



Soul Matters

The Gifts of **Justice & Equity**



Small Group

February 2024

Welcome to the Gift of Justice & Equity

Here we go again.
Another injustice.
Even more inequity exposed.

So much pain.
So many issues.
So little equality.

And so, so many people with certainty.

I wish I had it. Don't you?

The crystal-clear clarity
of who's right and who's wrong.
Every aspect of their argument
neatly lined up.
Nothing at all left to doubt.

But when I wake,
so much ambivalence shares my bed.
So weary am I of having to announce my position
right away.
So worried about my limited view.
So concerned that my people
will no longer consider me one of their own
if I express my doubts.

But answer I must.
Isn't that true?

What does justice look like in this case?
What is the next right step?
What is the correct point of view?

Just put my mind to it.
Reason will guide me
and show me the way.

But what if we've got the starting point all wrong?
What if my mind - and yours - is not enough?
What if the place to begin is not
"How do I answer these questions?"
But "Who do I need
to help me think them through?"

This is the plea of [that lawyer](#)
serving those on death row.
"Get proximate!" he pleads.
To change the world,
we must get close to those on the margins.
We must hear what they have to say.
We must see the world with their weary eyes.

Amen, cry those Latin American [priests](#)
who placed the word liberation
in front of their theology.
Blessed are the poor, they teach,
not just because they will inherit the earth,
but because they view our earthly woes
most clearly.

Their gift to me, to you, to us
is to remember that the answers to injustice
arise from relationship,
as much as, if not more than,
from reason.

Who, not how.
Who, not how.
What if that is the place to begin?
What if this is the way
we change the world?

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us*!

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did and what gift it gave you.

Option A

Examine Your Own Involvement

"To understand the causes of poverty, we must look beyond the poor. Those of us living lives of privilege and plenty must examine ourselves... Most government aid goes to families that need it the least. If you add up the amount that the government is dedicating to tax breaks — mortgage interest deduction, wealth transfer tax breaks, tax breaks we get on our retirement accounts, our health insurance, our college savings accounts — you learn that we are doing so much more to subsidize affluence than to alleviate poverty... And this is the way we designed it." - *Matthew Desmond*

This exercise asks you to read Matthew Desmond's highly celebrated book, [*Poverty, by America*](#).

As the above quote suggests, it is a book that challenges those of us in the middle and moderately affluent classes to look at the ways we knowingly and unknowingly keep poor people poor. This is not a role we are used to. When it comes to economic injustice, we privileged liberals are much more comfortable naming the problems than being named as the problem.

But alongside that discomfort lies a feeling of being liberated. Desmond is not out to guilt his reader. Rather, his aim is empowerment and understanding. You will leave this book with more compassion, more commitment and a clearer path forward.

To help make this a spiritual exercise, not just an interesting read, here are some questions to engage during and after reading the book:

- **How did it change your mind?**
What assumption about the poor did it invite you to re-examine and change your mind about.
- **How did it validate your experience?**
If you grew up in poverty, or are struggling with it today, how did the book help you better understand or better articulate your experience? What is the one idea or argument in the book that you most want non-impooverished people to understand?
- **What did it call you to do?**
Desmond calls us all to become "poverty abolitionists" and lists many ways to go about that. Of all the poverty abolitionist strategies he mentions, which do you feel called to make a commitment to and why?

Alternative: *If reading the book is too much to take on this month, consider engaging a couple of these related essays, reviews and interviews:*

- [*America Is in a Disgraced Class of Its Own*](#)
- [*Why Poverty Persists in America*](#)
- [*America's Addiction to Poverty, The Ezra Klein Show*](#)
- [*How the rest of us benefit by keeping others poor*](#)
- [*Five things we can all do to help end poverty*](#)
- [*End Poverty in America.org*](#)

Option B

Get Classy

[Classy](#) is a podcast that is getting [a lot of buzz](#). In it, the host, Jonathan Menjivar, explores how class and class inequities shape our social interactions. But what makes the podcast special is the way Menjivar vulnerably explores how class has shaped *him*! This vulnerability opens space for us to explore our own vulnerabilities around class, and in so doing, also makes listening to this podcast a spiritual exercise, especially if you grew up poor or working class.

We suggest you focus on episode two: [A Classy \(and Uncomfortable\) Laugh with Terry Gross](#).

This episode gets at how those of us who grew up poor or working class often contort ourselves as we navigate interactions with “higher class” folks and as we climb the so-called class ladder. It also lifts up how shame and self-doubt can become constant companions during that journey.

Use this podcast episode (and other episodes if you like) to reflect on your own experiences with “lower class” contortion.

You can keep it simple and just come to your group ready to share the biggest take-away from listening. Or, if you want to go the extra mile, write a poem or short reflection about one of the first times class reared its ugly and complicated head in your life.

Option C

A Recipe for Hope

It’s a question we all wrestle with: How do you hold on to hope in a world so overrun with injustice and inequity? Paul Goodman, a writer and leftist activist in the 1960’s, had a recipe for holding onto hope that others continue to quote even today. This is Goodman’s three step suggestion:

“Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society that you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now!”

