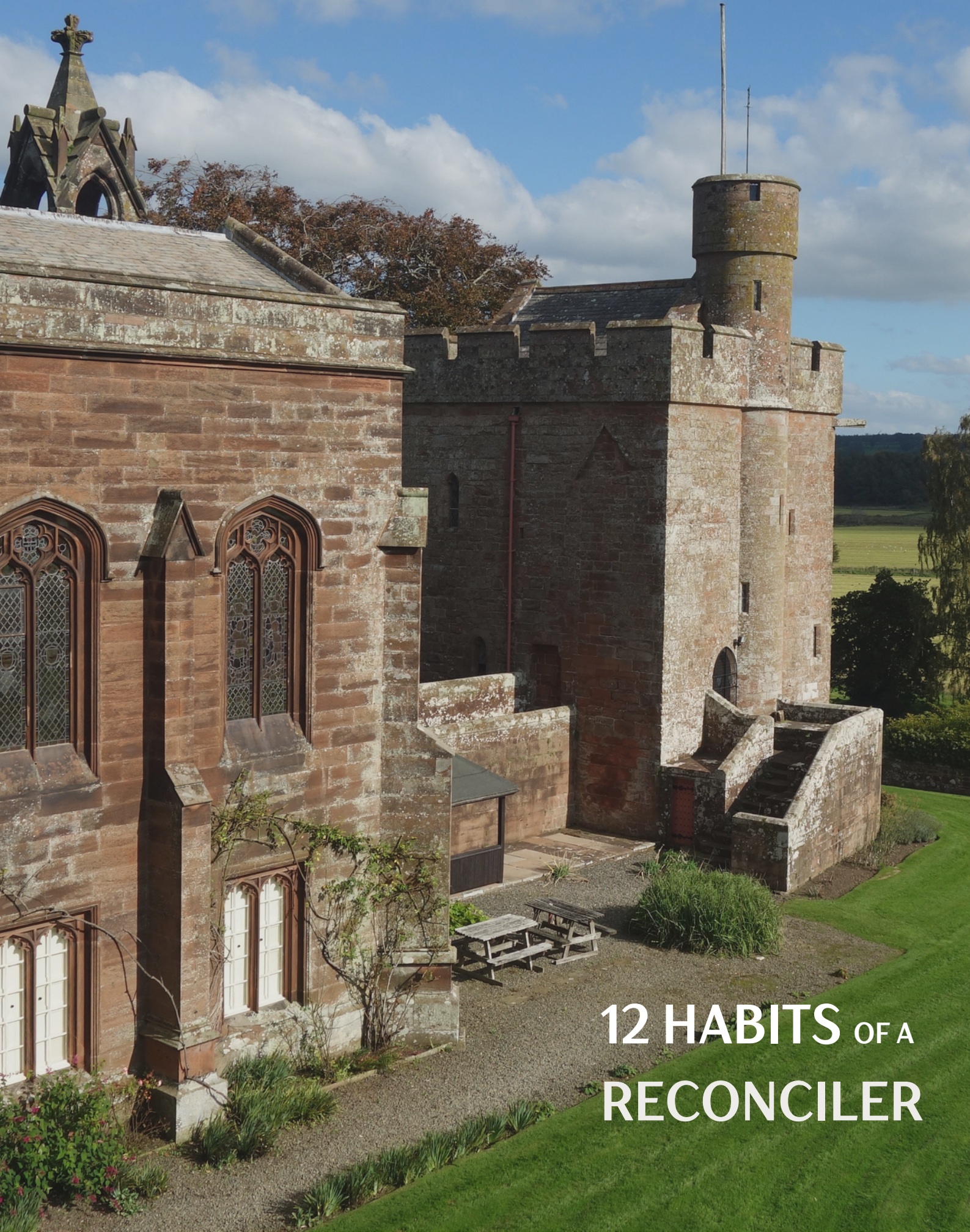




ROSE CASTLE
FOUNDATION



12 HABITS OF A
RECONCILER

Tools to help us navigate through change, chaos, and conflict

In an increasingly fractured world with growing levels of polarisation, misunderstanding and conflict, our human instincts lead us to retreat into silos.

At Rose Castle Foundation, we believe we need to re-engage, re-humanise and restore relationships. This is a **journey towards reconciliation** where faith and difference build trust and help build peace. This calling to re-engage and restore relationships is rarely nurtured and bringing it to life lies at the heart of our innovative approach to conflict – the Rose Way.

At the heart of the Rose Way, the **12 Habits of a Reconciler** are characteristics we have consistently observed in people acting in situations of conflict through over 30 years of experience ranging from divided church communities to wars and violent combat.

The Habits are lived practices which we can all apply. This guide opens a door onto each of the Habits in turn through an introductory reflection, followed by some practical steps to cultivate them in our daily lives.

Identity is not made by defining ourselves against others in hatred and by seeking domination: the habits of reconciliation and peacebuilding liberate our identities, preserve our autonomy, increase our safety, and show us the common good.

The Most Rev Justin Welby
Archbishop of Canterbury
(The Power of Reconciliation, 2022)

We are delighted to share this guide to introduce you to the **12 Habits of a Reconciler**. Let us know how you get on with rooting these habits within your own tradition and applying them to your context - your experiences will enrich for all of us the journey towards reconciliation.

Canon Sarah Snyder
Founding Director, Rose Castle Foundation

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Hospitality

Our first habit opens the door to risky Hospitality. As you turn the handle and catch a glance of this first guest at your door, what feelings come to mind? What does hospitality mean to you?

The root of a word reveals a lot about its meaning. The Latin root of hospitality is 'hospes', which means stranger or outsider. Given a foreigner had no where to stay, the word 'hospes' also means guest. And the related word 'hospitium' describes the relationship between host and guest – a sacred one that cannot be violated. Hospitality not only provided a much-needed bed, safety and sustenance for travellers, it also turned a stranger in to a guest.

The words hostility and hostage share the same root – the act of hospitality turns a potential foe in to a potential friend. Humanity is shown in the way strangers are treated before they are even known. The welcome offered to strangers is what distinguishes civilised people from barbarians. Hosts take a risk in welcoming. Guests respect the generosity offered to them, and behave accordingly.

What becomes clear through a deep dive into hospitality's evolution, is that the practice of hospitality is primarily concerned with 'stranger' and 'guest', rather than with host. Yet in Western culture, the spotlight is often thrown on how we host – our food, our company, our efforts to impress. Have you ever stopped to think about what it would take to be somebody else's risky guest, instead of hosting others in our own comfortable space? As communities of faith and practice, we are often rightly concerned with who and how we host those in need, but how can we turn those tables on their head and walk towards those who are different, sit with them in their spaces, be their guest?

The Bible and Qur'an share a powerful story of a nomadic couple, Abraham and Sarah, welcoming three strangers in the desert. Abraham ran to greet them and welcome them in. They offered the best of their food and shelter. And in the process discovered a life-changing gift. These "guests" were actually the host, bringing news of a long-awaited child despite Abraham and Sarah's old age.



“
The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door, feed
him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.
Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.
No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone puts onto pretend
they had a purpose
in the world.
I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.”

Naomi Shihab Nye
'Red Brocade'

In Jewish and Muslim understanding they were messengers or angels of God, and in Christian understanding God Himself. The New Testament recalls Jesus picking up on this theme, saying "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25:35-36). Throughout his ministry, Jesus had no home of his own. He assumed the role of guest in almost every encounter, submitting himself to the hospitality of others, sharing meals with the most unlikely of characters, taking risks to meet outsiders to his own community.

It is only in the modern era that hospitality has become more of a transactional service – enjoyed by the rich, provided by those who might not otherwise afford. This broke the 'sacred' ties between host and guest and has tarnished our understanding of mutual hospitality: seeing the face of God in every person, whether friend or foe. Hospitality is far from a transaction between two people. It is an expression of shared humanity. And given its power of inclusion and exclusion, it also holds the key to modern alienation, polarisation and injustice. It is worth reflecting on why some of the nations we might consider the most advanced are some of the most inhospitable societies on the planet.





Cultivating Hospitality

Hospitality is a way of life, not just an act of service. Think about tiny ways in which we can notice and welcome those different to ourselves. How can we walk towards others as their guest, sitting in their spaces instead of waiting for them to come to ours? Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of hospitality – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of being host and guest day to day.

Solitude

Solitude is central to being hospitable – the ability to be at home in one self. But this requires a movement from loneliness to solitude. Many of us naturally crave community with others, to alleviate our isolation, yet personal and spiritual wholeness first calls us to discover an at-ease with ourselves before God. From these quiet spaces we can welcome and walk towards others without needing them to fulfil our own desires for company and belonging.

Celebration

It's a mistake to think hospitality requires lavish entertainment. Yet, like Abraham and Sarah, the celebration of a guest by offering one's best, as if they were the most important person in the room, is a precious gift. Sensitivity to when it's appropriate to weep or to laugh, to sit quietly or to speak, is important. Where possible, set aside work and mundane tasks to celebrate the presence of a guest.

Rest

Busyness is almost a synonym for feeling important. "How are you doing?" "I'm busy." In some cases that is true but deliberately seeking out spaces of rest (keeping a Sabbath, afternoon walk etc.) opens new possibilities for being present to another person.

Being guest

For many of us, receiving from others is far harder than giving. Try to rectify this balance and allow yourself to receive. Take the risk of entering or sitting in someone else's space, stepping outside of our comfortable norm. It is often our own fear of rejection that stops us going to others, but the only realistic alternative is to turn our backs. Try speaking to the neighbour you pass most days in the street, or, visiting the place of worship of a community you have never encountered – not to agree with them, but to communicate, welcome, extend a hand of friendship.



Questions for Reflection

- How do you host spaces that enable others to flourish?
- In contexts of hospitality, do you feel more comfortable being host or guest?
Why?
- What would it look like for you to walk towards those who are unfamiliar to you?
- What holds you back from doing so?
- What refreshes your capacity to love, to help you give out to others from a place of fullness rather than trying to give from a state of emptiness?
- Whose door might you knock on today?





Curiosity

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Never lose holy curiosity.

Albert Einstein

We ask, not because we doubt, but because we believe.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Nobel prize winning physicist, Isidore Rabi, attributed his scientific achievements to his mother. "Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to say, 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?'"

Jesus often taught through questions. His first words, recorded in John's Gospel (John 1:38), are "What are you looking for?" Socrates, the great Greek philosopher and mentor of Plato, was also known for his questions. Still today persistent questioning in search of knowledge is known as the Socratic method. Yet, for this habit, among other things, he was put on trial and sentenced to death by the Athenians, accused of 'corrupting the young'.

