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**Touchstones Project**

**Small Group Discussion Guide**

**Wintering**

**Preparation:** (Read the *Touchstones Journal* on the theme and the questions below.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** “More than any other season, winter requires a kind of metronome that ticks away its darkest beats, giving us a melody to follow into spring. The year will move on no matter what, but by paying attention to it, feeling its beat, and noticing the moments of transition—perhaps even taking time to think about what we want from the next phase in the year—we can get the measure of it.”

*Katherine May*

**Chalice Lighting** (James Vila Blake), adapted

(In unison) Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

**Read the Wisdom Story**: Take turns reading the following wisdom story.

*How Coyote Stole Fire,* adapted

A long time ago, humans came into being and they loved the world. They loved the springtime with the beautiful emerging green plant life. They loved the summer, a time of berries and growth. As autumn came, the nights became colder and the humans shivered. The children and elders would die from the cold. Winter was a hard time.

One day Coyote wandered by the human village. He could hear the wailing of the humans as they mourned their loved ones who had died in the cold of winter. Spring was finally coming and Coyote heard an old one say, “Feel the warmth of the sun. If only we could have such warmth in the winter to heat our teepees.” Coyote was not of the People and had no need for fire, but he felt sorry for the men and women who were sad about the others who had died.

Coyote knew that on the top of a far mountain, three Fire Beings lived. These Fire Beings hoarded the fire and would not share with others. Coyote crept to the mountain to see how the Fire Beings were guarding the fire. Coyote watched the Fire Beings for many days. He watched as the fire was fed with dry things from the land like pine cones and twigs. He watched how the Fire Beings took turns guarding the fire one at a time at night while the others slept.

Coyote went back down the mountain to speak to his friends among the People. He told them of the shivering hairless humans and their need for fire. He told them of the selfish Fire Beings and their inability to share. He asked his friends among the People to help him. Squirrel, Chipmunk, Frog and Wood all offered to help Coyote bring fire to the humans.

Coyote crept back up the mountain. As the Fire Beings were changing the guard for the fire, Coyote leapt up to the fire and took a burning coal. Immediately, he turned and ran down the mountain. The Fire Beings flew after him, clawing to try and get the fire back. One Being touched the tip of Coyote’s tail which has since always been white.

Coyote threw the fire and Squirrel caught it. The coal touched his back and his tail has been arched since then. Then Squirrel threw the ember to Chipmunk, who froze in fear. Finally, he turned and ran. A Fire Being clawed his back, giving him white stripes forever. Chipmunk threw the burning coal to Frog who turned and ran. One of the Fire Beings grabbed Frog’s tail, but Frog jumped and tore free and thus he has no tail. The Fire Beings came at Frog again and Frog flung the coal at Wood.

Wood kept the coal safe, but the Fire Beings could not figure out how to get the coal from Wood. They yelled at Wood, they sang to Wood, they even promised presents to Wood, but Wood did not give up the coal. Finally, the Fire Beings returned to the mountain and left the People alone, assuming that if they could not release the coal, neither could the People.

Coyote took Wood to the human village and showed them how to get fire from Wood. He took two sticks and rubbed them together. Then he spun a sharpened stick in a hole in another piece of wood. Fire came to the humans, and they were never cold again.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/home/session6/59344.shtml>

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group

Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl as follows. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“Winter is coming.” George R.R. Martin

“In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.” Albert Camus

“We have seasons when we flourish and seasons when the leaves fall from us, revealing our bare bones. Given time, they grow again.” Katherine May

“Winter is the time for comfort, for good food and warmth, for the touch of a friendly hand and for a talk beside the fire: it is the time for home.” Edith Sitwell

“When I started feeling the drag of winter, I began to treat myself like a favored child: with kindness and love.” Katherine May

“I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt; and perhaps it says, “Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again.” Lewis Carroll

“To get better at wintering, we need to address our very notion of time. We tend to imagine that our lives are linear, but they are, in fact, cyclical.” Katherine May

“There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.” Rachel Carson

“Be ahead of all parting, as though it already were behind you, like the winter that has just gone by. For among these winters there is one so endlessly winter that only by wintering through it will your heart survive.” Rainer Maria Rilke