With this recipe for hope in mind, take some time this month to do the following three things:

1. Write down 8 things that would characterize the revolution and kind of society you dream about.
2. Write down 8 ways you would live differently than you do today in that dreamed of society.
3. Of those 8 ways you’d live differently, pick one and figure out a way to “start living that way now!”

Beware. Step 3 will likely turn out to be more complicated than you think, or hope. And that’s ok. Wrestling with that complication is a big part of what this exercise is all about. Don’t give up if you can’t live it out perfectly. An approximation is likely the most any of us can do given the society we live in today.

Come to your group ready to share not only what you gained from the exercise but also how it impacted your level of hope.

Option D

Ask Them About Justice & Equity

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It not only deepens our conversations but also our relationships.

Below is a list of “justice & equity questions” to help you on your way. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won’t be a typical conversation. Telling them a bit about Soul Matters will help set the stage.

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation(s) and what gift or insight it gave you. As always, keep a lookout for how your inner voice is trying to send you a word of comfort or challenge through these conversions with others.

Justice & Equity Questions:

- What did “fighting injustice” look like in your family of origin?
- Were you a child that wanted everything to be fair? Either way, how has that childhood relationship to fairness played out in your adult life?
- How do you differentiate between justice and equity? And why does that distinction matter?
- Looking back, have you been as much of a “radical” as your younger self thought you would be?
- What personal or societal injustice has most shaped your life?
- Has art ever led to or supported your justice & equity work?
- What have you learned about the relationship between anger and justice work?
- When the enormity of injustice looms, what enables you to hold onto hope?
- What have you learned about balancing the competing desires to [save and savor](#) the world?

Option E

Which Justice & Equity Quote Calls to You?

Sometimes we read a quote, and it perfectly captures what’s going on for us right now. Or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month reading through the quotes in the *Companion Pieces* section below to **find the one that best illuminates your journey with justice & equity.**

We encourage you to use the same discernment practice with these quotes as you do with the packet’s list of questions:

- **Read through the list of quotes** a few times, noting which ones “shimmer” (i.e. call to you or have an emotional gravitational pull for you). It often helps to circle or star these quotes that stand out.
- With each reading, **narrow your focus** in on those that stick out, until you finally **settle on the one quote** that pulls at you the most.
- Then make space to **reflect** on the gift, challenge or insight your chosen quote is offering you.
- Some of us may want to **go further** and capture your reflections with journaling or creative expression.

Come to your group ready to share your quote and the journey it took you on.

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. They are not meant to be answered as much as to take you on a journey.

Read through the questions 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions “shimmers.”

Then reflect on that question using one or all of these questions:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to speak to me through it?*
- *How might Life or my inner voice be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?*

Writing out your thoughts often enables you to go deeper. It also sometimes helps to read the list of questions to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with.

A note about self-care: *Often these questions take us to a vulnerable space. It is OKAY to ignore the questions that may be triggering – or lean in if that feels safe.*

1. What was your first moment of fighting injustice?
2. What was your family of origin’s relationship to “justice work”? How does that shape you today?
3. Were you a child that wanted everything to be fair? Either way, how has that childhood relationship to fairness played out in your adult life?
4. How do you differentiate between justice and equity? And why does that distinction matter?
5. How have you changed your mind about what it takes to achieve justice? What tactics seemed central earlier in your life, but no longer appear so now?
6. What personal or societal injustice has most shaped your life?
7. What have you learned about the relationship between anger and justice work?
8. Looking back, have you been as much of a “radical” as your younger self thought you would be?
9. Has art ever led to or supported your justice & equity work?
10. Has meditation ever led to or supported your justice & equity work?
11. What has most helped you heal from an injustice?
12. When the enormity of injustice looms, what enables you to hold onto hope?
13. What have you learned about balancing the competing desires to save and savor the world?
14. Where do you feel injustice in your body? How did that become the location where you carry it?
15. How are injustice and grief related for you?
16. How has your church changed the way you think about injustice and inequity?
17. **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 find it.

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 gift of justice & equity.

Wise Words

I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change.
I am changing the things I cannot accept.
Angela Davis

I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by all possible means—except by getting off his back.
[Leo Tolstoy](#)

If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected – those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! – and listens to their testimony.
[James Baldwin](#)

i don't want America no more.
i want to be a citizen of something new...
i want a country that keeps its word...
i want a country that don't treat it's people like a virus.
i want a country not trying to cure itself of me...
I want a nation under a kinder god.
I want justice the verb not justice the dream.
i want what was promised to me
i want 40 acres and a vote that matters.
i want no prisons and a mule...
i want peace. i want equity. i want guns melted into a masque, a church a place for us to pray
and i wanna stop praying for my country to be mine
[Danez Smith](#)

Your uprising against the forces of darkness has got to do more than say "no." A fierce, primal yes should be at the heart of your crusade.
rob brezny

When we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else's oppression, we'll find our opportunities to make real change.
[Ijeoma Oluo](#)