Curiosity is not universally celebrated by all, even today. Some prefer the concept of wonder – wondering about what we do not know, rather than seeking all the answers. The wise and greatly missed Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that "Faith is not opposed to questions, but it is opposed to the shallow certainty that what we understand is all there is.... Far from faith excluding questions, questions testify to faith – that history is not random, that the universe is not impervious to our understanding, that what happens to us is not blind chance. We ask, not because we doubt, but because we believe."

Some of the most vital questions are those that prompt us to act, especially in the face of injustice and wrongdoing. Sacks continues: "Judaism is God's question-mark against the random cruelties of the world. It is His call to us to 'mend the world' until it becomes a place worthy of the Divine presence, to accept no illness that can be cured, no poverty that can be alleviated, no injustice that can be rectified. To ask the prophetic question is not to seek an answer but to be energized to action."



Curiosity makes space for the unknown. It walks towards the people and things of this world that we do not understand, rather than dominating spaces by shouting about the things that we do. The word curious is formed from the Latin *cura*, meaning 'to take care of'. Curiosity propels us to be interested in the unknown, including people we do not understand, hopeful that by seeing and hearing them, we not only learn how to care for them, but are challenged to reflect on the way we live out our own life.

Our curiosity reminds us that we always have more to learn. It recognises that the human experience is multi-faceted and we cannot understand the world without listening to those who are different – outside our own comfortable social bubbles.

Turning our back on these others stifles our curiosity about the unknown and contributes to an 'us' and 'them' mentality that we may not even be aware of. This has its advantages of course - boundaries are vital for our ability to interpret and engage with the world around us. But when boundaries become walls, we close in on ourselves and stop seeing those on the other side, preferring our own echo chamber to genuine encounter with others. Modern technology can perpetuate these bubbles – we self-select our information feeds from those who think or act like us. Our choice of news channel, or those we 'like' and 'follow', reinforce what we already think or do. Before we know it, our world is comfortably but artificially familiar. Our curiosity about who and what is different to ourselves is replaced by a growing fear of the unknown.

One of the world's leading experts on transforming conflict, Professor John Paul Lederach, highlights the implications of our inter-dependant world. He calls on us not to give in to an 'us' and 'them' mentality but to trust in a capacity to move beyond our fear and insecurities and seek constructive collaboration instead. The theme of his book, *Moral Imagination*, encourages us to be curious about what lies beyond or beneath what is currently visible. To suspend our quick assumptions and judgements and pause to listen and learn from those around us, remembering that listening does not imply our agreement. Quite the opposite in fact – it can deepen our appreciation for what we hold true and dear.

This kind of curiosity hungers for authentic relationship. The end game is not to accumulate knowledge about the world and other people for our own gain and satisfaction. Nor is it to quell our doubts to restore a sense of self control. Curiosity embraces the unknown by recognising the God of all things, known and unknown. It seeks light in the darkness, pursuit of truth rather than reinforcement of our own opinions. In the context of reconciliation, curiosity energises us to seek justice, to hope for a better future, to heal what is broken. Curiosity invites us to listen deeply and vulnerably, and be open to surprise and even change, for God's sake, not our own. Such curiosity is surely a faithful endeavour?





Cultivating Curiosity

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of curiosity – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising curiosity day by day.

Listen deeply

When listening to others, we are often preparing what we'll say next, rather than genuinely listening. In conversation, try listening fully, and either silently acknowledging, or reflecting back what has been said, before inserting our own response. The same can apply to our conversations with God in prayer.

Prepare to be surprised

It can be more comfortable to live in a world that is familiar and controllable. Practise small ways to be open to surprise by others and perhaps even by yourself. Start each day by asking yourself, 'I wonder what will surprise me most today?' Regularly celebrate someone who surprised you.

Ask questions

Whether you are someone who speaks a lot or prefers to listen, try asking a question instead of making a statement. Questions that invite another to elaborate their view help us to understand them better and can be a gift to those who rarely feel heard.



Questions for Reflection

- To whom might you listen deeply in order to bring a fresh perspective?
- Which beliefs, habits and customs do you take for granted?
- Where are the limits of your beliefs and knowledge?
- How does it make you feel to accept these limits?
- Are there any beliefs or practices which you could never give up?
- What are the sources of our understanding?
- Which practices does your tradition - or others' - encourage to deepen curiosity?
- How can we actively open ourselves up to experiencing fresh surprises?



Generosity

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.

Winston Churchill

Real generosity towards the future lies in giving all to the present.

Albert Camus

We love to think of generosity as abundance – whether of life, friendship/relationship, or our own wellbeing. Sharing a smile with a loved one or a stranger, pausing to give time for those we take for granted, or thanking someone, costs nothing in financial terms, yet brings life and joy to others, and to ourselves. Whether we are the giver or the receiver, our response is often similar – a lightening of our mood and enlarging of our perspective. Building trust begins with tiny acts of generosity, including, and especially, in those “poor me” moments where we feel the world is treating us unfairly. Think of a mother whose cake has only 4 slices remaining, yet there are 5 people in the room. She promptly announces she doesn't feel like cake today! No fuss, just simple generosity.

Generosity is the habit of giving freely without expecting anything in return – an attitude as well as an action, including our time, gifts and skills, or resources. It seeks the wellbeing of the other. Whilst inadvertently also contributing to our own sense of wellbeing, the spirit of generosity does not seek personal gain. There is clear overlap with the practice of hospitality, as seen especially in Middle Eastern traditions – generously giving to strangers with no expectation of return, whilst also being willing to receive the gifts of others – sometimes far harder than the act of giving.

The English word derives from the Latin *generosus*, meaning ‘of noble birth’, from the root ‘genus’ meaning race or kin, and giving birth – life-giving in the deepest sense of the word. For people of faith, generosity is deeply linked to our experience of an abundant God, who generously gives. Generosity is seen as a divine gift, gratefully received and in turn shared with others. Mother Teresa reminded us to “be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile.”

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes the predominantly agricultural society of the Biblical Israelites, whose social laws laid down in the Torah were and are intended to alleviate poverty and suffering. They lay down right relationships (another way of describing reconciliation) between God and His world, as well as in our relationships one to another.

Hence, the fallen part of each harvest was left in the fields for others to gather, and the seventh and fiftieth years called for release of debts, freedom of slaves and return of ancestral property to original owners. There was the annual practice of bringing first fruits of harvest to Jerusalem, and the pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, reminding the people that the land belongs to God, and we are merely His tenants and guests. "Without such regular reminders", Sacks writes, "societies slowly but inexorably become materialistic and self-satisfied. Rulers and elites forget that their role is to serve the people, and instead they expect the people to serve them. That is how nations at the height of their success begin their decline, unwittingly laying the ground for their defeat."

Christians and Muslims share this understanding of God as the author of generosity. One of the Islamic names of God is Al Kareem, the Most Generous, and many Muslims understand their worldly possessions as a gift from God. In his hadiths recording the life and sayings of Prophet Muhammed, Al-Bukhari reports "He was the most generous of people and he used to be most generous in Ramadan."

One of the five pillars of Islam is the giving of charity, zakaat, from one's material resources (including money), but there is also another Islamic concept, sadaqa, concerning pleasing God with the heart. This is played out in voluntary acts of generosity to others, like helping an older person, or clearing rubbish and other obstructions from the street. It also conveys the meaning of giving up or away what we ourselves value, rather than giving from what we would otherwise discard. In this way Islam promotes a spirit of reconciliation, seeking healing/repair of what is broken in our relationships with God, with the world, with others and within ourselves.



On Christmas day, Christians share in an act of remembrance for God's ultimate act of generosity – His choosing to enter humanity as a vulnerable baby. One of Jesus' closest companions, author of the Gospel of John, was later to write: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Jesus, understood as God Incarnate, modelled something of the character of God. It is through his subsequent death and resurrection that Christians understand and embrace the divine gift of eternal life - God reconciling humanity to Himself. In this way Christians can act as reconciled reconcilers, called to reconcile others and ourselves because of first being reconciled to God.

For most people, religious or non-religious, generosity is a widely recognised and desirable character trait. Aristotle includes it within his virtues of character, calling for a balance of giving between wastefulness and wantonness – giving to the right people, at the right time, with the right attitude – not for flattery, but out of true pleasure. It has at times been distorted within institutionalised religion, being forced as a required act of charity, rather than given freely out of a desire for others' flourishing. Our generosity is not only for the benefit of those we encounter today. There is an element of our giving for future generations too – recognising that our own excesses, in the ways we live, can limit the wellbeing of others coming after us. The fast and technologically driven pace of today, with an emphasis on rights without responsibilities, can overshadow the virtue of generosity. It places greater emphasis on our own needs than those of others.

Yet for some of us, it is harder to show generosity to ourselves than to others. God longs for us to acknowledge and receive His gifts, including the abundance of the natural world around us. Even when it is hard to see any gift in the life we are experiencing, there is always something we can be grateful for. If we find ways to open ourselves, and lift our sights, beyond current challenges, we will indeed receive unexpected gifts, however momentary they may be. Reconcilers have an ability to see these gifts in others as well as ourselves, and to act in response – seeking the flourishing of all.



Cultivating Generosity

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of generosity – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising generosity day by day.

Open your eyes and ears

Be present to the circumstances of others, both those you know, and the strangers you encounter. Many of us live side by side with people we rarely notice. Identify small ways in which you can bless them unexpectedly. Notice others' response, and how it makes you feel.

Actively receive

Daily reflect on the ways that the generosity of others has or is blessing you and be intentional in how you receive them – gifts from God, from the beauty of creation, from other people, from circumstances. Think also of how you can show generosity to yourself, acknowledging your worthiness to receive as well as to give. Again, notice how it makes you feel.

Give beyond today

Identify three ways in which your thoughts and actions today can benefit future generations, for example the way in which you steward and share your limited resources, the food you eat, the waste you generate, your means of travel, or the example you give to young children in your care.



Questions for Reflection

- When have you received unexpected generosity from someone else?
- In which ways do you most usually express generosity to others, for example with your time, or skills/gifts, or resources?
- What does it feel like to be generous? And to receive generosity?
- When did you last show generosity to yourself?
- In which ways might your generosity today impact future generations?



Empathy

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Romans 12:15

Do you sometimes feel misunderstood? Wonder whether anyone knows what it's actually like to be you? Even when you try to share your thoughts or emotions, do you find others miss the point, or try to "solve" the problem instead of standing with you in that moment? And how about you? Are you able to share compassionately in others' hurt, humiliation, frustration or struggle, as well as their joy?

