

The Impossible Will Take a Little While

Classroom and Discussion Questions — 2026 Edition

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These are classroom study questions that faculty have found very helpful while assigning *The Impossible*, both for individual classes and for campus-wide programs, like first-year readings. *Soul of a Citizen* has its own [separate study questions](#). Since some faculty assign the entire book and others assign selected entries, I've listed questions for each piece in the book so you can pick, choose whichever are useful, or adapt them to your particular campus culture. I've updated them thoroughly for the new edition, but am still in the process of honing and revising , so if you develop other questions or instructional materials or undertake service learning projects that would seem worth sharing with other schools, please [send them to me](#).

Here are the section-by-section questions

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One note: Most faculty assign the entire book. Because the pieces are all tightly written, students don't get bogged down and enjoy the variety. But if reading time is scarce, you can always assign selected sections or pieces or give students a choice within each section category. In case it's useful, here's an annotated [Table of Contents](#) describing each piece.

INITIAL INTRODUCTION

What stops us from acting on issues we care about? Have there been issues, small or large, where you've wanted to take a stand, but didn't? Why do you think you held back?

If there were issues where you have taken a stand, what got you involved? How did the experience change you?

Do you feel like ordinary citizens really can make a difference? If you don't, how does that affect your actions?

Were you surprised to read about Desmond Tutu dancing and embracing joy, despite all the pain and injustice in South Africa? What does this suggest about the relationship between joy and political engagement?

Loeb describes a “deluge of assaults on human dignity,” using an image from Art Spiegelman’s concentration camp memoir *Maus*. We’re obviously not living under the Nazis, but how does this image speak to your experience of the current political climate and the feeling of the current time? If you feel overloaded by current politics, how do you respond?

Did you know the real Rosa Parks story, or only the myth? How does it change your view to know Parks didn’t act alone and was active long before her stand on the bus?

Did you know that spectators circulated photos of lynchings to their friends? What does that say about that time? Are there any current parallels, including on social media?

History shows, Loeb argues, that advances in human dignity are usually “the result of many people taking small steps together over a long period.” Do you think that’s correct?

Are you hopeful in your personal life? Are you hopeful in terms of this country’s future?

Were you surprised to know that the overthrow of a Communist dictatorship started with the defense of a rock band?

Three years before his country’s Communist dictatorship was overthrown, Václav Havel wrote that “hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart.” What would it mean to embrace hope as an orientation rather than a prediction? Has there been a time when you acted based on your values even when you were uncertain about the outcome?

Loeb discusses Rutger Bregman’s correction to William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* novel, noting that the novel even inspired the television show *Survivor*, whose creator helped launch Donald Trump’s national celebrity with *The Apprentice*. Did you know that? What stories do you think most shape your own sense of who we are at our core?

What are the lessons that Loeb is trying to convey through the story of his friend Lisa? Can you think of other situations where a person who clearly made an impact on history first got involved in a seemingly lost cause, or where the results of their attempts to work for change were initially invisible?

Were you surprised that a governor’s race could be decided by 133 votes and that one person could play a role just by walking a precinct? What’s your experience with voting or not voting, and does the example make you more likely to vote or volunteer? If you’ve ever also volunteered in an election, what was that experience like?

Loeb writes that “courage and forgiveness are both contagious,” and traces chains of influence from Thoreau to Gandhi to King to Eastern European democracy movements, the anti-apartheid movement and today’s activists. Can you extend this chain in any direction—backward or forward? Can you think of other comparable chains of influence?

When the English Quakers first took on slavery, Rebecca Solnit notes “three quarters of a century passed before it was abolished in Europe and America. Few if any working on the issue at the beginning lived to see its conclusion.” What does knowing this perspective do to your sense of what it means to act? Does it inspire patience, seem impossibly long in the face of brutal injustice, or both?

Search for more information about how Norwegian teachers resisted to the Nazis during WWII? In light of this new information, what does it mean that this story helped inspire anti-ICE protests in the heavily Norwegian city of Minneapolis?

Loeb writes that this book is “about flawed, frail, and contradictory human beings, who nonetheless manage to persist and somehow, together, change history.” And includes himself in this category. Does the admission of human imperfection make the book’s examples more or less inspiring?

Loeb asks readers to think of the content of the book as “...a conversation in which some of the most eloquent, visionary, and provocative people of our age explain historical, political, and spiritual frameworks that have shaped their lives.” Skim the Table of Contents to the book. Based on names of the writers and the titles of their work included in the book, who piques your interest? In other words, with whom might you be interested in having a conversation about their ideas?

Loeb describes how “the links in any chain of influence are too many and complex to trace,” but the connections are made. Who are some links in “chains of influence” you recognize? How did the person or actions influence you? How can we be links in a chain of positive influence with others?

In “This Gorgeous World,” Loeb reminds readers that “despite growing threats to the habitability of the planet, the very richness of life can still renew our spirits and energize us,” as he discovers in his runs on the Seattle beaches and trails. Where is a place of beauty near you—perhaps even hidden beauty not immediately recognized—where you can return to for strength and sustenance?

Throughout his life, Desmond Tutu embraced the humble gifts of the world with a response of joy and gratitude. Identify humble gifts in your own life. What is, or perhaps could be, your response to these gifts?

In addition to the importance of connectedness to fellow human beings, Loeb adds that “...this sense of connection should be extended to the nonhuman world—not only for its sake but also for ours.” Explain what you think he means. How does this point apply to the nonhuman world around you?

What does Loeb mean by “radical dignity”? How does he suggest we can develop the quality of “radical dignity”? Explain why this could be an important trait for people to share when living in community with others.

Loeb invites readers to see the seemingly disparate voices of the book as "...united in an overarching cause, forging a common vision of human courage and connectedness." Explain why this perspective is important in a civil society.

Explore the following themes:

Those who make significant advances to improve the world learn to do so often don't succeed immediately.

We may make our most powerful contribution by inspiring other individuals to their convictions

Embracing the richness of the world can help us keep on acting for change

Human courage and connectedness are critical to change.

Select a quote from the following that resonates with a specific experience of yours and explain how it resonates.

"The difficult I'll do right now. The impossible will take a little while."

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

"Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart."

"Simply pushing the rock in the right direction is cause for celebration."

"Nothing cripples the will like isolation."

"There are nothing but gifts on this poor, poor earth."

Loeb speaks of *The Impossible* modeling "a process by which citizens can at times agree to disagree, even on highly consequential issues, while still drawing inspiration for the larger work of change." In this context, many readers have found it fruitful to place the different stories and voices in dialogue with each other. So if you disagree with a particular stand in a particular essay, research it further, but also think about how one of the other authors might respond. You might even want to write out a response from their perspective.

SECTION ONE: DARK BEFORE THE DAWN

"Say Yes" by Andrea Gibson

Gibson opens with an image from physics: two violins placed in a room will resonate together when one is played. Did you know this? Can you think of a time when someone else's courage or commitment "sounded a note" in you?

Gibson ends: “Play like you know we won’t survive if you don’t / but we will if you do.” How does urgency coexist with hope in this poem? Have you ever been in a situation where your actions could help determine the outcome?

Poetry is meant to be heard. If you have the opportunity, read the poem “Say Yes” aloud 2-3 times (or pair with a partner and each read it aloud). Choose a line(s), word, phrases, images, or ideas that speak to you. Explain why, if a reason comes to mind; if not, that’s all right, too.

What does the poem’s title “Say Yes” mean to you?

“The Cure at Troy” by Seamus Heaney

What does Heaney say about the capacity of art to reconcile human suffering?

What does the third stanza of the poem mean to you? Can you imagine a moment “when hope and history rhyme?” Why or why not?

Section One Introduction:

Loeb says: “Living with conviction has value whatever the outcome of our efforts. Simply keeping the flame of conscience alive is a victory.” Do you agree? Explain. Can you think of an example of someone “living with conviction” from someone you know or your own life? What was the outcome, if any? If there isn’t a clear an outcome yet, do their actions still feel worth it?

Howard Zinn says: “We forget how often we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions.” Why do you think this has been so often forgotten or omitted in the history we’ve been taught? Does the history you’ve learned make existing systems seem more permanent than they actually are? Give an example.

Did you know about the South Korean attempted coup? What does it say about the strength of ordinary people vs powerful institutions that regular South Koreans were able to stop it?

The Serbian police officer at the Fulbright Scholars gathering said he had warned citizens of raids because he sympathized with the resistance. Why might the courage of someone in a lower position—a police officer, a low-ranking official, a soldier—be as important for change as those with more formal power?

Havel and the Czech human rights petitioners did not free a single prisoner, Loeb reminds us, but says their campaign was “essential in a more significant sense, though its results weren’t immediately visible.” Does knowing that Havel’s “futile” actions eventually helped topple the regime change your sense of what has an impact and what doesn’t? How does this point connect to this book’s title, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*?

Did you know about the solar transformation that McKibben describes? Do you feel you can do anything about climate change? Have you tried to do anything, large or small? If so, how did those actions make you feel?

“Lightsticks and K-Pop” by Jungmin Choi

Choi describes a group of soldiers assigned to storm the South Korean parliament instead pausing to eat ramen noodles, while 16,000 citizens surrounded the building. And other soldiers refusing to issue ammunition or to allow military helicopters to take off. What does this say about ways to resist would-be dictators? Can you think of other historical or contemporary examples of “slow-walking or willfully misinterpreting illegal orders” as a classic form of resistance”?

When ordinary South Koreans surrounded the parliament building, few had previous training in nonviolent direct action, yet Choi writes they “instinctively grasped what was most crucial.” What do you think gave them this clarity? Can you compare this and the ways people have resisted what they see as unjust authority in America, like resistance to the ICE raids or other contexts? What are the similarities and differences?

Choi describes citizens “tearfully appealing” to soldiers not to follow unlawful orders, and lawyers distributing templates for refusing unjust commands. What does this say about ways to resist when democracy is threatened? Could you see this happening in America? Explain why or why not. Can you think of other examples where it has?

The protests incorporated K-pop songs, lightsticks, food trucks, and other elements of a festival. Why do you think Choi includes “Create festive diverse forms of resistance” as one of the four lessons to help preserve democracy? Can you think of other examples of ways that culture can build a sense of common purpose or creative protest has made an impact? Does political involvement always have to be serious? Explain.

Choi draws four explicit lessons from the Korean experience. Which do you find most applicable to the United States? Which would be hardest to replicate?

“The Optimism of Uncertainty” by Howard Zinn

Zinn’s examples show how seemingly powerless people can actually change the world. Can you think of additional examples from history or your own experience that support his point?

Zinn warns: “Pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it reproduces itself by crippling our willingness to act.” Can optimism also become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Write a statement using “optimism” or “hope” that explains why this might be true.

“People are not naturally violent or cruel or greedy, although they can be made so. Human beings everywhere want the same things: they are moved by the sight of abandoned children, homeless families, the casualties of war; they long for peace, for friendship and affection across lines of race and nationality.” Do you agree or disagree? Support your position with specific examples.

Zinn writes: “Throughout history people have felt powerless before authority, but that at certain times these powerless people, by organizing, acting, risking, persisting, have created enough power to change the world around them, even if a little.” Do you agree that political power is “more fragile than we think,” or do you think he’s being unduly hopeful? Explain. What does it mean when he says

fundamental change does not come in one fell swoop but as a long succession of surprises”? Can you think of an example from your own life or experiences when you tried to undertake a change? Did the change come about gradually or all at once? How could this apply to an issue you’re passionate about?

Loeb echoes Zinn in writing, “History also shows that even seemingly miraculous advances are in fact the result of many people taking small steps together over a long period of time.” Is this the view of history you’ve been taught? How many of the examples Zinn gave of unexpected turnings did you know about? Think again of the Rosa Parks story. Do you think you’ve gotten an accurate picture of ways ordinary citizens have helped change the world?

If you think of Zinn as a fiery radical, were you surprised by his inviting a string quartet to play in his classroom? Why does Zinn say he did this? What does this say about the sources that sustain us? What sustains you in difficult or challenging times?

“The Dark Years” by Nelson Mandela

Mandela describes how authorities attempted to “exploit every weakness, demolish every initiative, negate all signs of individuality—all with the idea of stamping out that spark that makes each of us human and each of us who we are.” How can individuals, even in the most difficult situations, encourage that spark within ourselves and within others?

Why would Mandela and his ANC colleagues go to such lengths to get news of the outside, like passing summaries of newspaper stories from cell to cell on scraps of toilet paper? How does a sense of political isolation foster despair, while being connected with an engaged community encourages hope? How do you break down your own political isolation?

Most of us will not face the hardships of imprisonment like Mandela, but in what other ways can we be imprisoned? What qualities does Mandela suggest help human beings surmount even the greatest of challenges?

Loeb writes, “Those who make us believe anything’s possible, however, and fire our imagination over the long haul, are often the ones who’ve have survived the bleakest of circumstances. It’s the men and women who have every reason to despair, but don’t, who may have the most to teach us, not only about how to hold true to our beliefs, but about how such a life can bring about seemingly impossible social change.” Do you agree or disagree with this? And why? Are their lessons we can draw from people facing the most difficult situations that apply to our own more modest challenges?

How can courage be multiplied? Can you think of a time in your life or a situation you’ve witnessed or even read about when courage was multiplied? Explain.

“It was ANC policy to try to educate all people, even our enemies.” What was the point of this policy? Have you ever reached out to someone with whom you radically disagree? What was it like?

Mandela writes that he was always treated the warders decently. Mandela reminds readers, “Hostility [is] self-defeating.” What does he mean, and do you agree with this attitude? What are alternative strategies to hostility?

In the essay, readers learn how important the news was to Mandela and fellow prisoners and the lengths to which they would go to share news. So often the news each of us hears today comes from similar sources, resulting in each of us living in our own echo chambers, often created by invisible algorithms designed to draw us in emotionally. What is the risk of getting news from only a narrow selection of similar news sources that offer us shared views? How can citizens find multiple informed and accurate perspectives on any given political topic? How will this likely change in the age of AI?

“Guarding Mandela” by Christo Brand

Brand arrives at Robben Island having been told Mandela and the other prisoners are terrorists seeking to destroy his country. What does it tell us that he initially accepted this? How did his view begin to change?

