

Connected Learning

Desire and Delight

August 31, 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 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 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

Reading

- 5 **Plato, *Phaedrus***
- 9 **Virginia Woolf, "Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car"**

Phaedrus

by Plato

(428/427–348/347 BCE)

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1 SOCRATES: Of the nature of the soul, though her true form be ever a theme of
large and more than mortal discourse, let me speak briefly, and in a figure. And
let the figure be composite—a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the
winged horses and the charioteers of the gods are all of them noble and of noble
5 descent, but those of other races are mixed; the human charioteer drives his in a
pair; and one of them is noble and of noble breed, and the other is ignoble and of
ignoble breed; and the driving of them of necessity gives a great deal of trouble
to him. I will endeavour to explain to you in what way the mortal differs from
the immortal creature. The soul in her totality has the care of inanimate being
10 everywhere, and traverses the whole heaven in divers forms appearing—when
perfect and fully winged she soars upward, and orders the whole world; whereas
the imperfect soul, losing her wings and drooping in her flight at last settles on the
solid ground—there, finding a home, she receives an earthly frame which appears
to be self-moved, but is really moved by her power; and this composition of soul
15 and body is called a living and mortal creature. For immortal no such union can be
reasonably believed to be; although fancy, not having seen nor surely known the
nature of God, may imagine an immortal creature having both a body and also a
soul which are united throughout all time. Let that, however, be as God wills, and
be spoken of acceptably to him. And now let us ask the reason why the soul loses
20 her wings!

The wing is the corporeal element which is most akin to the divine, and which
by nature tends to soar aloft and carry that which gravitates downwards into the
upper region, which is the habitation of the gods. The divine is beauty, wisdom,
goodness, and the like; and by these the wing of the soul is nourished, and grows
25 apace; but when fed upon evil and foulness and the opposite of good, wastes and
falls away. Zeus, the mighty lord, holding the reins of a winged chariot, leads
the way in heaven, ordering all and taking care of all; and there follows him the
array of gods and demigods, marshalled in eleven bands; Hestia alone abides
at home in the house of heaven; of the rest they who are reckoned among the

1 princely twelve march in their appointed order. They see many blessed sights in
the inner heaven, and there are many ways to and fro, along which the blessed
gods are passing, every one doing his own work; he may follow who will and can,
for jealousy has no place in the celestial choir. But when they go to banquet and
5 festival, then they move up the steep to the top of the vault of heaven. The chariots
of the gods in even poise, obeying the rein, glide rapidly; but the others labour, for
the vicious steed goes heavily, weighing down the charioteer to the earth when his
steed has not been thoroughly trained:-and this is the hour of agony and extremest
conflict for the soul. For the immortals, when they are at the end of their course,
10 go forth and stand upon the outside of heaven, and the revolution of the spheres
carries them round, and they behold the things beyond. But of the heaven which
is above the heavens, what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily? It
is such as I will describe; for I must dare to speak the truth, when truth is my
theme. There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned;
15 the colourless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to mind, the pilot of the
soul. The divine intelligence, being nurtured upon mind and pure knowledge,
and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to
it, rejoices at beholding reality, and once more gazing upon truth, is replenished
and made glad, until the revolution of the worlds brings her round again to the
20 same place. In the revolution she beholds justice, and temperance, and knowledge
absolute, not in the form of generation or of relation, which men call existence, but
knowledge absolute in existence absolute; and beholding the other true existences
in like manner, and feasting upon them, she passes down into the interior of the
heavens and returns home; and there the charioteer putting up his horses at the
25 stall, gives them ambrosia to eat and nectar to drink.

Such is the life of the gods; but of other souls, that which follows God best
and is likeliest to him lifts the head of the charioteer into the outer world, and is
carried round in the revolution, troubled indeed by the steeds, and with difficulty
beholding true being; while another only rises and falls, and sees, and again fails to
30 see by reason of the unruliness of the steeds. The rest of the souls are also longing
after the upper world and they all follow, but not being strong enough they are
carried round below the surface, plunging, treading on one another, each striving
to be first; and there is confusion and perspiration and the extremity of effort;
and many of them are lamed or have their wings broken through the ill-driving
35 of the charioteers; and all of them after a fruitless toil, not having attained to the
mysteries of true being, go away, and feed upon opinion. The reason why the
souls exhibit this exceeding eagerness to behold the plain of truth is that pasturage
is found there, which is suited to the highest part of the soul; and the wing on
which the soul soars is nourished with this. And there is a law of Destiny, that the
40 soul which attains any vision of truth in company with a god is preserved from
harm until the next period, and if attaining always is always unharmed. But when
she is unable to follow, and fails to behold the truth, and through some ill-hap

