

Session 2: Self and Others: “The Center of the Universe”

Prior Reading

Having read through part of the introduction to May’s book, what stands out to you? Was there a particular line or idea, maybe even a key word for you? Was there a story that sticks with you? Was there something that gave you pause?

Todd May, *A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us*, pp. 1-14.

Quotes

Read through the following quotes, selecting a few of the ones that most appeal to you. Reflect on what they say to you and why you selected those particular quotes.

“The relentless first-person singular, the ‘I,’ falls silent and we become aware that we are not the center of the universe.”

-Jonathan Sacks

“For a twenty-first-century person with a smartphone as well as for the prehistoric hunter-gatherer on the savanna, isolation is deadly, while genuine solidarity is life-giving.”

-Alan Jacobs

“I will insist to my last day that life should be measured in three dimensions, not only length but breadth—how many other people does it reach out to embrace?—and depth—what values do I stand for, even in my somewhat diminished condition?”

-Harold Kushner

“All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought until you are what you ought to be.”

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

“The farther we are away from those in need, either geographically or through power differentials, the more we can judge them and congratulate ourselves on our wisdom and prudence.”

-D. L. Mayfield

“Here is an infallible test. Imagine yourself in a situation where you are alone, wholly alone on earth, and you are offered one of the two, books or men.... I do, indeed, close my door at times and surrender myself to a book, but only because I can open the door again and see a human being looking at me.”

-Martin Buber

“You can safely assume you’ve created God in your image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do.”

-Anne Lamott

“Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.... One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“Individualism is a feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows so that, having created a small company for its use, he willingly leaves society at large to itself.”

-Alexis de Tocqueville

“Scratch an altruist and watch a hypocrite bleed.”

-Michael Ghiselin

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”

-Adam Smith

“There is no smaller package in all the world than that of a man all wrapped up in himself.”

-William Sloane Coffin

“God created me among us, me inseparable from us, me for us and them for me.”

-Serene Jones

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

-Lilla Watson

“You say you care about the poor? Tell me their names.”

-Gustavo Gutiérrez

“Despite our advanced civilization and sophistication, to what extent are we still prey to the mechanisms of the me-first old brain?”

-Karen Armstrong

“One easily overestimates the importance of one’s own acts and deeds, compared with what we become only through other people.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“Research shows that where women have access to power, war is less likely to break out in the first place.”

-Robin Wright

“We have explored the entire planet and found only one human race.”

-Margaret Meade

“We now know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning.”

-George Steiner

“I have three things I'd like to say today. First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don't give a shit. What's worse is that you're more upset with the fact that I said shit than the fact that 30,000 kids died last night.”

-Tony Campolo

“The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation. The face opens the primordial discourse whose first words is obligation.”

-Emmanuel Lévinas

“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

-George Orwell

“Spirit is not in the I but between I and You.”

-Martin Buber

“Everyone’s true happiness and blessedness consists solely in the enjoyment of what is good, not in the pride that he alone is enjoying it, to the exclusion of others.”

-Baruch Spinoza

“Someone’s kids have to attend the worst school in your city. In your mind whose kids should that be?”

-D. L. Mayfield

“The human being is made of matter but also of breath. Breath is, indeed, what can be shared by all. It demands just one thing: the respect of the natural and spiritual life of the self and of the other.”

-Luce Irigaray

“No one can live happily who has regard to himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility; you must live for your neighbor, if you would live for yourself.”

-Seneca

“The strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.”

-Rudyard Kipling

“In every case, I gave them one rule and it almost always worked: the best way to feel better about yourself is to find someone to help.”

-Harold Kushner

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

-John Donne

“If you want to predict how happy someone is, or how long she will live (and if you are not allowed to ask about her genes or personality), you should find out about her social relationships.”

-Jonathan Haidt

“Charity is really self-interest masquerading under the form of altruism.”

-Anthony de Mello

“Over the centuries we have tried to define our species in terms of some faculty to which we can make an exclusive claim: language, tool making, or sapience.... Our ability to give and receive help may be our best alternative for defining humankind.”

-Garret Keizer

“He who says he has done enough has already perished.”

-Saint Augustine

“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.”

-James Baldwin

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

-Audre Lorde

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?”

-Hillel

“Self-care is never a selfish act - it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others.”

-Parker Palmer

Questioning and Wrestling (Q and W)

The first list below names some of the larger questions we will wrestle with in our session. There are also questions posted from the readings we did in advance. Take a few moments to reflect on these in preparation for group discussion. The other questions listed will make more sense after the plenary session.

Living the Questions

Is a life worth living primarily defined by what you want for yourself? What if what you want diminishes those around you? Are you obligated to care for others? What's the difference between self-care and being preoccupied with self? How might self-improvement disguise itself as narcissism? Where is the center of your universe? How does your social location affect your answers?

Todd May Reading

Do you think of the city where you live as aware of "the other" or not? What about where you grew up? How would you describe such a lifestyle of decency? How would you rate yourself on his scale from mediocrity to altruist? What do you make of the three approaches to ethics? Does one of them resonate with you more than another? Does one of them seem more problematic? What is your response to Singer's "child in the fountain" exercise? What are our moral obligations toward others even if we never see them?

Definition of Virtue

If the virtue of a knife is to cut well and of an eye to see well, what is the virtue of a person? What are people intended to do? How are we intended to live?

Richard Shweder's Ethics

Why do you think the ethic of the US is more autonomous in nature when compared to European and Asian cultures?

David Brooks on Eulogy and Resumé

What do you make of the difference between building a resumé and being worthy of a fitting eulogy? How does a person become less occupied with self?

Golden Balls

What do you make of the researchers' finding that repetition of "prisoners' dilemma" creates trust that isn't there from the start in relationships?

Pew Research and David Brooks

Why do you think that while Americans continue to find meaning in family and friendships, helping others no longer seems to hold the same value it once did?

David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water"

What does it mean to get out of oneself, to get out of one's own head?

Suggested Further Reading

If you decide to read more on the topic of self and others, here are some suggested titles.

Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*

Garret Keizer, *Help: The Original Human Dilemma*

Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden Party"
Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*
David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water"