



Soul Matters

Widening the Circle

Small Group

February 2022

Welcome to Widening the Circle

Is it possible that
being on the inside
leaves you out of the loop?
What if the margins
aren't narrow?
What if that space of exclusion
is also a position of perspective?
What if being shut out
allows you to understand the insiders
better than they understand themselves?

Why do so many seek the safety
of that inner circle anyway?
Don't we know that the circles
not only keep others out
but also the air?
Haven't we learned that
it's on the edge of circles
that hate makes its home?
So even if you weren't among the ones
who put the circle in place,
by allowing it to linger,
don't you carry the burden
of responsibility as well?

What if who we are
doesn't end at the barriers
of our own skin?
What if sin is believing
that you can put the puzzle together
with only the pieces that belong to you?
What if heaven is the moment you realize
that none of us can get there alone?
What if the only true freedom
lies in the willingness to
fight against that which imprisons
someone else?

And what if these all questions
are a matter of life and death?
Or is it a matter of dying to live?
After all, didn't the Nazarene say
we must lose our life in order to find it?
Haven't all the sages said the solitary self
must perish for the larger we to live?

If that is true
then let's widen the circle
until it breaks!
For as long as the circle exists
pieces and parts of ourselves
will always lie on the other side
of the line.

So let us push, pull,
twist and tear,
dig underneath
and climb over the top,
do whatever it takes to meet each other
face to face.
And having found each other,
let us stare
and struggle,
fight and forgive,
call in and call out,
until "me" and "you"
dissolves into "us."
Is there any other way we become
whole?

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

Let in Lovingkindness

It's one of the core practices of Buddhism: the [Lovingkindness meditation](#). By engaging your compassion for ever-widening circles of people, it transforms not only your relationship to others but also your sense of self.

So you're invited this month to learn more about it and give it a try. It works best if you do it at least a few days in a row. We also encourage you to consider journaling after you do the meditation, capturing the thoughts, challenges, insights that it stirred in you. And, of course, pay attention to how it changes the way you go about your day.

Here's a video that guides you through the process: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIW0VHupTFI>

If you prefer, here's written guidance instead: <https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree/loving-kindness>

And here are a few articles on the benefits it offers:

- <https://www.mindful.org/loving-kindness-meditation-makes-better-human/>
- <https://www.mindful.org/loving-kindness-takes-time-sharon-salzberg/>
- <https://www.lifehack.org/361244/6-amazing-benefits-loving-kindness-meditation-backed-science>

Option B

How Can We Win?

This option invites you to meditate and reflect on a powerful, brilliant and unfiltered response by activist and author Kimberly Jones to the protests surrounding the killing of George Floyd. Whether it widens your understanding or helps articulate your own pain and anger, it's a perspective that has the potential to widen us all.

Center yourself before watching. Open your heart and mind to wherever Jones' words, courage, anger and honesty take you. We suggest you set aside at least 30 minutes to journal your thoughts after watching. We also encourage you to watch it again with a friend and discuss it together.

How Can We Win, Kimberly Jones

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9_qGOa9Go

Here's an interview between Kimberly Jones and Trevor Noah about the video. It's a perfect way to dig deeper: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1k9APedIUY>

Option C

Step Outside Your Circle of Comfort

We get comfortable in our usual patterns. For instance, we tend to interact with people who share our own views. We stick to habits and activities that we're good at and that offer us predictability. But often these circles of comfort keep us small. So this month step outside one of your circles of comfort!

A ton of options to choose from: eating food you've not tried before, public speaking, engaging a family member about a hard issue you've long avoided, asking someone out on a date, watching NASCAR if you've never before, or the classic, parachuting out of a plane! If you are politically liberal, you might push yourself to listen to a conservative news source for a week. If you are political conservative, then reading [The Nation](#) this month may be your choice. If you hate exercise, then maybe a few long hikes make sense. If you are not the artistic type, how about signing up for a pottery or watercolor class this month? Or maybe you are a poet who has never shared their work. Well, this is your chance to do it!

A good standard to know if you've picked an adequately challenging choice is if your friends say, "I can't believe you'd do that!" when you tell them about it. The goal, of course, is growth, not discomfort. So be sure to make time to reflect on -and maybe write about - your choice. Why do you think you choose what you did? What need or hunger was behind the selection. What did the process of doing it teach you? How are you different having done it?

