



Soul Matters

**What does it mean
to be a people of
STILLNESS?**



Packet for Individual Reflection December 2020

What Does It Mean To Be A People of Stillness?

*Don't tell me to be calm
when there are so many reasons
to be angry...
I didn't say to be calm, said the wind,
I said to breathe.
We're going to need a lot of air
to make this hurricane together.*

- Rev. Lynn Unger, from her poem [Breathe](#)

Often when stillness weaves its way into our discussions, it's framed as a retreat strategy. A balm from the frantic and frequently wounding world. But as wise ones like Rev. Unger remind us, that's not quite right. It's less like a locked room that keeps all the enemies out and more like an oxygen mask that brings us back to life, that fills us with power. Stillness doesn't simply slow our breath and energy; it fills us with it.

As Unger suggests, we don't really want to be told to be calm these days. There is indeed so much to be angry about. So much that needs defended, resisted and restored. Which means that there's a lot at stake in how we talk and think about stillness. A stillness that invites us simply to escape the world is dangerous. A stillness that merely anesthetizes our nerves comforts us but widens the wounds of the world. To listen deeply to our troubled times is to hear a call to challenge the view that stillness is the resting place at the bottom of the hill we've climbed and instead imagine it as the basecamp that launches us into the long trek up the mountain.

And alongside this vision of stillness enabling us to gather strength also sits the equally important idea of stillness as something that clarifies our perception.

One of the most powerful and heart-breaking examples of this comes from the movie Schindler's List. In what is possibly its [most famous scene](#), Oscar Schindler is sitting still upon his horse at the top of a hill looking down at atrocities being committed by the Nazi soldiers. Up until that moment, Schindler couldn't see past his rationalizations. But in that still moment, which was filmed in black and white, we watch through his eyes and see one small burst of red emerging from the sea of gray. It's a single small girl in a bright red coat. In that moment his perception is transformed and the stillness allows him to notice that which calls him back to his humanity.

So friends, stillness does this too. It allows us to perceive that which is truly precious. And in doing so, it calls us back to our humanity.

When we pause and find that sacred point of balance, that which is precious in life lights up as if in neon. The blur that usually dominates our attention fades to gray and we are able to notice that which truly deserves our focus. Our care. Our commitment. Our love.

And when we are surrounded by and connected to those precious things, a type of magic happens. We suddenly know ourselves anew. We suddenly feel at home in ourselves and the world. That sense of home can calm us or it may challenge us, but either way life comes alive again.

So home, maybe that is the true aim of this month. Maybe stillness is not an end but a means. Maybe it is not the destination but the road. The road that leads us home.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

Let Lectio Divina Lead You into Stillness

This year, one exercise each month will draw on an ancient Christian spiritual practice called Lectio Divina, translated literally as “divine reading.” Learn more about it [here](#) and [here](#). The basic idea is to deeply listen to a text by reading it multiple times, through a different reflective lens each time. Think of it as bringing different discernment questions to the text, with each question inviting you to listen to the text in a new way.

With this as background, here are your instructions for this month.

Step One: Select the piece (or pieces) you want to reflect on. Explore this document for a bunch of “Stillness Texts” to choose from:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lhZQjDxsk3tPY_nVVmcf5SB2ZkOILFzjkr8fuDTh11c/edit?usp=sharing

Step Two: Apply this three-part deep listening practice to that text:

For your first reading, focus on FEELINGS, with your reading guided by the question, “What FEELINGS arise as I listen to the words?”

On your second reading, focus on MEMORY, with your reading and attention guided by the question, “What MEMORIES do these words stir?”

Finally, on your third reading, focus on WISDOM and GUIDANCE, with your attention guided by the questions, “What MESSAGE do these words have for me? What word of comfort or challenge is this piece trying to offer me?” (On this third reading it often helps to listen for which single word or phrase pops out at you, and then apply the question to that word/phrase.)

If you are up for a fourth reading, consider using this set of questions to guide you: “Who am I in the text? Which character, action or image represents me and where I’m at right now?”

Step Three: Journal or jot down what arose for you as you applied the questions to your reading of the texts.

Step Four: Come to your group prepared to share the top two insights/reactions/moments from your experience.