On their first walk together, Mandela does not discuss politics, but asks Brand about his family, his sports, and his studies. Why would Mandela choose this approach? What are the lessons?

What does reading Brand’s perspective add to our understanding of Mandela after reading both their essays?

Under leaders like Mandela, the ANC’s formal policy, was “to try to educate all people, even our enemies.” Is this a realistic or even possible strategy in our own polarized society? Have you ever changed your view of someone by getting to know them as a person, or had them change your views?

Christo Brand is eighteen years-old when he hired to guard political prisoners. Do you think if Brand had been older, he’d have been as open to interactions with Mandela and eventually develop a lifelong friendship? What might this suggest about the potential power for change that young people have in society?

Why do you think Loeb included this short essay by Brand in this book, especially paired with the piece by Mandela? What lessons can readers take from the pair of readings?

“An Orientation of the Heart” by Vaclav Havel

Havel describes how hope is “a state of mind, not a state of the world.” And he distinguishes hope from optimism. How would you distinguish the belief that things will turn out well from the deeper sense that guides us even when we are unsure whether our actions will yield results? Have you ever faced a personal situation where you acted even though the outcomes were uncertain?

What states of mind and approaches to the world do you think nurture hope? Do you know someone who exemplifies the kind of hope Havel describes? Describe them.

Have you ever heard people say that activists are just trying “to draw attention to themselves”? What was your response when you realized this same charge was being levied at a democracy movement that eventually took down a Communist dictatorship? How does our society portray political dissenters?

Would you agree with Milan Kundera that the petition circulated by Havel and others was futile? Why or why not? Compare Havel’s description of people being brought together to challenge the regime in an apparently futile context with Loeb’s friend Lisa standing in the rain and realizing she’d later helped inspire famed baby doctor, Ben Spock. How do these examples suggest that the impact of our actions may only be clear in hindsight?

How did the petition help keep the prisoners going? Have you ever witnessed a situation where the supportive actions of others help courageous individuals keep acting? Do you agree with Havel’s judgment that small acts of resistance can still matter—even if they don’t have the desired immediate outcome?

Since the dictatorship was still in power when Havel wrote his essay (and according to global consensus likely to remain so), what allowed him to see the cracks in the walls of their seemingly unchallengeable rule? Is it possible for us to look similarly beyond the horizon to see what might be possible in changing unjust situations in our own political context? What does it mean to “make a way out of no way”?

Havel describes resistance against a dictatorship that seeks to control every aspect of daily life to prevent people from questioning the prevailing authorities. Do our current leaders ever function in a similar way or does our culture function to marginalize dissent? If so, how? If we often avoid talking about the real and urgent questions of our time, what would it take for our culture to challenge this? What signs of these conversations do you see in today’s America?

Research Czechoslovakia’s “Chapter 77” movement. What were at least two goals of the movement?

What does *samizdat* mean? Why are the actions of *samizdat* important to the development of an independent culture? How important is it that books and periodicals in a free society express a range of views, even views some may not agree with? Are there current American examples that are comparable? Share any examples from your own experience about book banning or book challenges in your community.

“Here Comes the Sun” by Bill McKibben

McKibben describes a shift from solar and wind as “alternative energy”—like a niche health food store—to become the “Costco of energy,” cheap and mainstream. Did you know about the scale and speed of this transition before reading this essay? Or any of McKibben’s global examples? Why do you think you haven’t heard more about this story?

McKibben describes remarkable examples from Pakistan—where cheap Chinese solar panels enabled peasant farmers to pump irrigation water with electricity, causing diesel sales to drop 30 percent in a year—and similar progress in Africa. What does it mean for the future of energy that this transition is now being driven both by economics and environmental activism?

Or is environmental activism still essential because of the impact of government and corporate actions, for instance, the German environmental activists who pressured their government to widely subsidize solar deployment, which, in turn, dropped prices globally?

McKibben argues that the energy transition threatens not only fossil fuel companies but also autocratic regimes that depend on control of concentrated energy supplies: “The sun and the wind are available everywhere...This energy is impossible to hoard and difficult to fight wars over.” Do you agree that decentralized energy is democratizing? What are the implications for global politics?

The Trump administration’s “Big Beautiful Bill” ended federal tax credits for solar, wind, electric vehicles, and most renewable energy technologies. What were their justifications, and were they valid? What strategies does this suggest for those who want to continue this energy transition? What role can citizen activism play, including the kinds of activism described elsewhere in this book?

How would you describe McKibben’s overall perspective in the essay? Point to specific words or phrases that support your position. McKibben describes the energy transition as a hopeful development in a dire moment for the planet. After reading this essay alongside others in the anthology about climate despair and action, like Mary Pipher’s “Reluctant Activists,” does McKibben’s piece change your sense of what’s possible? What does hope look like in this context? If you believe this transition is necessary, can you think of actions you could take to accelerate it?

SECTION TWO: EVERYDAY GRACE

“The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry

How does the natural world liberate Berry from despair? Where do you go or what do you do to renew your spirit? Describe that place or activity. Why is it important for people to have places of renewal?

Everyday Grace: Introduction

Loeb compares those calling the suicide hotline where Diane Ackerman volunteers to burned-out political activists. “Suicidal people have tunnel vision,” Ackerman writes, “A counselor’s job is to put windows and doors in that tunnel.” How does this metaphor apply to political despair? Do you feel stuck in a tunnel in terms of options to change our society? If you’re feeling stuck in a tunnel of political despair, where might you look for windows and doors for that tunnel?

Scott Russell Sanders’s son accuses his father of being an “ambassador of doom”—someone who transmits so much despair about the ecological crisis that he forecloses hope rather than inspiring it. Have you encountered this dynamic, that is, someone whose urgency about an issue makes others feel more helpless? What’s the difference between conveying urgency and conveying hopelessness?

Barbara Kingsolver writes, “God is in the details, the completely unnecessary miracles sometimes tossed up as stars to guide us.” Howard Zinn invited a string quartet to play Mozart in his class because “political discussion can sour you. We needed some music.” What is the political argument being made here about the role of beauty, whether the beauty comes in nature, music, art or countless other expressions of beauty? Where do you find beauty? Think of examples where an experience of beauty or grace kept you going in a difficult time.

Do you get revived by a connection with the natural world? What lessons does this connection give in terms of working for its preservation?

“Gate A-4” by Naomi Shibab Nye

Why might Nye have paused at answering the call for someone who knew Arabic? Do you know anyone who has hesitated to respond to a comparably innocuous-seeming request because of political vulnerability?

In your opinion, what is the message that Nye is conveying to readers in her story? How did it make you feel?

How does Nye’s story relate to the section theme of hope emerging from everyday grace?

“A Slender Thread,” by Diane Ackerman

How are personal and political despair similar, from your experience? How do they differ?

Do you feel you have options for political change? How can the process of working for change be seen as “putting windows and doors” in a tunnel of political possibilities that we’re often told allows no exit?

What’s the relationship between what keeps Ackerman volunteering at the suicide hotline and the strength she tries to give to Louise? What are some strategies that Ackerman uses to help Louise in the midst of her crisis? How is the card Louise sends an example of a kind of impact we rarely know?

In her essay, Ackerman emphasizes the importance of human choices, explaining, “Choice is a signature of our species.” Describe the consequences of a critical choice you have made. How often do you define your choices in terms of the impact on the life of someone else or a larger common future?

[Please note: The national suicide and crisis hotline number is 988. (English and Spanish) Someone will always answer 24/7.]

Mountain Music” by Scott Russell Sanders

Do you relate more to the father’s or the son’s perspective in the essay? Explain. Have you had seemingly intractable rifts within your own family or close friends that were eventually bridged? What helped bridge the divide?

Have you wrestled with trying to acknowledge the crises of our time while still enjoying life? How do you resolve that potential tension?

Do you know or have you seen talks or interviews by activists who seem joyful despite all the bad news, as was true with Desmond Tutu? What do you think gives them this joy? How could you apply their example to your own life?

How open to change do you think the father is? What evidence in the essay supports your position? At the conclusion of the essay, the father says he must “look harder for antidotes, for medicines, for sources of hope.” What does he mean? How has he been challenged and changed by Jesse’s words? In your life and surroundings, identify possible “antidotes” and “medicines” that give you a sense of hope.

“Your view of things is totally dark,” says Sanders’s son, “It bums me out. You make me feel the planet’s dying and people are to blame and nothing can be done about it.” Do you ever feel that way when people are talking about global problems? How can people talk about what’s wrong in the world without reinforcing a culture of despair?

“Getting Our Gaze Back” by Rose Marie Berger.

Berger’s Christian faith tradition is central to her perspective. Must readers share a religious faith to understand her point? Why or why not? What does Berger mean by the “essential quality of Sabbath”? What is “holy dreaming”? Describe a current situation where you feel overwhelmed or bombarded by information, chaos, or despair. Now describe a daydream or other activity that gives you the kind of “essential quality of Sabbath” that Berger experiences. What activity recovers your clarity of vision?

“Fragile and Hidden” by Henri Nouwen

What connections do you see between Nouwen’s essay and the possibility of gaining strength through vulnerability? How does the fragility of Adam’s life nurture Nouwen’s hope?

Have you ever had a friendship or relationship with someone who was seemingly disadvantaged, perhaps severely physically or medically handicapped? Did you draw particular lessons from this person, as Nouwen did with Adam? Explain.

Have you ever experienced hope at a time or place when you least expected it? Explain.

“There Is a Season” by Parker Palmer

Palmer talks of being “swept away on an updraft of hope,” and then on “a tidal wave of despair.” Have you ever experienced this vast swing in feelings? In what situation? How do we keep our moorings in situations where our hopes are alternately raised and dashed?

Discuss the metaphor for life as one of natural seasons compared to one of manufacturing. Which do you prefer? To what extent do you think the metaphors we choose for life influence our perceptions? Our actions? Can you think of an additional metaphor for life, hope, or activism?

Through much of the essay, Palmer uses the metaphor of life as “a cycle of seasons.” Summarize the gifts each season brings to his life. Can you extend the seasons metaphor--that is, what other images or comparisons or gifts can you add for each season? Which of the four seasons that Palmer describes resonates with you today?

Describe a specific person or event from your own life that serves as a specific example of the gifts from one of the seasons Palmer describes.

What do you think Palmer means when he says that winter “clears the landscape, however brutally, giving us a chance to see ourselves and each other more clearly, to see the very ground of our being”? Have you ever experienced a loss in a way that eventually left you seeing more clearly? Explain.

Palmer calls abundance “a communal act.” According to him, how is abundance created? How does the world of nature teach the human world this same principle?

What lessons does Palmer suggest the natural world teaches about keeping on for the long haul in working for change?

“Political Paralysis” by Danusha Veronica Goska

Do we talk of feeling paralyzed too easily? If so, why do you think this is? What’s our response when we find someone who faces actual physical paralysis yet finds ways to act? Why do you think we often view people who work for change as “virtue saints?”

Why are so many of those who pick Goska up and give her a ride to and from the food bank the most seemingly marginal? Why are we often uncomfortable, perhaps even afraid, of the physically ill or economically vulnerable? Where might these hesitations come from? What might Goska say in response?

Identify a problem in your daily surroundings or community, like Goska being unable to get back and forth to the food bank. Is there anything you could do today to make a positive difference? Are any local groups trying to do something? Report back after you’ve either tried something yourself or asked someone already involved about their efforts to make a positive difference. How can these efforts be sustained?

Contrast Goska’s roles as a Peace Corps volunteer and a nurse’s aide. What is her point? Think of a specific person you know, or a specific experience you had where someone was overlooked because their job wasn’t respected. What specific contributions does this person make to the quality of your life or community?

Goska contends that “virtue” is often defined as “the ultimate commodity, something exclusive... [something] outside of normal experience or ability,” then provides contrasting examples of volunteering in the Peace Corps or for Sisters of Charity and working as a nurse’s aide. Think of other examples that support the distinction Goska is trying to make. Why is this distinction important to the broader understanding of activism?

Describe a time when you heard a “still, small voice” that prompted you to act. What did you do—did you act or stifle that voice? For the next week, make a concerted effort to hear those still, small voices that encourage you to act on small or large issues; then report back.

Goska reminds readers that they are “in charge of their own choices.” How does this point connect to the way Ackerman talks about choice? What do you think keeps Goska going in her bleakest moments?

SECTION THREE: REBELLIOUS IMAGINATION

“Celebration of the Human Voice” by Eduardo Galeano

Is it valuable to speak out even if you may never be heard? What are some of the ways voices are silenced in our society? What happens to us when our voices are silenced? Discuss times in your own life when you may have felt silenced.

What is Galeano saying about the human spirit? What is he saying about isolation vs. community?

Galeano concludes: “every single one of us has something to say to the others, something that deserves to be celebrated or forgiven by others.” As we listen to others, how do we discern authentic communication vs. empty words?

“Last Night as I Was Sleeping” by Antonio Machado

What does Machado mean by “marvelous error!”?

What is the main point Machado is expressing in this poem? List some of the seemingly ordinary things that both poets, Berry and Machado, seem to recognize as gifts of the everyday world. List several “everyday gifts” in your own surroundings.

Section Three Introduction

How often have you heard the phrase “There is no alternative” used to explain and justify a troubling political choice or situation? Is there a link between loss of imagination and resignation? Is there a link between recapturing our imagination and being able to act?

What is the role of imagination in a time when gains long-advocated by social justice movements are being rolled back or under attack?

Loeb describes activists wearing inflatable animal costumes—frogs, dinosaurs, dragons—at protests against Trump-era immigration enforcement. Loeb argues these costumes “belied the regime’s claims” that protest cities were “unlivable war zones” and “challenged images of regime opponents as everything from terrorists to humorless scolds.” What has been your response to these kinds of playful actions at protests held to call attention to serious issues? Explain why you think such actions strengthen a movement or undermine it? Have you ever used humor to call attention to something you cared about? If so, explain your approach and what happened.

As Loeb describes, the Serbian youth movement Otpor! painted dictator Slobodan Milošević's face on a barrel and invited passersby to pay a dinar to hit it. When police confiscated the barrel, Otpor! issued press releases reading "Police Arrest Barrel." How did this action undermine Milošević's authority?