“Winter is not the death of the life cycle, but its crucible.” Katherine May

“One writes music because winter is eternal and because, if one didn’t, the wolves and blizzards would be at one’s throat all the sooner.” David Mitchell

“Spring passes and one remembers one’s innocence. Summer passes and one remembers one’s exuberance. Autumn passes and one remembers one’s reverence. Winter passes and one remembers one’s perseverance.” Yoko Ono

“Wintering is a season in the cold. It is a fallow period in life when you’re cut off from the world, feeling rejected, sidelined, blocked from progress, or cast into the role of an outsider.” Katherine May

“Maintain a kind of summer in the midst of winter, and by means of windows even admit the light and with a lamp lengthen out the day.” Henry David Thoreau

“And when old Winter puts his blank face to the glass, I shall close all my shutters, pull the curtains tight, and build me stately palaces by candlelight.” Charles Baudelaire

“Here is another truth about wintering: you’ll find wisdom in your winter, and once it’s over, it’s your responsibility to pass it on. And in return, it’s our responsibility to listen to those who have wintered before us.” Katherine May

“I realize there’s something incredibly honest about trees in winter, how they’re experts at letting things go.” Jeffrey McDaniel

“My old grandmother always used to say, Summer friends will melt away like summer snows, but winter friends are friends forever.” George R.R. Martin

“In winter, we are invited into a particular mode of sleep: not a regimented eight hours, but a slow, ambulatory process in which waking thoughts merge with dreams, and space is made in the blackest hours to repair the fragmented narratives of our days.” Katherine May

“…it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” Charles Dickens

“We changed our focus away from pushing through with normal life and towards making a new one. When everything is broken, everything is also up for grabs. That’s the gift of winter: it’s irresistible. Change will happen in its wake, whether we like it or not. We can come out of it wearing a different coat.” Katherine May

“Melancholy were the sounds on a winter’s night.” Virginia Woolf

“Snow creates that quality of awe in the face of a power greater than ours. It epitomizes the aesthetic notion of the sublime, in which greatness and beauty couple to overcome you—a small, frail human—entirely.” Katherine May

“I’m still beyond obsessed with the winter season….” Taylor Swift

“Wintering brings about some of the most profound and insightful moments of our human experience, and wisdom resides in those who have wintered.” Katherine May

“The heart can get really cold if all you’ve known is winter.” Benjamin Alire Sáenz

“Music brings a warm glow to my vision, thawing mind and muscle from their endless wintering.” Haruki Murakami

“In winter, I want concepts to chew over in a pool of lamplight—slow, spiritual reading, a reinforcement of the soul. Winter is a time for libraries, the muffled quiet of book stacks, and the scent of old pages and dust.” Katherine May

“Learn to like the sunrise and sunset, …and the gentle fall of snow on a winter day.” Lowell Bennion

“Wintering… is the courage to stare down the worst parts of our experience and to commit to healing them the best we can.” Katherine May

“Winter is not a season, it’s an occupation.” Sinclair Lewis

**Sitting in Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions).*

**Reading:** “In our winter, a transformation happened. We read and worked and problem-solved and found new solutions. We changed our focus away from pushing through with normal life and towards making a new one. When everything is broken, everything is also up for grabs. That’s the gift of winter: it’s irresistible. Change will happen in its wake, whether we like it or not. We can come out of it wearing a different coat.” *Katherine May*

**Living the Questions**

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. What was winter to you as a child? What is it now?
2. Do you prepare for winter? How?
3. How would you define wintering?
4. Have you ever had, as Katherine May writes, “a melody to follow into spring?” How have you taken the measure of winter?
5. What wisdom was passed on to you about wintering? What wisdom do you have to pass on about how to winter?
6. Katherine May writes, “We may never choose to winter, but we can choose how.” Consider a time when you have wintered. How did you winter at that time?
7. Have you ever had winter blues? What did you do in response? What helped? What didn’t?
8. In winter, what do you look forward to? How does this sustain you?
9. Have you ever found within yourself, per Albert Camus, an “invincible summer?” What were the circumstances?
10. Have you ever experienced a transformation as part of wintering? What was it like? Have you ever come out of winter “wearing a different coat?” What was the experience?

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person for the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

**Extinguishing Chalice:** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

**Closing Words:** (Rev. Philip R. Giles)

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*