Option D

Look for the Helpers

When tragedy or trauma sweeps over our lives, our worlds become small. It becomes hard to extend our hearts and heads beyond the narrow feelings of fear, wounds and worry. As a way of widening that circle to include hope and connection, many have turned to the advice and words of [Fred Roger's](#): "[Look for the helpers.](#)"

To honor this, you're invited to take a week and look for the helpers. *Think of it as a day-long meditation or noticing practice.* Just raise your awareness for 7 days and pay attention to those who are helping. All forms of "helping" count! You might notice a firefighter or maybe it's just someone who engages a homeless person with respect. A co-worker offering a kind word counts just as much as the activist working to bring about change.

To put this into practice, we suggest setting aside at least 10 minutes at the end of each day to write down the helper or helpers you noticed. Better yet, take some time to daily share the story of the helpers you noticed with your partner or a friend. Most of us will do this exercise by ourselves, but a powerful alternative is to find someone to join you in this "hunt." Hold each other accountable to doing it 5-7 days in a row and then make a coffee or lunch date to go over your list of helpers. Come to your group ready to share the most impactful moment and insight you experienced.

Option E

Which Resource is Yours?

In the Companion Pieces section below, there are many quotes and resources on the practice of widening the circle. Engaging these resources and finding *the one* that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself. So, as your spiritual exercise for this month, reflect on those resources until you find the one that most deepens your understanding of widening the circle. After you've found it, engage it in a creative way. For instance, if it's an article or video, share it with someone close to you and discuss it with them. Create an art piece or write a poem in reaction to it. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. When were you "saved" by someone who widened a circle to let you in?
2. Are you a circle maker, a circle joiner or a circle avoider?
3. Who needs you to widen the circle for them?
4. Has an experience of being excluded permanently left a mark on you?
5. Has an experience of failing to confront racism permanently left a mark on you?
6. How has your definition of racism widened or shifted since you were younger?
7. How has your answer to "Are you racist?" changed over the years?
8. What beloved aspect of "UU worship" might you have to let go of to make UU worship more inclusive?
9. How has your definition of patriotism changed and widened over the years?
10. Has taking a trip ever widened your circle of concern?
11. Is your circle of friends keeping you small?
12. Could shrinking your circle of aspirations set you free?
13. Has your sense of self ever widened so much that you've felt "one with the universe"?
14. What has life taught you about widening circles to include your "enemies"?
15. Covid shrank our circles of connection. Is there any way in which that was a blessing to you?
16. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the spiritual practice of Widening the Circle.

Wise Words

He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him In!
Edwin Markham

A classic Zen exercise is the ensō, the circle hand-drawn in a single fluid brushstroke. It is close to perfect, but never there. If perfection is what you want, you can produce it anytime by using a compass or a computer, but the ensō defies such mechanistic precision; indeed it is often incomplete, left slightly open as though in invitation to everything beyond it... A perfect circle is uninteresting, a closed system containing nothing, while an imperfect one vibrates with warmth. It invites us into the moment of its creation...It is open, human, fallible—an expression, that is, of soul.

[Lesley Hazleton](#)

We must learn to live together as [siblings] or perish together as fools.
Martin Luther King, Jr

It's the community's job to figure out how we can stretch into the so-called margins to broaden our understanding and the ability to be inclusive. Inclusivity is not 'how do we make you a part of what we are?' but 'how do we become more of what you are?'

[angel Kyodo williams Sensei](#)

Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.
Vernā Myers

Dear Black America — We are many things, aren't we? We are hair. God yes, we are hair. And song. And memory. We are a language so deep it has no need for words. And we are words that feint, dart, and wheel like birds. Like James Brown, we feel good. Like Fannie Lou Hamer, we are sick and tired. We are fearsome. We are fire. Like God, we are that we are.

[Tracy K. Smith](#)

American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.

[James Baldwin](#)

You have to love your country the way you love your friends, the way your spouse loves you, right? The people who love you don't blow smoke up your backside. They tell you hard truths. They love you... my wife, if something's going wrong, she's going to tell me... That's the nature of the relationship... The question really is... can we get to a place where citizens are encouraged to see themselves critically, encouraged to see their history critically?

[Ta-Nehisi Coates](#)

We have to change [and widen] our idea of what it means to be racist... When we understand racism as a system that we have been raised in and that its impact is inevitable, it's really not a question of good or bad. It's just, "I have it. I have been socialized into it." And so, "What am I going to do about it?" is really the question... if you change your understanding, but you don't do anything different, then you're colluding.

