

A large, stylized silhouette of a tree with a thick trunk and a full, rounded canopy, rendered in a lighter shade of orange than the background. It is positioned on the left side of the slide, extending from the bottom to the top.

Connected Learning in a Time of Confinement

Week 5: Friendship and Fear

May 4, 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.

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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**

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

**Connected Learning in
a Time of Confinement**

Readings | Week 5

- 5 Michel de Montaigne, "Of Friendship," selections
- 7 Aesop, "The Ants and the Grasshopper"
- 9 Rosa Luxemburg, "Letter to Mathilde Wurm"
- 11 Gabriel Mistral, "The Sad Mother"

Of Friendship

by Michel de Montaigne
(1533–1592)

1 ...For the rest, what we ordinarily call friends and friendships are nothing but acquaintanceships and familiarities formed by some chance or convenience, by means of which our souls are bound to each other. In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam
5 that joined them, and cannot find it again. If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I.

Beyond all my understanding, beyond what I can say about this in particular, there was I know not what inexplicable and fateful force that was the mediator of
10 this union. We sought each other before we met because of the reports we heard of each other, which had more effect on our affection than such reports would reasonably have; I think it was by some ordinance from heaven. We embraced each other by our names. And at our first meeting, which by chance came at a great feast and gathering in the city, we found ourselves so taken with each other,
15 so well acquainted, so bound together, that from that time on nothing was so close to us as each other. He wrote an excellent Latin satire, which is published, in which he excuses and explains the precipitancy of our mutual understanding, so promptly grown to its perfection. Having so little time to last, and having begun so late, for we were both grown men, and he a few years older than I, it could not
20 lose time and conform to the pattern of mild and regular friendships, which need so many precautions in the form of long preliminary association. Our friendship has no other model than itself, and can be compared only with itself. It is not one special consideration, nor two, nor three, nor four, nor a thousand: it is I know not what quintessence of all this mixture, which, having seized my whole will, led it to
25 plunge and lose itself in his; which, having seized his whole will, led it to plunge and lose itself in mine, with equal hunger, equal rivalry. I say lose, in truth, for neither of us reserved anything for himself, nor was anything either his or mine.

When Laelius, in the presence of the Roman consuls—who, after condemning Tiberius Gracchus, prosecuted all those who had been in his confidence—came to
30 ask Caius Blossius, who was Gracchus' best friend, how much he would have been willing to do for him, he answered: "Everything." "What, everything?" pursued Laelius. "And what if he had commanded you to set fire to our temples?" "He

1 would never have commanded me to do that," replied Blossius. "But what if he
had?" Laelius insisted. "I would have obeyed," he replied. If he was such a perfect
friend to Gracchus as the histories say, he did not need to offend the consuls by this
last bold confession, and he should not have abandoned the assurance he had of
5 Gracchus' will. But nevertheless, those who charge that this answer is seditious do
not fully understand this mystery, and fail to assume first what is true, that he had
Gracchus' will up his sleeve, both by power over him and by knowledge of him.
They were friends more than citizens, friends more than friends or enemies of their
country or friends of ambition and disturbance. Having committed themselves
10 absolutely to each other, they held absolutely the reins of each other's inclination;
and if you assume that this team was guided by the strength and leadership of
reason, as indeed it is quite impossible to harness it without that, Blossius' answer
is as it should have been. If their actions went astray, they were by my measure
neither friends to each other, nor friends to themselves....

15 In this noble relationship, services and benefits, on which other friendships feed,
do not even deserve to be taken into account; the reason for this is the complete
fusion of our wills. For just as the friendship I feel for myself receives no increase
from the help I give myself in time of need, whatever the Stoics say, and as I feel
no gratitude to myself for the service I do myself; so the union of such friends,
20 being truly perfect, makes them lose the sense of such duties, and hate and banish
from between them these words of separation and distinction: benefit, obligation,
gratitude, request, thanks, and the like....

