



Soul Matters

Cultivating Relationship



Small Group

October 2021

Cultivating Relationship

Pandemic time is teaching us so many things about relationships.

It's undone our assumptions about work, calling into question the worth of "going into the office" and exposing how we pass most of the economic pain down to those on the so-called lowest rungs of the ladder.

It's clarifying that there is no real replacement for in-person connection, and certainly reminding us how precious human touch really is.

Our friendships were weeded out and realigned, inviting us to now prioritize those that are essential over those that are instrumental.

We noticed how much costuming is required of us, not just making it clear how sweats are so much more comfortable than suits and fashionable heels, but also helping us notice how insidiously our "required gear" ranks us and separates us from each other.

Routines once forsaken were welcomed back in and suddenly the sacredness of unhurried habits like sit-down dinners, dog walks and making our own bread reasserted themselves.

The promise and precariousness of the common good has been placed center stage, reminding us that when people aren't willing to make small sacrifices for the larger whole, pandemics don't end.

We've learned and are learning all this because Covid brought so much to a halt. It put on the brakes and made us pause. We've had time to look around. To notice.

And maybe that's the most important thing we've learned about cultivating relationships, the central thing we need to remember when we are finally able to move on: To go slow.

How long has it been friends since we carefully considered our relationship to speed? A slower pace. A quieter way of moving. A more careful way of dancing with each other. It's the secret so rarely mentioned, and so often overlooked. Simply put, relationships are really hard to build and care for when we are running.

May this month help us hold on to that. May it be one of the lessons we remember most. May we all be blessed by the sacredness of moving at a snail's pace

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

At Least Ten Reasons Why You Love Them

Relationships require comment, at least every once in a while. The precious people in our lives know we love, appreciate and adore them, but it doesn't hurt for us to tell them exactly why that is so. There is something about saying it out loud that breathes life back into our connections. There's something about giving voice to the reasons for our love that makes that love real.

This is what the poet, Matthew Olzmann, understands better than most. In his poem, [*Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem*](#), he lists all the reasons why he loves his partner, or as he puts it, "the reasons why our marriage might work." And the genius of the poem is the level of detail it contains. One after another, he lists the extremely particular. He goes to great pains to be precise. That's where the power rests, he seems to say.

So, here's your exercise: Write your own "Mountain Dew" poem! Pick someone precious in your life and make an *exceedingly specific* list of the reasons why you treasure them. Don't stress about the poetic structure or try to make it perfect. Just sit down and make a list. And when you are done, give it to your precious person. And if you've got the guts, you might even ask them to sit down and let you read it to them aloud.

Extra: Here's a video of the poem being read aloud: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpplxELjtkM>

Option B

Which, not How...

There's lots of advice out there about **how** to cultivate relationships, but what about the challenge of deciding **which** relationship to nourish?

We live in a society that narrows our view, that distracts us from the relationships that matter most, and certainly the relationships that *could* feed us the most. When societal voices encourage connection with our checkbooks, 401k accounts, social standing, and our Netflix cue, it's hard to hear our inner voice calling us to reconnect with wonder, stillness, play, protest, memory or prayer.

So this month, lean into the work of noticing, of stepping back to widen your view, of listening to the longings for deeper connection. Here's your assignment:

1. Set aside 15-30 minutes of reflection/meditation to read this poem/prayer multiple times by Phyllis Cole-Dai: <https://www.dailygood.org/story/2540/a-pandemic-poem-prayer-phyllis-cole-dai/>
2. On the first reading, pay attention to the 4-5 lines that "pop" for you, that seem to pull at your heart, that emotionally light up in neon lights.
3. Go slow and notice the way the poem invites you to consider types of relationship we usually overlook. For instance, our relationship with our voice, our sense of safety, our faith, our temper, our expectations or what tempts us.
4. Then reflect on those 4-5 lines and identify the one that stands out the most.

The aim is to uncover **the** relationship that wants *and most needs* your attention *right now*, the relationship that wants you to feed it so it can feed you.

Option C

How Do You NOT Cultivate Relationship?

It's counterintuitive but true: arguing well can strengthen relationships unlike almost anything else. Those skilled at navigating the tense waters of a fight know that it's not the fight itself but *the way* one fights that tears the threads of relationship. To have had a fight with someone that "fights fair" is to know that you can trust them when things get rough again. It leaves one clear that what matters most to the other is not winning but the relationship itself.

Here's the good news: we can all get better at arguing well, at fighting fairly! And a great place to start is with recognizing the ways in which you **don't** fight fairly.

So for your exercise this month, read [this article](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/worst-things-to-do-during-argument) (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/worst-things-to-do-during-argument | 5cc1ec65e4b066119de37b6d?utm_source=pocket_mylist) and identify the one or two you need to work on the most. And don't worry about this being an abstract or intellectual exercise because, if you pick correctly and honestly, then you are bound to run into a situation this month where the temptation to use your old bad habits will surely appear. Which also means you will be given the opportunity to resist that habit and come one step closer to becoming someone people look forward to arguing with! :)

Option D

Cultivating & Recalculating the Sum of Us

No one doubts that racism divides us. It is the great and terrible opposite of cultivating relationship. But are we sure we're clear about the exact cost of that division? Most often we assume that racism divides us into winners and losers. But could it be possible that in the end we all lose? This is what Heather Mcghee argues in her essential new book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone And How We Can Prosper Together*.

