

## Preparation for Cultivating Relationships (October theme)

As a species homo sapiens is neither the strongest nor the most ferocious. Early humans were more closely aligned with prey than with predators. So very early in our history, we developed a social strategy for survival. Extended families and small groupings provided safety, better access to food, and more reproductive opportunities. In order to be accepted within these groups, humans learned to develop relationships. And relationships with others have continued to be an important component of what is defined as quality of life.

Our earliest relationships influence our life story. A child learns about trust and self-worth while they are still in infancy. How we approach relationships in later years may be directly impacted by our earliest experiences within the immediate family. But as we develop independence, we experience a wide variety of relationships, each of which has the capacity to influence our growth.

Teachers, neighbors, extended family, playmates, and school peers become important in our early lives, providing tools for learnings, examples of different lifestyles, companionship in exploring the world, and a standard of acceptable behavior that may or may not resonate with our basic nature. These early relationships meet many of the basic needs for socialization and cooperation and help us to understand others and develop empathy.

As we enter adulthood, we may seek out relationships with intention, based on our needs and desires. The relationships we build at our jobs can foster our sense of competence and trust as we work toward a shared goal. Young adulthood can be a period of intense romantic relationships, and sometimes these romantic relationships become partnerships and perhaps family. Young adulthood can also be a time when we ally ourselves with a “chosen family” specifically to help ourselves grow in intentional ways. If we become parents, then we make the choice to nurture our children’s growth through relationship.

Developing fulfilling relationships takes practice. Our initial impulse may be to cultivate relationships in order to prevent loneliness, give an appearance of social status, or provide material and emotional comfort. But the more we practice relating with others, the more we may realize the depth that relationships can reach. Our mentors, coworkers, neighbors and friends all provide a web of caring and concern in which we are able to develop our own generosity.

As Fred Rogers said, “Mutual caring relationships require kindness and patience, tolerance, optimism, joy in the other’s achievements, confidence in oneself, and the ability to give without undue thought of gain.”

Some of us are basically introverted and find reaching out to others difficult. But again, the more we practice this skill, the easier it becomes. Small efforts, a casual good morning to a co-worker, greeting a neighbor as you pass on the sidewalk, chatting with a stranger you are briefly in contact with, can provide the confidence to reach out further. If we can learn to open our hearts to others who may appear to be superficially different, we often learn how universal the human experience truly is, and with this realization, we may find many of our fears and hesitations melting away.

Every person is unique and possesses unique skills and gifts. Just the act of getting to know someone adds to our wealth of understanding. We find our teachers by seeking out those who know what we have yet to learn. And we become the best versions of ourselves when we learn to give freely to those who need our friendship, love, and acceptance.

*The following quotes reflect the importance of relationships to the human spirit.*

Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything. *Muhammad Ali*

Strange combination, isn't it – gratitude and resentment? But this is the way I think. Actually, I think everybody thinks that way. Even the children of the humans who died long ago, I think they lived their lives holding similar contradictory thoughts about their parents. *Otsuichi, Zoo*

There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature. *Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey*

Are not friends and sworn brothers as important as blood-brothers? A true friend will know your heart and hear the roar of running waters and the distant wind over the mountains in the song of your zither, without any need for you to speak aloud. *Aliette de Bodard, On a Red Station, Drifting*

So long as we love we serve; so long as we are loved by others, I would almost say that we are indispensable; and no man is useless while he has a friend. *Robert Louis Stevenson*

A mentor is someone who allows you to see the hope inside yourself. *Oprah Winfrey*

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.

“Pooh!” he whispered.

“Yes, Piglet?”

“Nothing,” said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. “I just wanted to be sure of you.”

*A. A. Milne, The House at Pooh Corner*

## **Questions to Ponder**

*Also, note the Words of the Day section below. This is an activity that will be used at the Gathering.*

1. Parents might be sociable or introverted, supportive, negative, or indifferent. How have your earliest relationships influenced how you approached relationships in later life?
2. Who were your earliest friends? In what ways did friendships affect your childhood experience?
3. Tell your life story in terms of the relationships that have influenced who you have become.
4. What relationships do you consider to be the most significant in your life? What makes these relationships meaningful to you?
5. Think of relationships you have had with people of different backgrounds, belief systems, or cultures. How have these relationships influenced your path?
6. Looking forward, what would you like to gain from existing relationships? What do you think you might gain from expanding your social circle?

## **Words of the Day**

Before coming to the Gathering, reflect on how you have grown through relationships in your life. Think of a few words or phrases that describe relationships in your life. At the Gathering, members will complete this sentence: “In my life, relationships have been ...”