



Connected Learning in a Time of Confinement

Week 1: Learning and the Hope of Assurance

March 30, 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@aspennst.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 1

- 5 **Gandhi, "What is Education? "**
- 7 **Maya Angelou, "Mother's Long View"**
- 9 **Alain de Botton, "Camus on the Coronavirus"**
- 11 **Anna Akhmatova, "If all who have begged help"**

What is Education?

by Mahatma Gandhi
(1869–1948)

A speech given at the opening of the Gujarat Vidyapith in 1920. Glossary: shastri: an academic degree in the old college system; pathshala: a village school; Vidyapith: college or academy; moksha: release from the cycle of death and rebirth impelled by karma.

1 The English word 'education' etymologically means 'drawing out'. That means
an endeavor to develop our latent talents. The same is the meaning of *kelavani*, the
Gujarati word for education. When we say that we develop a certain thing, it does
5 not mean that we change its kind or quality, but that we bring out the qualities
latent in it. Hence, 'education' can also mean 'unfoldment'.

In this sense, we cannot look upon knowledge of the alphabet as education.
This is true even if that knowledge gains us the M.A. degree or enables us to adorn
the place of a *shastri* in some *pathshala* with the requisite knowledge of Sanskrit. It
10 may well be that the highest literary knowledge is a fine instrument for education
or unfoldment, but it certainly does not itself constitute education.

True education is something different. Man is made of three constituents, the
body, mind and spirit. Of them, spirit is the one permanent element in man. The
body and the mind function on account of it. Hence we can call that education
15 which reveals the qualities of spirit. That is why the seal of the Vidyapith carries
the dictum 'Education is that which leads to *moksha*.'

Education can also be understood in another sense; that is, whatever leads to a
full or maximum development of all the three, the body, mind and spirit, may also
be called education. The knowledge that is being imparted today may possibly
20 develop the mind a little, but certainly it does not develop the body and spirit. I
have a doubt about the development of the mind too, because it does not mean that
the mind has developed if we have filled it with a lot of information. We cannot
therefore say that we have educated our mind. A well-educated mind serves man
in the desired manner. Our literate mind of today pulls us hither and thither. That
25 is what a wild horse does. Only when a wild horse is broken in can we call it a
trained horse. How many 'educated' young men of today are so trained?

Now let us examine our body. Are we supposed to cultivate the body by
playing tennis, football or cricket for an hour every day? It does, certainly, build
up the body. Like a wild horse, however, the body will be strong but not trained.

From Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Writings* (Oxford World Classics, 2008), pp. 119-120.

1 A trained body is healthy, vigorous and sinewy. The hands and feet can do any
desired work. A pick-axe, a shovel, a hammer, etc., are like ornaments to a trained
hand and it can wield them. That hand can ply the spinning-wheel well as also the
ring and the comb while the feet work a loom. A well-trained body does not get
5 tired in trudging 30 miles. It can scale mountains without getting breathless. Does
the student acquire such physical culture? We can assert that modern curricula do
not impart physical education in this sense.

The less said about the spirit the better. Only a seer or a seeker can enlighten the
soul. Who will awaken that dormant spiritual energy in us all? Teachers can be had
10 through an advertisement. Is there a column for spiritual quest in the testimonials
which they have to produce? Even if there is one, what is its value? How can we
get through advertisements teachers who are seekers after self-realization? And
education without such enlightenment is like a wall without a foundation or, to
employ an English saying, like a whited sepulchre. Inside it there is only a corpse
15 eaten up or being eaten by insects.

It is and should be the ideal of the Gujarat Vidyapith to impart this three-fold
education. Even if one young man or woman is brought up in conformity with this
ideal, I shall regard the Vidyapith's existence as worth while.

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Mother's Long View

by Maya Angelou
(1928–2014)

1 Independence is a heady draft, and if you drink it in your youth it can have the same effect on the brain as young wine. It does not matter that its taste is not very appealing, it is addictive and with each drink the consumer wants more.