1 sinks beneath the double load of forgetfulness and vice, and her wings fall from
her and she drops to the ground, then the law ordains that this soul shall at her
first birth pass, not into any other animal, but only into man; and the soul which
has seen most of truth shall come to the birth as a philosopher, or artist, or some
5 musical and loving nature; that which has seen truth in the second degree shall be
some righteous king or warrior chief; the soul which is of the third class shall be a
politician, or economist, or trader; the fourth shall be lover of gymnastic toils, or
a physician; the fifth shall lead the life of a prophet or hierophant; to the sixth the
character of poet or some other imitative artist will be assigned; to the seventh the
10 life of an artisan or husbandman; to the eighth that of a sophist or demagogue; to
the ninth that of a tyrant-all these are states of probation, in which he who does
righteously improves, and he who does unrighteously, improves, and he who
does unrighteously, deteriorates his lot.

Ten thousand years must elapse before the soul of each one can return to the
15 place from whence she came, for she cannot grow her wings in less; only the soul
of a philosopher, guileless and true, or the soul of a lover, who is not devoid of
philosophy, may acquire wings in the third of the recurring periods of a thousand
years; he is distinguished from the ordinary good man who gains wings in three
thousand years:-and they who choose this life three times in succession have wings
20 given them, and go away at the end of three thousand years. But the others receive
judgment when they have completed their first life, and after the judgment they
go, some of them to the houses of correction which are under the earth, and are
punished; others to some place in heaven whither they are lightly borne by justice,
and there they live in a manner worthy of the life which they led here when in the
25 form of men. And at the end of the first thousand years the good souls and also the
evil souls both come to draw lots and choose their second life, and they may take
any which they please. The soul of a man may pass into the life of a beast, or from
the beast return again into the man. But the soul which has never seen the truth
will not pass into the human form. For a man must have intelligence of universals,
30 and be able to proceed from the many particulars of sense to one conception of
reason;-this is the recollection of those things which our soul once saw while
following God-when regardless of that which we now call being she raised her
head up towards the true being. And therefore the mind of the philosopher alone
has wings; and this is just, for he is always, according to the measure of his abilities,
35 clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and in beholding
which He is what He is. And he who employs aright these memories is ever being
initiated into perfect mysteries and alone becomes truly perfect. But, as he forgets
earthly interests and is rapt in the divine, the vulgar deem him mad, and rebuke
him; they do not see that he is inspired.

40 Thus far I have been speaking of the fourth and last kind of madness, which
is imputed to him who, when he sees the beauty of earth, is transported with the
recollection of the true beauty; he would like to fly away, but he cannot; he is like

1 a bird fluttering and looking upward and careless of the world below; and he is
therefore thought to be mad. And I have shown this of all inspirations to be the
noblest and highest and the offspring of the highest to him who has or shares in it,
and that he who loves the beautiful is called a lover because he partakes of it. For,
5 as has been already said, every soul of man has in the way of nature beheld true
being; this was the condition of her passing into the form of man. But all souls do
not easily recall the things of the other world; they may have seen them for a short
time only, or they may have been unfortunate in their earthly lot, and, having
had their hearts turned to unrighteousness through some corrupting influence,
10 they may have lost the memory of the holy things which once they saw. Few only
retain an adequate remembrance of them; and they, when they behold here any
image of that other world, are rapt in amazement; but they are ignorant of what
this rapture means, because they do not clearly perceive. For there is no light of
justice or temperance or any of the higher ideas which are precious to souls in the
15 earthly copies of them: they are seen through a glass dimly; and there are few who,
going to the images, behold in them the realities, and these only with difficulty.
There was a time when with the rest of the happy band they saw beauty shining in
brightness—we philosophers following in the train of Zeus, others in company with
other gods; and then we beheld the beatific vision and were initiated into a mystery
20 which may be truly called most blessed, celebrated by us in our state of innocence,
before we had any experience of evils to come, when we were admitted to the sight
of apparitions innocent and simple and calm and happy, which we beheld shining
impure light, pure ourselves and not yet enshrined in that living tomb which we
carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell.

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Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car

by Virginia Woolf
(1882–1941)

1 Evening is kind to Sussex, for Sussex is no longer young, and she is grateful
for the veil of evening as an elderly woman is glad when a shade is drawn over a
lamp, and only the outline of her face remains. The outline of Sussex is still very
fine. The cliffs stand out to sea, one behind another. All Eastbourne, all Bexhill,
5 all St. Leonards, their parades and their lodging houses, their bead shops and
their sweet shops and their placards and their invalids and chars-à-bancs, are all
obliterated. What remains is what there was when William came over from France
ten centuries ago: a line of cliffs running out to sea. Also the fields are redeemed.
The freckle of red villas on the coast is washed over by a thin lucid lake of brown
10 air, in which they and their redness are drowned. It was still too early for lamps;
and too early for stars.