Empathy plays a crucial role in the journey towards reconciliation. It enables us to behave in ways that seek the wellbeing of another, not just ourselves. It acknowledges how much it means to be seen, heard and understood, and therefore extends that to others. Empathy stops us viewing the world only from our own perspective, remembering that others have a story too, that it is not just my version of events that matters. This gives us a capacity to hear and experience their story rather than turning our back. It opens a crack in the walls we've built against those we misunderstand or fear, allowing us to catch a glimpse of what the other person is experiencing. Empathy demonstrates a desire to build a bridge across the chasm that may stand between us. It helps us to recognise their suffering and experience too, even when we are certain they are in the wrong.

We once had the privilege of hearing a mother speak about the loss of her son, killed by a sniper. The sniper was subsequently caught and imprisoned, and his own mother deeply mourned his loss. After years of anguish and distress, both mothers were able to meet, across stark enemy lines. Whilst neither could retrieve their son (for different reasons), they were able to empathise with one another's trauma, to discover a compassion and to console one another in that moment. What might the opposite have looked like? Retaliation? Blame? Inflicting pain on one another to alleviate or express their own unresolved pain? This is perhaps the more common story. Rather than stepping into the shoes of our enemy, we cannot see beyond our own suffering, and are more inclined to lash out and inflict our pain on them instead.

It is common to see this played out inter-generationally, even and especially within families – grandparents, to parents, to children: "These are the people we speak to....and these we don't." The burdens of one generation are enacted again in the generation to follow.

Cultivating the habit of empathy helps to break these chains, ending long destructive cycles of behaviour. Whilst we all know occasions when it is not appropriate to let down the walls between ourselves and others, including for our (or their) personal safety, there are many more examples of metaphorical walls we construct against others simply because we do not know, like or agree with them. Children are taught to be suspicious of strangers, to assume they cannot be trusted. The corollary of this natural desire to protect our children is the curtailment of healthy curiosity or welcome, even when that is the more appropriate response.

In the Biblical book of Exodus, God commands his people: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger: You were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9) He reminds them that they were once themselves strangers in another land, and therefore know what it's like to be the outsider. He calls on them to remember their experience, and apply it to their own treatment of those on the margins of society. To welcome the stranger, and the homeless, and the hungry, and all who are vulnerable. This same principle runs clearly through most of our religious traditions – treat others as you yourself would like to be treated (the golden rule, or ethic of reciprocity).

In general, however, we find it easier to empathise with those we know (and love), than with those who are strangers. The closer our own social circle, the greater our suspicion of outsiders to it. This dates back to earliest times, when our social groups were also our security and livelihood. Most of us form, and still live in, cohesive 'tribes' with whom we feel relatively safe. This may involve physical proximity, in our homes and communities, or virtual proximity, through our social media and other networks. It might be all well and good, except that we live in a world full of strangers and those who are different to ourselves. We encounter them every day, and our responses to them dictate our experience of the world around us. We cannot imagine what it is like to be them if we rarely spend time in their presence.



Empathy requires deep listening, especially to those we do not really want to hear. Such listening is not defensive, or suspicious, or critical. It is an open and sympathetic listening, in which we genuinely desire to understand the other's perspective and experience their story. At Rose Castle Foundation, we describe it as stepping in to the shoes of another for a little while, not to become them, but rather to glimpse the world through their eyes. We then step back in to our own comfortable shoes, albeit at times with an enlarged understanding and perspective. When others offer us this gift of time and attention, we are extraordinarily blessed – we feel seen and heard. Empathy then, is not only an end in itself (necessary though that is). It may contribute to the healing of others, and of the relationship between us.

In *The Iliad*, Homer narrates the story of Achilles meeting elderly King Priam, whose sons he had slaughtered. He was moved to compassion for this elderly father who reminded him of his own, saying: "Come, sit here, and we will shut away our sorrows, despite our grief, since there is but cold comfort in lament. The gods have spun the thread of fate for wretched mortals: we live in sorrow, while they are free from care." This reflects a separation between the gods and humanity, such that no god could fully understand the suffering of human beings. It is vastly different to a Christian understanding of God, in which He becomes fully human, in the person of Jesus. Christians understand God demonstrating his own empathy by stepping so totally in to the shoes of His creation that he became present with us. This opens the way for a two way empathy, allowing humanity, also, to glimpse something of God, expressed in human form. Muslims understand God revealing Himself quite differently, through the words of the Arabic Qur'an – in which they and others have access to the very words (and mind) of God. In these and other ways, believers variously and differently understand God's act of empathy by participating in our human story so that we might know Him better.

Many of us do not find empathy comes naturally. Practising it day by day can be costly, requiring us to put aside our own responses, pride and prejudices for the sake of another – to spend precious time with them, letting them know we see and hear them, that they matter deeply to us. All of us understand the power of being understood – of knowing that somebody else stands with us, fully present in that moment. This is a gift we can give, and receive, every single day. When we do, there is healing, in ourselves as well as others, and the world becomes a brighter place.



Cultivating Empathy

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of empathy – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising empathy day by day.

Be fully present

Share your time with others (the gift of presence); your ears (genuine listening to their story, including listening to what is unsaid as well as spoken); your words (perhaps acknowledging "I'm so sorry you feel this way" instead of trying to solve a problem); your eyes (noticing their expressions of feeling, their body language, and other ways in which they communicate without words); your experience (have I ever been there before?); and your instincts (what might they be trying to communicate?).

Step into the shoes of another

Use your imagination to try and step in to another's shoes, not only by responding as we would ourselves, but thinking about how differently they might be seeing the situation. Practise this regularly, for example when observing others on a bus, or watching/reading about characters in a film or book. Make the most of opportunities to ask questions that help you understand other people's perspectives better. "What makes you think or feel that?" "How are you really?"

Show your support

True empathy shows itself in action (including silence) – to encourage, affirm, console, comfort, share in carrying another's burden. Henri Nouwen wrote, "To console does not mean to take away the pain but rather to be there and say, 'You are not alone, I am with you. Together we can carry the burden.'"



Questions for Reflection

- Think of a time when someone you know fully empathised with you. How did you know they understood you? What did that feel like?
- Do you find it hard to empathise? What are some of the obstacles?
- How can you offer someone else the gift of 'being with them' – perhaps a phone call or card?
- Is there someone you know who would benefit from your empathetic listening? How can you make time for them this week, without trying to 'solve' or ignore the challenges they face?
- Are there others you do not know but could make a greater effort to show your solidarity with? In what ways might that be possible or appropriate this season?
- Is there someone to whom you'd like to show greater empathy? How can you start practising that in small ways this week?



Vulnerability

Imagine beyond what is seen. Risk vulnerability one step at a time.

John Paul Lederach

To love at all is to be vulnerable.

C. S. Lewis

"Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy – the experiences that make us the most vulnerable." This is the wisdom of Dr Brene Brown, who has spent years studying vulnerable human behaviour. Her TED talk on the subject (2010) is one of the highest viewed. Her research shows that people most likely to risk vulnerability in broken relationships are those with an inner conviction that they are worthy of love and connection (she calls them "whole-hearted"). They recognise and accept parts of their weaker selves as fully part of who they are, still worthy of love and acceptance. She defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure," or more simply, having the courage to be seen, to love and engage with our whole hearts, even though there are no guarantees.

C.S. Lewis reminds us that "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

It is an innately human condition to suffer and to be susceptible to suffering. Vulnerability experienced individually or communally can open us to attack or assault, whether physically, emotionally or by some other coercive means. Vulnerability implies a state of exposure. Thought of another way, however, it can also mean taking the risk to let go or let down some of the walls of protection we build to keep others out. Such vulnerability is innately social or relational – a reaching across divides within ourselves (the many facets of self), or between us and others.



'Monk by the Sea', Caspar David Friedrich

Courageous vulnerability asks us to take the risk of reaching across that wall or divide, for the sake of potential healing. It is a turning point in the transformation of conflict and the journey towards reconciliation. It opens a small window in the wall of separation, allowing a glimpse of the other person – the suffering person rather than the conquering one. This glimpsing is in both directions – them of us, and us of them. Yet we must be willing to take the initiative, inviting the other to connect, without any certainty of their response. If they are willing to do the same, a journey towards healing can begin. If not, we risk rejection and hurt yet again.

We were made to love and be loved. This is why the pain of loneliness is often too much to bear. We naturally desire companionship, affection, fellowship. All of this requires opening our souls to others, thus making us susceptible to relational pain. We do so because deep within we know we were built for more than solitary existence (Genesis 2:18)

Vulnerability asks for some degree of mutuality (though does not always receive it). It is not a one-sided, endless sharing of our own weaknesses and failures in the hope of receiving kindness and attention in return. Such people often reinforce their own failure or victim identity, rather than desiring mutually deeper and more meaningful relationship. They are not as interested in listening to the other, as they are in telling their own story. In doing so, they inadvertently maintain a relationship in which they are always the victim, reinforcing distance, rather than seeking a way through the brokenness they experience.

Dr Brown reminds us that vulnerability is not a marker of weakness, but a potential for strengthening our relationships – with God, with others and within ourselves.

"Admitting our vulnerability, learning to live with uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure is letting God in. It is also key to a meaningful life. Why? Because that's how we connect to others and connecting to others is what makes life worth living." 20th Century philosopher Martin Buber described the difference between an I-Thou relationship (with other beings) and an I-It relationship (with objects). The relationships in which vulnerability is essential are the I-Thou relationships – seeing the other as B'Tzelem Elohim, created in the image of God, just as we were.

Vulnerability includes the capacity to acknowledge and share part of our woundedness, and to receive or accept others' wounds. It reflects the spiritual concept of our own smallness or brokenness from which we reach out to God for relationship. The psalmist captures this spiritual, emotional and physical vulnerability: "I have become like a broken vessel" (Psalms 31:12). He declares "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18). He "heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalms 147:3).

God is interested most, says Isaiah, in those who are broken vessels: "... this is the one to whom I will look: He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." Isaiah describes God's task in the world as "reviving the spirit of the weak and visiting the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15). Prophet Mohammed modelled this in his leadership style. Rather than furthering his own position, he is recorded as saying, 'Allah isn't pleased with the slave who distinguishes between himself and his companions, and considers himself better than others.' Rather he followed God's command to seek advice from those around him (Qur'an 3:159).

