



Soul Matters

**What does it mean to be
a people of RENEWAL?**

Small Group

September 2020

What Does It Mean To Be A People of Renewal?

September is a season of homecoming for us UUs. And renewal is central to that. At the opening of each new church year, we renew our commitments to each other and our church community. We renew our energy for another year of journeying together.

It's also a time of renewing our renewal questions. Yes, that sounds odd, but it's essential to understanding the importance of this month, and the importance of our faith. You see, one of the less noticed roles of religion is its sneaky way of changing our lives by asking us to change the questions we ask. This is especially true when we talk about renewal.

In our culture and secular lives, the questions we ask about renewal focus mainly on health (Are you drinking enough water? Are you getting enough sleep?) and work/life balance (Are you making enough time for family, play and rest?). Those are fine questions, but they don't take us very deep or push us very far. They don't enable the kind of transformation that religion wants for us.

And so along comes religion and it says, "Hey, look over here. There's a box with an entirely different set of renewal questions that nobody's opened yet." Questions like:

Are you sure it's your body that's tired, or could it be your soul?

What if "time away" isn't about *restoring ourselves* in order to return to our work, but instead about making space to decide if it's time to *reconfigure ourselves* and re-imagine what our true "work" is?

Is it time to renew your responsibility to those who will come after you?

Is it time to renew your commitment to carry on the work of those who came before us?

What if you saw your daily living and loving as an opportunity (even a calling) to renew others' faith in humanity?

Could it be that continual self-improvement is not the path to renewal but instead compassionate acceptance of who you already are, warts and all?

What if renewing our common future isn't just about moving forward, but instead requires a return to an honest telling of the past?

And that's just the questions that are sitting on top of the pile!

So friends, this month let's dig in together.

Let's renew and refresh the renewal questions we ask.

Let's remind ourselves that, indeed, we change our lives by changing the questions we ask.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

Renew Your Understanding of History

The Movement for Black lives and the spring/summer protests against police violence have left us with a renewed sense of urgency about moving into a new and more just future. At the same time, leaders from these efforts remind us that a new future isn't possible without a truthful telling of the past. So this month, alongside your other efforts to support the Black and [BiPoc](#) communities, make some time for the spiritual practice of revisiting, correcting, enriching and renewing your understanding of our country's history.

Below are a number of resources to help you along your way. Use them as is helpful and/or seek out your own.

- **Article - Five Truths About Black History**
<https://www.aclu.org/issues/racial-justice/five-truths-about-black-history>
- **Podcast - '1619'**
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>
- **Documentary - Reconstruction: America After the Civil War**
https://video.kpbs.org/show/reconstruction-america-after-civil-war/?_ga=2.205144848.1807498231.1594489242-1530964149.1594489240
- **Video - Reconstruction in America**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=103&v=HRj35PtXnLs&feature=emb_logo
- **Article - on Richard Rothstein's book, *The Color of Law***
<https://ggwash.org/view/77589/richard-rothstein-lays-out-the-reality-of-government-mandated-segregation-in-color-of-law>
- **Video - Segregation Myth: Richard Rothstein Debunks An American Lie**
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=270363507375249>
- **Segregation Myth: Richard Rothstein Debunks An American Lie**
<https://www.facebook.com/NowThisPolitics/videos/270363507375249/>
- **Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise**
<https://www.pbs.org/show/black-america-mlk-and-still-i-rise/>
- **Video - Jim Crow and America's Racism Explained**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_gOtZ--4WE
- **Podcast - American Police, Throughline**
<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/03/869046127/american-police>
- **Documentary - The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution**
https://video.kpbs.org/video/independent-lens-black-panthers-vanguard-revolution-full-episode/?_ga=2.74058514.1807498231.1594489242-1530964149.1594489240
- **Article - The Enlightenment's Dark Side**
<https://getpocket.com/explore/item/the-enlightenment-s-dark-side>
- **Movie - When They See Us**
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ava-duvernay-when-they-see-us_n_5ceedc40e4b0508c91e1095a
- **Books - 15 History Books Every American Needs To Read To Get The Full Story Of Our Nation**
https://www.bustle.com/p/15-history-books-you-didnt-get-assigned-in-school-but-definitely-need-to-read-76540?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=owned&utm_campaign=feminismbustle&fbclid=IwAR3xNj1QWq2TaacYrOZocitb3WVJbOQT_dkiV_gO-YHVFuQ1DCXL-xbGCEM