Enhancements: There are a number of ways to deepen or change up this exercise:

- Instead of reading the texts by yourself, ask a trusted loved one or friend to join you, with each of you reading the text out loud for each other. Hearing the texts read aloud in a voice not your own often opens up that text in a different or deeper way.
- Don’t just pick one text, but instead engage a number of the texts over the month. Maybe this might become one of your regular or weekly spiritual practices!
- Travel with the same text throughout the month. Instead of jumping from text to text each week, stick with one text in particular. In every new week, the text itself becomes new.
- When applying the three-part deep listening practice to a text, take your time between each reading. Don’t rush from one reading to the next. Some people reflect for as much as 10-15 minutes between readings. Others play an instrumental song between each reading as a way to help them sink deeper into reflection.

Option B

Take a Pic of Your Calming Place

We all have one, even if we don't realize it or think of it this way. Our calm place. Some place or space that moves us into stillness as we move into it. A favorite bench overlooking a favorite view. That unique trail in the woods by our home. Some body of water that has our heart. For some, it is a corner of our house. Our study where we get to be alone. Or even our bed, all by ourselves, in the first 15 minutes of our day. For some it's an emotional not physical space created by listening to a piece of beloved music, like Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, Bach's Prelude No.1 or Bill Evans' Peace Piece.

Whichever it is, deepen your relationship with your "calming place" by capturing it with a picture.

Sounds simple, but after you give it some thought, it's more complex and challenging than first appears. For instance, what time of day will you take the picture of your favorite spot by the lake? Sunrise? Sundown? Late afternoon? Or what about the picture of your study? Do you take a picture of yourself sitting at your desk? Or on the chair in the corner? Will you look in the camera or capture yourself looking out the small window that routinely pulls and stills your gaze?

In the end, it's not the picture itself that is the spiritual exercise, but the process of capturing the moment of stillness and peace that your treasured space graces you with.

Bring your picture to your group and be ready to share the story of the journey that led you to take that particular one.

Oh, and here's a bit of inspiration to help you along: <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/on-calming-places/>

Option C

Find Stillness in Gratitude

Some say we sit in stillness in order to clear away our thoughts. But others remind us that certain thoughts are the doorway into stillness. That's exactly what Carrie Newcomer tries to get us to understand and experience with her poem [Three Gratitudes](#). In this poem, she helps us notice how filling our heads and hearts with gratitude "softens our lives" and opens a still space free of worry and want. Or to put it another way, sinking into gratitude stills us. What a paradox: if we allow gratitude to swirl around us, we suddenly discover ourselves centered. Like sitting in the [eye of hurricane](#). Our gratitude pulls us out of our past, silences our worries about the future and allows us just "to be" in the present, with the abundance of riches right in front of us, right here and right now.

So give it a try this month for yourself: Surround yourself with gratitude and let it lead you to stillness. There are numerous ways to do it. Read over or list to Newcomer's poem multiple times and let her gratitude remind you of your own. Or better yet, use her poem as a guide and pick a quiet night or calm morning to write your own three gratitudes poem. Or just sit down and make a list of all you are thankful for. The important (and fun) part is to see how many gratitudes it takes for you to find calm, stillness and a deeper peace. We look forward to hearing if it took 3 or 30. Whichever one it is will be a gift.

Find Three Gratitudes at...

- Text: <https://onbeing.org/poetry/three-gratitudes/>
- Spoken: <https://vimeo.com/112893555>

Option D

Sit Still with a Loved One in View

We watch our loved ones all the time. Our kids playing a sport. Our loved one making dinner or sitting in a chair reading while we cook. Our parent playing with our kids. Our significant other breathing quietly as they sleep. Our loved one pulling weeds in the garden. Our child sitting at the piano learning a new tune.

But let's be honest, how often are we really looking? How often are we fully present? Are we pausing long enough to let the wonder of who they are wash over us? Or are we simply glancing at them while our real attention is on the worried or busy thoughts in our head?

So this month, take the time. Pause long enough to allow the image to make its way from your eyes to your heart. Capture the moment; Don't just glance at it.

And how will you know when you are really watching, really being fully present to them? Here's are three full-proof tests:

- You will suddenly tear up.
- You will feel astonishment.
- You will hear a voice in your head say, "I don't want this moment to end. I don't want to turn away."

Our loved ones are miracles. Let's try to be still and present enough this month to notice.