To honor its important and needed perspective, make reading it your spiritual exercise for the month. If you are challenged for time, you might instead engage one of these video/audio options:

- Podcast conversation: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/vox-conversations/id1081584611?i=1000512526401>
- Interview with Trevor Noah: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZpse-90KTY>
- TED Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaCrsBtiYA4&t=1s>

But don't stop there. Don't just read or listen to the above pieces. Instead work to identify **the single** sentence or paragraph in one of them that grabs you most, that seems to be trying to speak to you personally, that seems to carry a message or a call specifically for you, something that is challenging you to think or act differently.

Come to your group ready to share that single sentence/paragraph, and what you think its challenge is for you.

Option E

Childhood Questions That Cultivate

It's often surprising how little we know about our partner's or close friend's childhoods. Yet awareness of that early part of one's life adds depth to our relationships in ways that little else can.

So for your exercise this month: **Fill in the childhood blanks!** With the below list of questions as your guide, have a conversation of depth with your partner or a close friend sometime this month.

Come to your group with the story of your favorite moment from the conversation.

Questions List

1. Who was your childhood best friend, and what is your favorite memory with that person?
2. What was your favorite childhood activity?
3. What was your favorite childhood toy?
4. What was your favorite movie growing up?
5. What was your first screen name?
6. Who was your first kiss? Do you think they remember you?
7. What sort of rules did you have in your house growing up?
8. What was your best family vacation?
9. Were you closer with one parent over the other? Why?
10. Were you closer with one sibling over the other? Why?
11. What caused you to get into the most trouble with your parents?
12. How did you and your family celebrate holidays?
13. What the best thing one of siblings did for you? What was the worst thing?
14. What kind of student were you?
15. Is there a childhood achievement you were particularly proud of?
16. What is your favorite childhood memory?
17. What was your childhood dream? Is there a particular reason you stopped pursuing it?
18. What was your most embarrassing childhood moment?

Option F

Which Quote is Yours?

In the Companion Pieces section below, there are many quotes about the practice of cultivating relationship. Engaging these quotes and finding *the one* that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, as your spiritual exercise for this month, reflect on those quotes until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of cultivating relationship.

After you've found it, consider writing it out on a small piece of paper and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. What was the most nourishing *new* relationship you cultivated during the pandemic time? Was it with an unexpected person? A new habit? A new part of yourself? And what's your plan to intentionally nourish that relationship moving forward?
2. What's the wisest thing you were ever taught about cultivating relationships?
3. When was the first time you deeply connected to someone in a way that caused you to also deeply connect with yourself?
4. When did you first realize there was something called "a chosen family"?
5. Which of your friend relationships have lasted the longest? Or gone the deepest? What's been the secret? And, most importantly, is that a secret you need to pull out and use again in your current life?
6. Is it time to *stop* cultivating a relationship and instead walk away from it?
7. How are you being called to more intentionally cultivate a relationship with a loved one who has died?
8. Do you ever feel that the push to cultivate relationships is overblown? Do you ever wish our culture (or those around you) had a greater appreciation of aloneness? What is it about aloneness that others around you don't understand?
9. Are you owed an apology, but afraid to ask for it?
10. What relationship in your life needs restored? What connection have you ignored for too long?
11. How far are you willing to let empathy take you?
12. What "unnoticed" sacred relationship is our country most in danger of severing? What unacknowledged tearing of threads scares you the most?
13. Have you ever encountered "God" in between you and another person? Some say God is the electricity that surges between people. Has that ever rung true for you?
14. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the spiritual practice of Cultivating Relationship.

Word Roots & Definitions

The roots of both words, cultivate and relate, carry a quality of tending to and taking care of. The roots of relate come through Latin *relatus*: *re* back, again + *lātus* borne: carried. In other words, “to carry again and again and again.” Cultivate comes from the Latin, *cultivus*: tilled, and *colere*: to cultivate, till; inhabit; frequent; respect; tend, guard. So together one can glean the sense that cultivating a relationship involves breaking up clumps found the ground traveled and making a conscious effort to keep the heart space of the relationship free of clumps. It is also an ever-repeating process of carrying and caring for.

Wise Words

All real living is meeting.

[Martin Buber](#)

The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out.

James Baldwin

Out
of a great need
we are all holding hands
and climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
the terrain around here
is
far too
dangerous
for
that.

Hafiz

Building community is to the collective as spiritual practice is to the individual.

Grace Lee Boggs

We are like aspen trees – who have mistakenly thought that since we look like many trees that is the truth – but under the ground, our root system is one – we are fully alive when we are connected because we are, we were always, part of one another.

[Rev. Hilary Krivchenia](#)

The ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one: “Whose am I?” – because there is not identity outside of relationship. You cannot be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

Douglas Steer

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?