Option B

Catch Up On a Couple of Commitments to Yourself

In her riveting poem, [My Commitments to Myself](#), Laura Mancuso lists all the things she does for self-care and self-renewal. To read it is to be reminded of the many avenues available to us for personal rejuvenation. It's also a reminder that refreshing our spirits is not a one-time or singular thing. To feel grounded and full takes constant care through the use of numerous carefully chosen commitments.

So in honor of Mancuso's reminder, make some time this month to meditate on her poem and then pick two from her list that call to you, that capture two commitments to yourself that you want to renew:

My Commitments to Myself

Laura Mancuso

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/my-commitments-myself>

Option C

Lay Down Among the Wild Things... and Renew Your Senses

In his well-known and beloved poem, [The Peace of Wild Things](#), Wendell Berry speaks of lying down in the midst of nature and letting it renew him. You can read it as instructions for how to tap into nature's restorative power. But for your exercise this month, take it a step further and engage the exercise with all five of your senses. Simply lie down in a natural setting of your choosing and then, with attention and mindfulness, slowly ask yourself these five questions:

1. What do I see?
2. What do I hear?
3. What do I smell?
4. What do I feel against my clothes and skin?
5. What can I taste? (A bit tricky but be creative.)

In each case, follow up each of the five questions with an additional one: "And what is that trying to say to me?" In other words, after you identify what is catching your eye, as "how is this trying to speak to me?" After noticing what you smell ask, "What message might this have for my soul?" Remember this is not so much about trying to create a long list and figure out how many things you can notice. Instead it's about trying to sort through the many things you see, smell, hear, touch and taste in order to find the *one thing* that really sticks out to your senses. And then discerning why it was that particular thing that grabbed you and what its deeper restorative message might be.

Option D

Return & Repair

Speaking of our faith's commitment to covenant and the work of renewing our covenants with each other, Rev. Gretchen Haley writes:

“What our faith asks of us, what our faith imagines for us, is that somehow, right at that moment when our hearts break, we will find our way to see through that heartbreak. We will stay put – not close off, not run away, not hurt back – but keep on being in relationship, doing what we can to repair the world and each other.”

With these words in your mind and heart, make some time this month, identify a relationship of heartbreak in your life. Maybe it involves a friend or family member, maybe even someone who is no longer living. Maybe a neighbor. Maybe even an institution, like your church or our government. Whoever or whichever it is, make time this month to return to that broken relationship and work on repair. Simply ask yourself “Where have I withdrawn, been betrayed or broken something myself?” Your heart will know the answer. Listen to what it says. Then open your heart one more time and lean into that relationship once again, doing what you can to repair and renew it.

This exercise asks you to do the work of return and repair.

Option E

A Renewal Box to Remind You

Reminders are essential to renewal. Normal life has a way of crowding out opportunities for rest, rejuvenation and what matters most. Because of this we have to be intentional about reminding ourselves to make room for renewal. And nothing helps us remember better than physical reminders. So this month engage your creativity and create “a renewal box” covered with and containing physical items and visual images that will help you renew and keep you connected to your core commitments as well as the things that nourish you most.

This exercise is imagined and designed by Soul Matters' new Creativity Consultant, [Elizabeth McKoy](#). She'll be designing one creativity-based exercise per month to help us explore the monthly theme using our aesthetic, intuitive and imaginative sides. Think of it as making room for your right brain to dance with your left brain.

[Click here](#) to read her detailed instructions and video tutorial for this exercise.