Option E

Sit Still and Stare at Another

This one may be the most challenging and intimidating exercise of this month: Spend a minute or two staring into the eyes of a family member or friend. Here are a number of videos to guide you on your way. (If doing it intimidates you too much, consider adapting the exercise by simply mindfully watching the videos labeled "inspirational video" and "Couples giving it a try.")

- Video with explanation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ei1EaY_ytZg
- Inspirational video: <https://www.happify.com/hd/60-seconds-with-a-stranger-can-be-magical/>
- Couples giving it a try: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm-T3HCa618>

Related articles:

- <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xd7pqz/staring-into-a-strangers-eyes-is-better-than-drugs>
- <https://lifehacker.com/staring-at-a-stranger-for-60-seconds-helped-me-feel-bet-1843137874>

Option F

Find Stillness in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of stillness. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself. So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month.

Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of stillness. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. 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 single 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"? 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. What do you know now about stillness that you didn't when you were younger?
2. When were you saved by finding a "still space" in the midst of chaos?
3. What if the doorway into spiritual stillness is learning to look at your present life and say "This is enough?"
4. We all have things that press our buttons, that send us into anger, trauma or that just shut us down. It's so easy to lose our ability to carve out a space between [stimulus and response](#). Between what "stimulus" and "response" do you wish you could create more still space?
5. What childhood moment of "winter stillness" has never left you?
6. Is your identity rooted in busyness or stillness? And which one do you *want* it to be rooted in?
7. Is busyness your way of running and hiding from stillness?
8. Has stillness ever "spoken" to you? Are you hungry for it to speak to you again?
9. Is it possible that stillness is inviting you to finally sit with your sadness?
10. Have you ever been "[stunned to stillness by beauty](#)"?
11. Could it be that the one thing missing from all your resistance and justice work is rest?
12. **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 what it means to be a people and a person of STILLNESS.

Word Roots & Definitions

The word stillness comes from the Middle English word stillness via the Old English *stilnes*, 'meaning silence, absence of noise or disturbance, tranquillity, quietness and absence of movement'. The root still appears to derive from the Old English *stille*, related to the Old German *stilli*, meaning 'be fixed, to stand'. It is also related to the Classical Greek word *stela* which means 'a post'. In Latin the word for stillness is *silentium* meaning 'silence and immobility'. Similarly, the Sanskrit word for stillness meant 'immobile'.

Wise Words

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Viktor E. Frankl

All of humanity's problems stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

Blaise Pascal

By not giving ourselves the minutes — or hours — free of devices and distractions, we risk losing our ability to know who we are and what's important to us.

[Alan Lightman](#)

When we hear the word "stillness" we immediately think of it as the opposite of movement - but stillness is something quite different altogether. Stillness is an energetic quality of being... Stillness is a choice. It can be felt by living in a state of presence where we remain connected to ourselves and are completely present in our body... In this quality of presence there is something that 'stands still', but it is not absent of physical movement.

Rather, it is our beingness that remains unaffected by any movement, action or doing even though it moves, acts and does. It is the depth of the ocean unaffected by its waves... Therefore, Stillness is not something we have to go in search of nor is it a journey into escapism or numbness. It is where we come from and what we are innately made of and thus it is our natural state of being.

[Serge Benhayon](#)

I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance and Other Essays

Even sequestered we can busy ourselves and forget to stop.

When we stop and wait for others

in the gap we enlarge ourselves.

When the merely important stops for what is beautiful,

when we let a little sabbath interrupt our busyness the holy enters in the empty spaces.

Stop, and let the Holy breathe in you.

Who knows? In the pause, angels may parade the neighborhoods of your soul.

[Steve Garnaas-Holmes](#)

Stillness is the First Proof of God's Presence

Sri Daya Mata

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalms 46:10

I'm taking the day off.

Quiet as a feather.

I hardly move though really I'm traveling a terrific distance.

Stillness. One of the doors into the temple.

[Mary Oliver](#)

A day of Silence
can be a pilgrimage in itself.
A day of Silence
can help you listen
to the Soul play
its marvelous lute and drum.

