and some of you have completed that work with great brilliance and verve. But this ceremony is not simply one of reward. I’m sorry, but my role here is to inform you that rewards notwithstanding, this is indeed a rite of preparation. Because the world into which you go now is a world which came into being as a result of what the Founding Fathers were unable to bring themselves to do, and of what those who made peace after the Civil War, or the War Between the States, were unable to do. And the state of world into which you are about to enter isn’t just a matter of laws. It is also a matter of the spiritual quality of our American principles and the manner in which they infuse not only our words and our laws, but the arrangements of our cities, the quality of our education and the disposition of our neighborhoods.

No, the moral conflict which marks the world into which you go was present even in our sacred documents of state, evening in the clerical forms which made it possible for our bureaucracies to get on with their work. So you see, even though we could look away from certain unpleasant moral realities, they did not go away. They were woven into the texture of our society. They remained to color even our most sublime gestures. And as surely as the values stated in our sacred documents were compelling and all-pervasive, and as surely as they were being made a living reality in the social structure, such people as were excluded from the rewards and promises of that social structure would rise up and insist on being included. Such people as were brutalized and designated a role beneath the social hierarchy were sure to rise up, and with the same rhetoric and in the name of the same sacred principles, accuse the nation and insist upon a rectification.

I would like to think that we have come to grips with that problem, and

which there is such a multiplicity of events that in order to protect ourselves
we take on a stance, a posture of cynicism. Yes, but the old sacred words still work
within us. Morality still claims us, because these words in whose name we act were
made luminous by human sacrifice, with the shedding of blood. We are not so
sophisticated that we are able to throw that off. So now, as I say, we have a society,
a civilization, of quantity in which all may be well fed and clothed, and given the
opportunity to achieve their own best possibilities. The world into which you are
about to enter is such a world, and I can think of no generation of graduates of
the College of William and Mary in Virginia which is better able to deal with the
problems of such a world.

For you know something of your opposite numbers. You do not have to ask
yourselves, “Is the black man an American?”

You do not have to ask yourselves whether the melting pot melts—because it
has indeed melted. We are united by the principles enunciated by those young
men who preceded you here as graduates so long ago.

We are united in the language we speak.
We are united in the national cultural style and all of its manifestations.
We are united, certainly, on the field of athletics.

But best of all, we are better able to think together about the cost of the daring
and heroic dream which made this country. We know—you know—that no man
lives simply his own life. He lives in great part the lives of his ancestors, of his
parents. He lives the lives of his children and the lives of those who are to follow
them. He lives but a small part of his life for himself. What are you able to do
today, what Virginia and the College of William and Mary have been making it
possible for you to do, is to live your own life. That is not to be irreverent to the ties
of the past, but to understand its tragic dimensions and to take on that conscious
awareness as you try to make your way and as you try to deal with the difficulties
which are common to all men and women.

We do not bury the past, because it is within us. But we do modify the past
as we live our own lives. And because of this we are now able to resuscitate in
all its boldness, and with great sophistication, that conscious and conscientious
concern for others which is the essence of the American ideal. I would remind you,
however, that we are nation that plays it by ear. We are inventive both in creating
sublime visions and in copping out on them. These too are a part of the human
response.

Now, in completing my unusual role, I want to thank you for having invited
me here. I want to thank you for giving an American writer a renewed sense of
the complexity of change, the resurrection of hope, the continuing presence of
courage, and that old American desire to move on and to make things a little better.
Once upon a time there was a merchant named Abdul Malik. He was known as the Good Man of Khorasan, because from his immense fortune he used to give to charity and hold feasts for the poor.

But one day it occurred to him that he was simply giving away some of what he had; and that the pleasure which he obtained through his generosity was far in excess of what it really cost him to sacrifice what was after all such a small proportion of his wealth. As soon as this thought entered his mind, he decided to give away every penny for the good of mankind. And he did so.

No sooner had he divested himself of all his possessions, resigned to face whatever events life might have in store for him, Abdul Malik saw, during his meditation-hour, a strange figure seem to rise from the floor of his room. A man was taking shape before his very eyes, dressed in the patchwork robe of the mysterious dervish.