Loeb describes John Lewis's childhood metaphor—children holding hands in corners of a house during a storm to keep it from blowing off its foundation—as "a perfect parable for those of us who wish to stand firm against the political storms of our times." Do you find this metaphor useful? Can you think of a situation where you were part of a group that did something together that none of you could have done alone?

Loeb writes: "Imagination and community feed each other. In isolation, imagination can breed obsession and estrangement. Shared imagination, by contrast, leads outward, to other people and new possibilities." Have you experienced either of these dynamics—imagination cut off from community or imagination building on community? What conditions seem to produce one or the other?

"To Love the Marigold" by Susan Griffin

Griffin writes of the critical role of dreaming and imagination in working for change. What distinguishes dreaming as escape, fine in its place but limited in its impact, from dreaming that opens up new possibilities for action?

What is the difference between "capitulatory imagination" and "rebellious imagination"? Can you think of examples of each kind?

Griffin refers to a skyscraper as "an icon of an anonymous power, in whose shadow [she] feels powerless." What other icons of power do you see in American society today? Who or what created and maintains the power behind them? Who might feel powerless in the face of them? Why? Is it important for all citizens to feel empowered in their lives?

"To see what exists freshly and without prejudice clears the way for seeing what might exist in the future, or what is possible," Griffin writes. Do you agree? Given all we've been told and taught, what are some ways of learning to see the world with fresh eyes? Have you ever experienced something that helped you do this?

"The camera's eyes," Griffin writes, "also catch a tender quality of innocence and hope, an expression one so seldom sees any longer even on the faces of any but the youngest children." Do we live in a time where innocence is rare? If so, what factors have contributed to that? What do we lose by assuming there's little or nothing we can do together to improve the world for others? What's the difference between wishful thinking and genuine hope?

Griffin speaks of the failure of grand political dreams: How do we work for fundamental change when visions of systematic social transformation have often ended up in destructive betrayal? As Griffin writes, "Where once there were societies that served as models for a better future, grand plans, utopias, now there is distrust and dissatisfaction with any form of politics, a sense of powerlessness

edging into nihilism.” Are there other ways to view social change that acknowledge the limits of past alternatives, but still let us dream beyond the boundaries of the present? Can you think of any contemporary examples?

How does imagination generate hope? Why do you think Desnos reading people’s palms in a concentration camp turned around the reality the prisoners were facing? If we can’t always translate wild hope directly into politics, can we use play and creativity to sustain our spirits? Can you think of a time in your own life when this has happened?

Can you give an example of the paralysis of “realism?” What does Griffin mean when she says social movements are driven by imagination? How does a society cultivate imagination in its citizens, especially the young? How might imagination address some of our society’s critical needs?

Griffin writes, “What was obscure comes forward. Lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn over the old maps: It is from this new way of seeing the present that hope for the future emerges.” Can you think of a moment—historical or personal—when someone literally redrew what seemed possible by seeing differently? Are there positive and negative examples of this?

Griffin concludes her essay with the imperative: “Let us begin to imagine the worlds we would like to inhabit, the long lives we will share, and the many futures in our hands.” Identify one community of which you are a part, such as your dormitory, college campus, or hometown. Using your imagination, describe the community in terms of one you’d like to inhabit. What will have to occur in the present community in order to make these changes a reality? What role can you have in enacting change?

“The Black Hole” by Ariel Dorfman

Did you know about Allende and the Chilean coup before reading this essay, or about the “No Campaign” that finally removed the dictator Pinochet? What about their overthrow of an elected government in Iran, which set the stage for the dictatorial rule of the Shah, and the country’s current religious dictatorship? If not, would you call these cases of hiding “the grief of history” for raising discomforting questions? Can you think of current examples where history is being hidden or erased? What is the implication of examples like these?

Dorfman describes the message about the lack of human worth communicated to the Chilean people as “subhuman, incompetent, inferior, worthless, lazy.” Similarly, are there people in America who are told this about their lives? How much is the American Dream based on “each person scratching his way to the top, where, if he was lucky or ruthless enough, he could then become the exploiter of his brothers”?

What does it mean for people to tell “their own lives in their own way” rather than live under “the shadow of somebody else’s story”? Which stories about who should be in charge dominate US culture?

How did Allende's version of socialism differ from the brutal dictatorships of Eastern Europe? What lesson does it teach when the United States overthrows governments that play by the rules of democracy?

Does any country have the right to overthrow the government of another or invade another country? Under what circumstances? Would it ever be acceptable for another country to try to overthrow the US government? Explain, possibly incorporating Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Donald Trump's attacks on other countries or their leaders.

Research how many governments the US has overthrown or helped overthrow since the end of World War II. How often did US efforts bring democracy to a dictatorship? How often did US efforts change a dictatorship into a democracy? How often did US actions replace one dictatorship with another?

Dorfman describes how Pinochet disciplined the factory worker Juan and his *companeros* for "an act of the imagination." Does this mean people should not dream of justice or act for justice because this might bring retribution? Explain.

Dorfman would like to tell "the young man he used to be" some of the lessons he learned. List some lessons he would tell "that young man" differently. What is the one thing he says he will not tell him? Can you think of something you would tell your younger self about a lesson you have learned?

In many ways this essay is a discussion of crushed hopes and justice unredeemed. It describes a world where, Salvador Allende was dead and the dictator Augusto Pinochet was, when Dorfman wrote it, alive and free. Yet it is also a piece about the persistence of hope. Dorfman seems to still find strength from memories of those first days when it seemed like everything could change. Do these hopes seem impossible? How does our hope differ if we've never lived through such moments? How can we even begin imagining far-reaching changes if we're told that we have no right to even open up these questions?

The Chilean woman who was tortured found comfort in the words of Neruda and Machado, although she does not cite specific poems. Look back at the poem "Last Night as I Was Sleeping" by Machado. How might this poem have brought comfort in the middle of a living Hell? Search poems by Neruda to see if you can find a Neruda poem that might have brought the Chilean woman comfort.

Dorfman concludes the essay by defending both the woman's "right to struggle and our obligation to remember." What does he mean that struggle is "a right"? Why is it our obligation as citizens to remember those who struggled before us? How can we learn this history if we've not been taught it before?

"Jesus and Alinsky" by Walter Wink

Have you heard anything resembling Wink's reinterpretation of these classic parables? How do they mesh with your previous reading of the Bible? Do you see the parables of "Turn the Other Cheek" and "Go the Extra Mile" as supporting compliance or resistance?

What do you think of Wink's thesis that the more radical translations of Jesus were buried by court translators in favor of ones that promoted docility and blind acceptance of authority? How does the religious tradition you've grown up with suggest we respond to the actions of our leaders? In other words, do you think we're trained to question leaders, or to assume that if they publicly manifest religious faith they're following God's will?

Did you know about the uprisings against the Romans and the laws that governed relationships between Roman occupiers and the Jews? Why is this kind of information helpful to interpretation of scripture?

How has the Bible been used to justify injustice in situations like slavery, segregation, or apartheid South Africa, as when the Southern Baptists and Presbyterians split off from their more abolitionist northern brethren over slavery, white Southern churches supported segregation, or white South African church leaders justified apartheid? What do you know of this history?

How has the Bible been used to inspire people and maintain hope and spirit in freedom movements, like the role of the black churches in the American Civil Rights Movement and of South African leaders like Desmond Tutu? What do you know of this history? Can you think of current civil rights leaders for whom their faith is central?

Do you think that taking the message of Jesus seriously should lead one to engage in activism? If so, for what kinds of issues? How would that activism look compared to those who come to engagement from other religious backgrounds or from no religious background? What values and convictions are shared among those who work for social justice from different cultural and religious experience?

How do Wink's creative nonviolent resistance efforts parallel Griffin's call for radical creativity in approaching injustice?

Do Jesus and the legendary community organizer Saul Alinsky seem appropriate to be linked in this essay? Why or why not?

How could we apply the kinds of approaches Wink describes to our current time? Or can you name examples where this is happening? How can we bring the imaginative—and even the outrageous—into political action without feeding a culture of chaos and fear? Is there a clue in Wink's suggestion that we only pursue tactics that we would not mind others pursuing against us?

Wink describes three responses to injustice—violent resistance (or rage), passivity, and creative nonviolent resistance. Can you think of examples in your own life where you've faced an unjust situation? How did you respond? What lessons does Wink offer for creative responses in personal or political life?

How valuable is the practice of "turning the other cheek"? Do you think it can successfully shame the powerful? Can you think of strategies for our own time similar to those that Wink explores?

Do you think that Pope Francis and Pope Leo represent a shift in the core priorities of the global Catholic Church? If so, what do you think of this shift, whether or not you're Catholic?

Identify a current situation of injustice or oppression with which you are familiar. Brainstorm possible opportunities for creative political activism in your community. Or, talk about engagement that's currently going on.

What's the relationship between dramatic political theater, like that embodied by the Serbian movement Otpor! and more patient community organizing of the type that Alinsky also promoted?

“Stories from the Cha Cha Cha” by Vern Huffman

The context for the stories Huffman shares dates back to the 1960s. Why are the stories still relevant today?

Did you know any of these stories? How do the stories mesh with the lessons of Griffin and Wink? What is the place for the wild or even outrageous in successful social movements? How can we take radical or provocative stands without reinforcing a culture of fear?

“Walking With the Wind” by John Lewis

Do you have core childhood memories that help you through difficult times, or ones that hold you back and make you hesitate to act on your deepest beliefs? Are you surprised Lewis credits this childhood memory with helping inspire his amazingly powerful life? Does the story he cites resonate with you? Explain.

Lewis asserts that in the 1960s, “people of conscience” never walked away from the weakest corner of the house; rather, they joined hands to gain strength where they were weak. Think of citizens today who are “people of conscience”? Describe why.

Identify some of the “weakest corners” of American society today and identify possible causes. Whose responsibility is it to strengthen them? What responsibility, if any, do individual citizens have to the house as a whole?

To what degree are the core myths of our society communal—about joining together—or individual, based on lone heroes? If the latter, does this make it harder to act together on larger concerns? How can we recover the stories that help us act in common?

We often think of our families as bastions of love—or would like to. Can we extend the way we treat the bonds of common kinship and apply it to how our society should be run or to how we could work for social change? In this context, what would it mean to treat all human beings as fellow children of God?

One of the clichés of our culture is that those who act for change when they're young inevitably sell out down the line. What are the continuities between Lewis as a young man and as a Congressman? Why do you think he was able to hold on to his values?

Optional assignment: Read Lewis's autobiography, *Walking with the Wind*, Lewis's graphic novel trilogy *March*, about the Civil Rights movement, or David Halberstam's portrait of Lewis in *The Children*.

“Do Not Go Gentle” by Sherman Alexie

The title of Alexie's story is a phrase from Welsh poet Dylan Thomas: “Do not go gentle into that good night.” Read the Thomas poem to see how it poem informs your understanding of the point Alexie is making.

What kind of hope does Alexie's story convey?

What does Alexie mean by “We were Indians, and didn't want to carry around too much hope. Hope eats your flesh like a spider bite.” Can you hope for a given outcome too much? Can you find ways to act while letting go of the outcome? This was an intensely personal crisis, yet Alexie's character was hardly passive. Does Alexie's essay offer hope to the oppressed?

Alexie talks about being “deadly serious and deadly funny at the same time.” Explain how powerful activism can be both. “A father like a sick child,” writes Alexie, “is an angry god.” How can we take the fierceness with which we'd fight for our family and fight for the families of others?

“When you're hurting, it feels good to hurt someone else.” Have you ever felt that? Have you ever acted on that? Did it ease the hurt?

What might the parents have been feeling when they beat on the drums with the Chocolate Thunder vibrator? Have you ever experienced a mix of grief, an outlet for that grief, and hope?

How do the characters portrayed draw strength from their native culture and tradition? Is it important to retain cultural heritage? Explain. Is there a cultural tradition in your family that provides a sense of foundation and strength?

What was your response to Alexie's use of sexual humor? Did it seem unexpected in a book on political hope? Would Desmond Tutu have liked this story? What lessons does the story convey about the links between imagination, faith, and the possibility of miracles of hope?

“Despair Is a Lie We Tell Ourselves” by Tony Kushner

What does Kushner mean by calling despair a lie? How does an attitude of despair become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Can hope become a self-fulfilling prophecy as well?

Discuss your own experiences with activism and complacency. Do individual citizens in a society have a responsibility for activism? Think of examples in history or your experience where complacency had a negative effect. Now think of examples of courage or action, and effect they had.

Does climate change feel more like an urgent immediate threat or some distant possible cataclysm, like a distant star going supernova? Explain.

What's the relationship between our individual actions and the possibility of changing the world? "Not any single one of us has to or possibly can save the world," Kushner says, "but together in some kind of concert, in even-not-especially-coordinated concert, the world will change." Do you agree? What examples from essays or poems in this book support Kushner's argument?

At one point, Kushner tells us to turn off the computers and show up "at meetings and demos and rallies and leafletting corners." Since our computers and phones can be key political tools, what point is he making? What are benefits that technology can provide for activism, and what are the limits? How do recapture face-to-face interactions with our fellow human beings if we're always staring at our screens?

How do we cultivate a spirit of wild hope, like that in the Sherman Alexie's story or that of the man who drove the Range Rover through the shop window?

SECTION FOUR COURAGE IS CONTAGIOUS

"To Be of Use" by Marge Piercy

When this poem first came out in the early 1970's, copies were tacked to every activist bulletin board imaginable. What is it about "work that is real" that is so elusive in our society and so integral a goal in efforts at change?

Piercy's poem was written long before artificial intelligence. Does AI affect our understanding of the nature of work and the point Piercy is making in the poem?

Summarize the personal qualities of the people that Piercy loves best. Have you known someone who exhibits these traits? Describe the kind of work ethic you admire in others. Do you possess or aspire to aspects of this ethic?

Why do you think "To Be of Use" was selected as the introductory poem to section four titled "Courage Is Contagious"? How does this poem have broader application to community? To the theme of hope?

American income inequality is getting wider and wider, with even full-time work leaving more and more people precarious. How important is work to individual citizens and society? Beyond financial compensation in wages and benefits, what else does work provide for people? What happens when decently paid work disappears? Research unemployment and underemployment in your community, the experience of the long-term unemployed, the experience of struggling to get by, and groups that are working to reduce this.