Whilst retaining a full appreciation of God's ultimate healing power, Christians also understand God straddling the void between healing and healer, victim and offender, suffering and oppressor. This is most evident in Jesus' suffering on the cross – God at his most vulnerable, whilst all the while remaining God in power. Jesus' vulnerability – his willingness to suffer and die – lies at the heart of Christian understanding of the link between vulnerability and reconciliation. Without this episode on the cross, Christians believe, the gap between God and humanity could not be crossed - there would be no reconciliation between God and humanity.



Jesus' "most loved disciple" gives us an intimate glimpse of Jesus' vulnerability the night before his death when he writes the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." (John 11:35). In this moment, Jesus shows His extreme vulnerability to his closest followers. This is the same Jesus who spoke publicly with authority, and performed miracles. He modelled a style of leadership, and of being, in which sharing our deepest emotions is possible. Jesus' expression of vulnerability is recognised by Christians as the ultimate act of resilience – life over death.

Few of us see vulnerability being modelled as we grow up, however. Instead, often in the face of actual or perceived criticism, we learn to hide our deeper, emotional selves – to build walls of protection from all but a few trusted family or friends. Through careful maintenance of these walls, we try to control the relationships around us. Vulnerability risks breaking that control – a risk few of us are willing to take.

An underlying fear of vulnerability is shame. We are wired to hear negative feedback about ourselves, before positive. If a boss appraises our work, giving a long list of commendable items and just one problem area, we remember only the last. Many of us harbour feelings of unworthiness. We think there is something about ourselves that, if others found out, would prompt them to exclude or judge us. We live in fear of being 'discovered'. So we try to hide our vulnerability by numbing it with food or drink; distracting ourselves through work or sport or socialising; or keeping others at an emotional distance. The problem is that we cannot selectively numb or bury our emotions. If we numb our vulnerability, we also numb our capacity for joy, for gratitude and for genuine love. Others deal with vulnerability by trying to make everything certain, by trying to order our daily lives and relationships, including ideologies with clear rules and regulations. That gets problematic when it is not our own perfection we pursue, but the expectations of others. Parents may try to produce perfect children – through the best schooling, or university, or marriage. Dr. Brown reminds parents to model and teach their children that struggle and failure are part of life and that we remain worthy in the midst of it all.

As we leave childhood, we grow increasingly good at covering up aspects of ourselves we prefer to keep hidden. We lose touch with our deeper selves. We try to become somebody others want us to be, or society says we should be. We are not who we think we are, but who we think other people think we are. Cultivating the practice of vulnerability helps us be more honest with ourselves and with others. Acknowledging that we are fallible, we make mistakes, and being able to apologise to those we hurt. "I have sinned....", King Saul finally says to Samuel after he has covered up the reality of his disobedience for so long. "I was wrong...." (1 Samuel 15:24). This kind of honest vulnerability draws us closer to others and to God.



Cultivating Vulnerability

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of vulnerability – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising vulnerability day by day.

Be self-aware with your emotions

It is not a strength to suppress our feelings, whether positive or negative. Instead of bottling up your emotions, try asking questions to probe the what, why and how you are feeling. For some this might mean talking to a friend, for others writing, or meditating, or having a bold conversation within ourselves.

Walk towards uncertainty

Fear of failure or criticism paralyse many of us from stepping outside our comfort zones, holding us back from trying something new. In her TED talk, Brene Brown encourages us to be open to new experiences, to 'show up anyway' and resist negative thoughts that hold us back. The more we do so, the more our resilience can grow.

Seek excellence, not perfection

Brown describes perfectionism as "the belief that if we live perfectly, look perfectly and act perfectly, we can avoid the pain of blame, judgment and shame." Perfectionism isn't about growth, improvement, or personal achievement; it's about fear and avoidance. Therefore, it is better to focus on seeking excellence, the best version of ourselves despite our flaws.

Stop comparing yourself to others and look to God

Many believers understand God as the source of our strength and identity, and yet still compare themselves with others, favourably or unfavourably. Comparison is the enemy of vulnerability when it sets us up in unhealthy competition with those around us. Instead, we can be honest about our own weaknesses, whilst turning to God as the One from whom we seek approval.



Questions for Reflection

- Sometimes, a vulnerable space can feel awkward and exposing. What is your strategy for dealing with those moments?
- Is there anything you might change to help you hold and facilitate vulnerable spaces? (e.g. instead of making a joke to lighten the mood, try respecting the moment with a silent pause).
- Think of a time when somebody else shared vulnerably with you, particularly in a moment of disagreement. How did it make you feel?
- What fears hold you back from sharing your own vulnerabilities with others? It may be a fear of rejection or failure or criticism... How might you recognise those fears in order to move beyond them?
- How can you cultivate vulnerability in a way that genuinely desires mutually deeper and more meaningful relationships?





Humility

“One should wish to celebrate, more than one wishes to be celebrated.”

Lucille Clifton

Humility is often understood as a foundational virtue, imperative to living a life of right relationships (another way of describing reconciliation) – with God, with one another, and within ourselves. It is, perhaps, the opposite of pride and greed.

Humility reminds us that we do not have all the answers – there is always more to understand. In this way it opens us to the gifts others can bring, even the most unexpected others. It encourages us to see and listen to those we encounter, not in order to control, or teach, or change their minds, but to receive from them – materially, socially, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally. This is the basis for strong and mutual relating. It reinforces the notion, understood across many of our religious traditions, that every person reflects the image of their Creator God, even if it is very hard for us to recognise those qualities in them.

Well known theologian and author, C.S. Lewis, reminded us that humility is not thinking less of ourselves, it's thinking of ourselves less. In other words, humility is not about becoming a doormat for others to tread over – it is easy to imitate modesty and humility before others because, deep down, we actually seek their praise and affirmation. This uses a posture of humility to turn others' attention back on ourselves, seeking flattery and self-affirmation.

Humility embodies the opposite of the competitive spirit many of us learn growing up – assessing ourselves and our performance, favourably or unfavourably, against others. We are taught to measure success by our ability to outshine others in order to be seen and heard. Youngest children in a large family often experience this keenly.

Aristotle did not particularly recognise humility as a virtue, suggesting it sits alongside obedience and servitude, more appropriate for those born to be ruled, than to rule. It was the religious traditions that prioritised humility as praiseworthy for a leader. Harvard Business Review published a survey in 2014 showing that “the best leaders are humble leaders,” able to accept criticism, and confident enough to empower and affirm others – to make others feel they are the most important person in the room. The same principle applies to most of our relationships, whether at home, in the community, at work or in our places of formation.

The Latin origin of humility is *humilitas*, from the root *humus*, or earth. This might explain popular understanding of humility as meaning lowly, or beneath us, of little worth. Literally speaking, the Bible and Qur'an describe God creating the first human, Adam, from "the dust of the earth" (Genesis 2:7; Qur'an 3:59) and believers are reminded that we, God's people, are inferior "creatures" to the Creator. "I am dust and ashes," (Genesis 18:27) said the Patriarch Abraham to God, though in the same breath he challenged God on the justice of His plan to punish the city of Sodom.

Thomas Aquinas writes, "The virtue of humility consists in keeping oneself within one's own bounds, not reaching out to things above one, but submitting to one's superior." The concept of submission to God lies at the heart of the word Islam – to be a Muslim means to submit – to humble oneself before our Creator. How different to the signs of a strong leader so prevalent in pre-Islamic Arab culture, for whom status and authority were critical.

The late Rabbi Sacks points out that "Believing that there is a God in whose presence we stand, means that we are not the centre of our world." Another way of understanding this advice is to stop living our lives in comparison to others, but rather in submission to God. An upward orientation, rather than a sideways one. This, in turn, enables us to turn to our neighbour, or stranger, and celebrate goodness and giftedness in them, rather than see them as a threat. True humility is possible when we do not feel the need to compare ourselves with others.



Confident in our own identity, we can recognise and value others, and learn to co-operate rather than compete. This is imminently easier when we are certain of, and rooted in, the love of God for us. Hence, perhaps, why Nietzsche, well-known philosopher and religious critic, described humility as a weakness, not a virtue, calling it the revenge of the weak against the strong.

Jesus called on his followers to recognise the log in their own eye, before picking out the speck in another's (Matthew 7:5). In other words, to recognise that we too have shortcomings, "We all fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Such an ability, to acknowledge our own weaknesses, is foundational to the practice of reconciliation. When faced with disagreement and conflict, it is tempting to view our offender as all bad, and the victim, including ourselves, through rose-coloured spectacles. Whilst we must always stand with and stand up for the victims of injustice, it is worth remembering that many offenders are also somebody else's victim. This in no way condones their harmful action or attitude, but it can lift our sights above the immediate circumstances, recognising the longer term importance of restorative justice, for offenders as well as for victims.

Humility calls us to press the pause button in our emotional responses. To step back for a moment rather than rush in to defend or retaliate. It reminds us to put God, rather than ourselves, at the centre of our lives, and to look outwards rather than in. Our world becomes exponentially larger and life-giving when we do so.





Cultivating Humility

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of humility – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising humility day by day.

Pause in the heat of a moment

When you find yourself drawn in to a 'tit for tat' conversation or action, pull back and remind yourself that we do not need to live our lives in comparison or competition with others. Have confidence in yourself, knowing that God sees and knows you and loves you just as you are.

Recognise and admit your own weaknesses

Seek critical feedback when helpful and relevant, and assess its truthfulness. Sometimes criticism is misdirected, but sometimes we simply do not want to hear it. Where you recognise a weakness, consider delegating certain opportunities to others who might be better placed to act. It may be a gift for them to be given the space to flourish.

Actively try to learn something new from another person every day

Perhaps a different perspective, an unknown fact or new means of doing something. This can go hand in hand with the opportunity to acknowledge and affirm others' accomplishments, without seeking in return self-flattery or praise.



Questions for Reflection

- How would you describe the difference between humility and humiliation? When did you last experience humiliation? How did it make you feel?
- When were you last humbled by someone or something, and emerged stronger or grateful for the experience? Did you learn anything about yourself?
- Can you think of someone you respect who embodies humility? What does it look and feel like in practice?
- What are the obstacles to humility in your own life? What would those close to you say?
- What does it mean to humble oneself without becoming a doormat for others to tread on? How can genuine humility strengthen our relationships with God, with others and within oneself?



Lament

Lament is fierce conversation addressed to God. To lament is to name the ruptures of this world so truthfully that we move beyond the point where any explanation or action is adequate, to the space where the only way forward is the desperate anguished cry directly to God.