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.
Desmond Tutu

In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist.
Angela Davis

I learned that racism, like most systems of oppression, isn't about bad people doing terrible things to people who are different from them but instead is a way of maintaining power for certain groups at the expense of others.
[Alicia Garza](#)

The government isn't bad because it's big: it's bad because it's bought.
[Briahna Joy Gray](#)

If you are not at the table then you're probably on the menu.
[Modern adage](#)

You've heard the old saying, "You give a person a fish and you feed him for a day; but if you teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." [Well...] we've also got to ask, "Who owns the pond? And who polluted the pond? And who built the gates up? And why does a fishing license cost so stinkin' much?"
[Dr. John Perkins](#)

Why is it that if you take advantage of a corporate tax break you're a smart businessman, but if you take advantage of something so you don't go hungry, you're a moocher?

[Jon Stewart](#)

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.

Hélder Câmara

Once poverty is gone, we'll need to build museums to display its horrors to future generations. They'll wonder why poverty continued so long in human society--how a few people could live in luxury while billions dwelt in misery, deprivation and despair.

Muhammad Yunus

This is who we are: the richest country on earth, with more poverty than any other advanced democracy... The American government gives the most help to those who need it least. This is the true nature of our welfare state, and it has far-reaching implications, not only for our bank accounts and poverty levels, but also for our psychology and civic spirit.

[Matthew Desmond](#)

A higher minimum wage is an antidepressant. It is a sleep aid. A stress reliever. Vocal segments of the American public, those with brain space to spare, seem to believe the poor should change their behavior to escape poverty. Get a better job. Stop having children. Make smarter financial decisions. In truth, it's the other way around: Economic security leads to [better choices](#).

[Matthew Desmond](#)

Poverty is the worst form of violence.

Mahatma Gandhi

It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.

[James Baldwin](#)

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 on [The Gifts of Justice & Equity](#).

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

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [The Gifts of Justice & Equity](#).

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

Videos & Podcasts

What is Transformative Justice?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-BOFz5TXo>

Washington National Cathedral Unveils Its New Racial-Justice-Themed Stained Glass Windows

<https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/kerry-james-marshall-now-and-forever/>

The Psychology Of Inequality, Hidden Brain

<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/912749547>

Liberal Hypocrisy is Fueling American Inequality

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNDgcjVGHLw>

Why Wealth Inequality Should Worry You Much More Than Income Inequality

<https://www.vox.com/2014/5/7/5690976/wealth-inequality-is-dangerous-for-america>

Why This Economist Wants to Give Every Poor Child \$50,000

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tSGiQXWx3s>

I Dreaded Black History Month, Until a Novelist Opened My Eyes

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/books/review/black-history-month-historical-fiction.html>

How 'McMindfulness' Manipulates Us into Coping Instead of Protesting

<https://www.kqed.org/forum/2010101872000/how-mcmindfulness-manipulates-us-into-coping-instead-of-protesting>

AI's Social Justice Problem: It's Amplifying Human Bias

<https://www.cnet.com/culture/ai-social-justice-problem-its-amplifying-human-bias/>

Articles

Ways to Distinguish between Equality, Equity and Justice

[Here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)

The Equity Wars: Equity is everywhere, why is it so controversial?

<https://www.vox.com/policy/2023/5/4/23644810/equity-social-justice-equality-sanders-biden>

Your Brain on Poverty: Why Poor People Seem to Make Bad Decisions

And why their "bad" decisions might be more rational than you'd think.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/11/your-brain-on-poverty-why-poor-people-seem-to-make-bad-decisions/281780/>

To Achieve Racial Justice We Must Save The Planet

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/earth-day-olufemi-taiwo-reparations-global-racial-climate-justice/>

Mindfulness for Activists: How to avoid burnout while fighting for justice

<https://tricycle.org/article/mindfulness-for-activists/>

The Mindfulness Conspiracy

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jun/14/the-mindfulness-conspiracy-capitalist-spirituality>

"It is sold as a force that can help us cope with the ravages of capitalism, but with its inward focus, mindful meditation may be the enemy of activism.."

A rebuttal:

<https://www.mindfulnessstudies.com/mindfulness-response-2019/>

Artificial Intelligence: Threat or Useful Tool for Social Justice?

<https://theglobepost.com/2019/08/22/ai-social-justice/>

Books

[Poverty, by America](#)

[Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want](#)

[Social Justice for the Sensitive Soul: How to Change the World in Quiet Ways](#)

[The Fire Next Time](#)

Movies & TV

[Full Time](#)

[The White Lotus](#)

[Descendant](#)

[American Fiction](#)

[Coded Bias](#)

[Gideon's Army](#)

[Black Art: In the Absence of Light](#)

[Jim Crow of the North](#)

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](#).

Packet Introduction Credit Note: Unless explicitly noted otherwise, the introductions of these packets are written by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler. Rev. Scott gives permission for his pieces to be used in any way that is helpful, including in newsletters, worship and in online service/recordings.



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