5 When I was twenty-two and living in San Francisco, I had a five-year-old son, two jobs, and two rented rooms with cooking privileges down the hall. My landlady, Mrs. Jefferson, was kind and grandmotherly. She was a ready babysitter and insisted on providing dinner for her tenants. Her ways were so tender and her personality so sweet that no one was mean enough to discourage her disastrous culinary exploits. Spaghetti at her table, which was offered at least three times a week, was a mysterious red, white, and brown concoction. We would occasionally encounter an unidentifiable piece of meat hidden among the pasta.

10 There was no money in my budget for restaurant food, so I and my son Guy were often loyal, if unhappy, diners at Chez Jefferson.

15 My mother had moved from Post Street into a fourteen-room Victorian house on Fulton Street, which she filled with gothic, heavily carved furniture. The upholstery on the sofa and occasional chairs was red-wine-colored mohair. Oriental rugs were placed throughout the house. She had a live-in employee who cleaned the house and sometimes filled in as cook helper.

20 Mother picked up Guy twice a week and took him to her house where she fed him peaches and cream and hot dogs, but I only went to her house at our appointed time.

25 She understood and encouraged my self-reliance. We had a standing appointment, which I looked forward to eagerly. Once a month, she would cook one of my favorite dishes and I would go to her house. One lunch date stands out in my mind. I call it the Vivian's Red Rice Day.

When I arrived at the Fulton Street house my mother was dressed beautifully, her makeup was perfect, and she wore good jewelry.

30 After we embraced, I washed my hands and we walked through her formal dark dining room and into the large bright kitchen.

Much of lunch was already on the table. Vivian Baxter was very serious about her delicious meals.

On that long-ago Red Rice Day, my mother had placed on the table a crispy, dry-roasted capon, no dressing or gravy, and a simple lettuce salad, no tomatoes

1 or cucumbers. A wide-mouthed bowl covered with a platter sat next to her plate.

She fervently blessed the food with a brief prayer and put her left hand on the platter and her right on the bowl. She turned the dishes over and gently loosened the bowl from its contents and revealed a tall mound of glistening red rice (my
5 favorite food in all the world) decorated with finely minced parsley and the green stalks of scallions. The chicken and salad do not feature so prominently on my taste buds' memory, but each grain of red rice is emblazoned on the surface of my tongue forever.

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Camus on the Coronavirus

by Alain de Botton
(1969–)

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*He reminds us that suffering is random, and
that is the kindest thing one can say about it.*

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In January 1941, Albert Camus began work on a story about a virus that spreads uncontrollably from animals to humans and ends up destroying half the population of “an ordinary town” called Oran, on the Algerian coast. “The Plague,” published in 1947, is frequently described as the greatest European novel of the postwar period.

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As the book opens, an air of eerie normality reigns. The town’s inhabitants lead busy money-centered and denatured lives. Then, with the pacing of a thriller, the horror begins. The narrator, Dr. Rieux, comes across a dead rat. Then another and another. Soon an epidemic seizes Oran, the disease transmitting itself from citizen to citizen, spreading panic in every street.

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To write the book, Camus immersed himself in the history of plagues. He read about the Black Death that killed an estimated 50 million people in Europe in the 14th century, the Italian plague of 1630 that killed 280,000 across Lombardy and Veneto, the great plague of London of 1665 as well as plagues that ravaged cities on China’s eastern seaboard during the 18th and 19th centuries.

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Camus was not writing about one plague in particular, nor was this narrowly, as has sometimes been suggested, a metaphoric tale about the Nazi occupation of France. He was drawn to his theme because he believed that the actual historical incidents we call plagues are merely concentrations of a universal precondition, dramatic instances of a perpetual rule: that all human beings are vulnerable to being randomly exterminated at any time, by a virus, an accident or the actions of our fellow man.

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The people of Oran can’t accept this. Even when a quarter of the city is dying, they keep imagining reasons it won’t happen to them. They are modern people with phones, airplanes and newspapers. They are surely not going to die like the wretches of 17th-century London or 18th-century Canton.

“It’s impossible it should be the plague, everyone knows it has vanished from the West,” a character says. “Yes, everyone knew that,” Camus adds, “except the

1 For Camus, when it comes to dying, there is no progress in history, there is
no escape from our frailty. Being alive always was and will always remain an
emergency; it is truly an inescapable “underlying condition.” Plague or no plague,
there is always, as it were, the plague, if what we mean by that is a susceptibility
5 to sudden death, an event that can render our lives instantaneously meaningless.