Bishop Jo Bailey Wells

Lament is the ability to pause when something is wrong, to express our deepest anguish. It is our cry of pain and injustice, and the first step of any process of reconciliation. When all is not well in our own life or in the world around us, lament acknowledges the hurt that we feel for ourselves and on behalf of others, no matter how different people may view the circumstances. When our lament is unheard, it is hard to move towards healing what is broken. We must make suitable space for such expression – our own and others'. Burying the hurt helps nobody, and invariably resurfaces in angry, defensive, and depressive ways.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks described the loss of his father: "I felt an existential black hole, an emptiness at the core of my being. It deadened my sensations, leaving me unable to sleep or focus, as if life was happening at a great distance and as if I were a spectator watching a film out of focus with the sound turned off. The mood eventually passed but while it lasted I made some of the worst mistakes of my life."

In the face of loss and grief, we lose control of our emotions – feeling angry when calm is needed, hitting out instead of speaking, and speaking when we should be silent. It can be like hearing our own and others' words as if through a long, dark tunnel.



In the Biblical book of Genesis, we read about the attempt of Joseph's brothers to get rid of him – throwing him in to a pit and letting their father, Jacob, believe he had been attacked by a wild animal. In response, Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned his son for many days. His sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. He said, "I will go down to the grave mourning for my son." (Genesis 37:34-35).

The Qur'an shares the Joseph narrative: "They [Joseph's brothers] came to their father in the early part of the night weeping. They said: 'O our father! We went racing with one another, and left Joseph by our belongings and a wolf devoured him; but you will never believe us even when we speak the truth.' And they brought his shirt stained with false blood." (Qur'an 12:16-18a) Jacob did not lose hope in the face of this tragic news, but his patience was sorely tested. A long time later, when his sons had gone to Egypt, he admitted, "Alas, my grief for Joseph!" And he lost his sight because of the sorrow that he was suppressing. (Qur'an 12:84).

Sacks comments on Jacob's refusal to be comforted – his refusal to give up hope for his lost son. As we read on in Genesis, we discover Jacob was indeed reunited with Joseph later in life, but this is not an experience we all share. Many of us know the devastating and everlasting impact of the loss of loved ones. The despair and hopelessness that comes with our outpouring of sadness.

At times like these, our lament is also our coming to terms with loss – being reconciled to the inevitable consequences of a broken world. It is our cry to mend what and who is broken, ourselves as well as others, even when there seems little we can do. This lies at the core of our faith. Naming the injustices we see and feel, holding pain before God in the belief that He stands with us in our suffering. Sometimes it is right that we act in response, and sometimes we need to wait, and to mourn.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted", says Jesus during his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:4). In the Christian tradition, God decisively stands in solidarity with human suffering through Jesus. After experiencing rejection and being falsely condemned for political crimes by the Roman state, Jesus hung, beaten and defeated, on a wooden cross. Whilst many of his onlookers jeered that he seemed unable to save himself, he expressed what many of us feel in our own suffering, crying out to God, "Why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:29-34).

When we see and experience injustice and intractable conflict in the world, it requires humility, empathy, and compassion to set aside our desire to 'solve the problem'. Cultivating lament as a habit recognises an overwhelming realisation that we may be powerless to heal the pain and restore what is lost. Lament is the guttural response of protest, protest against a world that is not as it ought to be, and a deep conviction that somehow, somewhere, it needs to be put right.

Lament recognises that neat and right outcomes are not always possible. Even in our own unfulfilled dreams and hopes, which are sometimes our greatest expression of regret. Lament calls us to reflect on and process the grief that arises out of our personal, emotional and spiritual reactions to pain, conflict and loss. Yet it is also more than that. It is the solidarity and ability to sit with those who weep, not as a 'fixer' but as a friend who 'weeps with those who weep' (Romans 12:15).



Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions meet us in our experience of grief and protest. Most of the Psalms express individual or collective lament towards and against God for the injustices in the world. They process confusion, express fear and deep emotion, call for punishment, protest against the status quo – Why, O Lord, why? Why do you stand so far away? (Psalm 10:1); Why do you reject me? (Psalm 88:14); How long O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? (Psalm 89:46). Likewise, Lamentations is an expression of humiliation, suffering and despair; and the book of Job tells the powerful story of one man's deep cry against the untold tragedies that befall him and his family.

Prophet Mohammed was known to weep in response to what he saw and heard. One of his companions, Ibn Al Qayem, said: "He shed tears until his eyes overflowed, and his chest sounded like a boiling kettle. His weeping was sometimes due to mercy for the deceased, or fear for his nation and out of pity upon it, and sometimes out of fear from Allah and while listening to the Qur'an. It is weeping out of longing, love and reverence, which is accompanied with fear and dread."

The Scriptures express solidarity with these human experiences of pain and suffering in the face of loss, injustice, and wrongdoing. They do not try to 'fix it' but recognise and articulate the deep anguish of longing for seemingly unattainable justice. They deal with the paradox and mystery of hopelessness alongside hopefulness.

Indeed, lament is not the end of the story. It sits alongside hope – that God is the God of justice and mercy. That there is a longer time frame in which God is at work, beyond our own ability to see and understand.

Is it possible that God weeps with us? So much of our suffering is part of the wider consequences of a broken world. Rather than seeking all the answers, perhaps our best response is to continue our heartfelt questioning – 'Why O Lord, Why?' To sit alongside one another in our grief and sadness, instead of trying to solve the problems that beset us. On our fridge, a magnet with a Rudyard Kipling quote says, "God could not be everywhere, and so He created mothers." In fact, we might argue, God is everywhere, in our places of sadness as well as our places of gladness, standing in powerful solidarity with all His creation, hearing our cries of desperation, and for healing all that is wrong with the world.



Cultivating Lament

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of lament – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising lament day by day.

Welcome lament

Being present to the things in our lives and in the world that are difficult and wrong is important. Instead of trying to suppress challenging emotions, or to jump to 'quick fix solutions', allow yourself to name when you're in a state of lament and to be present to that for a while.

Make time to feel deeply

In the coming weeks, reflect upon your responses to the news (local, national and global). Make time to 'rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep' – this might mean changing the time and place you read the news to allow yourself the right environment to really digest and feel what is happening in the world. Beyond the news, how else might you make time to feel deeply?

Stand in solidarity with others

The next time you are with someone experiencing deep grief, challenge yourself to stand in solidarity with their experience. Sometimes just sitting with them in silence is enough.



Questions for Reflection

- When was the last time you recognised your grief toward injustice in the world or in your personal life, and expressed it outwardly?
- What is your natural stance towards the lament of others? Do you attempt to 'dive-in' and solve the problem? Do you find lament awkward, preferring to distance yourself from the rawness of others' responses?
- In balancing the juxtapositions of hopefulness alongside hopelessness, which elements of lament do you find cathartic and which pull you in to a depressive cycle of self-pity? How could you better foster lament as a healthy response to all that is wrong with the world – one that brings healing in place of sickness?





Forgiveness

“He who seeks revenge should dig two graves.”

Unknown

This is probably the hardest habit in the series, but it lies at the heart of any journey towards reconciliation. In your remembering of the past, are there events or people who resurface again and again because you are unable to let go of their hold on your life? Do you sometimes think of yourself as innocent victim, or as guilty party, however trivial or grave the occasion that sparked it? Have you ever wondered about the fuzzy lines between victims and offenders? That an offender is somebody else's victim, or a victim can go on to offend another?

These are extremely challenging questions, but ones many of us can relate to. Most of us have suffered at the hands of another, and have also upset others, inadvertently or intentionally.

Letting go of painful memories does not mean forgetting what happened, or excusing who did it. It gives us an opportunity to name and acknowledge the wrong, before then choosing – perhaps again and again – to let go of its hold on our lives. Very often this requires expert help as we work through the ways in which past hurts define our way of being today, and the challenging consequences of change, however beneficial.

The opposite of letting go is revenge, tit for tat, or turning our back. Which sets in motion a spiral of hate and vengeful action. Martin Luther King wrote a famous letter from prison in which he recognises this dangerous cycle of retaliation: “Returning hate for hate, multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars....Hate scars the soul....hate is just as hurtful to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity.....it causes us to describe the beautiful as ugly, and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true.”

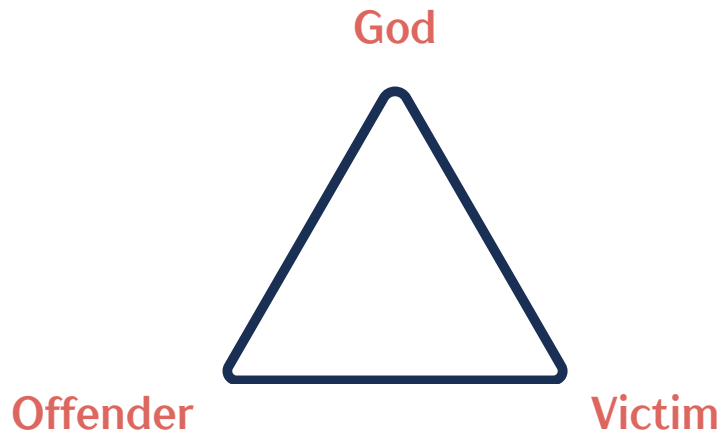
Dr Jonathan Oloyede, medical doctor and minister, relates to this. "When I was very young and growing up in Africa, I hurt my shin on a broken bottle. My mum was a nurse and she would use scalding hot water on any of her kids to sanitise our cuts and bruises before bandaging us up. I think she also used the hot water to secretly punish us for our frequent cuts. I decided to hide my wound rather than go through mum's 'Guantanamo' treatment. Needless to say, two weeks later I was limping from pain and secondary infection and had to be taken to hospital for treatment."

Unforgiveness is like an untreated wound, poisoning the rest of our being the longer we leave it. Pain and healing are strange but necessary partners in the journey towards forgiveness. Trying to hide or bury our pain, can thwart our healing. Bitterness and resentment fester in the heart, growing and taking root until they become a part of us. In this way, events and people can take us hostage, chaining us together until it seems impossible to separate. We become defined by our offenders (even the word 'victim' implies relationship to an 'offender'), however much we long to be free of them. The ability to let go and forgive can cut those chains, releasing us to a future in which we, not they, define us. Likewise, as offenders, the act of genuine (not forced) apology can do the same, even if our victim is not willing or able to forgive.

Such acts do not always lead to reconciliation, and there are times when it is more appropriate to go our separate ways. However, there are remarkable and inspirational stories of those who succeed in finding new relationship after seemingly impossible hurt.