Section Four Introduction:

Have you ever spoken out on an issue you cared about to people you doubted would be receptive, or stood up to bullying or intimidation? What was the response? What did it take to voice your perspective, and what did it feel like when you did?

How is silence contagious? How is courage contagious? Why don't we stand up more often to actions we feel are unjust, whether in public or in personal life?

Loeb writes: "All these seemingly mundane activities"—phone calls, canvassing, coalition-building, voter registration—"play at least an equal role in bringing about change" to the more dramatic acts of civil disobedience. Do you believe this? In a media environment that privileges dramatic gestures and extraordinary risk, how do we maintain respect for and commitment to the unglamorous work of organizing?

Do you agree with suffrage pioneer Susan B. Anthony, when she writes: "Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform." Is there a tension between Anthony's call to disregard social standing and the importance of building broad coalitions that necessarily include people who are cautious? How do you navigate between uncompromising courage and strategic judgment about when and how to speak?

Loeb quotes legendary tennis player Martina Navratilova: "I defected from a totalitarian regime, and like hell am I gonna be cowed again and have to be careful about what I say." Loeb places this alongside Tom Paine's call to be more than "summer soldiers" and "sunshine patriots." What does it mean to carry the lessons of one historical struggle into a different context? Is there a lesson or figure from a historical struggle that inspire you today?

Paul met the young Egyptian woman Nada as an American college student, yet she participated in the historic Arab Spring events that overthrew the dictator Mubarak. She said she understood the risks, but acted anyway. Why is it that some people will literally risk lives and freedom for democracy yet nearly half of eligible students didn't vote in 2024?

Do you agree with Nada that participating in the overthrow of Mubarak was still worthwhile despite his being replaced by another dictator, because their activism gave her and millions of others their voices? Describe what you think provided Nada with a voice in her activism efforts?

Read the following quotes, and then think of a personal example that supports the main point of the quote you've selected:

"Democracy is not a spectator sport. It works only when people take the risk of standing strong for what they believe, and refuse to be bullied and intimidated."

"Courage can be contagious."

"The heroic draw strength from the humble, just as often as the humble draw strength from the heroic."

Republican former Congressman Adam Kinzinger says: "It's not that I was so courageous. It's that the others weren't willing to stand for what they believe." This reframes courage not as an exceptional trait but as a baseline most people are capable of, but simply don't exercise. What does it suggest about why so many people who privately disagree with unjust actions still go along with them?

Loeb describes his encounter with Phil Berrigan, who asked pointedly when the author was going to "follow his book." He concludes: "If we aren't going to follow a path similar to those who take the greatest risks... then maybe we should use their deeds as a call to do what we can, in our own way, according to our own abilities and circumstances." How do you think about the relationship between admiring radical courage and deciding what level of risk you're personally willing to take?

Regardless of party identification, is there a line that political leaders need to draw between legitimate partisan stands and ones that value winning over basic democratic principles? Is it ever acceptable for political leaders to move their political agendas forward at any cost? Think about the present and past administrations of the United States. Can you think of examples when this has happened? What is an appropriate response if you agree with a party on many issues, but find their political tactics troubling? Where do you draw the line?

"Refusing to be Quislings" by Paul Rogat Loeb

The word "quisling"—now a synonym for traitor and collaborator—comes from Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian fascist who collaborated with the Nazi occupation. Before reading this essay, did you know the history of Quisling and the Norwegian teachers' resistance? What does it say about our collective memory that stories of resistance often get less attention than stories of collaboration or defeat?

Norway's teachers faced a stark choice: sign a loyalty pledge to the new fascist order, or face arrest, loss of salary and pension, and imprisonment in concentration camps. About 11,000 of 14,000 teachers refused, sending their refusals by mail on the same day. What gave them the courage to do this? What role did coordination and solidarity play—and what would have happened if only a few hundred had refused?

The teachers developed small acts of resistance—wearing paper clips to "stay together," singing patriotic songs when school inspectors arrived, turning their backs on German soldiers. These may seem trivial, but they accumulated into something powerful. Can you think of examples today where small symbolic acts of resistance have amplified into something larger?

Loeb describes how the imprisoned teachers worked to maintain morale: singing, forming choirs, giving lectures, drawing. Holmboe said solidarity was critical because participants needed to know "that others will do it too." How does knowing others are with you in a struggle sustain you? Can you think of a time when this was true in your own life?

When Quisling told the teachers at Stabekk—"You teachers have destroyed everything for me"—what does this reveal about the power that ordinary people can exercise in their work roles? What lessons does the Norwegian resistance hold for educators, public servants, and professionals defending democracy today? Do you think America's professionals today have responded stood up for their beliefs sufficiently when faced with edict such as the removal of certain books in a school library or bans on teaching certain subjects? Are there challenges in America today that make resistance more challenging than for Norwegian teachers in the 1940's? Are there still ways past these challenges? Explain.

What can educators today as well as the rest of us learn from the Norwegians?

The teachers' resistance was key to Hitler eventually ordering the complete abandonment of Quisling's Corporative State. Does knowing that their efforts actually worked against the Nazis change how you think about the possibility of nonviolent resistance? What does this story of resistance have in common with Jungmin Choi's "Lightsticks and K-Pop" about South Korea? What does it mean that Minnesotans resisting ICE often talked about how Norwegian grandparents had resisted the Nazis?

"Resisting Terror" by Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall

Did you know the stories of the Rosenstrasse Jews, or the Mothers of the Disappeared? Why don't we learn about these immensely hopeful stories?

What do these stories say about how some people manage to act even among the most extreme and intimidating circumstances—such as the threat of being shot by the Nazis? Most of us face far fewer potential consequences for standing up on our beliefs than the stories in this essay, or others in the book. So what lessons do these stories suggest about taking about courageous action when we have far more freedom and latitude, and far less risk?

Azucenda de Villaflor de De Vincente was an "ordinary homemaker, never looking outward until 1976." What is meant by the phrase, "never looking outward"? Do you mostly look outward or inward? What are some ways we can challenge ourselves to be more outward looking and actively engaged in ways that might prevent tragic events? To what extent do you feel you look outward in your own life, or consider yourself an activist?

De Vincente became an activist after her son and daughter-in-law disappeared. What allows people to act if they haven't been directly touched by oppression or tragedy? Is it a sense of feeling someone's story, whether or not you know them personally? Interview someone who acts to save particular communities or individuals even though they may never directly know them directly.

The essay describes stories of oppression in both Berlin and Buenos Aires, where the power of women to initiate change was underestimated. What skills, traits, or attributes did the women bring to those situations of oppression that helped initiate change? Do you think the power of women to initiate change is underestimated today? Explain.

Research other examples of nonviolent resistance, like the others in Ackerman and DuVall's book. How do these stories support the thesis of the essay?

Are there lessons from "Resisting Terror" about how to deal with dictatorial regimes like Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Venezuela? Explain whether you agree or disagree.

Whatever one thinks about the possibilities of nonviolent resistance, what do these essays say about the possibilities of human courage and hope?

"The Transformation of Silence" by Audre Lorde

How does Lorde's cancer lead her to look at her life "in a merciless light?"

What does she mean by “What I most regretted were my silences”? Why do you think we sometimes remain silent when we wanted to use our voices?

Are there silences that you have regretted, situations or issues where you wanted to speak up but didn’t? Why didn’t you, and was there a cost?

What does it mean to learn to work and speak when you are afraid? What would it take for you to do this in your own life? Do you think we get more comfortable about speaking out the more we do it?

“The Small Work in the Great Work” by Victoria Stafford

What was your response to the young Native American woman’s story? Could you imagine yourself taking any equivalent stand? What would hold you back? What would allow you to do this?

Safford talks about our souls blooming when we step into the sunlight of acting on our beliefs, on who we are. Do you find the image of our souls blooming in the sunlight of acting on our beliefs to be exciting or daunting, perhaps both? Explain. What does Safford’s essay suggest about vocation or calling?

Have you ever taken a difficult action and felt your spirit bloom? If you felt you did, when did that happen in relation to the action you took? What does this suggest about activism and patience?

Safford writes: “Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope...the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle.” What does she mean, and how would you apply her challenging call to your own choices?

“The small work in the Great Work” can be explained as “the place of your little life and love, daily days and earnest effort as a solitary person within the larger Life and larger Love.” Explain the “small work” you’re doing within the Great Work. Is there a way to expand your efforts to make an even greater difference?

Safford describes ordinary people who have inspired her to act, to do good. Describe someone you know who has inspired you.

“On Being Different” by Dan Savage

In 2015, a Supreme Court ruling made same-sex marriage legal in the United States; globally, same-sex marriage became legal in the Netherlands in 2001. Do you think most people of your generation take gay marriage for granted? What would it feel like to be in a relationship that’s been so previously stigmatized but now gets legitimacy from the highest court in the land? Does the same-sex marriage legal decision seem threatened or secure with the current Supreme Court?

Did you know that marriage between whites and Asians was illegal in California until 1949, and in half the states in the country as late as 1957?

Do you have friends or relatives who are LGBT (or do you fit one of those categories)? What was their experience (or your experience) growing up? How different is it from the picture that Merle Miller describes or that Savage experienced growing up? Have any of them (or you) received judgments similar to those that Miller described? What has helped or hindered the national change in attitude toward LGBT individuals?

Do you know any families whose views on homosexuality changed when they discovered that their children were gay?

What do you think led the parents of the friends of Dan Savage's adopted son to trust them with Savage and his husband in Hawaii?

How much do you know about the history of the gay rights movement and how it changed dialogue in America? Research some of its history of pioneers?

What did Harvey Milk mean by saying, "I know that you cannot live on hope alone but without it, life is not worth living"? Have you ever given someone personal or political hope to keep on? Has anyone ever given you hope to keep on? Search for more information about Harvey Milk.

Have you had to ever tell your family or friends something about who you are that you knew might upset them? What was the context and what was this experience like?

What are the lessons from the successes of the gay rights movement for other movements to create social change?

"We Are All Khaled Said" by Wael Ghonim

When you heard about the protests in Tahrir Square, did you wonder about what led up to it? Why is it that we think of movements only in their most dramatic visible public moments and yet ignore everything that leads up to them?

What barriers did people face in Mubarak's Egypt to speaking out, to "coming into the light," in the phrase of Victoria Safford? Describe how they overcame them?

Much of today's activism is online—petitions, email campaigns, liking a cause on Facebook, or promoting a related TikTok or Instagram. In the case of "We Are All Khaled Said" movement, discuss the effectiveness of the online strategies? What are the advantages and disadvantages of online approaches compared to face to face organizing? How can online and face to face strategies complement each other?

Did Mubarak's Egypt have particular circumstances that made it more appropriate for many to begin their dissent online? What were the strategies of the organizers as they worked to get people to speak out in person?

Loeb's *Soul of a Citizen* book talks about the need for successful citizen activists to combine a leap of faith with intentional strategic action. How did the Egyptian protests combine the two? Does Ghonim offer lessons about how to make a buried issue visible? How would you apply them to very different culture of the United States?

Ghonim describes creating an alternative to another, more confrontative Facebook page, and trying to speak in a language that ordinary Egyptians would respond to. How would you engage people who vehemently disagree with you on an issue you care about?

The Silent Stand aimed to bring people out from behind their computers and phones and help them give each other courage to publicly share their outrage. Have you had an experience where people helped each other speak out in a difficult situation?

What do you think gave the mostly young Egyptians the courage to face potential death, beating, jail or torture? What had stopped them from speaking out previously? What are the lessons for us, even in a situation where we aren't facing such dramatic costs?

“In What Do I Place My Trust?” by Sister Rosalie Bertell

What is Bertell's main point about stories? Interview someone who has a “nourishing story” to tell, that is, a story to inspire, to instruct, to carry you forward.

Bertell tells readers that “...it is the little things, wonderful synergies, amazing coincidences, and sudden discoveries of beauty that offer us daily nourishment.” Think of a small thing, perhaps an amazing coincidence, or unexpected discovery of beauty lately that gave you a sense of daily nourishment. If you can't think of an example, what might be the reason?

Bertell writes about the importance of human connectedness: “We have to be part of something larger than ourselves, because our dreams are often bigger than our lifetimes.” What are historical or contemporary examples of individuals who did not achieve their goals within their lifetimes, but they continued to work for their dreams anyway, and looking back, helped achieve those goals? What traits might we need to learn or develop in ourselves so that we, too, learn to act in causes whose full fruits may not bloom until long after we're gone?

Does Bertell's notion of connectedness and mutual dependency conflict with the common belief of American individualism? Explain.

Bertell was a long-time environmental activist. Brainstorm one or more environmental issues that affect you and your community. For one of the issues, research the issue and positions of key elected officials. What are the pros and cons of the issue? With which position do you agree or disagree the most? Why?

“Faith Works” by Jim Wallis

What does Wallis mean by “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change”? Do you agree?

Wallis describes the “rise of the consumer society.” How satisfied are you with this direction? In what way do you support or resist pervasive consumerism? How do our religious institutions respond to this shift?

Do you think Wallis speaks only to Christians? Explain.

Discuss the appropriate role of faith as a political tool. How did Desmond Tutu’s faith empower him to tell the South African policemen that they were on the wrong side of God and history, and then invite them to join the winning side? How could we adapt Tutu’s style of generous-spirited truth-telling to our own political climate?

PART FIVE: THE TURNINGS OF HISTORY

“Imagine the Angels of Bread” by Martin Espada

Identify the specific groups of oppressed or humiliated people on which the poem focuses. In part, this poem contrasts those who have power and those who don’t, for example, the landlords and the homeless. List other contrasting categories of people with power or seeming lack of power that you can think of.

Reread the poem, preferably aloud. What is the effect of the line “This is the year...” repeated throughout the poem? What other words, lines, or images seemed particularly powerful as you reread the poem?

What responsibilities do those hold positions of power have towards those who have less?

Espada describes a reversal of roles—one aimed more at justice rather than vengeance. What’s the difference between the two visions? Why is it hard to imagine those on the bottom of our society being treated with dignity instead of contempt?

What thoughts or feelings were evoked in you after you read this poem?

Part Five Introduction

Reread the Serenity Prayer in the first paragraph of Part Five Introduction. Do you view it as encouragement to take on daunting challenges, to accept the world as it is, or both? When we’re deciding what is or isn’t changeable, what do you think of Loeb’s conclusion, that “we can only know through action.” And how do you avoid both fatalism and denial when thinking about major social challenges?

