

# Connected Learning in a Time of Confinement

## Week 2: Loss and Transcendence

April 13, 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/](https://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](mailto: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 2

- 5 **Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit***
- 7 **Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," selections**
- 10 **Zhuangzi, "On Happiness"**
- 12 **Czeslaw Miłosz, "Late Ripeness"**

# The Velveteen Rabbit

by Margery Williams  
(1881–1944)

1        There was once a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid.  
He was fat and bunchy, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and  
white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. On  
5 Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy's stocking, with a  
sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming.

There were other things in the stocking, nuts and oranges and a toy engine, and  
chocolate almonds and a clockwork mouse, but the Rabbit was quite the best of  
all. For at least two hours the Boy loved him, and then Aunts and Uncles came to  
dinner, and there was a great rustling of tissue paper and unwrapping of parcels,  
10 and in the excitement of looking at all the new presents the Velveteen Rabbit was  
forgotten.

For a long time he lived in the toy cupboard or on the nursery floor, and no  
one thought very much about him. He was naturally shy, and being only made of  
15 velveteen, some of the more expensive toys quite snubbed him. The mechanical  
toys were very superior, and looked down upon every one else; they were full  
of modern ideas, and pretended they were real. The model boat, who had lived  
through two seasons and lost most of his paint, caught the tone from them and  
never missed an opportunity of referring to his rigging in technical terms. The  
Rabbit could not claim to be a model of anything, for he didn't know that real  
20 rabbits existed; he thought they were all stuffed with sawdust like himself, and he  
understood that sawdust was quite out-of-date and should never be mentioned  
in modern circles. Even Timothy, the jointed wooden lion, who was made by the  
disabled soldiers, and should have had broader views, put on airs and pretended  
he was connected with Government. Between them all the poor little Rabbit was  
25 made to feel himself very insignificant and commonplace, and the only person  
who was kind to him at all was the Skin Horse.

The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was  
so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath,  
and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He  
30 was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and  
swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that  
they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is

1 very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having  
5 things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

10 “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

15 “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

20 “I suppose you are real?” said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

“The Boy’s Uncle made me Real,” he said. “That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.”

# The Love of God and Affliction

by Simone Weil  
(1909–1943)

1  
In the realm of suffering, affliction is something apart, specific, and irreducible. It is quite a different thing from simple suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery. Slavery as practiced by ancient Rome is only an extreme form of affliction. The men of antiquity, who knew all about this question, used to say: "A man loses half his soul the day he becomes a slave." ...

5  
Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain. If there is complete absence of physical pain there is no affliction for the soul, because our thoughts can turn to any object. Thought flies from affliction as promptly and irresistibly as an animal flies from death. Here below, physical pain, and that alone, has the power to chain down our thoughts; on condition that we count as physical pain certain phenomena that, though difficult to describe, are bodily and exactly equivalent to it. Fear of physical pain is a notable example.

10  
When thought is obliged by an attack of physical pain, however slight, to recognize the presence of affliction, a state of mind is brought about, as acute as that of a condemned man who is forced to look for hours at the guillotine that is going to cut off his head. Human beings can live for twenty or fifty years in this acute state. We pass quite close to them without realizing it....

15  
There is not real affliction unless the event that has seized and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical. The social factor is essential. There is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another.

20  
There is both continuity and the separation of a definite point of entry, as with the temperature at which water boils, between affliction itself and all the sorrows that, even though they may be very violent, very deep and very lasting, are not affliction in the strict sense. There is a limit; on the far side of it we have affliction but not on the near side. This limit is not purely objective; all sorts of personal factors have to be taken into account. The same event may plunge one human being into affliction and not another.

25  
The great enigma of human life is not suffering but affliction. It is not surprising that the innocent are killed, tortured, driven from their country, made destitute,

1 or reduced to slavery, imprisoned in camps or cells, since there are criminals to  
perform such actions. It is not surprising either that disease is the cause of long  
sufferings, which paralyze life and make it into an image of death, since nature is  
at the mercy of the blind play of mechanical necessities. But it is surprising that  
5 God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent  
and to take possession of them as their sovereign lord. At the very best, he who is  
branded by affliction will keep only half his soul.

As for those who have been struck by one of those blows that leave a being  
struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm, they have no words to express  
10 what is happening to them. Among the people they meet, those who have never  
had contact with affliction in its true sense can have no idea of what it is, even  
though they may have suffered a great deal. Affliction is something specific and  
impossible to describe in any other terms, as sounds are to anyone who is deaf and  
dumb. And as for those who have themselves been mutilated by affliction, they are  
15 in no state to help anyone at all, and they are almost incapable of even wishing to  
do so. Thus compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility. When it is really found  
we have a more astounding miracle than walking on water, healing the sick, or  
even raising the dead.