The Return of the Prodigal Son
(Rembrandt van Rijn)





Many people of faith and belief recognise a triangle of letting go – not only between ourselves and our offenders (along the bottom axis), but also with God. They recognise that it is because God forgives us our own wrongdoing when we turn back to Him, they in turn find strength to forgive others. The Lord's prayer reflects this: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others" (Matthew 6:12). The Qur'an records: "Our Lord, forgive us our sins, wipe out our bad deeds, and grant that we join the righteous when we die." (Qur'an 3:193, Abdel Haleem translation).

There are times when the hardest person to forgive is in fact ourselves. In these moments, we can turn to the All-Forgiving One and seek His forgiveness, a reconciliation between ourselves and our Creator. Likewise, when we find it impossible to forgive others, we can hand our offenders to God in prayer, trusting in His greater ability to break the harmful chains that bind us to them, even when we are unable to do so ourselves.

In this way, forgiveness and apology do not need the permission of another. We can choose to forgive and let go even when our offender refuses to acknowledge their wrong. We can show remorse for our own wrongdoing, even if those we have hurt refuse to forgive. The choice is ours, not theirs. Prophet Mohamed consistently chose forgiveness over retaliation, recognising the futility of endless cycles of revenge. In the Qur'an we read God exhorting him to "hold to forgiveness; command what is right; but turn away from the ignorant. (Qur'an 7:199, Yusuf Ali translation)

In his letter to the earliest Christians in Ephesus, St Paul wrote: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:31-32).

Christians understand Jesus' death on the cross as the ultimate act of letting go – in which Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world, in order that God might forgive. Even in that moment of intense suffering, he found the means to ask God to forgive those who had put him there. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

Forgiving, and apologising, does not negate the wrong that was done. To the contrary, it recognises the hurt, and spotlights the need for change. Forgiveness does not mean turning a blind eye to justice. Rather, it offers a different kind of just response, one that seeks restoration rather than revenge. It may include punishment for wrongdoing, and restitution – making amends for the wrongs that were committed, where that is possible and appropriate. Forgiveness and apology do not always lead to reconciliation, though they each play a substantial role in that journey. The Qur'an reminds us that "whosoever forgives and makes amends, his reward is upon God" (Qur'an 42:40)

Rabbi Sacks advises, "Resentment is a heavy load to bear. Let go of it and you will travel more lightly. Now is the time to heal the wounds of the past. Then you will have more energy for the future."





Cultivating Forgiveness

How can we cultivate different ways of responding to the wrongdoing, hurt and injustice we observe in the world, in our communities and in our personal lives?

Reframe

When remembering past hurts, try to re-tell the story through others' eyes – not to minimise or change what happened, but to see it through different perspective. You might also re-tell it in which you are no longer the victim in the story, but the change maker – perhaps by extending the story in to the future, beyond where you normally stop. Where possible, ask somebody else to help you do this.

Apologise

No one wants to be wrong. Many of us are hard-wired to defend or cover up our mistakes, or to blame others. Practise, in small ways, the humility to recognise when we act inappropriately or wrongly, and apologise to others – even when they are unwilling to apologise in return. Likewise, if you are able, turn to God every day, honestly recognising and confessing your own shortcomings, before pointing out those of others. Open yourself to the reality of His total forgiveness, described in the Psalms: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions (wrongdoing) from us." (Psalm 103:12)

Pursue justice

Forgiveness at its fullest is deeply just and restorative in its outcomes. As reconcilers, we need entrepreneurship, creativity, and courage to pursue both justice and forgiveness. Sometimes, we might realise our own personal sense of injustice cannot find the resolve we are looking for. Yet, we can remain committed to transforming the contexts and conditions that create further injustice against others.



Questions for Reflection

- Are you carrying grudges against others you find hard to shake off? Given the opportunity, would you want to let them go, or are they part and parcel of who you are today?
- Sometimes we are longing for others to sympathise with our pain and suffering. While sympathy may bring temporary relief, forgiveness and/or letting go can bring lasting relief. Is there anything about the story you choose to tell others that is keeping you tied to an identity of victim?
- 'Forgiveness at its fullest is deeply just and restorative in its outcomes.' Do you primarily understand forgiveness to be a personal 'self-help' tool? How can your capacity to forgive motivate you to be an agent of healing and change for the sake of those who are experiencing ongoing injustice?
- Is there anyone you need to apologise to? What would it take for you to reach out to them? What is holding you back?
- How can the hope of forgiveness open up a new future for you today? Where do you long for liberation, for yourself and for others?





Gratitude

Our life is not our own to be defended but a gift to be shared. All we have has been given to us. Our part is to be grateful and to give thanks.

Henri Nouwen

Researchers studying the effects of gratitude on our wellbeing have found that grateful people are more likely to take regular exercise, have better physical and mental health, higher quality of sleep and increased immunity against disease. Gratitude reduces negative emotions like resentment, frustration, regret or a desire for revenge. It enhances self-respect, making us less likely to envy others for their achievements or success. Conveying an authentic "thank you" strengthens friendships and elicits better performance from employees. It is a major factor in building resilience in relationships. Remembering the many things we have to be thankful for helps us survive painful experiences, from losing a job to bereavement.

Henri Nouwen, a former Harvard professor who devoted his later life to working among people with developmental disabilities, reminds us that gratitude (from the Latin *gratia*, meaning favour) is the opposite of resentment or complaint. Resentment binds us to negative feelings and a prolonged sense of victimhood; gratitude allows us to let go of anger, recognise and receive hidden gifts in others, especially those different to ourselves, and make these gifts visible to the community as a source of celebration. This can be especially true for those people within our communities who do not realise the gifts they offer, either because their gifts are rarely acknowledged, or because they themselves are overlooked and marginalised. In our experience of travelling in war-torn and highly challenged parts of the world, it is those who rarely consider themselves as gift bearers who are in fact the greatest life-givers. Some of us find it easier to give than to receive, but it is actually in the receiving that we can bring our greatest gift. When we recognise and receive others' gifts, and show and share our gratitude, we contribute to healing and reconciliation.



An inability to show gratitude can stem from our unwillingness to acknowledge the debt we owe to others. Part of the essence of gratitude is that it recognises we are not the sole authors of what is good in our lives. In this way it connects with humility. Contrary to many cultural norms, gratitude involves recognising that who we are and what we have is due to others, and above all to God.

Brother David Steindl-Rast is a Catholic Benedictine monk who was born in Austria in 1926 and spent his teenage years under Nazi occupation. Those were difficult times, yet he became increasingly convinced of the importance of gratitude as a daily habit: "In a world where uncertainty and fear surround us every day, living gratefully reminds us to embrace mystery and celebrate that which is certain and essential. In a world that too often reinforces separation and division, gratefulness reminds us of unity and interconnection. In a world rife with messages of scarcity and lack, grateful living brings us back to the overflowing hope and heart of what truly matters."

Choosing to live gratefully means receiving each moment as a gift. And, as Steindl-Rast points out, the gift within the gift is opportunity. This is when you stop long enough to ask yourself, "What's the opportunity in this moment?" The stopping is perhaps the greatest obstacle when we live such fast-paced lives. We need daily prompts to pause. In the morning before opening your eyes, try keeping them closed for a moment, to be thankful that we have eyes with which to see. Before eating, pause to give thanks for the food on the table. "Anything we take for granted is lost to our experience. Anything we do mindfully can give joy."

All of our religious traditions emphasise gratitude. It lifts our horizons beyond ourselves. It is incompatible with negativity or alienation. We see and acknowledge something about the person or environment around us that prompts a response of appreciation. It is not just a feeling, it is a communication – a shared expression. It opens, however briefly, a window to the world beyond us. Gratitude, communicated and shared, starts both outside ourselves – something external noticed or experienced – and also deep within ourselves – the ability to notice and acknowledge it at all. It is a habit that grows in richness over time – the more we express gratitude, the more we see and hear new aspects we can be grateful for, and point the way for others to do the same.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that "to be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives – the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections – that requires hard spiritual work." The rewards of living a grateful life are exponential, on our own wellbeing as well as that of others.





Cultivating Gratitude

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of gratitude – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising gratitude day by day.

Slow down

Create spaces in which to pause and notice what is around us. Acknowledge the small details of our lives for which we are grateful and appreciative. Be present to those who might otherwise be overlooked by us in our busyness.

Remember

Take a moment at the end of the day to recollect what or who has lifted our spirits, and be thankful for them. We might note or draw them in a journal – nothing is too insignificant to recall.

Communicate

When you reflect on the people and things you are grateful for, think about how you can show appreciation for who they are and what they've done (God included). What might you say? What might you do?



Questions for Reflection

- What relationships are you grateful for? Is there anyone who might not know your gratitude, for example those who serve us daily/weekly by cooking our meals, delivering our post, removing our rubbish?
- What parts of yourself and your life do you find it hardest to be grateful for? As Henri Nouwen reminds us, it requires hard spiritual work to be thankful for the failures...the rejections...the moments of sorrow... How might you start to practice gratitude for your own life in small ways?
- An inability to show gratitude can stem from our unwillingness to acknowledge the debt we owe to others, perhaps through pride, or a preference to give, not receive. How far do you recognise this in yourself? What can you do to reshape this?
- Is your daily life a rush from one thing to the next? What can you change that would allow space to pause and appreciate the people and things that make up your world?
- Is there a daily moment in your regular routine that you can turn into a gratitude moment? (e.g. brushing your teeth or each time you hold a mug of tea)



Hope

Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change

Jim Wallis

Do you ever feel hope is setting ourselves up for disappointment or despair, rather than anticipating, and realising, positive change? After a year like this one, many of us are more familiar with dashed hopes, than hopefulness. Yet hope is one of the greatest attributes of those who work through and out the other side of difficulty. It is the ability not only to look back, regretfully, but also to look forward. To recognise that we are not only the victim of the past, but the potential change maker of the future. Reconcilers always need such hope.

Hope is the ability to hold on to our 'yes' when all around us say 'no'. Which might put us in contra-flow to everyone else – a lonely and vulnerable direction of travel. Imagine a world without Martin Luther King's hope for change in seemingly impossible circumstances, or Nelson Mandela's, or Ghandi's, or indeed any of the world's greatest change makers. All of them are marked by a deep hope that propels them to keep going amidst every obstacle put in their way. And their approach is echoed across the world by unknown, sometimes unrecognised, extra-ordinary bearers of hope committed to constructive change within their families, schools, communities and places of work. These are the role models for us to reflect on as we cultivate our habit of hope.