This is what Camus meant when he talked about the “absurdity” of life.
Recognizing this absurdity should lead us not to despair but to a tragicomic
redemption, a softening of the heart, a turning away from judgment and moralizing
to joy and gratitude.

10 “The Plague” isn’t trying to panic us, because panic suggests a response to a
dangerous but short-term condition from which we can eventually find safety.
But there can never be safety — and that is why, for Camus, we need to love our
fellow damned humans and work without hope or despair for the amelioration of
suffering. Life is a hospice, never a hospital.

15 At the height of the contagion, when 500 people a week are dying, a Catholic
priest called Paneloux gives a sermon that explains the plague as God’s punishment
for depravity. But Dr. Rieux has watched a child die and knows better: Suffering
is randomly distributed, it makes no sense, it is simply absurd, and that is the
kindest thing one can say of it.

20 The doctor works tirelessly to lessen the suffering of those around him. But he
is no hero. “This whole thing is not about heroism,” Dr. Rieux says. “It may seem
a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency.” Another
character asks what decency is. “Doing my job,” the doctor replies.

25 Eventually, after more than a year, the plague ebbs away. The townspeople
celebrate. Suffering is over. Normality can return. But Dr. Rieux “knew that this
chronicle could not be a story of definitive victory,” Camus writes. “It could only
be the record of what had to be done and what, no doubt, would have to be done
again, against this terror.” The plague, he continues, “never dies”; it “waits patiently
in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers” for the day when it
30 will once again “rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city.”

Camus speaks to us in our own times not because he was a magical seer who
could intimate what the best epidemiologists could not, but because he correctly
sized up human nature. He knew, as we do not, that “everyone has it inside
himself, this plague, because no one in the world, no one, is immune.”

If all who have begged help

by Anna Akhmatova
(1889–1966)

¹ If all who have begged help
From me in this world,
All the holy innocents,
Broken wives and cripples,
⁵ The imprisoned, the suicidal—
If they had sent me one kopek
I should have become 'richer
Than all Egypt....'
But they did not send me kopeks
¹⁰ Instead they shared with me their strength,
and so nothing in this world
is stronger than I,
and I can bear anything even this.

Notes

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Image of the Week



Jacob Lawrence, Street Shadows

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Guiding Questions

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

Mahatma Gandhi, "What is Education?"

- What is education, according to Gandhi? What is it not? What is the difference between education and training?
- What is the purpose of education, according to Gandhi?
- How does Gandhi understand the relation among mind, body, and spirit?
- Why might it be the case that the less said about spirit the better?
- What might Gandhi encourage us to learn as we are in confinement?

Maya Angelou, "Mother's Long View"

- What does the narrator say about herself? What does she value? What is her situation?
- How does the narrator describe her mother? Her relationship with her mother?
- What is "Red Rice Day"? What is its significance? Do you have the equivalent?
- What are the meaningful delights of having to "shelter in place"?
- What is the wisdom of mother's long view?

Alan de Botton, "Camus on the Coronavirus"

- How does de Botton describe our vulnerability?
- How do we think about meaning when confronted by death?
- Is there a vision of heroism here?

Does Dr. Rieux give us any advice on how to act during a plague?

- What might Camus mean when he says that we all have the plague inside us?
- Is this essay ultimately an expression of hope or despair?

Anna Akhmatova, "If all who have begged help"

- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- How does Akhmatova understand the relationship between giving help and maintaining one's own strength?
- Do you find the demands of others begging help to drain or strengthen you? Why?
- How do you maintain your own strength in difficult circumstances?

Jacob Lawrence, Street Shadows (1959)

- Set a time and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see?
- Is this a vision of community or isolation?
- Who is included? Excluded?
- Is this image comforting or disturbing?
- In what ways does it evoke your own experience of community?

General questions for the week

- How have you been bringing order out of chaos? How have you been resisting order in search of greater freedom?
- What in your sphere of action is inviting you tolerate greater chaos or greater order?
- Is there an opportunity to "tame" yourself or others, or to be "tamed"?

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?"

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