For this perfect friendship I speak of is indivisible: each one gives himself
so wholly to his friend that he has nothing left to distribute elsewhere; on the
25 contrary, he is sorry that he is not double, triple, or quadruple, and that he has
not several souls and several wills, to confer them all on this one object. Common
friendships can be divided up: one may love in one man his beauty, in another his
easygoing ways, in another liberality, in one paternal love, in another brotherly
love, and so forth; but this friendship that possesses the soul and rules it with
30 absolute sovereignty cannot possibly be double. If two called for help at the same
time, which one would you run to? If they demanded conflicting services of you,
how would you arrange it? If one confided to your silence a thing that would be
useful for the other to know, how would you extricate yourself? A single dominant
friendship dissolves all other obligations. The secret I have sworn to reveal to no
35 other man, I can impart without perjury to the one who is not another man: he is
myself. It is a great enough miracle to be doubled, and those who talk of tripling
themselves do not realize the loftiness of the thing: nothing is extreme that can
be matched. And he who supposes that of two men I love one just as much as the
other, and that they love each other and me just as much as I love them, multiplies
40 into a fraternity the most singular and unified of all things,
of which even a single one is the rarest thing in the world
to find.

The Ants and the Grasshopper

by Aesop

(620 BCE–564 BCE)



1 One bright day in late autumn a family of Ants were bustling about in the warm sunshine, drying out the grain they had stored up during the summer, when a starving Grasshopper, his fiddle under his arm, came up and humbly begged for a bite to eat.

5 “What!” cried the Ants in surprise, “haven’t you stored anything away for the winter? What in the world were you doing all last summer?”

“I didn’t have time to store up any food,” whined the Grasshopper; “I was so busy making music that before I knew it the summer was gone.”

10 The Ants shrugged their shoulders in disgust.

“Making music, were you?” they cried. “Very well; now dance!” And they turned their backs on the Grasshopper and went on with their work.

Notes

Letter to Mathilde Wurm

by Rosa Luxemburg
(1871-1919)

Wronke, 28/12/1916

1 My dear Tilde,

I am answering your Christmas letter immediately, while I still feel the wrath it caused me. Your letter made me terribly, wildly angry, because, for
5 all its brevity, every line of it shows that you have again totally succumbed to the environment in which you move. This tearfully complaining tone, this self-pity and wailing over the 'disappointments' you have suffered—you say you have been disappointed in others, but why not look into the mirror, where you might discover the whole misery of mankind accurately portrayed. And
10 when you speak of 'we' you mean your society of frogs croaking in their swamp; but during our old relationship, you meant my company. Naturally, I must identify you with the people you now associate with.

You complain in tones of melancholy that I find "too little aggressiveness" in your attitudes. "Too little," that's good! You don't march forward at all;
15 you crawl. And the difference is one of kind, not degree. You and your kind belong altogether to a different zoological species than I, and never was your morose, peevish, cowardly and half-hearted kind more alien, more hateful, to me than it is now. You wouldn't mind more 'aggressiveness,' you say, only one gets pinched for it and that 'profits but little.' O, miserable
20 shop-keeper's soul! You would be ready to offer even a bit of 'heroism' but only against cash; the profit must be on the counter immediately, be it only three moldy copper pennies. The simplest words of that honest and upright man, *Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, so help me God*—these were not spoken for you.

25 It is fortunate that the history of humanity was not made by people like you, or there would have been no Reformation and we would probably still be living under the *Ancien Regime*. But so far as I am concerned, while I have never been soft, I have recently become as hard as polished steel and from now on I will not make the slightest concession, either politically or
30 in personal relations. I need only think of your gallery of heroes to be

From Dissent magazine, Winter 1954

1 nauseated: the sweet Haase, Dittman with his beautiful beard and beautiful
parliamentary speeches, Kautsky that vacillating shepherd, who is naturally
followed through thick and thin by your Emmo, the wonderful Arthur—*ah, je n'en*
finirai!