Martin Luther King had a future dream of a "beloved community" – not one that was de-segregated by race, but one that was integrated by justice for all, in which people of different races, religions, socio-economic and educational status, could collaborate instead of compete. In his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, he spoke of the work required to bring this about: "through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men [and women] willing to be co-workers with God." His hope-filled vision was based on realism – avoiding both a superficial optimism and a crippling pessimism – and the recognition that he could not do this alone.

Genuine hope is not a naïve or wishful thinking, even though the optimists among us are vital carriers of such positivity. Hope is a deep belief in something beyond what is currently seen or apparently possible...coupled with a readiness to act in anticipation of it. It is an ability not to give in to the status quo – "things are as they are" – but to prepare for things as they could be. It sits alongside perseverance, seeking justice, looking forward instead of giving up.

The starting point for hope, however, is recognising the status quo – that all is not well. That change is needed. It is a recognition of current hopelessness, in order to find a new hopefulness. It is even an expression of despair, before then discovering the reality of hope. It is often such despair that drives us beyond an acceptance of how things are, to seek creative opportunities in how things could be.

Sociologist, Peter Berger, reflected, "[People] exist by constantly extending [their] being into the future, both in [their] consciousness and in [their] activity... An essential dimension of this "futura"....is hope. It is through hope that [people] overcome the difficulties of any given here and now. And it is through hope that [they] find meaning in the face of extreme suffering." It is hope that guides us through despair, and sets our face resolutely beyond current circumstances.....not a groundless hope, but one testified to by generations before us.



The late Professor Rick Snyder, a psychologist, recognised the link between hope and action: "high hope individuals do not react in the same way to barriers as low hope individuals, instead they view barriers as challenges to overcome and use their pathway thoughts to plan an alternative route to their goals." In this way, hope is something we practise, not just an attitude we hold.

Such hope requires a new horizon, one that sits above and beyond our current perspective. This is usually found with others, including those different to ourselves. It accompanies a deep conviction that there is indeed a longer and wider vision to be discovered. We do not need to be the ones who claim that vision – very often we are only a tiny part of the journey towards it – but if we are not willing to walk towards it, we stay where we are, which might not be where we'd like to be!

For people of faith, hope is closely associated with trust. The prophets are known for their singular hope in God amidst crisis and disaster, when all around them have lost hope. The prophets articulate a hope in the unknown – a different world to the one they are currently experiencing; hope in the God who remains in charge, contrary to all appearances. Jeremiah tells God, "Our hope is in you" (Jeremiah 14:22), not a tentative "hopefully things will get better".

Another of the biblical and qur'anic prophets who embraced such hope is Noah, whose story is told in Genesis chapters 6 to 8, and Qur'an chapter 71. Imagine the jesting and jeering of his community when he started to build a massive boat on dry land! Yet he and those he took inside the ark were the only survivors of a global flood. Indeed they enabled the world to continue beyond catastrophe. After this devastating episode, God put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of hope (Genesis 9:13-16) – promising He would never again flood the earth, and would remain faithful to the covenant He established between Himself and all living creatures. Still today, many of us marvel at the rainbow when it appears – a flash of colour in a darkened sky. A reminder that there is indeed light in the darkness – hope at the end of the tunnel.





Theologian, Frederick Buechner, said "the worst thing isn't the last thing about the world", recognising instead a power "that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring."

The journey of hope starts by taking a risk, seeing something others cannot see, and acting on it for the benefit of all. It means stepping in to the unknown, and believing in a future that is better than the past or even the present. However limited our own capacity to control our circumstances, nobody can take away our ability to hope. To look towards a tomorrow that is different from today, or yesterday.



Cultivating Hope

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of hope – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising hope day by day.

Recognise that all is not well, and seek change

Healthy change usually comes through constructive disagreement, rather than by sticking with what you already know. Whilst a hopeful stance can be a lonely one, lasting change cannot be achieved by oneself. When seeking change, think about which different perspectives you will need alongside your own, and what practical steps you can take to listen to those who are radically different.

Lift your eyes

Where possible, seek a God's eye perspective on what might be needed in the midst of crisis and conflict – to raise your sights beyond the status quo instead of contributing to the same old story. Reflect creatively on small ways in which you can be a bridge builder instead of a hole (grave) digger.

Act on what you see and hear in others

We all need each other. Sometimes someone else might be the carrier of hope and you might have the skillset to help them take practical steps forward. Welcome hopeful ideas from others rather than being too quick to shut them down. And if you are the hope carrier, be attentive to what you are seeing and hearing in others, especially if they disagree with you. Seek a 'togetherness' as you take the risk of seeing the possible beyond what appears impossible. That first step might simply be to recognise that change is needed.



Questions for Reflection

- Can you think of a time when you or someone else brought a vision of hope that carried you through a time of challenge or crisis? How was that hope experienced and what difference did it make?
- Reflect on a time when you struggled to believe in the hope that someone shared with you. What was your reaction? Can you identify any barriers that you feel regularly prevent you from trusting those who are hope carriers?
- For hope to bring about constructive change, we need both those who carry hope and those who trust in the hope carriers. What hope do you carry, and how can you share that with others?
- Who are the hope carriers in your life, and how can you support them?
- Reflect on what the status quo of today is. Do you feel anything needs to change? Where do you hope for change? How could your hope make a difference?
- What or who helps you lift your eyes to more hopeful horizons when you are in a place of despair? Could you be that to someone else today?





Stewardship

Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life

St John Chrysostom

We may think of stewardship as giving away our money or protecting the environment, both of which are important, but the concept is far broader. It concerns taking care of anyone or anything not our own, on behalf of someone else – managing and sharing limited resources for the benefit of all. Many believers understand the world as God's creation, in which we are His stewards. In that sense our responsibilities include care for the world around us, as if on God's behalf. The Qur'an emphasises "It is He (God) who has appointed you viceregents on earth" (Surah 6:165), and encourages fair distribution of resources. "Eat and drink, but do not waste by excess..." says the Qur'an, "for God does not love the wasters." (Surah 7:31)

Muslims are taught by their very nature to be moderate and conserving, rather than excessive or wasteful. The Qur'anic word for stewardship is khalifa. Prophet Mohammed said, "The world is beautiful and verdant, and verily God, the Exalted, has made you His stewards in it." Likewise, in the Bible, the Psalmist declares: "The heavens belong to the Lord, but he has given the earth to all humanity" (Psalm 115:16). While the creation narratives outlined in the Bible and Qur'an clearly establish God as Master of the Universe, it is we humans who are appointed His stewards on earth.

Wise stewards are those who receive God's gifts gratefully. They may include our experience and talents, time, love, resources, health, faith and practice, and any other way in which we can responsibly look after people and things, for God's sake and for the benefit of the wider community – now and in the future.

Such stewardship recognises that our resources, whether abundant or scarce, can be distributed where needed most. When the things we care for are in limited supply, our deepest values are exposed – we are forced to make choices, what to keep and what to share.



Our focus must be on collective wellbeing through enhancing the good of the other, not only for those we now care for, but future generations too. Ultimately, when or before we die, our resources pass from one generation to the next. Their accumulation for ourselves is fruitless, especially when we store them away under the illusion that we can possess what we hold for ever more.

Jesus tells a story about a wealthy property owner who was called away to travel (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 9:11-27). He entrusted his resources to three staff, distributing them differently, so that one had 5 talents (equivalent to 180kg of silver, or around £110,000 in Britain today), another had three, and another just one. On return from his travels, he enquired how they had looked after what he had given them. The first two had put their resources to work, doubling the value. The last (with whom many of us can identify) had buried his talent under a tree to keep it safe, afraid he might otherwise lose it. The owner praised the first two, but showed his disappointment in the third. He took back the one talent and gave it to the man who had 10, saying: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things" (Matthew 25:23).

Wise stewardship is not just our care and distribution of physical resources (land, water, oil, food, etc.) but also how we spend our time and, most significantly, use the power and influence we hold over others. This applies especially to those in positions of leadership. At every moment of every day we are allocating our time, attention, and energy – the most valuable resources we possess. How do we steward our power and influence? Do we seek to empower and open doors for others, or hold on to it for our own privileges, self-importance and status quo?

Our stewardship has a direct impact on healing the fractures and brokenness within and between our communities. The 'grab-go-move on' attitude to using limited, and sometimes scarce natural resources motivates a competitive "us or them" attitude, leading to chaos and violence. The 'other' is seen as a drain on the precious resources that could otherwise be accumulated for oneself. Tragically, conflict perpetuates the cycle of scarcity by ripping up and destroying landscapes with missiles and landmines, corrupting water sources with chemical waste and spoiling arable and fruitful land by making it into a desolate and unsafe place.

Our access to clean water, a warm and safe bed, community, healthcare and education is often decided by where and when we were born. Stewardship extends beyond the lines on world maps, beyond race, beyond religious belief, and discerns where resources are best allocated for the genuine benefit of all. The discriminating lens of dehumanisation – our own decisions about who is or is not worthy of receiving such resources – can only manifest our own self-care and promotion at the expense of others. This is not stewardship as God intended.

In Genesis chapter 2, God creates the first human, Adam, in the Garden of Eden "to work it" (le'ovdah - literally to serve it) and "take care of it" (leshomrah - to guard it on behalf of another)." The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out the significance of these two verbs: "We do not own nature...We are its stewards on behalf of God, who created and owns everything. As guardians of the earth, we are duty-bound to respect its integrity." He recalls a midrash in which God showed Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are - how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it." (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

Are we conscious of the precious nature of what we have? Do we think of our time and resources as a gift, or as limited commodities we need to hold on to? Recognising them as a gift helps us to consider ways in which we can share them abundantly - to live generously, rather than for our benefit alone.

Giving of ourselves and our resources abundantly is only possible when we believe we too can receive abundantly. For believers, that stems from the knowledge of God's infinite capacity to give – of his love, his mercy and his provision in kind. It does not mean we have everything we want, but it does mean we live our lives in expectation that we have sufficient for our needs.



Cultivating Stewardship

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of stewardship – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practicing stewardship day by day.

Share

Take 10 minutes of each day to share something you have with others – perhaps through a phone call, an emotion, a card/message, or a gift in kind?

Give

Consider giving a percentage of your income or resources to those in greater need. Many faith communities practice this regularly. If not your income or resources, could you give your time or influence?

Simplify

Every weekend, think of one way in which you can simplify your life and belongings, perhaps by recycling clothes to charity, sorting waste, reducing time on social media, travelling less, reviewing what meals you will have in the week ahead and how they could be ethically sourced or chosen. In all these ways, you are contributing to a more sustainable world.



