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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/
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

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**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.
Philosophical Basis

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

5  Rabindranath Tagore, “The Grasp of Your Hand”

7  Attributed to Fernando Pessoa, “Stages of Life”
The Grasp of Your Hand
by Rabindranath Tagore
(1861–1941)

1 Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but to be fearless in facing them.

5 Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain, but for the heart to conquer it.

Let me not crave in anxious fear to be saved, but hope for the patience to win my freedom.

Grant me that I may not be a coward, feeling Your mercy in my success alone; but let me find the grasp of Your hand in my failure.

You can have flaws, be anxious, and even angry, but do not forget that your life is the greatest enterprise in the world. Only you can stop it from going bust. Many appreciate you, admire you, and love you.

Remember that to be happy is not to have a sky without a storm, a road without accidents, work without fatigue, relationships without disappointments.

To be happy is to find strength in forgiveness, hope in battles, security in the stage of fear, love in discord. It is not only to enjoy the smile, but also to reflect on the sadness. It is not only to celebrate the successes but to learn lessons from the failures. It is not only to feel happy with the applause but to be happy in anonymity.

To be happy is to stop feeling like a victim and become your destiny’s author. It is to cross deserts, yet be able to find an oasis in the depths of your soul. It is to thank God for every morning, for the miracle of life.

Being happy is not being afraid of your own feelings. It is having the courage to hear a “no”. It is confidence in the face of criticism, even when unjustified. It is to kiss your children, pamper your parents, to live poetic moments with friends, even when they hurt us. To be happy is to let live the creature that lives in each of us, free, joyful and simple.

It is to have the maturity to be able to say: “I made mistakes”. It is to have the courage to say “I am sorry”. It is to have the sensitivity to say, “I need you”. It is to have the ability to say “I love you”.

May your life become a garden of opportunities for happiness. That in spring may it be a lover of joy. In winter, a lover of wisdom. And when you make a mistake,

start all over again. For only then will you be in love with life. You will find that to be happy is not to have a perfect life. But use the tears to irrigate tolerance. Use your losses to train patience. Use your mistakes to sculpt serenity. Use pain to plaster pleasure. Use obstacles to open windows of intelligence.

Never give up.
Never give up on people who love you.
Never give up on happiness, for life is an incredible show.
Francisco de Zurbarán, *Hercules and the Hydra* (1634)
Guiding Questions

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

Rabindranath Tagore, “The Grasp of Your Hand”
- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- Does it make sense to pray not to be sheltered from dangers?
- What does it mean to endure and overcome, rather than to avoid?
- What is the hand you grasp?

Attributed to Fernando Pessoa, “Stages of Life”
- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- What does this piece suggest about suffering?
- What is the right balance between acknowledging hurt and forgiving those who wound you, between “feeling like a victim” and “being your destiny’s author”?
- Does the poem reflect “stages of life”?

Francisco de Zurbarán, Hercules and the Hydra (1634)
- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- How does the painting depict strength?
- Does this vision of strength accord with your own?
- How would you depict the strength? Failure? The relationship between the two?

General questions for the week
- What is failure, and what makes it incapacitating or a source of strength?
- What positive qualities may emerge out of failure?
- Would we be better if our culture and organizations allowed more room to fail?
- Does our culture need a different definition of strength?
Short Guide to Leading a Discussion

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?”