Option F

Find Renewal in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of renewal. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself. So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month. Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of renewal. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every single one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? What is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. Whose way of being in the world renews your faith in humanity?
2. How is "summer renewal" different from "fall renewal" for you?
3. Are you sure it's your body that's tired, or could it be your soul?
4. During fall, the trees turn their energy away from reaching out to the sun. Instead, they let go of their leaves and seek renewal in the rich soil where their roots live. How about you? Is it time to cease seeking nourishment from that which lies beyond your reach and instead enter a time of disconnecting and returning to the richer soil of that which lies within?
5. When was the last time you allowed yourself a day in which nothing was produced, no items were checked off your list, no problems were confronted, no solutions were searched for?
6. We're taught that "time away" is about *restoring ourselves* in order to return to our work. But what if we saw it as making space to decide if it's time to *reconfigure ourselves* and re-imagine what our true "work" is?
7. How would your life change if you saw rest as "a form of resistance" against a culture that gladly "uses us," deforms us and lures us into believing that exhaustion is a mark of success? ([Tricia Hersey](#))
8. You've been telling yourself you need rest, but what if what you really need is play?
9. Which of your commitments to the greater good needs renewed this year?
10. Have you ever been "washed clean"? (Is there something in you that longs for it now?)
11. What would it look like to take a break from being a "giver" and allow yourself to receive?
12. How are you staying close to those people and things that "[reteach you your loveliness](#)"?
13. We regularly renew our homes and porches with a new coat of paint. This constant and tender care is what makes them beloved to us. What precious personal relationship of yours has paint that has grown dry and is starting to peel? And could use a bit of tender renewal?
14. Is it time to renew that promise you made to yourself?
15. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of thinking about what it means to be part of a people of renewal.

Word Roots & Definitions

to begin or take up again, as an acquaintance, a conversation, etc.; resume.

to make effective for an additional period:

to renew a lease.

to restore or replenish:

to renew a stock of goods.

to make, say, or do again.

- [source](#)

Antonyms: impair, wear, deteriorate, vitiate, exhaust, discontinue, corrupt, weaken, defile, deprave

Wise Words

Whether something lasts or not has nothing to do with whether it's made of stone or steel or wood or fabric. A house built all in wood can be a monument that lasts for hundreds of years because it seduces people to live in it, to use it and maintain it. Eternity depends on whether people are willing to take care of something. In Greece, ordinary white houses are repainted every year. Today we are often told to use materials and structures that are free of maintenance. But no building can be neglected entirely. We need constantly to renew our relationships — to the houses we live in, to our friends, to our own bodies — all the time, every day.

Werner Herzog

Covenantal theology doesn't just say that we become human through our promising, but also we become human when we break those promises, and yet somehow find ways to reconnect and begin again — when we repair the relationship because we know we need each other — even when we think

the other isn't doing enough — even when our partner is annoying us, or isn't listening well, or isn't doing things the way we want them done — even then — when we realize right then, that we are still partners, and we can't give up — and so we return, and begin again — it is this beginning again that is what it means to be human.

[Rev. Gretchen Haley](#)

It was my conviction and determination that the church would be a resource for activists -- a mission fundamentally perceived. To me it was important that individuals who were in the thick of the struggle for social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church.

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman (quoted in Mark Morrison Reed's Black Pioneers)

I always forget how important the empty days are, how important it may be sometimes not to expect to produce anything, even a few lines in a journal. A day when one has not pushed oneself to the limit seems a damaged, damaging day, a sinful day. Not so! The most valuable thing one can do for the psyche, occasionally, is to let it rest, wander, live in the changing light of a room.

May Sarton, from Journal of a Solitude

Every person needs to take one day away. A day in which one consciously separates the past from the future. Jobs, family, employers, and friends can exist one day without any one of us, and if our egos permit us to confess, they could exist eternally in our absence. Each person deserves a day away in which no problems are confronted, no solutions searched for. Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us.

Maya Angelou

When we live without listening to the timing of things, when we live and work in twenty-four-hour shifts without rest – we are on war time, mobilized for battle. Yes, we are strong and capable people, we can work without stopping, faster and faster, electric lights making artificial day so the whole machine can labor without ceasing. But remember: No living thing lives like this. There are greater rhythms, seasons and hormonal cycles and sunsets and moon rises and great movements of seas and stars. We are part of the creation story, subject to all its laws and rhythms.

[Wayne Muller](#)

A good rest is half the work.