‘O Abdul Malik, generous man of Khorasan!’ intoned the apparition. ‘I am your real self, which has now become almost real to you because you have done something really charitable measured against which your previous record of goodness is as nothing. Because of this, and because you were able to part with your fortune without feeling personal satisfaction, I am rewarding you from the real source of reward.

‘In future, I will appear before you in this way every day. You will strike me; and I will turn into gold. You will be able to take from this golden image as much as you may wish. Do not fear that you will harm me, because whatever you take will be replaced from the source of all endowments.’

So saying, he disappeared.

The very next morning a friend named Bay-Akal was sitting with Abdul Malik when the dervish spectre began to manifest itself. Abdul Malik struck it with a stick, and the figure fell to the ground, transformed into gold. He took part of it for himself and gave some of the gold to his guest.

Now Bay-Akal, not knowing what had gone before, started to think how he could perform a similar wonder. He knew that dervishes had strange powers and concluded that it was necessary only to beat them to obtain gold.
So he arranged for a feast to be held to which every dervish who heard of it could come and eat his fill. When they had all eaten well, Bay-Akal took up an iron bar and thrashed every dervish within reach until they lay battered and broken on the ground.

Those dervishes who were unharmed seized Bay-Akal and took him to the judge. They stated their case and produced the wounded dervishes as evidence. Bay-Akal related what had happened at Abdul Malik’s house and explained his reasons for trying to reproduce the trick.

Abdul Malik was called, and on the way to the court his golden self whispered to him what to say.

‘May it please the court,’ he said, ‘this man seems to me to be insane, or to be trying to cover up some penchant for assaulting people without cause. I do know him, but his story does not correspond with my own experiences in my house.’

Bay-Akal was therefore placed for a time in a lunatic asylum, until he became more calm. The dervishes recovered almost at once, through some science known to themselves. And nobody believed that such an astonishing thing as a man who becomes a golden statue—and daily at that—could ever take place.

For many another year, until he was gathered to his forefathers, Abdul Malik continued to break the image which was himself, and to distribute its treasure, which was himself, to those whom he could not help in any other way than materially.
To Live in the Borderlands

by Gloria Anzaldúa
(1942–2004)

To live in the Borderlands means you are neither *hispana* *india* *negra* *española* ni *gabacha*, *eres* *mestiza*, *mulata*, half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps while carrying all five races on your back not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years, is no longer speaking to you, that *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*, that denying the *Anglo* inside you is as bad as having denied the *Indian* or *Black*;

*Cuando vives en la frontera*
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice, you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat, forerunner of a new race, half and half—both woman and man, neither—a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to put *chile* in the borscht, eat whole wheat *tortillas*, speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent; be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;

Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle, the pull of the gun barrel, the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;

In the Borderlands you are the battleground where the enemies are kin to each other; you are at home, a stranger,

---

the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads.
Image of the Week

José Roosevelt, Autumn Story
Guiding Questions

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

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dear Ijeawele, selections
- This is the concluding piece of advice to a friend on how to raise her daughter. Is this advice you would give? Why or why not?
- Is this practical advice on how “to survive in a diverse world” or is it a statement of moral principle?
- What does it mean to be opinionated but non-judgmental?
- With what advice would you conclude if you were to write a letter on how to raise a child?

Ralph Ellison, “Commencement Address the College of William and Mary, 1972,” selections
- This is the concluding piece of advice to seniors graduating from college. What is the “moral conflict” that the graduates are being launched into?
- In what ways does Ellison see them as being prepared or unprepared?
- How does Ellison see the individual life (and the national life) as nested in past, present, and future?
- In what ways does Ellison’s speech still echo within your own life and the life of your nation?

Gloria Anzaldúa, “To Live in the Borderlands”
- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- What does it mean to live “in the borderlands”?
- In what ways do you live in the borderlands? In what ways do you not?
- What does it mean to “be a crossroads”?

José Roosevelt, Autumn Story
- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- How are the different images within the painting related to one another?
- Does the image reflect any of the themes that emerged for you in the other readings?

General questions for the week
- What do these texts reveal about what it means to be resilient? To be flexible?
- Are resilience and flexibility the same thing? Why? Why not?
- What are the sources of your resilience? Of your flexibility?
- On what matters are you not willing to be flexible?
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)

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?”