Questions for Reflection

- When was the last time I used my position of privilege or leadership to empower others, especially those who are less resourced?
- Do I consider my belongings as 'my own' or as possessions I am merely a temporary custodian of?
- Do I share from a place of scarcity or out of my own surplus/excess?
- Is my use of resources sustainable? Do I take and use them at the expense of others (including future generations)?
- How does the way I allocate my resources (physical, social, or spiritual) represent what I value in life? Would anyone know that I care about reconciliation by the way I spend my time?



Creativity

If you want to be more creative, you just have to be more natural.

Tom and David Kelley

Have you ever watched children fearlessly follow their creative instincts? The discarded cardboard box is suddenly the perfect set up for a tea party. Out comes the toy teapot, which despite being empty and imaginary, somehow never runs out. There is enough for everyone at this tea party and whatever you ask for..."Of course!"...there it is in your "pretend" tea cup. Children are often our best guides when it comes to inhabiting a world of possibility. As they wonder how clouds stay up in the sky and shadows move over the ground, their ability to be present to and in awe of creation opens the door to imagination.

Creativity is a spontaneous erupting from within – an expression of our heart, mind and soul to the outside world. For some this is through classic media of drawing, writing, sculpting, speaking...but each of us is endowed with all we need to express our inner convictions in endlessly diverse and creative ways. It is only the inhibitions we learn and adopt as we grow up that hold us back from such expression.

In their book, *Creative Confidence*, the Kelley brothers (who designed some of our everyday digital products like the first Apple mouse) describe the importance of believing in our ability to create change in the world around us. Cultivating and acting on this mindset lies at the heart of creativity. They point out that we were all creative as children, but many of us lose our creative abilities through social conditioning. "What we've found is that we don't have to generate creativity from scratch. We just need to help people rediscover what they already have: the capacity to imagine – or build upon – new-to-the-world ideas. But the real value of creativity doesn't emerge until you are brave enough to act on those ideas. That combination of thought and action defines creative confidence: the ability to come up with new ideas and the courage to try them out."

Many believers understand God as the Creator of the world. Made according to His image, we humans reflect something of His creative stamp, whether or not we are skilled at arts and crafts. The Bible and Qur'an both describe God endowing human beings with the capacity not only to adapt to our environment, but to adapt our environment: to be active, not merely passive, in relation to the influences and circumstances around us.

The Qur'anic chapter entitled "The Bee" relates, "And your Lord inspired the bee: 'Set up hives in the mountains, and in the trees, and in what they create. Then eat of all the fruits, and follow the pathways of your Lord, with precision.' From their bellies emerges fluid [honey] of diverse colours, containing healing for the people." (16:68-69). Beekeepers witness the colours of honey changing according to what and where the bee consumes. If the bees can create such beauty and wholesome product from their daily activity, how much more can we humans exercise our talents and ability to create what is good? Matthew's Gospel (6:28-29) records Jesus reminding us not to worry about what we wear: "See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these."

These verses remind us of the Creative God in whom so many trust. In reading the first chapter of Genesis, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes how it teaches us to be creative, following God's lead. It does this in three stages: the first in saying "Let there be." The second in recognising "and there was," and the third in seeing "that it is good."

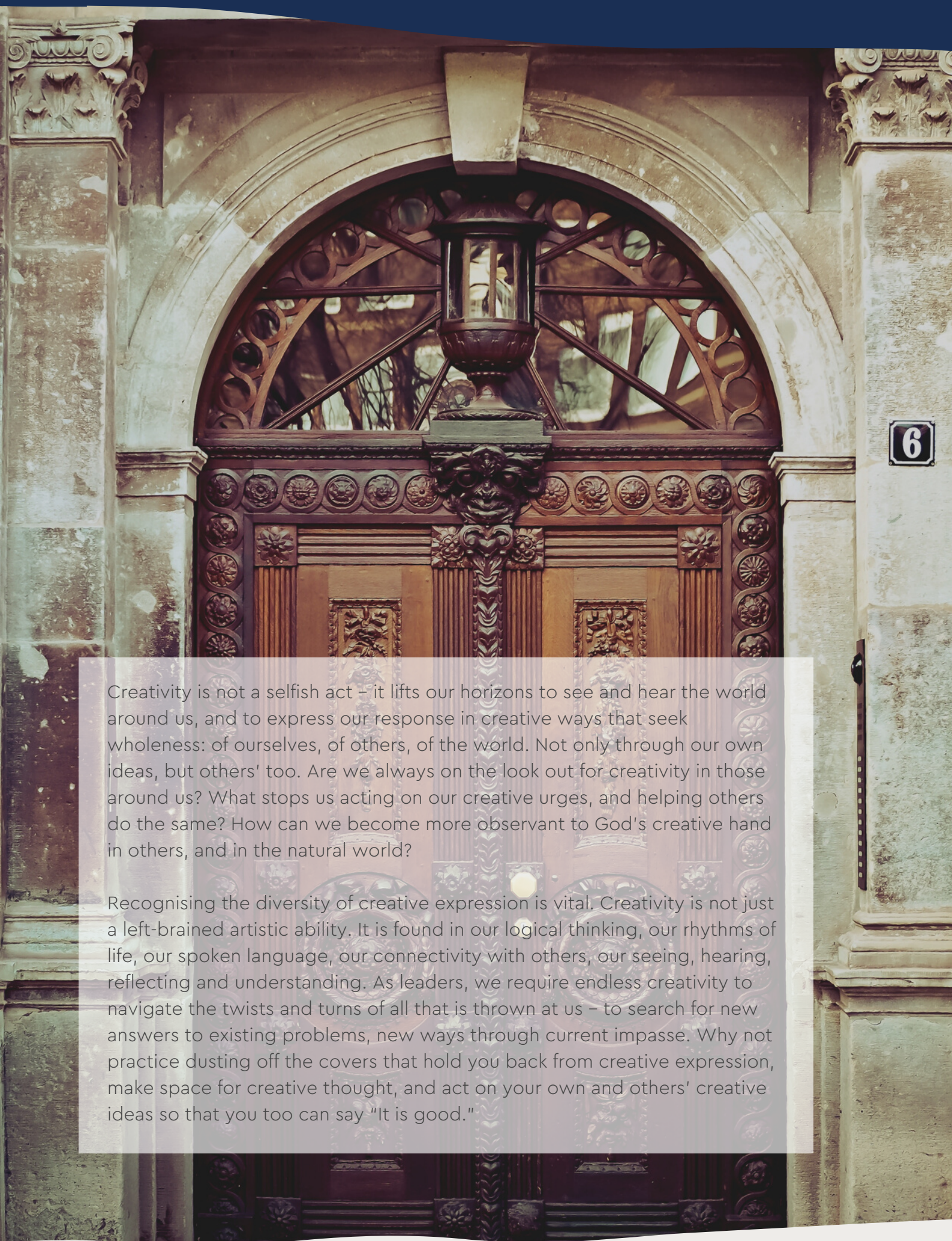


Our God-given creativity challenges us to explore our potential as agents of change – on God's behalf, and for the sake of others, rather than only for its own sake (though creativity for its own sake can also be very good). It encourages us to imagine a world different to the one we currently experience. Not to settle for the status quo if we see suffering, injustice and hurt. Rather to seek new ways through impasse, restorative ways through wrongdoing, healing in place of suffering."

"Creation begins with the creative word, the idea, the vision, the dream", Sacks writes. "The ability to remember a distant past and conceptualise a distant future lies at the heart of our uniqueness as the image of God. Just as God makes the natural world by words ("And God said....and there was") so we make the human world by words." Yet beyond that, we are called to act on our ideas – often the hardest challenge of all. "Between the...dream and reality, lies struggle, opposition, and the fallibility (limits) of the human will. It is all too easy, having tried and failed, to conclude that nothing ultimately can be achieved, that the world is as it is, and that all human endeavour is destined to end in failure." However, as believers we trust that we are not alone in our attempts to change the world. God, and others, join with us to bring about the changes required to see and enact change that is good in God's sight. To overcome curse with blessing, wrongdoing with righteousness.

A significant part of this is enabling others to live out their creative dreams for a better world. To help them realise their aspirations, recognising the good in them and supporting their bringing it to fruition. When we encourage others to act on their creative ideas, we too are being creative. We follow God's longing for each of us to exercise our natural creativity.





Creativity is not a selfish act – it lifts our horizons to see and hear the world around us, and to express our response in creative ways that seek wholeness: of ourselves, of others, of the world. Not only through our own ideas, but others' too. Are we always on the look out for creativity in those around us? What stops us acting on our creative urges, and helping others do the same? How can we become more observant to God's creative hand in others, and in the natural world?

Recognising the diversity of creative expression is vital. Creativity is not just a left-brained artistic ability. It is found in our logical thinking, our rhythms of life, our spoken language, our connectivity with others, our seeing, hearing, reflecting and understanding. As leaders, we require endless creativity to navigate the twists and turns of all that is thrown at us – to search for new answers to existing problems, new ways through current impasse. Why not practice dusting off the covers that hold you back from creative expression, make space for creative thought, and act on your own and others' creative ideas so that you too can say "It is good."



Cultivating Creativity

Here are some practices we have found helpful for cultivating the habit of creativity – let us know what surprises you, and your own experiences of practising creativity day by day.

Connect with beauty

Consciously stop to notice the beauty in what you see and experience day by day, whether in the natural world, or something you or others have created. Each time, remind yourself that you too are creative, no matter how others have labelled you.

Disconnect from devices

Disconnect from electronic devices for part of every day to free our minds from the noise and clutter of others. We are so wired to external content, we risk losing the ability to generate our own.

Experiment

Change your routines if you are able, for new inspiration – getting outside and/or taking a lunch time walk, travelling a different way to work or the shops, sourcing food from somewhere new. Try mind mapping as a way of expressing and arranging your thoughts - its visual layout helps us generate new connections and ideas and does not require too many words. As you experiment, remind yourself that there is no such thing as failure when it comes to being creative. Rather, creativity is the ability to experiment.



Questions for Reflection

- When did you last stop to appreciate artistic beauty – whether in the natural world, or created by you or somebody else?
- How might you encourage others to be more creative?
- Do you view creativity – your own and others – as a luxury or essential? Reflect on some of the daily examples of creativity around you that you take for granted.
- When did you last experience a creative thought or idea? Did you act on it? If not, what held you back?
- What stops you noticing and expressing your inner creativity? Have others labelled you as uncreative? Might they have missed a part of you that is, in fact, longing to create?

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