What do you think we learn from the chain of events where Loeb begins with the daughter of Lockheed engineer Robert Aldridge’s daughter challenging her father on the moral implication of his work, and ends with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issuing a statement against the nuclear arms race and Reagan and Gorbachev ultimately halting it. What does it suggest about the interactions between individual action and institutional change?

How does the chain of events Loeb describes in the introduction connect to Bertell's statement, "We are part of a great chain of big-hearted people who care about the Earth, about the life that gives it fruitfulness, and about a world where rights would be respected, children would be cherished, and peace would prevail"?

The Keystone XL pipeline was widely considered "a done deal" until Mary Pipher and a handful of friends began engaging others to challenge it. What does their eventual success say about the relationship between institutional power and citizen organizing?

Did you know how close the Southern states came to extending slavery to dominate the U.S? Are there lessons from today for the unexpected success of the abolitionists?

Textile magnate Amos Lawrence describes how citizen resistance to slavery led him to go to bed one night "an old-fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whig" and wake up "a stark mad Abolitionist." What produces this kind of rapid political conversion? Have you experienced anything like this yourself, or witnessed it in someone else? What makes a person's previous commitments suddenly feel insufficient in the face of a pervasive injustice?

Explain the following quote: "Hope isn't an abstract theory about where human aspirations end and the impossible begins; it's a never-ending experiment, continually expanding the boundaries of the possible."

"Reluctant Activists" by Mary Pipher

Has your community experienced extreme weather events that fit the pattern of global climate change? What were they, and did community leaders and people you knew talk about this broader context or just address the immediate crisis?

How often do you think about climate change? Do you think you can do anything about it? Describe actions, small or large, that you have taken any actions to address climate change.

What traits, qualities, or skills do you think people need to act even when they're told "there's no alternative"?

Does it surprise you that someone who's a nationally best-selling psychologist also wrestles with despair? Explain. Have you ever read anything that leaves you temporarily despairing, but later inspires you to act, even in small ways?

What does Pipher mean by saying, "shouting 'Wake up' doesn't work"? What alternative does she create to simply telling people "Things are terrible." Have you ever experienced a situation where you wanted to shout "Wake Up" on some issue? What happened?

Why do you think Pipher and her friends felt better as the night went on in their initial potluck, even though they didn't have clear solutions? What does this say about the power of community?

What do you think of TransCanada leasing land from all the local officials along the proposed pipeline route? Think of additional situations or examples where monied interests buy political allegiances? Does Pipher's essay make you feel you can do something in situations like this, or on climate change in general?

Why do you think the movement against Keystone chose rancher Randy Thompson as a symbol? What does this say about the potential for people of differing political perspectives to work together in common cause?

What does Pipher mean when she says "People seemed to be able to 'afford to' listen when the conversation ended with something specific they could do"? What's the difference in your experience between learning about challenging issues presented along with ways to act and ones presented without them? Should this change the way social action groups or even academic classes present their conclusions? Explain.

How would it feel to be part of Pipher's coalition and hear 85,000 Nebraska fans boo TransCanada's ad at the Big Red football game? Have you ever encountered situations where people worked to shift public sentiment and it began to succeed?

How did you feel as a reader to learn Pipher and her colleagues ultimately won, even though the prevailing seemed nearly impossible at the beginning? Do you think they were surprised? Is this a good example of Jim Wallis's acting despite the evidence and then watching the evidence change?

What does Pipher mean by "I do this work because acting as if I have hope gives me hope"? How does her experience bears this out? How could you apply this approach in your own life? Explain why most of us could be called "reluctant activists" at one time or another. What changes people's reluctance so they become more engaged?

"Curitiba" by Bill McKibben with a post-script by Paul Rogat Loeb

Several essays in this anthology celebrate the power of human imagination. Cite examples where you see the power of imagination at work in the city of Curitiba. How did the government of Curitiba blend the imaginative and the practical?

Would you like to live in Curitiba? Explain. What are some of the challenges U.S. cities face that are similar to the challenges Curitiba faced? Is a city like Curitiba possible in the United States? Why or why not?

Why has Curitiba's approach to low-income housing been successful?

What about its transportation approaches? What does it do to a city to replace public transit with private cars or private cars with public transit? How could you make more environmentally sustainable options available where you live?

McKibben cites “integration” as one of the mantras of Curitiba, meaning the “knitting together [of] the entire city-rich, poor, and in-between-culturally and economically and physically.” How realistic is this definition of integration in the city or town in which you live? What barriers stand in the way of this understanding of integration in your city or town? Brainstorm imaginative solutions as Curitiba has done to at least one of the barriers you have identified.

Did it surprise you that a relatively poor city could come up with solutions that rich cities and countries had not even tried? How does our affluence sometimes create blinders on our vision?

When Loeb visits Curitiba sixteen years later, what has changed about the city that McKibben described? Research other situations where a place or institution has adapted to comparable changes and growth while continuing to serve as a model for sustainability.

What does Loeb’s host Cesar mean by saying Curitiba was, when he grew up, “not that agreeable. Now it is”? Is it possible that making an environment more sustainable will also make it more convivial? Use Curitiba’s example and any others you can find to explain.

“Slavery Overturned” by Heather Cox Richardson

Richardson describes 1853 as a moment when elite enslavers were close to capturing all branches of the federal government and expanding their rule to a majority of states. What parallels to our own time does she draw, explicitly or implicitly?

Richardson describes the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 as a moment that catalyzed opposition: “[W]e rose each fighting, grasping whatever he could first reach—a scythe—a pitchfork—a chopping axe, or a butcher’s cleaver.” The Republican Party emerged in direct response to this overreach. What does this suggest about how political opposition forms, and how even apparent defeats can galvanize a new coalition?

Within less than a decade, Richardson points out, America went from a government dominated by slaveholders who explicitly rejected the idea that all men are created equal, to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address calling for “a new birth of freedom.” Does knowing how quickly things shifted change the way you think about social change?

South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond explicitly argued that there were two classes of people, the “Mudsills” and their superiors, and that the superior class had “the right—and even the duty—to rule over them.” Are there people today who express a similar worldview? What approaches can counter this argument?

Richardson says she finds hope in history. Do you? Which historical examples included in this book open up possibilities of hope for you when facing current threats to democracy and other challenges? Or does each era’s crisis feel too specific to its own time to inspire hope and action? Explain.

“Small Acts Have Huge Consequences” by Andrew Carter

How did Chicago anti-ICE activists learn from those in other cities like Los Angeles? How did Minneapolis and other cities learn from Chicago? And were you surprised to learn, in the book’s introduction, that Minneapolis anti-ICE activists cited Norwegian teachers resisting the World War II Nazis? How do various stories of activism—locally, nationally, and globally—play a part in the human chain of activism?

Did you know about people using plastic whistles as warning systems about ICE raids? Did it surprise you that this approach started with just a few individuals in each city, and then spread? Can you think of other examples, perhaps from other readings in this book, where simple, replicable ideas spread quickly and became symbols of larger movements?

Lisa Porter describes herself as “no longtime activist”—a suburban mom who ran out of her house screaming at federal agents because “I was finally able to find a place to put my rage.” Have you seen previously uninvolved people become engaged? What has motivated them? And how do people go beyond rage as a fuel for sustained organizing?

Carter documents many forms of resistance: people documenting events with their phones, neighbors physically intervening, high school students walking out, people sheltering day laborers from raids. These acts vary enormously in risk. How do different people in a community respond to a threat based on their own vulnerability or position? What obligations, if any, do people with more safety and privilege have to take greater risks?

The essay ends with Porter hearing a young man say, “They came and took my dad 10 minutes ago.” Why do you think Carter chose to end here? Do you think Carter will continue her efforts to resist ICE? Why or why not? The subtitle of the original article calls resistance to ICE raids a “movement” built from “small acts.” In what ways does this story connect to the relationship between individual action and collective change, the power of community, and the way courage spreads?

“The Progressive Story of America” by Bill Moyers

What does Moyers mean by saying the women in his small Texas town “simply couldn’t see beyond their own prerogatives?” Have you encountered people blinded in a similar way? Can you think of a time when you, too, were not able to see beyond your own prerogatives? How can we guard against that kind of blindness?

As of 2025, nine-hundred billionaires owned roughly twice as much wealth as the bottom half of all Americans, a group made up of 174 million people. And the top one percent owned more than the bottom ninety percent. How does this compare with the periods of the “Robber Barons” and “The Gilded Age” that were notorious for vast inequalities of wealth?

Had you heard of the populists and progressives who Moyers describes, like William Allen White, Tom

Johnson, Alice Hamilton, George Norris, or Robert La Follette? Was the history Moyers describes taught in your school, or buried? If the latter, why do you think you didn't learn about it, and what is lost when people growing up don't learn these stories or others like them?

Research one or more of the figures Moyers describes and then summarize their political journey in 2-3 paragraphs.

How did the populists and progressives balance the benefits brought by a new industrial age and the corporations whose products drove much of those positive changes with reining in the human misery that the actions of these same corporations created? Are the people who resisted the corporations or tried to rein them in models for our time?

Many people feel that money so dominates our political life these days that it's impossible to challenge. Do the stories Moyers tells of a period when ordinary citizens challenged equally dominant concentrated wealth seem applicable now? Explain.

Moyers explains how the movements of the progressives and populists spanned both political parties. Think of issue today that you and someone from a different political point of view might find common ground to collaborate. What strategies might you employ to bridge the initial divides?

Moyers says. "The rich have the right to buy more cars than anyone else, more homes, vacations, gadgets and gizmos, but they do not have the right to buy more democracy than anyone else." Do you agree? Discuss his essay in the light of Supreme Court decisions that, since 2010, have eliminated nearly all limits on how much wealthy individuals can donate to political candidates and committees. Should a single individual be able to donate nearly \$1,000 for every man, woman, and child in the US, such as Elon Musk did in giving \$288 billion to Donald Trump and allied candidates in the 2024 election?

SECTION SIX: RADICAL DIGNITY

"How Have You Spent Your Life?" by Jalaluddin Rumi

In your own words, briefly explain what you think Rumi is saying in the poem. Are the central ideas of this thirteenth-century poem applicable today? If so, what does it say about enduring questions that transcend time and place?

Rumi writes the poem as if God were posing questions to the reader. Is this an effective poetic strategy for you as a reader? Why or why not?

Imagine God (or one of your future grandchildren) is asking YOU the questions from the poem "How Have You Spent Your Life?" Answer one of the questions asked of you in the poem; support your response with specific personal examples.

Section Six Introduction

What does the phrase “radical dignity” mean to you? Can you think of an instance from your own life, or from history, where someone maintained their dignity specifically through continued action under pressure?

How would you describe the relationship between moral integrity, what we see in the mirror, and effective social change involvement? Loeb has written in his *Soul of a Citizen* book about the traps of the “perfect standard,” where people feel they have to be saints and do everything right if they’re going to act on issues they care about. How can those interested in activism incorporate moral integrity in social change without carrying the burden of perfectionism?

Do you agree that hope, as Tony Kushner put it, is a moral obligation? What’s the difference between naive hope and hope that’s grounded in history?

Loeb traces Alexei Navalny’s evolution from anti-corruption activist to prisoner in a Siberian gulag, returning to Russia even knowing he’d likely be arrested and die in prison. He said he returned because otherwise he had no right to ask others to stand up. What kind of example do you want set by those you look to as leaders?

Loeb discusses Wendell Berry’s phrase about acting “to preserve qualities in our own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence.” What qualities do you think Berry means? Have you ever felt that staying silent or going along with something you believed was wrong damaged something in you? Explain.

Volodymyr Zelensky, asked why he stayed in Kyiv when everyone expected him to flee, said similarly that he “could not have done otherwise,” and described his decision in terms of love for his parents, loyalty to those who elected him, and the company of “others who were also taking risks.” What does this say about community as empowering all who act in a common cause?

Martin Luther King argued that the greatest stumbling block to freedom was “not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice.” Loeb applies this to contemporary “law firms, universities, and media outlets” that capitulated to political pressure before threats were even executed. Does this comparison seem reasonable? Why or why not? Who are the “good people” in your current context or our current time who are staying silent? Do you believe that common action can change their minds or shift power to people who are more courageous? Explain.

Loeb discusses “anticipatory obedience”—institutions surrendering to threats before they were even executed. Historian Timothy Snyder has written that “the anticipatory obedience of people who could see what was coming” was one of the most dangerous features of the rise of dictatorships in the 1930s. What is the psychology of anticipatory obedience? And what is its opposite—the willingness to hold firm even if explicitly threatened? Draw lessons from other examples in the book, such as the Norwegian teachers.

Looking inward to the challenges of social change movement, Loeb writes that for all the importance of engaged community those involved long enough in movements will “encounter difficult situations, frustrating colleagues, people who don’t live up to their values.” He warns of the traps of human failings like “ego, arrogance, impatience, purist rigidity, or manipulateness.” How do you handle those failings in yourself? And how do you handle disappointment or betrayal in a community you are part of without leaving engagement altogether?

At the same time, Loeb describes Civil Rights veterans saying the years of risking beatings, jail or death were “the best in their lives” because they were sustained by common bonds. Describe an experience in your own life when you discovered deep connections through a shared commitment to something difficult.

Do secular and religious activists differ in their views of social commitment and the reasons for persistence? If so, how? You could interview activists in both categories, perhaps even those working on the same side of a particular issue like climate change. Or, if you’re active in an issue, talk with compatriots who differ in their theological worldview.

“Patriot” by Alexei Navalny

Why might Loeb have included a memoir by someone who died in one of Putin’s prisons in a book on hope? Did you feel more or less likely to engage hard issues after reading this essay? Explain.

Why do you think Putin considered Navalny so much of a threat that he tried to poison Navalny and then jailed him on false charges? Is this a testament to Putin’s power or Navalny’s effectiveness? Drawing on the story told in his diary, what did Navalny say, do, or believe that made him such a threat?

Can you think of people who our government has illegitimately prosecuted because they view them as a threat?

Humor helps sustain Navalny, as he writes, “I think someone upstairs must have read Orwell’s *1984* and said, ‘Hey, that’s cool. Why don’t we do that?’” What role do you think this kind of humor plays in keeping Navalny going? Can you think of other humorous examples from his essay that particularly resonated with you? Have you ever been in a hard situation where bleak humor has helped get you through? Describe.