Proverb

Taking care of yourself doesn't mean me first, it means me too.

L.R. Knost

There is deep power in taking a break, honoring your body and actively participating in your deprogramming from grind culture. We have been brainwashed to be violent towards our own bodies by pushing it to exhaustion... Rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy.

[Tricia Hersey](#)

So often I assume that I am indispensable... Even if my body and spirit are asking for a break... But if I power through, I am not leaving room for guidance of the spirit... It's a leap of faith to be authentic and honest, rather than ignoring the messages of body and spirit saying, "I'm tired" or "this doesn't feel right" and powering through. It requires faith that we are not alone- faith that we are part of a web of community larger than ourselves. Can we have faith that if the spirit is truly calling us to do something, spirit will help make it happen like a stream helps the paper boats that children set on the water and release?...

[Rev. Darcey Laine](#)

Anyone can slay a dragon, she told me, but try waking up every morning & loving the world all over again. That's what takes a real hero.

[Brian Andreas](#)

The thing is to love life, to love it even when you have no stomach for it, and everything you've held dear crumbles like burnt paper in your hands, your throat filled with the silt of it... Then you hold life like a face between your palms, a plain face, no charming smile, no violet eyes, and you say, yes, I will take you, I will love you again.

Ellen Bass

It is always quietly thrilling to find yourself looking at a world you know well but have never seen from such an angle before.

Bill Bryson

I all too often take for granted what I once deemed an unmerited gift. And it is often only in the face of a looming transition that I am inspired to remember—not only to bask in the memory, but to recall, remind myself of how I once received this gift with gratitude... Transitions; beginnings and endings; they provide a pathway into awakening and reawakening; into gratitude and a renewal of gratitude... Beginnings: "Today is the first day..." Endings: "What if this were your last day..." They cause us to reassess. They inspire us to consider what is most important. They remind us of the beauty that surrounds us... To paraphrase a popular song from decades ago, "You don't know what you've got till it changes..."

Rev. Rod Richards

Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending.

Maria Robinson

Sometimes with the bones of the black sticks left when the fire has gone out someone has written something new in the ashes of your life.

[David Whyte](#)

May the tears I cried last year be nourishment to the soil of this new year.

Anonymous

When I have no more mass than a leaf dead on the branch, still this is enough for the earth to find me. She reaches for what little I have and says, stay... Press the soles of your feet back into the ground you sprang from. Feel the weight of your body and know that it is glorious. You are born of soil and sun, and all the heaviness of the earth is a call to you. The earth is reaching for you. Reach back. Reach back.

[Jess Reynolds](#)

The world of play favors exuberance, license, abandon. In it, selves can be revised.

Dianne Ackerman, from [Deep Play](#)

In rare moments of deep play, we can lay aside our sense of self, shed time's continuum, ignore gain, and sit quietly in the absolute present, watching the world's ordinary miracles. No mind or heart hobbles. No analyzing or explaining. No questing for logic. No promises. No goals. No relationships. No worry.

Dianne Ackerman, from [Deep Play](#)

The receding wave does not despair; it knows it will rise again.

Marty Rubin

To be a people of renewal is to ask not simply, "How do I refresh?" but also "How do I return?" The challenge of life is not just about moving forward but moving forward without losing touch with all we hold dear.

Rev. Scott Tayler

A self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living.

Virginia Woolf

Videos & Podcasts

Why Now, White People?

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/16/878963732/why-now-white-people>

On the need to renew our relationships not just our learning and commitment.

'There Is No Neutral': 'Nice White People' Can Still Be Complicit In A Racist Society

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/09/873375416/there-is-no-neutral-nice-white-people-can-still-be-complicit-in-a-racist-society>

On what is needed by white people to really renew our racial wounds and structures.