But, I thought, there is always some sediment of irritation when the moment
is as beautiful as it is now. The psychologists must explain; one looks up, one is
overcome by beauty extravagantly greater than one could expect—there are now
15 pink clouds over Battle; the fields are mottled, marbled—one's perceptions blow
out rapidly like air balls expanded by some rush of air, and then, when all seems
blown to its fullest and tautest, with beauty and beauty and beauty, a pin pricks;
it collapses. But what is the pin? So far as I could tell, the pin had something to
do with one's own impotency. I cannot hold this—I cannot express this—I am
20 overcome by it —I am mastered. Somewhere in that region one's discontent lay;
and it was allied with the idea that one's nature demands mastery over all that it
receives; and mastery here meant the power to convey what one saw now over
Sussex so that another person could share it. And further, there was another prick
of the pin: one was wasting one's chance; for beauty spread at one's right hand,
25 at one's left; at one's back too; it was escaping all the time; one could only offer a
thimble to a torrent that could fill baths, lakes.

But relinquish, I said (it is well known how in circumstances like these
the self splits up and one self is eager and dissatisfied and the other stern and
philosophical), relinquish these impossible aspirations; be content with the view

From Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), pp. 7-11.

1 in front of us, and believe me when I tell you that it is best to sit and soak; to be
passive; to accept; and do not bother because nature has given you six little pocket
knives with which to cut up the body of a whale.

5 While these two selves then held a colloquy about the wise course to adopt in
the presence of beauty, I (a third party now declared itself) said to myself, how
happy they were to enjoy so simple an occupation. There they sat as the car sped
along, noticing everything: a hay stack; a rust red roof; a pond; an old man coming
home with his sack on his back; there they sat, matching every colour in the sky
10 and earth from their colour box, rigging up little models of Sussex barns and
farmhouses in the red light that would serve in the January gloom. But I, being
somewhat different, sat aloof and melancholy. While they are thus busied, I said
to myself: Gone, gone; over, over; past and done with, past and done with. I feel
life left behind even as the road is left behind. We have been over that stretch, and
are already forgotten. There, windows were lit by our lamps for a second; the light
15 is out now. Others come behind us.

Then suddenly a fourth self (a self which lies in ambush, apparently dormant,
and jumps upon one unawares. Its remarks are often entirely disconnected
with what has been happening, but must be attended to because of their very
abruptness) said: "Look at that." It was a light; brilliant, freakish; inexplicable. For
20 a second I was unable to name it. "A star"; and for that second it held its odd flicker
of unexpectedness and danced and beamed. "I take your meaning," I said. "You,
erratic and impulsive self that you are, feel that the light over the downs there
emerging, dangles from the future. Let us try to understand this. Let us reason it
out. I feel suddenly attached not to the past but to the future. I think of Sussex in
25 five hundred years to come. I think much grossness will have evaporated. Things
will have been scorched up, eliminated. There will be magic gates. Draughts fan-
blown by electric power will cleanse houses. Lights intense and firmly directed
will go over the earth, doing the work. Look at the moving light in that hill; it is
the headlight of a car. By day and by night Sussex in five centuries will be full of
30 charming thoughts, quick, effective beams."

The sun was now low beneath the horizon. Darkness spread rapidly. None of
my selves could see anything beyond the tapering light of our headlamps on the
hedge. I summoned them together. "Now," I said, "comes the season of making
up our accounts. Now we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self.
35 Nothing is to be seen any more, except one wedge of road and bank which our
lights repeat incessantly. We are perfectly provided for. We are warmly wrapped
in a rug; we are protected from wind and rain. We are alone. Now is the time of
reckoning. Now I, who preside over the company, am going to arrange in order
the trophies which we have all brought in. Let me see; there was a great deal of
40 beauty brought in to-day: farmhouses; cliffs standing out to sea; marbled fields;
mottled fields; red feathered skies; all that. Also there was disappearance and the
death of the individual. The vanishing road and the window lit for a second and
then dark. And then there was the sudden dancing light, that was hung in the

1 future. What we have made then to-day," I said, "is this: that beauty; death of the
individual; and the future. Look, I will make a little figure for your satisfaction;
here he comes. Does this little figure advancing through beauty, through death,
to the economical, powerful and efficient future when houses will be cleansed
5 by a puff of hot wind satisfy you? Look at him; there on my knee." We sat and
looked at the figure we had made that day. Great sheer slabs of rock, tree tufted,
surrounded him. He was for a second very, very solemn. Indeed it seemed as if the
reality of things were displayed there on the rug. A violent thrill ran through us;
as if a charge of electricity had entered in to us. We cried out together: "Yes, yes,"
10 as if affirming something, in a moment of recognition.