Affliction constrained Christ to implore that he might be spared, to seek  
20 consolation from man, to believe he was forsaken by the Father. It forced a just  
man to cry out against God, a just man as perfect as human nature can be, more so,  
perhaps, if Job is less a historical character than a figure of Christ. "He laughs at  
the affliction of the innocent!" This is not blasphemy but a genuine cry of anguish.  
25 The Book of Job is a pure marvel of truth and authenticity from beginning to end.  
As regards affliction, all that departs from this model is more or less stained with  
falsehood.

Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a  
dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror  
30 submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is  
terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to  
love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness,  
or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal  
part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to  
35 reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job. But if the soul stops loving  
it falls, even in this life, into something almost equivalent to hell.

\* \* \*

40 Affliction is a marvel of divine technique. It is a simple and ingenious device  
which introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind,  
brutal, and cold. The infinite distance separating God from the creature is entirely  
concentrated into one point to pierce the soul in its center.

The man to whom such a thing happens has no part in the operation. He  
45 struggles like a butterfly pinned alive into an album. But through all the horror he

<sup>1</sup> one might almost say no difficulty. For the greatest suffering, so long as it does not cause the soul to faint, does not touch the acquiescent part of the soul, consenting to a right direction.

<sup>5</sup> It is only necessary to know that love is a direction and not a state of the soul. If one is unaware of this, one falls into despair at the first onslaught of affliction

# On Happiness

by Zhuangzi

(c. 325 BCE)

1        Zhuangzi's wife died and Huizi came to console him, but Zhuangzi was sitting,  
legs akimbo, bashing a battered tub and singing.

5        Huizi said, "You lived as man and wife; she reared your children. At her death  
surely the least you should be doing is to be on the verge of weeping, rather than  
banging the tub and singing. This is not right!"

10        Zhuangzi said, "Certainly not. When she first died, I certainly mourned just like  
everyone else! However, I then thought back to her birth and to the very roots of  
her being, before she was born. Indeed, not just before she was born, but before the  
time when her body was created. Not just before her body was created, but before  
15        the very origin of her life's breath. Her life's breath wrought a transformation,  
and she had a body. Her body wrought a transformation, and she was born. Now  
there is yet another transformation, and she is dead. She is like the four seasons in  
the way that spring, summer, autumn, and winter follow each other. She is now at  
peace, lying in her chamber, but if I were to sob and cry, it would certainly appear  
that I could not comprehend the ways of destiny. This is why I stopped."

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# Notes

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# Late Ripeness

by Czeslaw Milosz  
(1911–2004)

1 Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,  
I felt a door opening in me and I entered  
the clarity of early morning.

5 One after another my former lives were departing,  
like ships, together with their sorrow.

10 And the countries, cities, gardens, the bays of seas  
assigned to my brush came closer,  
ready now to be described better than they were before.

15 I was not separated from people,  
grief and pity joined us.  
We forget—I kept saying—that we are all children of the King.

20 For where we come from there is no division  
into Yes and No, into is, was, and will be.

25 We were miserable, we used no more than a hundredth part  
of the gift we received for our long journey.

30 Moments from yesterday and from centuries ago—  
a sword blow, the painting of eyelashes before a mirror  
of polished metal, a lethal musket shot, a caravel  
staving its hull against a reef—they dwell in us,  
waiting for a fulfillment.

35 I knew, always, that I would be a worker in the vineyard,  
as are all men and women living at the same time,  
whether they are aware of it or not.

# Notes

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# Image of the Week



**James Turrell, Skyspace I (1974)**

# Notes

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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

## Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

- What happens to the Velveteen Rabbit? Is that experience at all familiar?
- What does it mean to be real?
- What is gained and lost in becoming real?
- Can we help others become real, or is becoming real something that only “happens to you”?

## Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction”

- What does Weil mean by affliction?
- How does she compare physical pain and the pain of the soul?
- How do you describe the experience of affliction?
- What does it mean to say that love is “a direction...of the soul”?
- Is Weil’s description of affliction a counsel of hope or despair?

## Zhuangzi, “On Happiness”

- Why is Zhuangzi no longer mourning?
- How does he describe the cycles, or “transformations” of life and death?
- Is Zhuangzi’s approach an adequate response to Weil’s description of affliction?

## Czesław Miłosz, “Late Ripeness”

- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the

poem evoke in you?

- How does Miłosz describe our encounters with time and memory?
- How do you conceive of the passage of time and what you’ve left behind, and what you hold on to?
- What does it mean to be “a worker in the vineyard”? What is your work?

## James Turrell, *Skyspace I*

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see?
- Does the image strike you as an absence or a presence? A warmth or a coldness?
- Is this an image of being enclosed, or a portal to a wider perspective?
- How do you take time to get perspective?

## General questions for the week

- What experiences of loss are top of heart and mind for you this week? For those closest to you?
- How do you encounter loss? What might it mean to move through loss, rather than to go around it or “process” it?
- What practices do you have for transcending loss?
- Is it simply wishful thinking to believe that the journey of loss and transcendence makes us more real?
- What action would you like to take to engage your and others’ experience of loss?

# 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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