Loss and Renewal: Moving Forward After A Door Closes

<https://www.npr.org/2018/12/28/680679054/loss-and-renewal-moving-forward-after-a-door-closes>

Adrienne Maree Brown on Pleasure as Birthright

<https://forthewild.world/listen/adrienne-maree-brown-on-pleasure-as-birthright115>

On spiritual renewal through re-centering affirming our right to pleasure

Your Body's Real Age: How often does our body renew and regrow itself?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=61&v=Nwfg157hejM&feature=emb_logo

Won't Get Fooled Again with classroom instruments!!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzOGDrn-GM8>

For When You Need Your Faith in Humanity Restored

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5okTR7LRRM>

Max Richter - On The Nature Of Daylight

Music written to restore your soul...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_YHE4Sx-08

Articles

Always Building and Mending, Mark Nepo

Full piece at

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/fieldnotesonliving/2019/04/13/always-building-and-mending/>

Except: “The birds pausing from their tasks became silent teachers, saying without saying that we need to fall in love with the ordinary rhythms of life, again and again. And when the tasks are done or have become too heavy to complete, we need to pause and perch atop our worries and concerns. So we can return to the world and do what needs to be done, until what sustains us reveals itself like the inside of a seed cracked by our beak...”

America’s Racial Contract is Showing, The Atlantic

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/americas-racial-contract-showing/611389/>

On challenging ourselves *not* to renew our nation’s social contract.

Dear White People, This is What We Want You to Do, Kandise Le Blanc

On what it means for white people to renew their commitment to the work of racial justice

https://insidethekandidish.wordpress.com/2020/05/30/dear-white-people-this-is-what-we-want-you-to-do/?fbclid=IwAR3kIOsL1DGPusl1O_y-b_RU6oQ-3hzSLF6B6m2eP5QRut5UTKI06m8SUW4

More here: <https://www.katykatikate.com/the-blog/2020/5/26/5-racist-anti-racism-responses-good-white-women-give-to-viral-posts>

Podcast - Why Now, White People?

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/16/878963732/why-now-white-people>

How to Feel Better When You Don’t Know What’s Wrong

<https://www.raptitude.com/2020/06/how-to-feel-better-when-you-dont-know-whats-wrong/>

There Are Enough Signs, Shawna Lemay

<http://transactionswithbeauty.com/home/signmuseum?rq=restore>

A blog article on a museum that restores and renews old signs. What is calling you to tenderly renew and restore it?

“I think about now we’re all looking for signs of tenderness. But today, I’ll settle for signs, tenderly restored, carefully displayed...”

Coronavirus Will Change the World Permanently: 34 big thinkers’ predictions for what’s to come.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>

Covid 19 is likely to reorder our society in a whole host of ways. The question is: Will it renew us or unraveling us?

Delighted by the Joy of Bad Things, Dwight Garner

A review of Rebecca Solnit’s [A Paradise Built in Hell](#)
<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/21/books/21book.html>

On the paradoxical dynamic of having our humanity renewed and reignited by disaster

“Our response to disaster gives us nothing less than “a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become.” Her overarching thesis can probably be boiled down to this sentence: “The recovery of this purpose and closeness without crisis or pressure” — without disaster, that is — “is the great contemporary task of being human.”

Books

A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last

Stephen Levine

On renewing your love of life by confronting the reality of your death

“when we do this practice of turning mindfully to the idea that we are going to die, we stop delaying our lives. We start catching up with ourselves...”

Deep Play

Diane Ackerman

[https://www.amazon.com/dp/B004ZZJ9LM/ref=dp-kindle-redirect? encoding=UTF8&btkr=1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B004ZZJ9LM/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?encoding=UTF8&btkr=1)

Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives

Wayne Muller

Movies

Whose Streets?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upiInjJSerw>

On renewing and widening our understanding of the call, context, trauma and anger of today's protests for racial justice

Awakenings

On renewing ourselves through our efforts to renew and heal others

Silver Linings Playbook

On being renewed by the random gifts of grace that life sends our way

Music

We create two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. We organize these lists as a journey of sorts. So consider listening from beginning to end and using the lists as musical meditations. Follow the links below to connect with this month's "Renewal Songs."

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Renewal](#)

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Renewal](#)

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).

Find support for bringing the
monthly themes home and into your family life with

Soulful Home: A Guide for Families:

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/soulful-home.html>



© 2020-21 Soul Matters ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Packets are for use only by member congregations of the Soul Matters Sharing Circle.

Learn how to join at

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com>