Henry David Thoreau

Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion.

[bell hooks](#)

Empathy isn't just something that happens to us—a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain—it's also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It's made of exertion, that dowdier cousin of impulse. Sometimes we care for another because we know we should or because it's asked for, but this doesn't make our caring hollow. The act of choosing simply means we've committed ourselves to a set of behaviors greater than the sum of our individual inclinations. This confession of effort chafes against the notion that empathy should always rise unbidden, that genuine means the same thing as unwilling, that intentionality is the enemy of love. But I believe in intention and I believe in work.

[Leslie Jamison](#)

My friend is one who knows my song and sings it to me when I forget.

Anonymous

She is a friend of mind. She gather me man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order.

[Toni Morrison](#)

Friends are those who treat you kindly behind your back.

Unknown

Real family does not come from your blood. It is the people standing beside you when no one else is.

Nishan Panwar

Loneliness does not come from having no people around, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.

Carl Jung

I believe every inch of America is sacred, from sea to shining sea. I believe we make it holy by who we welcome and by how we relate to each other. Call it my Muslim eyes on the American project. "We made you different nations and tribes that you may come to know one another," says the Qur'an.

Eboo Patel

When we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. The love in romance that makes us want to be better people, the love of children that makes us change our whole lives to meet their needs, the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them, the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts... If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact... If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression. We would suddenly be seeing everything we do, everyone we meet, not through the tactical eyes of war, but through eyes of love. We would see that there's no such thing as a blank canvas, an empty land or a new idea — but everywhere there is complex, ancient, fertile ground full of potential... We would understand that the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships, which could only be measured by their depth.

[Adrienne Maree Brown](#)

Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.

[bell hooks](#)

Unconditional love is not so much about how we receive and endure each other, as it is about the deep vow to never, under any condition, stop bringing the flawed truth of who we are to each other.

[Mark Nepo](#)

What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?

George Eliot

We must remember to go slow. It's the secret so rarely mentioned. Simply put, relationships are hard to build when we are running.

Rev. Scott Tayler

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Cultivating Relationship](#).

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Cultivating Relationship](#).

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

Karma Kitchen!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5r7fbLvvc&t=28s>

"Imagine a restaurant where there are no prices on the menu and where the check reads \$0.00 with only this footnote: "Your meal was a gift from someone who came before you. To keep the chain of gifts alive, we invite you to pay it forward for those who dine after you. That's Karma Kitchen, a volunteer-driven experiment in generosity... [and new forms of relationship!]"

Article about it:

<https://www.karmakitchen.org/index.php?pg=about>

Related article on the concept behind it - "gift ecology":

<https://www.dailygood.org/story/2349/gift-ecology-a-conversation-with-nipun-mehta-elizabeth-denley/>

To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian

Ross Gay

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aTOA28IW7E>

The Star Spanglish Banner

Angelica Maria Aguilera

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1711660122261792>

Also at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-star-spanglish-banner-by-angelica-maria-aguilera-2/>

Emotional Currency: How Money Shapes Human Relationships

<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/10/795246685/emotional-currency-how-money-shapes-human-relationships>

How To Start And End Your Day Together (3 min)

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/6LtWVy4u6EtIEQVmNoB3Kd>

Alain de Botton on Love

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJ6K_f7oSdg

Articles

Want to Improve Your Relationship? Start Paying More Attention to Bids

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/want-to-improve-your-relationship-start-paying-more-attention-to-bids/>

Look With Your Heart: Lessons From My Time With My Grandmother

<https://www.dailygood.org/story/832/look-with-your-heart-lessons-from-my-time-with-my-grandmother-mia-tagano/>

Excerpt: "Slowly, without words, we were building a relationship based on kindness... After this, she slowly shared more about her life and I found out more of who this woman is, found out more about her spirit... Amazing. It doesn't take long to make a real intimate genuine human connection with someone. It only takes stopping for a moment, listening deeply, and looking with your heart rather than your eyes..."

Books

The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone And How We Can Prosper Together

Heather Mcghee

“McGhee embarks on a deeply personal journey across the country from Maine to Mississippi to California, tallying what we lose when we buy into the zero-sum paradigm—the idea that progress for some of us must come at the expense of others.”

Interview with *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZpse-90KTY>

30 Lessons for Loving

Karl Pillemer

Giving voice to masters of cultivating relationship: “Drawing on interviews with seven hundred long-married elders, 30 Lessons for Loving delivers timeless wisdom from a wide range of voices on everything from choosing “the one” to dealing with in-laws, money, children, and, yes, sex.”

Movies & TV

[Antonia’s Line](#)

A widening of what family means and a celebration of one’s “chosen family.”

[My Octopus Teacher](#)

“One of the best, most beautiful accounts of interspecies connection and why it matters.”

[Tales of the City](#)

Related essay: <https://www.flare.com/tv-movies/tales-of-the-city-netflix/>

Couples Therapy (Showtime)

Preview:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sniKkAPs_F4

Review: https://repeller.com/couples-therapy-tv-show/?utm_source=pocket_mylist

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).



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