



# Connected Learning

## Self-Respect

July 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 Seminars**

## 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

# Readings

**5 Joan Didion, "Self-Respect: Its Source, Its Power"**

# Self-Respect: Its Source, Its Power

by Joan Didion  
(1935–)

1       Once, in a dry season, I wrote in large letters across two pages of a notebook  
that innocence ends when one is stripped of the delusion that one likes oneself.  
Although now, some years later, I marvel that a mind on the outs with itself  
should have nonetheless made painstaking record of its every tremor, I recall  
5       with embarrassing clarity the flavor of those particular ashes. It was a matter of  
misplaced self-respect.

I had not been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. This failure could scarcely have been  
more predictable or less ambiguous (I simply did not have the grades), but I was  
unnerved by it; I had somehow thought myself a kind of academic Raskolnikov,  
10       curiously exempt from the cause-effect relationships that hampered others.  
Although the situation must have had even then the approximate tragic stature of  
Scott Fitzgerald's failure to become president of the Princeton Triangle Club, the  
day that I did not make Phi Beta Kappa nevertheless marked the end of something,  
and innocence may well be the word for it. I lost the conviction that lights would  
15       always turn green for me, the pleasant certainty that those rather passive virtues  
which had won me approval as a child automatically guaranteed me not only Phi  
Beta Kappa keys but happiness, honour, and the love of a good man (preferably  
a cross between Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* and one of the Murchisons in a  
proxy fight); lost a certain touching faith in the totem power of good manners,  
20       clean hair, and proven competence on the Stanford-Binet scale. To such doubtful  
amulets had my self-respect been pinned, and I faced myself that day with the  
nonplussed wonder of someone who has come across a vampire and found no  
garlands of garlic at hand.

Although to be driven back upon oneself is an uneasy affair at best, rather like  
25       trying to cross a border with borrowed credentials, it seems to me now the one  
condition necessary to the beginnings of real self-respect. Most of our platitudes  
notwithstanding, self-deception remains the most difficult deception. The charms  
that work on others count for nothing in that devastatingly well-lit back alley  
where one keeps assignations with oneself: no winning smiles will do here, no

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From Joan Didion, "Self-Respect: Its Source, Its Power." Originally published in *Vogue* magazine on August 1, 1961, pp. 62-63. Available online at <https://www.vogue.com/article/joan-didion-self-respect-essay-1961>.

1 prettily drawn lists of good intentions. With the desperate agility of a crooked faro  
dealer who spots Bat Masterson about to cut himself into the game, one shuffles  
flashily but in vain through one's marked cards—the kindness done for the wrong  
reason, the apparent triumph which had involved no real effort, the seemingly  
5 heroic act into which one had been shamed. The dismal fact is that self-respect  
has nothing to do with the approval of others—who are, after all, deceived easily  
enough; has nothing to do with reputation—which, as Rhett Butler told Scarlett  
O'Hara, is something that people with courage can do without.

To do without self-respect, on the other hand, is to be an unwilling audience of  
10 one to an interminable home movie that documents one's failings, both real and  
imagined, with fresh footage spliced in for each screening. *There's the glass you  
broke in anger, there's the hurt on X's face; watch now, this next scene, the night Y came  
back from Houston, see how you muff this one.* To live without self-respect is to lie  
awake some night, beyond the reach of warm milk, phenobarbital, and the sleeping  
15 hand on the coverlet, counting up the sins of commission and omission, the trusts  
betrayed, the promises subtly broken, the gifts irrevocably wasted through sloth or  
cowardice or carelessness. However long we postpone it, we eventually lie down  
alone in that notoriously uncomfortable bed, the one we make ourselves. Whether  
or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves.

20 To protest that some fairly improbable people, some people who *could not  
possibly respect themselves*, seem to sleep easily enough is to miss the point entirely,  
as surely as those people miss it who think that self-respect has necessarily to do  
with not having safety pins in one's underwear. There is a common superstition  
that "self-respect" is a kind of charm against snakes, something that keeps those  
25 who have it locked in some unblighted Eden, out of strange beds, ambivalent  
conversations, and trouble in general. It does not at all. It has nothing to do with  
the face of things, but concerns instead a separate peace, a private reconciliation.  
Although the careless, suicidal Julian English in *Appointment in Samarra* and  
the careless, incurably dishonest Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby* seem equally  
30 improbable candidates for self-respect, Jordan Baker had it, Julian English did not.  
With that genius for accommodation more often seen in women than in men, Jordan  
took her own measure, made her own peace, avoided threats to that peace: "I hate  
careless people," she told Nick Carraway. "It takes two to make an accident."

Like Jordan Baker, people with self-respect have the courage of their mistakes.  
35 They know the price of things. If they choose to commit adultery, they do not  
then go running, in an access of bad conscience, to receive absolution from the  
wronged parties; nor do they complain unduly of the unfairness, the *undeserved  
embarrassment*, of being named correspondent. If they choose to forego their  
work—say it is screenwriting—in favor of sitting around the Algonquin bar,  
40 they do not then wonder bitterly why the Hacketts, and not they, did *Anne Frank*.

