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**Touchstones Project**

**Small Group Discussion Guide**

**Beauty**

**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:** “Each of us is an artist whose task it is to shape life into some semblance of the pattern we dream about. The molding is not of self alone, but of shared tomorrows and times we shall never see. So, let us be about our task. The materials are very precious and perishable.”

*Arthur Graham*

**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 needs, and to help one another.

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind 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 your time limit.

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

*Wisdom Story: The Beautiful Tiger* by Rev. Christopher Buice

There once was a beautiful and powerful tiger.

One day she was captured by a mean and cruel man who put her into a cage. The man kept the cage in the jungle not far from his house. Every day he would bring out a bowl of water and some food for the lonely tiger.

Sometimes the tiger would see her own reflection in the bowl of water and she would say, “My, I must be a beautiful tiger.”

When the man heard her say this he would lie and tell her, “No, you are not a beautiful tiger. You’re very ugly. You’re a pitiful creature.”

Sadly, the tiger would believe the man.

Some days, after she ate her food, she would walk back and forth in her small cage and feel energy and power moving through her body, and she would say, “My, I must be a powerful tiger.”

When the man heard her say this, he would lie and tell her, “No, you are weak and puny. You’re a pitiful creature.”

Sadly, the tiger would believe the man.

Then one day, when the man was nowhere around, a lion happened to walk by the cage. The lion saw the tiger inside and spoke to her, “Beautiful and powerful tiger, what are you doing lying about in that cage?”

“Do not make fun of me,” replied the tiger. “I know that I am neither beautiful nor powerful.”

“I’m not making fun of you,” said the lion. “You are surely the most beautiful and powerful tiger I have ever seen. I am only surprised to see you lying here when you are clearly strong enough to break out of that cage.”

“You really think I could break out of here?” asked the tiger.

“Quite easily, I should think,” replied the lion.

The tiger was not so sure at first. She had been told so many times that she was a weak and pitiful creature.

But suddenly it seemed that she could feel energy and strength moving through her body. She began to pace back and forth in her cage and then, almost without thought, she leapt against the cage door and it flew open without any resistance.

Once outside she seemed dazed. “That cage didn’t even have a lock on it,” she said. “I spent so much of my life stuck in there and the door wasn’t even locked.

The lion looked at her with soft brown eyes and said, “Those kinds of traps don’t need locks, for it is the lies we believe in that keep us in our cages ...and it is the truth that sets us free.”

Source:<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/story/beautiful-tiger>

**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.

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever: its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.” John Keats

“Do not confuse beauty with beautiful. Beautiful is a human judgment. Beauty is All.” Matthew Fox

“The beauty of the natural world lies in the details, the intricate patterns, and the hidden wonders waiting to be discovered.” Rachel Carson

“Life is full of beauty. Notice it. Notice the bumble bee, the small child, and the smiling faces. Smell the rain, and feel the wind. Live your life to the fullest potential, and fight for your dreams.” Ashley Smith

“I cannot believe that the inscrutable universe turns on an axis of suffering; surely the strange beauty of the world must somewhere rest on pure joy!” Louise Bogan

“Beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time.” Albert Camus

“Beauty crowds me till I die. Beauty mercy have on me.” Emily Dickinson

“I said to myself—I’ll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.” Georgia O’Keeffe

“Of life’s two chief prizes, beauty and truth, I found the first in a loving heart and the second in a laborer’s hand.” Khalil Gibran

“The perception of beauty is a moral test.” Henry David Thoreau

“Let the beauty we love become the good we do.” Rumi

“It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness of pain…. The beauty of disappointment and never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature and everlasting beauty of monotony.” Benjamin Britten

“Personality is more important than beauty, but imagination is more important than both of them.” Laurette Taylor

“That which is striking and beautiful is not always good, but that which is good is always beautiful.” Ninon de L’Enclos

“Though beauty gives you a weird sense of entitlement, it's rather frightening and threatening to have others ascribe such importance to something you know you're just renting for a while.” Candice Bergen

“To experience sublime natural beauty is to confront the total inadequacy of language to describe what you see. Words cannot convey the scale of a view that is so stunning it is felt.” Eleanor Catton

“In a meadow full of flowers, you cannot walk through and breathe those smells and see all those colors and remain angry. We have to support the beauty, the poetry, of life.” Jonas Mekas

“The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science.” Albert Einstein

“There is no definition of beauty, but when you can see someone’s spirit coming through, something unexplainable, that's beautiful to me.” Liv Tyler

“The more often we see the things around us—even the beautiful... —the more they become invisible to us. That is why we often take for granted the beauty of this world: the flowers, the trees, the birds, the clouds - even those we love. Because we see things so often, we see them less and less.” Joseph Wirthlin

“Some people, no matter how old they get, never lose their beauty—they merely move it from their faces into their hearts.” Martin Buxbaum

“The first question I ask myself when something doesn’t seem to be beautiful is why do I think it’s not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason.” John Cage

“In difficult times, carry something beautiful in your heart.” Blaise Pascal

“The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” Henry Miller

“At some point in life the world’s beauty becomes enough. You don’t need to photograph, paint or even remember it. It is enough. No record of it needs to be kept and you don’t need someone to share it with or tell it to. When that happens—that letting go—you let go because you can.” Toni Morrison

“The ability to see beauty is the beginning of our moral sensibility. What we believe is beautiful we will not wantonly destroy.” Sean Parker Dennison

“People often say that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder,’ and I say that the most liberating thing about beauty is realizing that you are the beholder. This empowers us to find beauty in places where others have not dared to look, including inside ourselves.” Salma Hayek

“We do not want merely to see beauty.… We want something else that can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.” C.S. Lewis

“If you look closely at a tree, you’ll notice it’s knots and dead branches, just like our bodies. What we learn is that beauty and imperfection go together wonderfully.” Matthew Fox

“I see beauty as the grace point between what hurts and what heals, between the shadow of tragedy and the light of joy. I find beauty in my scars.” Alexandra Heather Foss

“Sometimes, to become whole you just have to put yourself in the way of beauty.” Cheryl Strayed

**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:** “The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.” *Elisabeth Kübler-Ross*

**Living the Questions**

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

1. How does beauty relate to our pursuit of meaning and purpose in life?
2. What were your experiences of beauty as a child? How did they affect you?
3. Where have you found beauty? What do those places mean to you?
4. How have you created beauty? What did those experiences mean to you?
5. What is beauty, and how do cultural, social, and personal perspectives shape our understanding of it?
6. Is there a connection between beauty and self-confidence? How can we cultivate genuine self-esteem that isn’t solely reliant on physical appearance?
7. Can beauty be a source of inspiration and motivation for personal growth and development?
8. Can beauty be found in imperfection, Can embracing imperfection affect our well-being and happiness?
9. How does age influence how we see beauty? How do societal biases toward youthfulness affect the sense of beauty for individuals of different ages?
10. What are differences between inner beauty and outer beauty? How do they interact and influence each other?
11. How does beauty relate to resilience and coping in challenging times?
12. Have you known beautiful people? What made them beautiful?

**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.*