Returned to the special punishment unit, Navalny wonders if his conditions “will be closer to those of Hannibal Lecter or those of Magneto from *X-Men*.” At another point he refers to a Leonardo DiCaprio movie. Does it surprise you that Russia’s most significant resistance leader would also be a fan of Western pop culture? How does that change your view of Navalny or social change participants in general?

Social progress, Navalny writes, “can only be achieved if a certain number of people are willing to pay the price for their right to have their own beliefs. The more of them there are, the less everyone has to pay.” Do you agree? Does this framing by Navalny or others who have taken major risks or paid major costs encourage you to become part of taking the smaller steps that Loeb argues ultimately change history? Explain.

Loeb notes in his introduction that he included Navalny because of “his fierceness and steadfastness, and by the scathingly funny gallows humor he levied at the system, at Putin, and even at himself.” After reading the diaries, explain how you feel about Loeb’s choice. Do these qualities make Navalny a figure of hope rather than simply a martyr? What do you take away from his example for your own life?

Navalny answers the question of why he returned to Russia even after the attempted poisoning by saying, simply: “I have my country and my convictions. I don’t want to give up my country or betray it.” Reading this powerful expression of beliefs from Navalny, what is your response to this statement? How does the statement and Navalny’s choices compare to soldiers willing to sacrifice their lives to defend their country?

Navalny talks of the hypocrisy of those who rule Putin’s Russia and benefit from the absence of democracy. Review the definition of *oligarch* and *oligarchy*, including the Greek origin of the word. Do you see American parallels with a society run by oligarchs? How is American society similar to or different from an oligarchy, and do you see actions you can take to prevent it from becoming more like Russia?

How does Navalny’s religious faith contribute to the choices he makes? How does his faith compare to other people of faith who acted for social justice that you have read about in this book? If you consider yourself part of a faith tradition, does that belief system make you more likely to take difficult stands on hard public issues? Explain.

Rent or have your class rent the Oscar-winning documentary *Navalny* and compare it to the journal selection that you read.

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King

What is the central thesis of “Letter from Birmingham Jail”? Had you read any of King’s writings before, aside from his “I Have a Dream” speech?

Explain what King meant when he said: “Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” Think of an example in your own life or in our society that supports King’s point.

Explain what King means by the “myth of time” when he says he hoped that “the white moderate would reject the myth of time.” Explain situation(s) in which this point is still applicable today. Take a current situation where people don’t act because they believe a particular issue will simply be addressed in due time (or maybe is impossible to adequately address). Discuss possible courses of action on that particular issue that can and should be taken today.

King wrote, “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.” How is this statement true in today’s America? Explain. Identify situations and issues of today that people should be discussing more, but where too many are remaining silent. Similarly, give at least three examples where you have seen people talk of their commitment to democracy and justice but take actions that undermine democracy and justice. What do you think motivates this behavior?

The original audience for King’s letter was white Christian ministers. What gives the letter its broader and enduring appeal? Did the letter speak to you, and, if so, how? Do you think “Letter from Birmingham Jail” should be included in today’s school curricula? Explain your position.

“The Real Rosa Parks” by Paul Rogat Loeb

Explain in your own words why the conventional retelling of the Rosa Parks story may actually make it harder for ordinary citizens to get involved in issues of social change?

Did you know the real story of Rosa Parks before reading the full account of her story in this book or Loeb’s other work? How does knowing the real story shift your view of Parks? Of social change?

What is the empowering moral of the Rosa Parks story? What does that moral suggest to you about your own involvement and/or responsibility for social change?

Do you agree or disagree that Parks’s first action in going to a NAACP meeting was just as pivotal as her stand on the bus? Would one have happened without the other?

Had you heard of Highlander Center? If not, what does it say about our education that such an important institution is omitted from our history? Research and then summarize what the Highlander Center is doing now and how their efforts fit with their earlier legacy.

Who are some of the models of social commitment you have known in your life? If you can’t think of anyone right now, look back at the essays in this anthology, and identify 2-3 people you would like to remember as models of social commitment. Briefly summarize the traits of activism you admire in these individuals and might wish to emulate.

Interview someone who is a model of social commitment (or read more about someone you’ve identified from this anthology) to find out additional information about the daily struggles that they faced and how they kept on going.

Research one of the following historical efforts at change: the American union movement; the movement that initiated the Social Security system; the women's suffrage movement; the origin of the forty-hour work week; the environmental movement; the pro-choice and anti-abortion movements. Through your research, identify a person often associated with the movement who often has been overlooked, but serves as a model of social commitment.

“Road to Redemption” by Billy Wayne Sinclair

Sinclair describes his decision to do the right thing in order to maintain his self-respect based on the moral framework he had developed. Have you ever faced a similar dilemma on whether to “do the right thing” in a difficult situation (no doubt easier than Sinclair's dilemma)? What did you decide? What factors helped you decide one way or another? If you had the opportunity to make the same decision again, would you make the same decision? Explain.

Could you imagine taking a stand like Sinclair's, knowing that it might leave you spending the rest of your life in jail? What kind of moral courage would it take? Is it surprising that this courage developed in someone who once was a destructive criminal?

What do you think gave Sinclair his core strength? Did Sinclair's moral conviction come on suddenly, or did it build as he took different challenging actions? What is the implication for activism, or for hope by including Sinclair's story?

What role did personal loyalties, as Sinclair displayed to his wife, play in his conversion?

Based on Sinclair's story, what do you think makes the difference between situations that give criminals a chance to be redeemed and ones that make more likely that they'll continue with a life of crime?

“Composing a Life Story” by Mary Catherine Bateson

Bateson argues that creative lives are more zig zag than linear, and that following your instincts to explore different areas about which you care passionately is a useful strategy of life. Do you agree? Include supporting examples from your own life or the life of someone you know well.

Identify a problem you solved in the past; briefly explain the problem and how you solved it. What lessons did you take from that experience? What skills and adaptive patterns from your past do you bring to new situations, including leaving home to attend college for the first time? Do you think these skills and adaptive patterns will be helpful in your future? Explain.

Bateson asserts that women have long had to combine different areas of their lives into a difficult balancing act; men traditionally have been able to separate various aspects of their lives, though increasingly men are living with “multiple simultaneous demands.” Do you agree or disagree? What is causing both women and men to live with increasing multiple simultaneous demands?

Summarize Bateson's three meanings for "composing a life." Which of the three does Bateson emphasize and why? Which of the three do you prefer and why? Do you think of your life as a linear narrative with clear goals, or as something you'll improvise along the way?

Bateson quotes someone who once said, "My life is like surfing, with one wave coming after another." Can you think of an appropriate metaphor for your life? Explain.

How do Bateson's arguments apply to sustaining long-term social activism?

"On Witness and Respair" by Jesmyn Ward

"Respair" is an archaic English word meaning the return of hope after despair. Ward revives the word as part of the title of this essay. Why do you think Ward chose the word "respair" in the title instead of "hope" or "renewal"?

Ward's essay is rooted in devastating personal loss—the sudden death of her husband. She writes of sinking "into hot, wordless grief." How does Ward move from private grief to witness about public grief? What is the relationship in this essay between personal mourning and political consciousness?

Ward begins with the staggering personal loss of the death of her husband. How does starting with that story make you more receptive to her descriptions of the killing of African American men, women, and children by police that follow in her essay, and of the protests that challenged those killings? How do we learn to see unjust individual deaths as more than abstractions?

Ward describes the belief she has carried "from the moment I took my first breath" that white America considers Black lives no more valuable than those of "a plow horse or a grizzled donkey." She then describes this belief breaking open when the global George Floyd protests reclaimed her hope. What did her description of that process feel like to you? Have you ever held a belief about your own powerlessness or invisibility that was suddenly challenged or broken? What did that feel like?

Why does Ward use the term "witness" for both the dying of her husband, the deaths of African Americans needlessly killed by police, and the protests against those deaths?

Ward's essay is itself an act of witness: She names Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. Do you know these names? Take a few minutes to look up each name. What do these people have in common? Ward also talks of her own losses. What do you think she's asking you to do as a reader of this essay?

Ward is one of only six novelists to win the National Book Award twice, and the only woman or African American. What elements of craft—structure, imagery, language, rhythm—make this essay particularly powerful? Explain a moment in the essay that you found most affecting.

SECTION SEVEN SEEDS OF THE POSSIBLE

“Origami Emotion” by Elizabeth Barrette

Barrette’s metaphor for hope is a paper crane. Think of your own metaphor or simile for hope. Consider writing an original poem about hope, employing your metaphor.

Do you know the story of Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes? If not, look up the story and reflect on why its metaphor has touched people worldwide. Search online for instructions, and make a paper crane as your own tangible symbol of hope. You can also give it to someone you know, explaining the story of the thousand paper cranes.

Section Seven Introduction

Loeb opens this section with his grandchildren—their somersaults, their animal art, three-year-old Alice asking urgently at a play, “What’s gonna happen?” He notes that unlike children in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, they have so far been protected from the worst. Do you think of children, including specific children who you know or have read about—as a motivating force in your own engagement with social for change? What most connects you personally to the future?

Jonathan Kozol has spent his career bearing witness to what he calls “savage inequalities”—the enormous gap between schools serving children of privilege and those serving children of poverty. But both Kozol and Marian Wright Edelman also draw strength from what Kozol calls “the almost inexplicable spiritual resilience” of children in desperately poor communities. What enables them to persist in advocacy for the children who our society routinely makes expendable? What lessons do you learn from their persistence?

Loeb recounts that William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* helped inspire the producer of *Survivor* to create *The Apprentice*, which launched Donald Trump’s national media career. What does this suggest about how culture can impact politics and how stories and beliefs about human nature can shape our assumptions? Can you think of other examples where a cultural narrative has had profound political effects?

Hawken writes that “humanity is coalescing. It is reconstituting the world, and the action is taking place in schoolrooms, farms, jungles, villages, campuses, companies, refugee camps, deserts, fisheries, and slums.” Can you think of examples where you live of this counter-narrative to despair?

“Childhood and Poetry” by Pablo Neruda

“To feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know,” Neruda writes, “widens out the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things.” What does Neruda suggest about how this power of unexpected generosity and affection from a boy whose face he never saw shaped his life? How do we widen the boundaries of our being to really see the lives of those whose worlds are unfamiliar, hear their stories, and begin to understand what they experience? How do we develop a sense of human solidarity and connection with those we’ve never met? Have you ever felt the kind of special connection Neruda is describing, an unexpected moment of generosity or kindness from a stranger? If so, explain the circumstance. What opportunities do you have to extend it to others who you do not know?

Neruda talks of the need “to pass to the other some good things of life.” As citizens in a community, what specific things should we pass on to others? How do we accomplish this? What are examples of obstacles that prevent us from extending kindness to strangers? Are they insurmountable? Explain.

Do you ever think about your responsibility to the children you may have some day, to those of friends, or to your current children? How would you define that responsibility? How would you view your responsibility to children you’ve never met and never will?

“Ordinary Resurrections” by Jonathan Kozol

Do you know kids like those in the South Bronx neighborhood Kozol visits? Have you ever lived in a neighborhood where needless death is routine? What is surprising about the fierceness and power of a love, where children can leave Rice Crispies for dead friends or explain “this was his chair” in attempt to honor their missing friends? Think about moving tributes for other children or teens in which you participated or have seen in the media. Why is it important for such actions to take place?

What would it take to open more possibilities in the lives of the children Kozol describes? Why are people like Kozol and Mother Martha still hopeful and engaged, despite all they’ve seen over the years? Is their hope justified?

What are “ordinary dyings”? Why does our society mourn some deaths but not others?

Why do you think Kozol entitled the excerpt (and book by the same name) “Ordinary Resurrections.” Who or what is “resurrected” in this essay? How does the use of “ordinary” impact Kozol’s point?

Kozol states that he returns to Mott Haven “when I know I need to.” Why might he need to return to this seemingly blighted neighborhood? Have you ever found value in returning to difficult places or situations? Explain.

“Standing Up for Children” by Marian Wright Edelman

Why do politicians too often talk about their concern for families, then enact legislation that negatively impacts the most vulnerable? Why do citizens allow elected officials to do this? Is part of the reason that lives of children like those Kozol and Edelman write about are invisible? If taking care of children is the “litmus test of our humanity,” how does Edelman rate our country’s humanity? Do you agree?

What is challenging about thinking of all children as having the potential to change and heal the world, as Edelman suggests?

Is Benjamin Mays right that it demeans us not to dream and dream of a better world? Why do we accept this? Why does our society encourage us to dream mostly about private possibilities, like financial success? Describe what would it take for more of us to dream of and act for justice for all people, not just those who look and believe as we do?

What are today’s mountains of ice that fuel indifference to injustice? What would it take for more of us to be on fire enough to melt them?

Did you know the U.S. ranked so poorly in areas like preventing infant mortality, the percent of children living in poverty, the number of teenage births, and the number of children lost to gun violence? Did you know that the top one percent of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 90 percent? What could be done to address this?

Optional project: Research how much of our national governmental budgets go to programs that benefit children. What does this say about our national priorities?

Do you agree with Edelman's reading of the Bible as a series of stories in which the powerless triumph over the powerful?

Edelman asks, "What legacies, principles, values, and deeds will we stand for and send to the future through our children and to a world desperately hungering for moral leadership and community?" Apply Edelman's question to your own life: What specific legacies, principles, values, and deeds do you want to send to the future? How might you accomplish these hopes?

"The Real Lord of the Flies" by Rutger Bregman

Most readers have encountered William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* as a statement of truth about human nature. If you read the novel in school, is that consistent with how you were taught the book as well? How does Golding's vision of humanity compare to Bregman's? Why do you think Golding's version has been so influential for so long?

Bregman found that the real castaways—six Tongan boys who survived fifteen months on a deserted island by cooperating—carries "the opposite lesson" from Golding's novel. How does learning Bregman's story of the Tongan boys impact your worldview of human nature? Can you think of other core cultural stories that promote worldviews of either pessimism or possibility?

Bregman reveals that Golding wrote the novel, in part, by projecting his own personal demons. Does this biographical context change the way you read the novel?