[Hafiz](#)

Our lives might be a lot more balanced if we learn to re-allocate prestige, pulling it away from those with a full diary and towards those wise enough to allow for some afternoons of reflection. We should think that there is courage not just in travelling the world, but also in daring to sit at home with one's thoughts for a while, risking encounters with certain anxiety-inducing or melancholy but also highly necessary ideas. Without the shield of busy-ness, we might bump into the realization that our relationship has reached an impasse, that our work no longer answers to any higher purpose or that we feel furious with a family member who is subtly exploiting our patience. The heroically hard worker isn't necessarily the one in the business lounge of the international airport, it might be the person gazing without expression out of the window, and occasionally writing down one or two ideas on a pad of paper... The point of 'doing nothing' is to clean up our inner lives...

[The School of Life](#)

Keeping Quiet

Pablo Neruda

Full poem at

<https://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=2298>

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still
for once...
If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves...

Through the sacred art of pausing, we develop the capacity to stop hiding, to stop running away from our own experience. We begin to trust in our natural intelligence, in our naturally wise heart, in our capacity to open to what arises.

[Tara Brach](#)

After one milks a cow, filling the pail to the brim, if he then carries it carelessly, spilling all the contents on the way to the house, there was no point in collecting the milk, because it has all been wasted. The same is true about meditation: After achieving stillness within, it is important to very carefully, watchfully carry that pail of peace with us throughout the entire day, drinking deeply from it.

[Sri Daya Mata](#)

It was what I was born for —
to look, to listen,
to lose myself
inside this soft world...

Mary Oliver, from her poem [Mindful](#)

We are sunrise with a remembrance of dusk,
We are soul with patina of soil,
We are stillness with mere veneer of words,
We are smooth surface of water stirred by the Spirit.

[Tess Baumberger](#)

Be still
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your
Name.
Listen
To the living walls.
Who are you?
Whose
Silence are you?...
Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you may one day be.
Rather
Be what you are (but who?) be
The unthinkable one...

Thomas Merton, from his poem [In Silence](#)

We have forgotten what rocks and plants still know;
we have forgotten how to be still, to be ourselves,
to be where life is here and now.

Eckhart Tolle

Don't tell me to be calm
when there are so many reasons
to be angry...
I didn't say to be calm, said the wind,
I said to breathe.

We're going to need a lot of air
to make this hurricane together.

[*Lynn Ungar*](#)

Rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and
pushes back against capitalism and white
supremacy.

[*Tricia Hersey*](#)

By slowing down and relishing the unfolding of
every experience, you aren't choosing to be less
accomplished or productive than others. You're
choosing to be accomplished and productive in
ways they may not even understand. You're
choosing to change what's within your own heart
and mind, thereby becoming a part of the solution
rather than a part of the problem. By no longer
rushing through, you're choosing to stop focusing
so much of your energy on the wanting and
yearning, the wishing it was done, the frustration
with what hasn't happened yet; and to make,
instead, the most of every experience as it unfolds
at its own pace.

Nea Justice

Try patience. Slow down, instead of immediately
acting on a habitual response. Sit with your anguish
and the discomfort of it. It's like sitting on a wild
horse. When we stick with this process we learn
something very interesting: there is no resolution
for these uncomfortable feelings. When we feel
powerful energy, we tend to be extremely
uncomfortable until things are fixed in some kind of
secure and comforting way, either on the side of
"yes" or "no," "right" or "wrong." Patience, on the
other hand, gives us nothing to hold on to. Joy,
happiness, inner peace, harmony come from sitting
still with the moodiness of the energy until it rises,
dwells and passes away. Patience is a way to
develop fearlessness, to contact the seeds of war
and the seeds of peace and decide which ones we
want to nurture.

Pema Chodron

Blessing in the Chaos

[*Jan Richardson*](#)

Full poem at

<https://wordsfortheyear.com/2015/07/21/blessing-in-the-chaos-by-jan-richardson/>

Let there be
a calming
of the clamoring,
a stilling
of the voices that
have laid their claim
on you...
that go with you
even to the
holy places
but will not
let you rest...
Let what distracts you
cease...
and let depart
all that keeps you
in its cage.

It only takes a reminder to breathe, a moment to be
still and just like that, something in me settles,
softens,
makes space for imperfection. The harsh voice of
judgment drops to a whisper and I remember again
that life isn't a relay race; that we will all cross the
finish line; that waking up to life is what we were
born for. As many times as I forget, catch myself
charging forward without even knowing where I am
going, that many times I can make the choice to
stop, to breathe, to be and walk slowly into the
mystery.

