
SOUL FOOD

Nourishing Essays on Contemplative
Living and Leadership



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DISCUSSION GUIDE



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About This Guide

Celebrating our 50th anniversary, the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation continues to grow our reach globally. We have found that there are not enough available published resources that can speak from different perspectives on contemplative living and leadership in everyday life. To address this need, we have created Soul Food, a collection of experiential and academic writings on contemporary contemplative living and leadership. Written by contributors from a wide array of backgrounds, including the LGBTQ+ community and people of color, these seventeen essays offer contemplative reflections from a variety of perspectives.

The purpose of this guide is to provide discussion questions for individuals or small groups. With the exception of Gay L. Byron, who died shortly after the release of the book, all the questions were developed by the contributors themselves after the publication of the book. Byron's questions are taken directly from her essay.

Part 1

Welcoming and Belonging

God's Pronouns

– Carl McColman

1. Reflect on your image(s) of God. How does language help you to draw closer to God?
2. Are there any ways in which language or words have been a barrier for you in your faith journey?
3. How can God help us to understand the mysteries of gender — and how can gender help (or hinder) us in our relationship with God?

Listening to the Holy

– Sarah Forti

1. What are the elements of your perceived grounding (the things that help you to feel stable and in control), and have they changed over time?
2. If you were to engage in a spiritual practice that grounds you in love and compassion, not only toward others but also toward yourself, what would it be?
3. What challenges might be constricting or holding back our practice of holy listening, and what could be relinquished or broken open for that practice to grow?

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Contemplative Collegiality: Caring for the Souls of Black Biblical Scholars

– Gay L. Byron

1. What happens when institutional structures don't match the realities of individuals called to lead or contribute to the goals of the group or organization?
2. What happens when we realize there is still so much to learn about the ways in which we have been formed by our experiences and misinformed about the experiences of others?

From Censorship to Contemplation: Silence in Queer Life

– J.M. Smith

1. What difficult or marginalizing experiences in your life led you into deeper prayer and contemplation?
2. What did you discover about yourself and God in that experience?
3. How do you see censorship occurring in your community and what might invitations to contemplation offer as a response?

Towards a Decolonized Spiritual Direction Practice

– Althea Banda-Hansmann

1. What does decolonizing spiritual direction practice mean to you?
2. What personal, relational, institutional, and collective social body themes have been present in the narrative of directees in individual or group direction sessions?
3. What are growth opportunities in which you can embody a decolonizing spiritual direction practice?

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I Am

– Joanne C. Youn

1. What cultural expectations did you grow up with, and to what extent did they empower or limit your understanding of yourself?
2. Have you ever had an experience where chaos became the source of creativity and brought you somewhere you never expected to be?
3. What places in your life cry out to be activated through stillness? In this regard, how have the social justice movements of the past several years informed and/or interacted with your faith?

Tell Me About Mary's Rage

– Amanda Lindamood

1. How do you think that the notion that God is nonviolent could contribute to spiritual abuse?
2. What is the impact of characterizing Jesus' conception as consensual?
3. What accountability do contemplatives have to interrogate their theological assumptions, practically and morally?

To Heal What Ails Us: Belonging through Group Spiritual Direction

– Melanie Dobson

1. When have you felt lonely? What, if anything, helped you to move through that experience?
2. When have you felt deep belonging? What did it feel like in your body? Mind? Spirit?
3. How could you create spaces of belonging in your life? Might group spiritual direction be practice where you would try to cultivate belonging?

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Part 2 Holy Awe

A Thousand Paths to Contemplation

– Westina Matthews

1. How do you experience stillness – which may or may not include silence?
2. What is one spiritual practice from your own faith or cultural tradition that helps you to “center down”?
3. What is one spiritual practice drawn from another faith or cultural tradition that has strengthened your own journey?

Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart: Social Justice and the Art of Spiritual Guidance

– Phillip Stephens

1. What is the significance, within the ministry of spiritual guidance, of God being immediate to us in our very materiality?
2. How does the dance between willingness and willfulness manifest within the ministry of Spiritual Guidance?
3. How might the ministry of spiritual guidance nurture social justice?

Coming to Our Senses: Embracing Wonder and Gratitude

– Leah Rampy

1. Reflect on a time when you felt fully embraced by Holy awe and wonder. What practice assisted you in being open and available to this gift? What practices might be calling you now?
2. Take time to name the gifts that you have been given this day through the living world. Let gratitude arise in you. What gifts might you feel called to offer in return for all you have received?

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Embodying Contemplative Leadership: Howard Thurman and Feeding the Timeless Hunger

– Lerita Coleman Brown

1. What stirs a sense of Presence in and around you? How might you kindle that same Presence in others?
2. How might you seek stillness and practice being still in your daily life? Are there ways you can encourage large and small group stillness in your spiritual community or place of worship?
3. What are your sacred calls? What role does “inner authority” and “Inner Authority” play in your discernment process?

Considerations of Recovery, Centering Prayer, and Social Justice Action

– Anita-Yvonne (AY) Bryant

1. What challenges have you experienced addressing inequity in social systems?
2. As you reflect on using the recovery model, what step will be the most challenging for you?
3. What contemplative practice(s) might you use in your recovery process?

What Your Tender Heart Knows

– Marcelle Martin

1. What practices help you give attention to inner images, sensations, subtle movements of energy, and spiritual perceptions?
2. What happens inside you when you speak from the heart to an attentive, loving, non-judgmental listener?
3. When are you in touch with the wisdom of your tender heart?

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Embodied Contemplation of Deep Time: Resourcing for Spiritual Resilience

– Kolya Braun-Greiner

1. After contemplating a quote from the mystics, what new insight emerges about the interrelatedness of all creation and your relationship with Earth (our common home)?
2. Find one thing of nature which expresses the grace of the Universe, of God's presence and love for all creation. What do you see or hear it say to you of God's first Word, through the voice of Earth?
3. When meditating on Colossians 1:17, where do you witness how this scripture and the 14-billion-year creation story of evolution are relevant to today's unfolding realities of Earth?

A Contemplative View of Resilient Aging

– Elaine Voci

1. Were there any “standout” passages in this essay that have stayed with you?
2. How did this essay inform your own growth as an elder?
3. In what ways is your elder hood a journey of the human spirit that brings you joy and a sense of contentment?

Summer Day of the Owls

– DanaLee Simon

1. What are some of the lessons that the natural landscapes of your life have taught you?
2. What are some ordinary and extraordinary ways you have experienced God's gift of Presence in your life?
3. Is there a circumstance in your life where you are working hard to force God's hand? What would it be like to soften around that sense of striving, to allow for grace rather than try to make it happen?