Bregman argues that a more hopeful view of human nature is emerging from science. Why do you think pessimistic views of human nature dominate popular culture? Or do they? What are the social and political consequences of believing humans are fundamentally selfish and violent versus fundamentally cooperative?

What does the Tongan boys' story suggest about the conditions under which human cooperation and community emerge? What lessons might their story offer about crisis, adversity, and the possibilities of democratic and cooperative self-organization?

"You Are Brilliant and the Earth Is Hiring" by Paul Hawken

From what you can tell, including by talking with your parents or others from older generations, are environmental problems worse or better than when they were your age? Who is responsible for the changes?

Ask your parents or older people in your community whether they've noticed impacts on the local habitat/ecosystem from climate change, for example, as hunters, fishermen, farmers or ranchers, gardeners, or others who spend lots of outdoors.

Since you can't work directly for the Earth as a prospective employee, what do you think Hawken means by saying, "the Earth is Hiring"? How might you apply Hawken's call to your likely career path? Are there things you and other students can do prior to your future careers to respond to Hawken's call or to prepare yourselves to respond in the future?

How do experiences like looking at the stars at night, viewing mountain peaks, or seeing animals in the wild affect your perspective on nature and your role in the world? Do such experiences give you anything useful for tackling seemingly overwhelming problems? Explain. Hawken writes that instead of recruiting limos, the earth sends you "rain, sunsets, ripe cherries, night blooming jasmine"; compare that perspective to what keeps Desmond Tutu going.

What is the lesson for readers in the Adrienne Rich poem that Hawken quotes? Is it "perverse" to believe your actions can matter? Identify a way that you, too, might "reconstitute the world."

What do you think impelled the British (and American) abolitionists to take on their seemingly impossible task for people that most never met? Can you think of any contemporary parallels?

Is "stealing the future" a fair description of much of our economy? Did you know about Interface Global, the company Loeb sites in his introduction to Section Seven? Can you think of other examples of companies that work to heal the future, at least in some of what they do and have also succeeded in the marketplace? Consider a research project on this subject.

Does it change your perspective on your connection to other human beings to know that you are literally "breathing molecules this very second that were inhaled by Moses, Mother Teresa, and Bono"? If so, how? What would it mean for you to take Hawken's message of responsibility "and run as if your life depends on it"? Explain.

SECTION EIGHT: BEYOND HOPE

From "The New York Poem" by Sam Hamill

Hamill wrote his poem in the aftermath of the Sept 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center. Do you understand the phrases "get up and sing" and "get up and dance again" to be literal or figurative expressions, or both? Explain. Describe a time in your own life situation when you felt sadness or fear, yet found the strength within you to go forward. In the poem's final line, Hamill writes, "If I don't the savages will win." What do we run the risk of losing if we don't stay true to our soul in the face of sadness, despair, or defeat?

“Sept 1, 1939” by W.H. Auden

Auden wrote this poem following the Nazi invasion of Poland, which launched World War II. Does the poem still have relevance as a call to resist in the face of potential tyranny? What would it mean if we took Auden’s message seriously, “We must love one another or die?”

Section Eight Introduction:

What is it that keeps us working for change even when results seem elusive or when we hit frustration? How much is it a sense of our own dignity?

Loeb distinguishes impatient hope and a deeper, far-seeing kind of hope. What are the defining characteristics of each kind of hope? List specific strategies or practices that would help you develop the resilient kind of hope Loeb and his authors describe.

Loeb describes his experience of doomscrolling: feeling “boxed in, helpless before vast institutional forces,” clenching in rage—then stopping, breathing, and thinking “of some small way to act—a vigil I can join, a phone call I can make.” Does it surprise you that Loeb has hit moments of despair in his own work? How do you personally navigate between staying informed about problem you care about and maintaining the capacity to act?

Loeb again highlights the importance of community over isolation. How does community help sustain deep, far-seeing hope in individuals? What’s the difference between feeling isolated and feeling supported? How does our society try to make social justice activists feel isolated? Have you ever experienced or witnessed collective grief as a source of solidarity and action?

How do we balance the importance of immediate results and long-term persistence? Are there times when you have to keep on even if you see no fruits from your efforts? How does this link to stories like those of President Nixon changing his mind on his nuclear threat because of a demonstration he publicly spurned?

Did you know about the “Takedown Tesla” movement? What are the lessons of it beginning with just a single Bluesky post that got 175 likes in four months—which then went viral with the help of an actor with a large following, and translated to impactful real-world action. Loeb compares it to his friend Lisa standing “pathetic and bedraggled in the rain,” accidentally inspiring famed baby doctor Benjamin Spock. What do these two examples suggest about how difficult it is to predict where an action will land?

Loeb cites Jane Goodall, referring to her own obstinacy as a source of hope. Loeb calls this “radical stubbornness.” How is stubbornness a facet of hope, and how does it contribute to sustaining engagement?

Ta-Nehisi Coates believes that hoping for major change in your lifetime can be a trap, offering false hope. But “if you hope that your struggle might in your children’s generation, your grandchildren’s generation, your descendants’ generation, actually lead to a better world,” that’s rooted “in something

very, very real.” Do you think Americans in general, including you, would be willing to act for a cause where the fruits won’t be realized until a future generation? Explain why or why not. What hinders us from operating with this kind of farsighted hope?

K. C. Golden writes: “What we often call preordained becomes so only through our resignation.” Can you think of an example—historical or current—of something that seemed inevitable but turned out to be contingent on people’s willingness to resign themselves to it? What does this say about the politics of inevitability as a rhetorical and psychological weapon?

“The Hard-won Hope of the Long Defeat” by Ian Bassin

Bassin borrows the phrase “the long defeat” from Tolkien’s character Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*. She fights for beauty and justice even though evil may never be fully vanquished, so victories will always be temporary. How does the framing of “the long defeat” differ from simple pessimism? Is there something paradoxically hopeful about it?

Bassin describes the “autocrat’s playbook”: flooding the zone with outrages to exhaust defenders, keep them reactive and divided, and make the defense of democracy feel futile. He writes: “Despair is a political weapon.” Describe examples from the current time that seem drawn from this playbook. How do individuals protect themselves from becoming victims of this kind of bombardment while remaining engaged in protecting democracy?

Bassin draws on Poland’s Solidarity movement after martial law in 1981. Its leaders were imprisoned and the organization shattered—yet underground organizing, clandestine publishing, and a continuation of the “Flying University” kept democratic culture alive until the crack in the regime appeared in 1989. What aspects of this strategy are applicable to current resistance to assaults on democracy and to the continued work of expanding democracy?

Bassin offers four guideposts for sustaining democratic resistance: find the signal in the noise; cultivate strategic readiness; uphold a common truth; bolster each other. Which of these resonates most with you personally? Which is hardest to practice? Can you think of specific, concrete ways to act on each guidepost?

Bassin says he is “more optimistic than Tolkien”—Bassin believes history bends toward justice, not entropy. But he finds value in Tolkien’s framework anyway because it “is agnostic about one’s optimism or pessimism—it simply reminds us that the task of being human is to do right and to do good and to embrace beauty where we can find it.” Do you find this framing helpful or too abstract for sustaining day-to-day action?

Bassin’s essay is explicitly addressed to people who are already exhausted and feel as if they are staring into an abyss. Do you resonate with that feeling? What does Bassin include in his essay that might help overwhelmed, beleaguered activists look past the bleakness? Explain.

“Staying the Course” by Mary-Wynne Ashford

Is the metaphor of rolling a rock up the hill a useful one? How do we know when we’re making progress?

Recall a time when you did something just because it seemed it was right to do, even if you weren’t sure you’d get the outcome you desired. What kinds of support or challenges did you encounter when trying to do the right thing?

Ashford describes almost paralyzing despair over the crises of our planet. Identify global or national issues that evoke in you a similar type of despair or fear. What does Ashford do in the face of her despair? What lessons from her essay can help you with your own temptations to give up? Ashford asserts, “The planetary crises raise existential and spiritual questions we are usually able to avoid in our affluent society.” Does being an affluent society allow us to avoid difficult questions in ways that aren’t an option to poorer nations that often face more intense consequence with fewer resources? Explain.

What does it mean to “stay the course”? Use examples from the essay to help explain. Do you have personal examples of “staying the course”?

Explain what is meant by the Quaker phrase, “Speaking truth to power.” How does it balance passion, courage, and commitment, along with a truth that’s based on knowledge and accurate information?

Ashford states that “breaking the silence is the most significant thing we can do as individuals.” Identify a pressing societal issue today that concerns you. Research the issue in order to give yourself background that will help you “speak the truth to power.” Develop a course of action to help “push the rock up the hill,” if only a little way.

“The Elm Dance” by Joanna Macy

Can you imagine a situation where you could no longer walk in a forest that had long sustained you and your community? What does it do to us when we kill the natural world?

Why did the Novozybkov residents bury their pain for so long? Have you been in a situation where something terrible has happened or is happening and people don’t talk about it? Can you think of some examples of difficult questions that our society buries?

What happened when the residents began to talk about their pain? Why was breaking the silence freeing? What is the gain and the hope in talking about the most difficult questions for a family, a community, a society? Use the example of the Novozybkov mayor and the people at Macy’s workshops.

What might be gained when we let our hearts break open? What’s the link between this essay and the power of vulnerability that others have touched on in this book?

Did you know about the Chernobyl disaster? Research additional information about it or the 2013 meltdown of the reactor in Fukushima, Japan. Is there a risk of these kinds of disasters occurring today? Why or why not?

One strategy for healing the past for the citizens of Novozybkov was to strength their “cultural immune system.” Through tradition and memories, participants remembered who they were and remembered their sources of strength. The Elm Dance song built on the traditions of different cultures. Can you think of how culture here can be used to give people courage?

Describe a special family or community memory or tradition that is important to you. How does this tradition serve as a source of strength for you? What do you think the importance is of preserving cultural traditions?

What did Macy mean when she explained the history of the Elm Dance and said, “They [the German people] gave their children everything-except one thing. They did not give them their broken hearts. And their children have never forgiven them.” What is Macy’s point? Do you agree/disagree that a society should give its children everything, including their broken hearts? Explain. Apply Macy’s point to issues today, including the debates about how to teach the less than admirable sides of our country’s history.

“The Inevitability Trap” by K.C. Golden

In your own words, summarize “the inevitability trap.” Think about your own views on crucial environmental issues. Or other issues you care about. Why do we find ourselves falling into “the inevitability trap” on issues like global climate change? Is there a way to get out of this pattern?

Golden talks about U.S. corporations shifting their factories to China and then opposing climate change action in the US because of the growing Chinese carbon footprint—even as China shifts to investments in renewables in ways we can barely imagine. How should we allocate responsibility for this ultimate challenge, where countries, institutions, and individuals can all pass responsibility to someone else? How do Golden’s arguments compare to the statement of Rabbi Abraham Heschel that “in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.”

What does “self-fulfilling prophecy” mean? If possible, provide an example from your own life when you experienced this. Explain how self-fulfilling prophesies can work either positively or negatively. What’s the relationship between these assumptions and outlooks that breed political hope or despair?

What does Golden mean by saying, “Well, it’s up to somebody. Who’s it gonna be?” Could you see yourself becoming one of those somebodies? What connections can you make between Golden’s essay and previous essays, poems, or section introductions in this book, such as Hawken’s “You Are Brilliant and the Earth Is Hiring”?

“Is There Hope on Climate Change” by David Roberts

What are some responses that you can take to reverse global climate change? What about major institutions, like corporations, governments, or universities and colleges—what can they do to reverse global climate change? Are they doing what they can, or have they retreated? Research how the current administration is responding to global climate change compared to previous administrations, like Biden’s. Give a specific example of two contrasting responses.

If you have taken action on a climate change issue, how do you deal with the issue of hope in the face of ever more alarming scientific reports and ever escalating climate-related disasters? If you haven’t acted, is a sense of hopelessness part of why you don’t act? What other reasons hinder your getting involved?

Is Roberts right that Climate Change is particularly difficult to tackle because “psychologically and physiologically, we are designed to heed immediate threats with teeth and eyes, not long-term, incremental, invisible dangers”? If so, can you think of ways to highlight and make visible the threat so its gravity becomes comprehensible?

What does Roberts mean when he says that he doesn’t think hope is “about the future as much as it is about the present,” about our actions and choices? Compare this framework to that of Vaclav Havel and to the other essays in this section.

Compare Roberts’s discussion of chaos theory and Stephen Jay Gould’s “punctuated equilibrium” to Howard Zinn’s “Optimism of Uncertainty.” How are they similar or different?

What would it mean to recognize that there is no “game over” on climate change because “there are always better and worse paths ahead. There’s always a difference to be made”? Do you share this perspective? Why or why not?

“Next Year in Mas’Ha” by Starhawk

When Starhawk describes the settlement, residents who could be her aunts and uncles explain the tug of loyalty she feels. Why is it difficult to question the actions of a group in which you were raised? Use an example from your own life, if possible.

What do you know about the history of the Israeli West Bank settlements? About the life and death of Rachel Corrie, or of other American volunteers who were killed volunteering in the West Bank, like Seattle’s Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi? About the nonviolent resistance efforts they were part of? Have you ever seen a map of the Israeli settlements? Choose one of these areas to conduct additional research.

Starhawk describes the stark contrast of two realities, the California-like homes of Elcanah and the zone of destruction beyond the wall. Does this kind of “two realities” exist in America as well? Explain. What are some of the root causes of two realities within the United States? Do you think this contrast between these two realities is increasing or decreasing over time? Explain your response.

What is the “slight sweet hint of hope” that Starhawk tastes in a situation that might seem unimaginably grim? How does it connect with the book’s theme of the power of generosity?

What would it mean in our own situation to open our hearts to the children of the enemy and ask for help?

Why does Starhawk close with “Next year in Mas’Ha”? Research Mas’Ha to check its current status. What did you find out?

From “Hoping Against Hope” by Nedezhda Mandelstam

Mandelstam writes, “It is a deeply European feeling, nurtured on self-respect, the sense of one’s own worth, rights, needs, and desires.” Is this feeling shared by Americans? Explain.

Mandelstam explains how “fear and hope are bound up with each other.” Explain this relationship in your own words.