Danna Faulds

Peace, happiness, and joy is possible during the
time I drink my tea.

Thich Nhat Hanh

I was seven years old, and my parents were trying to move to the West Coast. Our relative poverty, however, caught up with us, and we were forced to winter in the cabin of an uncle in the Rocky Mountains. The time was difficult for my parents, I am sure, but for me it was glory... My most vivid memory is of the fireplace. (I had never been around a fireplace before, all our heat heretofore having come from the coal furnace in our Nebraska home.) Every night I would pull out the bed that hid in the couch by day and climb under the heavy quilts, my head less than ten feet away from the crackling warmth. Night after night I would fall asleep, watching this strange yellow blaze that warmed us all. I was in my grateful center.

Richard J. Foster

Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing
there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul
lies down in that grass the world is too full to talk
about.

Rumi

Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be
Astonished.

Mary Oliver, from her poem [Learning to be Astonished](#)

Music

We create two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. We organize these lists as a journey of sorts. So consider listening from beginning to end and using the lists as musical meditations. Follow the links below to connect with this month's "threshold songs."

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Stillness](#).

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Stillness \(instrumental\)](#).

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

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Stillness](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Stillness \(instrumental\)](#).

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

Videos & Podcasts

Watch Night: An Extended Public Service Announcement

Terrance Hayes

<https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/an-extended-public-service-announcement/>

Video Meditation featuring Pablo Neurda's poem *Keeping Quiet*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5kjqbqt-FA>

My Life Changed When I Started Making Space For Stillness, Ryan Holiday

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNpKjSRUtl4>

Just Breathe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVA2N6tX2cg>

"In this powerful short film, watch and hear from elementary school students learning to use mindfulness to navigate complex feelings."

How Does Singing Help Achieve Stillness? - TED Radio Hour

<https://www.npr.org/2014/11/21/364151177/how-does-singing-help-achieve-stillness>

Be Here, Be Still by Melissa Monforti

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

A sung meditation

A Meditation from Stress to Stillness

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/03/style/self-care/coronavirus-guided-meditation-nature.html?fbclid=IwAR22sPJ3GO5Ins6TVWyd8_2P4tNapz_1UneAvyk7UgzRMlgXReo1UQG6Jul

Jellyfish Meditation!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xw7wz9PFrw>

Articles

Loitering Is Delightful

Ross Gay

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/02/11/loitering-is-delightful/>

Excerpt: “The Webster’s definition of loiter reads thus: “to stand or wait around idly without apparent purpose,” and “to travel indolently with frequent pauses.” Among the synonyms for this behavior are linger, loaf, laze, lounge, lollygag, dawdle, amble, saunter, meander, putter, dillydally, and mosey. Any one of these words, in the wrong frame of mind, might be considered a critique or, when nouned, an epithet (“Lollygagger!” or “Loafer!”)... All of these words to me imply having a nice day. They imply having the best day. They also imply being unproductive. Which leads to being, even if only temporarily, nonconsumptive, and this is a crime in America, and more explicitly criminal depending upon any number of quickly apprehended visual cues. For instance, the darker your skin, the more likely you are to be “loitering” ...”

Why We All Need Quiet Days

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/why-we-all-need-quiet-days/>

“In our slow days we have the time, and the patience, to notice what seem, at first, like small sources of pleasure. And as we appreciate them, we realize how big and moving they really are – and how much we missed out on when, in our busier time, we tried to do everything...”

The Seven Most Calming Works of Art in the World

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/24287-2/>

Books

Quiet Mind: A Beginner's Guide to Meditation

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3673325-quiet-mind>

“Each contributor presents a short written teaching along with an audio recording of a guided practice.”

Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art

James Nestor

Related presentation found [here](#)

How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy

Jenny Odell

<https://bookshop.org/books/how-to-do-nothing-resisting-the-attention-economy/9781612197494>

“To resist in place is to make oneself into a shape that cannot so easily be appropriated by a capitalist value system.”

Review found [here](#)

Movies

Max Richter's Sleep

Review found [here](#)

Trailer found [here](#)

Watch it [here](#)

The Big Silence

<https://topdocumentaryfilms.com/big-silence/>

Silence

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/silence_2017

The Sound of Silence

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejZ75QFesgE>

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>



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