In brief, people with self-respect exhibit a certain toughness, a kind of moral  
nerve; they display what was once called *character*, a quality which, although



1 approved in the abstract, sometimes loses ground to other, more instantly  
negotiable virtues. The measure of its slipping prestige is that one tends to think  
of it only in connection with homely children and with United States senators  
who have been defeated, preferably in the primary, for re-election. Nonetheless,  
5 character—the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own life—is the source  
from which self-respect springs.

Self-respect is something that our grandparents, whether or not they had it,  
knew all about. They had instilled in them, young, a certain discipline, the sense  
that one lives by doing things one does not particularly want to do, by putting fears  
10 and doubts to one side, by weighing immediate comforts against the possibility of  
larger, even intangible, comforts. It seemed to the nineteenth century admirable,  
but not remarkable, that Chinese Gordon put on a clean white suit and held  
Khartoum against the Mahdi; it did not seem unjust that the way to free land  
in California involved death and difficulty and dirt. In a diary kept during the  
15 winter of 1846, an emigrating twelve-year-old named Narcissa Cornwall noted  
coolly: “Father was busy reading and did not notice that the house was being  
filled with strange Indians until Mother spoke about it.” Even lacking any clue as to  
what Mother said, one can scarcely fail to be impressed by the entire incident: the  
father reading, the Indians filing in, the mother choosing the words that would not  
20 alarm, the child duly recording the event and noting further that those particular  
Indians were not, “fortunately for us,” hostile. Indians were simply part of the  
*donnée*.

In one guise or another, Indians always are. Again, it is a question of recognizing  
that anything worth having has its price. People who respect themselves are willing  
25 to accept the risk that the Indians will be hostile, that the venture will go bankrupt,  
that the liaison may not turn out to be one in which *every day is a holiday because  
you’re married to me*. They are willing to invest something of themselves; they may  
not play at all, but when they do play, they know the odds.

That kind of self-respect is a discipline, a habit of mind that can never be faked  
30 but can be developed, trained, coaxed forth. It was once suggested to me that, as  
an antidote to crying, I put my head in a paper bag. As it happens, there is a sound  
physiological reason, something to do with oxygen, for doing exactly that, but the  
psychological effect alone is incalculable: it is difficult in the extreme to continue  
fancying oneself Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* with one’s head in a Food Fair  
35 bag. There is a similar case for all the small disciplines, unimportant in themselves;  
imagine maintaining any kind of swoon, commiserative or carnal, in a cold shower.

But those small disciplines are valuable only insofar as they represent larger  
ones. To say that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton is not to say that  
Napoleon might have been saved by a crash program in cricket; to give formal  
40 dinners in the rain forest would be pointless did not the candlelight flickering on  
the liana call forth deeper, stronger disciplines, values instilled long before. It is a  
kind of ritual, helping us to remember who and what we are. In order to remember  
it, one must have known it.

1 To have that sense of one's intrinsic worth which, for better or for  
worse, constitutes self-respect, is potentially to have everything: the ability to  
discriminate, to love and to remain indifferent. To lack it is to be locked within  
oneself, paradoxically incapable of either love or indifference. If we do not  
5 respect ourselves, we are on the one hand forced to despise those who have so  
few resources as to consort with us, so little perception as to remain blind to our  
fatal weaknesses. On the other, we are peculiarly in thrall to everyone we see,  
curiously determined to live out—since our self-image is untenable—their false  
notions of us. We flatter ourselves by thinking this compulsion to please others  
10 an attractive trait: a gift for imaginative empathy, evidence of our willingness to  
give. *Of course* we will play Francesca to Paolo, Brett Ashley to Jake, Helen Keller  
to anyone's Annie Sullivan: no expectation is too misplaced, no role too ludicrous.  
At the mercy of those we can not but hold in contempt, we play rôles doomed to  
failure before they are begun, each defeat generating fresh despair at the necessity  
15 of divining and meeting the next demand made upon us.

It is the phenomenon sometimes called *alienation from self*. In its advanced  
stages, we no longer answer the telephone, because someone might want  
something; that we could say *no* without drowning in self-reproach is an idea  
alien to this game. Every encounter demands too much, tears the nerves, drains  
20 the will, and the spectre of something as small as an unanswered letter arouses  
such disproportionate guilt that one's sanity becomes an object of speculation  
among one's acquaintances. To assign unanswered letters their proper weight, to  
free us from the expectations of others, to give us back to ourselves—there lies  
the great, the singular power of self-respect. Without it, one eventually discovers  
25 the final turn of the screw: one runs away to find oneself, and finds no one at home.

# Image of the Week



**Ohara Koson, *Cat and Bowl of Goldfish* (1933)**

# Notes

# Guiding Questions

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

## **Joan Didion, "Self-Respect: Its Source, Its Power"**

- What does Didion mean by "misplaced self-respect"?
- Do aspects of Didion's description of her internal conversations ring true to your own?
- How does Didion understand character?
- What are "the small disciplines"? How do we cultivate them in ourselves? In others?

## **Ohara Koson, *Cat and Bowl of Goldfish* (1933)**

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- What is the story here? Do you see yourself in the story?
- What is the relationship between self-respect, self-restraint, and respect of others?
- Is our character formed more by the boundaries we put on ourselves, or the boundaries imposed on us by the world?

## **General questions for the week**

- What is the difference between self-respect and pride?
- What is the relationship between self-respect and respect of others?
- How do we foster communities of greater respect?

# 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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