Reread “Celebration of the Human Voice” by Eduardo Galeano in the “Rebellious Imagination” section of this book. What do you think Galeano would say to Mandelstam about her decision to scream rather than to remain silent? Why? Explain how “silence is a real crime against humanity.” Identify an issue today that is important to you and needs a voice, perhaps even a scream. Think of at least one way you can use your voice regarding this issue.

“You Have to Pick Your Team” by Sonya Vetra Tinsley, as told to Paul Rogat Loeb

Do you think you’ve lived mostly on the team of the cynics or those with hope? Or a combination? Explain.

Review some of your favorite essays from *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*. Choose 2-3 people from these essays whose team you’d like to be on. Explain why.

Think of someone in your own life who has served as a mentor or role model for social commitment. What traits or characteristics make this person an important mentor for you?

Tinsley says we won’t know till the end of history who’s right, the cynics or the people with hope, so we might as well join the team of the people with hope. Do you agree? Explain.

Do you think it’s possible for the people on one team to convince people on the other team to join them? What would help persuade others to join the other team?

“From Hope to Hopelessness” by Margaret Wheatley

“As the world grows ever darker,” Wheatley wonders “...how might [she] contribute to reversing this descent into fear and sorry, to help restore hope to the future.” Do you think that the world is growing darker? After reading this book, do you feel more possibility? Explain.

Part of Wheatley’s response to the increasing grief, suffering, aggression, and violence she sees all around her is to journey into letting go of immediate hope, making room for what she calls hopelessness. How does this help her keep on in her work for change?

What do you think of her judgment that “we don’t need specific outcomes. We need each other?”

Have you ever acted on something even when you felt hopeless in terms of prevailing? What was that experience like?

SECTION NINE: ONLY JUSTICE CAN STOP A CURSE

“**Still I Rise**” by Maya Angelou

The poem describes efforts to humiliate someone, and how that person resists and asserts their dignity. How do the words and tone of “Still I Rise” exemplify the over-arching theme in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*? Discuss specific essays or poems and how they embody the book’s central themes.

Does the poem’s message speak only to the African American experience, or is it applicable to other situations where people treat their fellow human beings with disrespect and contempt. Explain.

Compare Angelou’s [YouTube performance](#) of “Still I Rise” with musician [Ben Harper’s version](#). How does the poem change when set to music and/or when performed by a male instead of a woman?

Section Nine Introduction:

In the face of ever-increasing global problems and assaults on human dignity here in America, activists can easily experience a sense of rage and bitterness. Give examples of issues over which you have felt “pickled in horrors.” How did you respond to this overload? What brought you out of it? What’s the difference between righteous anger that fuels action and bitterness that corrodes it?

Loeb warns of the tendency to blame people who vote for destructive leaders and wish them destruction in turn. “If you start rooting for suffering,” he responds, “or dismiss people who might be newly receptive allies, you’ve lost the game before you begin.” Do you agree with this? How should we respond to ordinary people who contribute to destructive actions because they believed lies?

Loeb offers the example of professor Edda Matua, who, instead of arguing with two students who denied racial profiling existed, primarily listened, then said, “If I had your experience, I’d probably believe the same,” and encouraged them to talk to people with different experiences. What is the argument Loeb is making with this example? How do you listen to views you radically disagree with?

Using Terry Tempest Williams’s metaphor, what would it mean to construct new bridges to help us get past the crises we’re currently facing? How could you see yourself as part of building those bridges?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes, “Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.” Loeb applies this directly to the Haitian cats-and-dogs story that Donald Trump and JD Vance knowingly spread despite knowing the stories were false. Where does the line fall between legitimate political argument and weaponized lies?

Loeb describes his friend Heather Booth's motto that she uses to close weekly activist calls: "When we organize, with love at the center, we win." He reflects that "learning to organize is critical," but putting "love at the center" may be even more challenging. What does it mean to put love at the center of political organizing?

Loeb presents South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a powerful example of healing through reconciliation rather than retribution. What conditions and actions made this possible? Can you think of situations or issues today where something similar might be possible? How could we adapt South Africa's model?

Desmond Tutu talks about being called to act by the three billion people in the world "who are not responsible for global warming" but "will pay the highest price if wealthy countries refuse to do their fair share." Do you feel a connection to those people or a sense of responsibility? If you do, what would it mean for your choices to act on those feelings? Thinking back to the beginning of the book, does Tutu offer a way to do that without lapsing into bleak despair? Explain.

Dostoyevsky once wrote, "Each one of us is responsible to all others for everything." Do you agree or disagree with this perspective? Explain. If you agree, how is this possible? List specific ways you can carry out your responsibilities "to all others for everything."

Loeb closes with the image from Terry Tempest Williams of two bridges: the old rusted bridge everyone holds their breath crossing, and the new one being built alongside it. "I feel like we are building this new bridge. I hope we can finish it in time." The book ends with Desmond Tutu's essay and Alice Walker's claim: "All we own, at least for the short time we have it, is our life. With it we write what we come to know of the world." After reading *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, what do you take from this ending? What does it ask of you?

"Only Justice Can Stop a Curse" by Alice Walker

Have you ever experienced the mind-state Alice Walker describes, where you feel like humans have messed up the world so profoundly, that maybe we're just doomed to extinction? How did you get past it?

What is your reaction to the curse-prayer at the beginning of the Walker essay? Have you felt this kind of anger and bitterness toward an enemy? Were you able to channel your anger in positive ways? If so, how?

Walker states that although she has been an activist all her adult life, she sometimes has felt embarrassed to call herself one. What defines an "activist," in your opinion? Compare definitions with others. What traits do you share from the definitions of *activist* that you found? Would you be proud or embarrassed to call yourself an activist? Why or why not?

Can you conceive of Walker's interracial marriage being illegal, and the laws prohibiting it being justified by mainstream institutions, like most of the southern churches? Does this have any relevance to contemporary debates, for instance, on gay marriage? Compare this history with the history described in Dan Savage's essay.

What is the tragedy of the world that Walker refers to?

Walker concludes her essay by recalling the story of "blond Paul from Minnesota" from her voter-registration work in the deep South. What is the point of this story—that is, what did she learn from that experience that is a part of who she is today? Have there been people you've dismissed but who have surprised you with their courage or vision?

Walker renews her soul by remembering fresh peaches and the courage of "people at their best, reaching toward their fullness." Have you ever been brought out of feelings of bitterness by savoring the fruits of the world? How does point parallel the Desmond Tutu story that Loeb tells in the book's introduction?

How do our small stones of activism help build an edifice of hope?

Explain the quote: "All we own, at least for the short time we have it, is our life. With it we write what we come to know of the world." How does this echo the Persian poet Rumi's questions from Section Six? How would you write a more just world with your life?

"Kids, Trees and Climate Change" by Mark Hertsgaard

Why does Hertsgaard personalize the issue of climate change with the face of his daughter, Chiarra? How does she give him hope? Can you think of other examples of people taking political action for the sake of their children?

If, as Hertsgaard writes, climate change is already damaging the habitability of much of the landscape we take for granted and threatens to damage it more, why don't we do more to challenge it? Can we make the problem visible in a way that will move our fellow citizens to act? Which lessons from other movements around other causes like those described in this book could also apply specifically to climate change?

Did you know about the successful movements stopping new coal plants? Compare Hertsgaard's description with the challenges of Mary Pipher and her neighbors to the Keystone XL pipeline. What can we take away as key points from these examples?

What are the lessons of African farmers growing hundreds of millions of acres of trees to reverse deforestation? Do these challenge the stereotypes of successful environmental initiatives having to come from more developed countries?

How much did you know about the recent proliferation of renewable technologies? What does this say about the possibilities of moving beyond fossil fuels and your potential role in acting on this?

“The Clan of One-Breasted Women” by Terry Tempest Williams

Did you know about the nuclear testing of the 1950’s? How did you feel to learn that our government knowingly exposed our population to these risks?

Compare Tempest Williams’s essay to Joanna Macy’s “The Elm Tree Dance” in Section Eight. How is your understanding of the Macy’s essay affected after reading that of Tempest Williams?

Has anyone told you to “just let it go” about an injustice you later regretted not acting upon? What stops you or those you know from standing up to injustices that you see?

Tempest Williams asserts, “Tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives.” Explain what she means. Do you agree/disagree? Do you see examples of this today? Explain.

When Tempest Williams is handcuffed, the officer finds a pen and pad of paper, which Tempest Williams says are weapons. Explain how a pen and a pad of paper can serve as political weapons. How does the dream portion of the essay contribute to its overall meaning?

Terry Tempest Williams’s goal is “to find a language that opens hearts rather than closes them.” Nine women in her immediate family have had mastectomies from radiation-linked cancers; her brother died from lymphoma. She has, Loeb writes, “every legitimate claim to righteous anger” but advocates “a fierce form of love.” What is the difference between righteous anger and fierce love? Are they compatible, or does one require suppressing the other? How do you imagine Williams holding both? Why does Loeb consider Tempest Williams such a powerful, hopeful voice?

“No Future without Forgiveness” by Desmond Tutu

Why do you think the Rwandans listened to Desmond Tutu? Just because he was a Nobel Peace Prize winner, or was there something in the South African experience that made them take him seriously as a messenger of hope?

Reread Sam Hamill’s “The New York Poem” at the beginning of the section “Beyond Hope.” What connection do you see between the poem and the rally at the main stadium of Kigali?

What is the difference between “retributive justice” and “restorative justice,” which Tutu encouraged? How do we break endless cycles of vengeance? What clues does Tutu’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission provide for us? What elements must be included?

Summarize what much of the world anticipated would occur in South Africa after a democratically elected government was in place. Why is it surprising that the black South Africans did not simply turn the tables on the whites who had oppressed them? Why did the black majority choose restorative justice rather than retributive justice? How can restorative justice apply to social conflicts in the U.S., and to our everyday lives?

Tutu believes that “it was courageous leaders who gave the sides hope that negotiations could lead to a good outcome,” and applauds De Klerk and Mandela for their leadership. What qualities did both embody in the process of moving toward democracy? What are lessons for our own leaders who are faced with difficult situations?

Where do you think Tutu gets his hope? Think back to this book’s introduction and to Jim Wallis’s story of Tutu inviting the South African police officers to join the winning side.

What does Tutu mean by “God has a sense of humor.” How does this compare with Howard Zinn’s “The Optimism of Uncertainty?”

Why do you think Loeb chose the Tutu essay to conclude this anthology? Do you agree that “Only justice can stop a curse”? What’s the relationship between this concept and Tutu’s notion of forgiveness?

OVERVIEW QUESTIONS--AFTER STUDENTS HAVE READ THE BOOK

It seems that everywhere we turn, we find people in despair, feeling there’s nothing they can do about the most critical issues of our time. Yet others face the same realities (or challenges far greater and more personally risky) and still find ways to act. Think over the essays you have read. Review Sonya Tinsley’s “You Have to Pick Your Team,” and then write an essay about which of these authors (at least one) you would “pick for your team” and why, such as their attitude, the issue they care about, their personal stories, etc.

The book includes multiple examples of people standing up to dictatorships in the most difficult circumstances, including facing off against the Nazis in Berlin and Norway, stopping the South Korean Coup, resisting apartheid South Africa, challenging Communist dictatorships in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and mothers challenging an Argentinian dictatorship that had seized their children. What do these examples have in common? What do they teach us?

Based on your reading of this anthology, how do the following elements contribute to creating and sustaining a sense of hope despite all the reasons for despair?

A sense of history

An ability to see options and ways to act

The natural world

Creativity and the arts

A sense of humor

A sense of spiritual connection

A sense of radical stubbornness

Are there other themes in the book that give you hope? What specific works would you draw on to explain your response?

A possible paper topic: We have read extensively about “hope” in *The Impossible*. Explain what hope means to you after reading this book. Here are three clusters of questions to consider; you don’t have to address every sub-question.

(a) How is hope different from optimism? Is some vision of an ideal society necessary, even if it is never achieved in this world? How do people coming from religious and secular traditions differ or converge in their views of hope?

(b) What is the social context for hope? Do you agree with various diagnoses of the problem in *The Impossible*? How can people who feel vulnerable and powerless increase their sense of hope? Why is collective action necessary—or is it?

(c) What are the political implications of hope? What issues and trends in society most challenge your sense of hope? How can specific groups of people, like groups you are part of, make a difference on a specific issue that some see as hopeless?

(d) Has *The Impossible* moved you closer to working for a more just and sustainable world? If so, how?

Choose an issue you deeply care about. Search out websites for organizations noted for constructively working on that issue. Find out what you can about their efforts, such as their mission statement, main areas of interest, and recent accomplishments. Did you know about their work before? How often have you seen any of their spokespeople on the mainstream media? If you support some of their positions, but not all, which do you agree with? If you agree with most of their positions, how could you support their efforts?

The Impossible can be read as a sustained argument that unfolds from “Dark Before the Dawn” to “Only Justice Can Stop a Curse.” What is the argument? How does it develop from section to section? What question or tension does each section seem to address.

The introduction for each section of *The Impossible* treats hope as something that can be learned, practiced, and sustained, not just felt. What are the practices Loeb recommends or describes, explicitly or by example? Can you identify at least five specific practices of hope embedded in the introductions—that is, ways of being, thinking, or acting that he suggests sustain the capacity to keep going?

Loeb is frank about his own moments of despair, imperfection, and uncertainty—the week his student voting project was falling apart, his worry that he might be too slow from running, his admission that his own views sometimes differ from those he’s included. What is the effect of this authorial self-disclosure? Does it increase or decrease the authority of his argument for you? Is this kind of vulnerability a rhetorical strategy, a genuine opening, or both?

SPECIAL QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC TEACHERS

I’ve focused these questions on the thematic content of each essay, story, or poem. If you’re teaching writing or rhetoric classes, you can also add questions on the writing itself, focusing either on the book as a whole or essay-by-essay and poem-by-poem. For instance:

What are your favorite stories, lines, or images? Explain.

How does the writer structure their argument? Identify and discuss their writing strategies. What works or doesn’t work in their approaches?

What adjective describes the tone of this essay (or poem)? What words or images from the piece support your choice?

Summarize the central arguments and rhetorical strategies in this essay. What strategies does the author use to convince readers? Are they convincing?

As a writer, explain how the author uses the following writing strategies to reach their audience: description; sensory detail; personification; and narrator’s voice.

Write your own essay (or poem) exploring the same central theme as this piece.