[Robin DiAngelo](#)

The thing that's really slick about whiteness, if you will, is that most of the benefits can be obtained without ever doing anything personally... There are a whole set of assumptions that flow from being white, just like there are a whole set of benefits that flow from being male—you know, being a man doesn't mean that you have antipathy toward women, but if society is patriarchal, which a lot of people say it is, it means that the way resources are distributed in society benefits men. In that sense, men are not innocent, even though they may not personally have antipathy toward women. In the same way, in that sense, whites are not innocent. They're given the spoils of a racist system, even if they're not personally racist.

[john a. powell](#)

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Lilla Watson

Differences are not intended to separate, to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realize our need of one another.

Desmond Tutu

To be free, you must embrace
the breadth of your own existence
without apology...
But to actually be free, you must
know and you must fight for the entire
Universes inside of everyone else.

[Theresa I. Soto](#)

In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives

Parker J. Palmer

Empathy isn't just remembering to say 'that must really be hard'—it's figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all... Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see.

[Leslie Jamison](#)

Imagining someone else's pain with too much surety can be as damaging as failing to imagine it... Empathy is always perched precariously between gift and invasion.

[Leslie Jamison](#)

We all get shit wrong. So the question is: Have you built the capacity to care more about others than you care about your own ego? Will you choose to protect someone else over your own ego?

[Austin Channing Brown](#)

You can widen your circle of influence by widening your circle of service.

Joseph Grenny

Open your hands if you want to be held.

[Rumi](#)

You will never outperform your inner circle.

John Wooden.

I live my life in widening circles...
I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?

[Rainer Maria Rilke](#), translated by Joanna Macy

You are not a drop in the ocean, you are the ocean
in a drop

Rumi

we belong to the grand communion...
we are the dust, the dust that hopes...
the dust that dances in the light
with all other dust...
that makes the world.

[Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer](#)

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

On Crazy We Built a Nation - Seeing White Podcast

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-34-on-crazy-we-built-a-nation-seeing-white-part-4/>

On Widening Our Understanding of History

That's Not Us, So We're Clean - Seeing White Podcast

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-36-thats-not-us-so-were-clean-seeing-white-part-6/>

On Widening our Understanding of Responsibility

Black Lives Matter Tribute

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2FPKTgiQFE&t=8s>

"A bone chilling collaboration piece. Each poet brings a different perspective to the black lives matter movement."

How Can We Win, Kimberly Jones

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9_qGOa9Go

"How can you win? You can't win! The game is fixed!"

Gate A4, Naomi Shihab Nye

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb-iGnA4pbo>

A poem on the wider circle of human community that is still possible.

WindowSwap

<https://www.window-swap.com/>

A website that allows you to widen your perspective by looking through windows from around the world! Addictive!

Articles

How Not to Talk About Race

Patricia J. Williams

<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/talk-about-race/>

On widening the conversation about critical race theory

An Invitation to Move Toward Land

Acknowledgments & Beyond

https://www.uua.org/justice/blog/beyond-land-acknowledgment?mc_cid=d2873a8708&mc_eid=6237a64832&utm_source=pocket_mylist

Books

There's a Revolution Outside, My Love: Letters from a Crisis

40 writers widening our understanding of the moment we're living through.

Interview with editor:

<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/17/997602089/new-poetry-book-expresses-still-fresh-feelings-about-a-tumultuous-year>

The Empathy Exams, Leslie Jamison

Review: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/28/books/the-empathy-exams-essays-by-leslie-jamison.html?utm_source=pocket_mylist

On widening our Hearts to include the pain of others.

The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone And How We Can Prosper Together, Heather Mcghee

Movies

What Movie Widened Who You Are?

This month, instead of lifting up movies, we invite you to explore people thanking movies for widening their sense of self. [This Movie Changed Me](#) is a podcast that interviews well-known people about the movies that made a mark on them. We hope their testimonies inspire you to watch at least one of their beloved films this month. Maybe more importantly, we also hope it reminds you of the movie that widened who you are. Here's the link to the podcast: <https://onbeing.org/series/this-movie-changed-me/>. Enjoy the exploration!

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as "soul_matters_circle"

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).

Find support for bringing the
monthly themes home and into your family life with

Soulful Home: A Guide for Families:

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/soulful-home.html>



Soul Matters
SHARING CIRCLE

© 2021-22 Soul Matters ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Packets are for use only by member congregations of the Soul Matters Sharing Circle.

Learn how to join at

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com>