5 I swear to you that rather than 'struggling' with your heroes or even to have
anything to do with them I would sit for years, not here where I feel as if in paradise
after what I had before, but in that hole on the Alexanderplatz where in a cell
measuring eleven cubic meters, without light in the morning or evening, squeezed
between the C (but without W) and the iron plank-bed I could read my Moerike
10 aloud. I prefer Count Westarp—and not because he talked of 'almond shaped
velvet eyes' in the Reichstag, but because he, at least, is a man. I warn you that as
soon as I will be free to taste fresh air again I will chase and hunt your company of
frogs with trumpets, with cracking whips and blood hounds—I was going to say
like Penthesilea, but God knows you are no Achilles.

15 Does this suffice as New Year's greetings? See to it that you remain a *Mensch*.
To be a *Mensch*, that is the main thing. And that means to remain steadfast, clear,
serene; yes, serene despite everything. To whimper is the business of weaklings. To
be a *Mensch* means gladly to throw one's whole life, when need be, onto the 'great
scale of destiny.' And it means, as well, to find pleasure in each clear day and each
20 beautiful cloud. Oh, I don't know how to write recipes for being human, I only
know how one is; and when we used to walk together in the fields of Suedende
and the red evening sun lay on the wheat, you knew it too. Despite all its horror
the world is beautiful, and if there were no weaklings and cowards it would be
more beautiful still. But come: you get a kiss after all, for you are still an honest
25 soul. Happy New Year!

R.

The Sad Mother

by Gabriela Mistral
(1889-1957)

1 Sleep, sleep, my beloved,
without worry, without fear,
although my soul does not sleep,
although I do not rest.

5 Sleep, sleep, and in the night
may your whispers be softer
than a leaf of grass,
or the silken fleece of lambs.

10 May my flesh slumber in you,
my worry, my trembling.
In you, may my eyes close
and my heart sleep.

Notes

Image of the Week



Pablo Picasso, Friendship (1908)

Notes

Guiding Questions

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

Michel de Montaigne, "Of Friendship"

- How does Montaigne differentiate between common friendships (or acquaintanceships) and the "perfect" friendship he describes?
- What are the qualities of perfect friendship? Have you experienced this kind of friendship?
- In the story of Laelius and Blossius, Montaigne illustrates the degree to which true friends would act for one another. How did you understand the story? What would you be willing to do (or not do) for your closest friend?
- What do you fear in losing a friend?

Aesop, "The Ants and the Grasshopper"

- Read the fable aloud. What do the ants and grasshoppers value, respectively?
- Does the fable privilege one value over the other?
- What do the ants fear in not sharing with the grasshopper?
- Are the ants and the grasshoppers friends? Why? Why not?
- If you were to rewrite the fable as a story of cooperation, what would the story be?

Rosa Luxemburg, "Letter to Mathilde Wurm"

- What wrath is Luxemburg giving vent to in this letter to her friend Mathilde?
- How would you assess their friendship, given the tone and content of the letter?
- How do you give criticism to a friend? How do you receive it?

- Luxemburg is writing from prison, but counsels Mathilde to "remain steadfast, clear, serene." How do you remain steadfast, clear, and serene in uncertain and hostile circumstances?
- In what ways do your friendships help you walk through fear?

Gabriela Mistral, "The Sad Mother"

- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- How easy is it to "sleep, sleep,...without worry, without fear"?
- In what ways may loving another be a source of anxiety? Of comfort?
- Can you be at rest when others are not at rest?

Pablo Picasso, Friendship

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- What does the image suggest about friendship?
- Is the image of friendship one of comfort? Anxiety? Certainty? Ambiguity?

General questions for the week

- What have you discovered recently about friendship? Have you found the character of your friendships changing? If so, how?
- Is our capacity for friendship limited only to a few, or as Montaigne would have it, to one only?
- What gets in the way of stronger

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)

- what is on your heart and mind?
- the person speaking chooses the next person
- 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?"

Notes



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