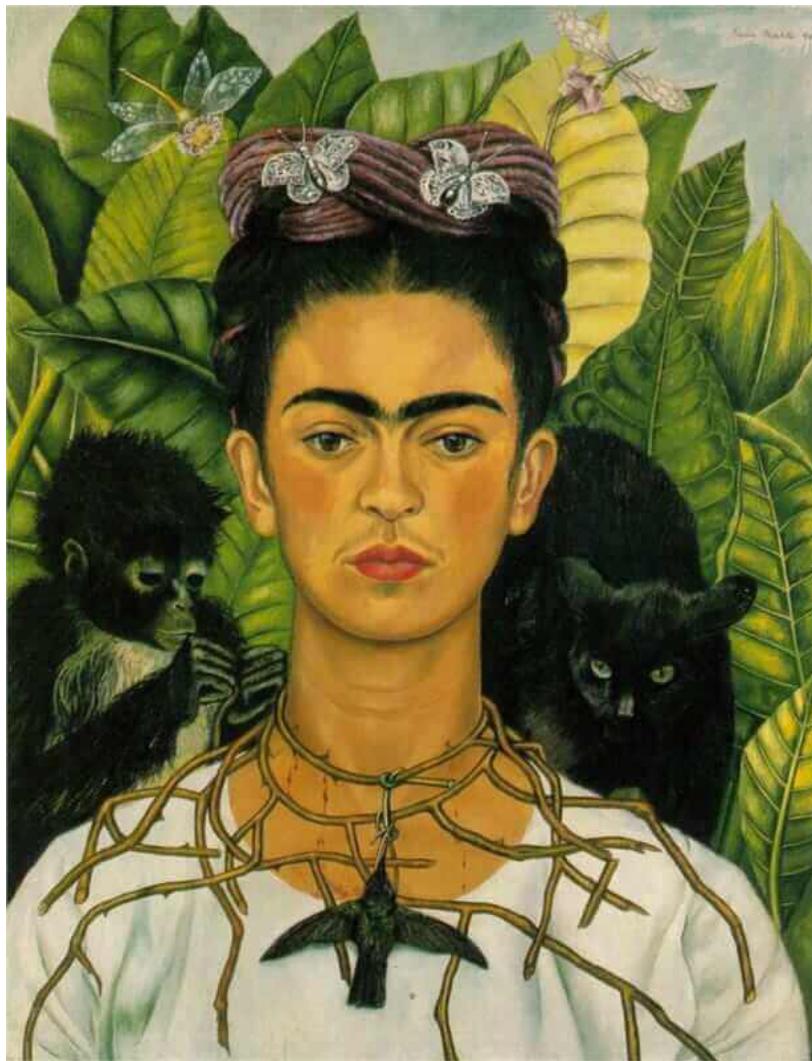
And then the body who had been silent up to now began its song, almost at first
as low as the rush of the wheels: "Eggs and bacon; toast and tea; fire and a bath;
fire and a bath; jugged hare," it went on, "and red currant jelly; a glass of wine
with coffee to follow, with coffee to follow—and then to bed and then to bed."

15 "Off with you," I said to my assembled selves. "Your work is done. I dismiss
you. Good-night."

And the rest of the journey was performed in the delicious society of my own
body.

Notes

Image of the Week



Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait With Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940)

Notes

Guiding Questions

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

Plato, *Phaedrus*

- What are the key features of Plato's image of the charioteer and horses?
- Why, according to Plato, does the soul lose her wings?
- What draws the soul upwards?
- How are we to understand the relationship between desire and delight?

Virginia Woolf, "Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car"

- What is Woolf describing? What of your experience does her description evoke?
- What are the four selves? Have you ever met any of these selves?
- How does Woolf describe delight?
- Are we to understand this experience as solitary or communal?

Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait With Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- Is this a depiction of a unitary or divided self? How?
- How are we to understand the figure of the thorn necklace?
- What might Frida Kahlo contribute to our discussion of desire and delight?

General questions for the week

- Do desire and delight unify or divide our souls?
- What objects of desire and delight uplift us? What objects draw us down?
- Do desire and delight always carry with them the promise of pain?

Notes

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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