

Seven Weeks with Seven Whispers

This study guide is designed to follow the chapters of:
The Seven Whispers, A Spiritual Practice for Times Like These
by Christina Baldwin (New World Library, 2002)

Intention: to provide a framework for people to get together and experience a meaningful conversation about their own spiritual insights and practices using the book as a chapter-by-chapter conversation starter.

Commitment: seven weeks, or sessions, are suggested to build trust and comfort. This conversational series may be experienced as a cycle complete in itself, enjoyed as the basis for starting an ongoing group, or held within an already existing group. Plan for about two hours each week, allowing time for greeting and leave-taking. NOTE: Several things need to happen in session one and session seven that may require more time so it may be helpful to schedule these meetings to be half an hour longer than the others.

Potential Settings: book groups, writing groups, churches and other religious settings, spiritual direction groups, spirit-at-work teams, conversation cafes, libraries, neighborhoods, potluck suppers and living-room circles with friends and families.

Please refrain from alcohol before or during the gathering as it impairs the ability to listen and speak with intentionality. It's helpful to negotiate arrival and departure times and whether or not (and if so how) newcomers will be welcomed during the seven weeks.

Size: you can follow this study guide by yourself, journal writing the responses; or do it with one other as a way to know a partner or friend more deeply; or call any size group up to about 12. (Any larger and it's hard for people to have enough time to speak, and for listeners to hold the amount of story. If you have lots of interest, suggest that several groups gather at the same time.) Seven people in a group is a nice size as it offers each person the chance to host one meeting and one chapter.

What you need to hold these conversations: Copies of Christina Baldwin's book, *The Seven Whispers, A Spiritual Practice for Times Like These*, (New World Library 2002) and people who are reading it; a comfortable setting with privacy and quiet; someone to serve as host (may rotate time by time).

If your group chooses to write the weekly reflections, everyone will need paper and pens or personal journals.

The quality of conversation is served by creating a simple interpersonal container for receiving each other's insights and stories. Each member of a conversation contributes to this quality by listening attentively, speaking intentionally, and tending to the well-being of the group as well as their own well-being. The host should prepare seating so everyone can see each other. A circle is highly recommended. Please put a simple focusing object in the center of this space: a candle, flower, or object from nature will serve.

To begin, the host may light the candle and remind people of the agreements for this conversation. Agreements may be adapted to meet the needs of the group, but suggested agreements are:

1. to practice the qualities of the seven whispers as we meet to dialogue about them
2. to hold personal material in confidentiality
3. to listen to each other with curiosity and compassion.

To shift from social/greeting space to listening/speaking in intentional conversation, the host calls for a moment of reflection, which may be silence, a brief reading from a chapter, or the instructional theme.

Suggested formatting of the time: adapt to meet your own needs and interests.

- Check-in using a talking object so every voice is gathered and no one is interrupted (about 10 minutes). In check-in, a person offers a brief statement of how they are and what they bring to the circle.
- Pause and address the reflection in writing or silence (about 5 minutes if meditating, 15 minutes if writing).
- After reflection, another round of talking piece council invites members of the group to share stories and insights (this round may take 30 minutes). A talking piece designates the person holding the object as the speaker and the rest of the group is the listener.
- After this round, a period of dialogue with the talking piece resting in the middle will elicit less structured conversation (about 30-45 minutes). This dialogue can be started by the host reading the suggested questions and the group choosing one or two to focus on for the session.
- The group may also wish to explore meditation, prayer, or creative arts.

- Check-out with a talking piece round so every voice is honored in leave-taking (10-15 minutes). Make whatever arrangements need to be made for the next session.

Some of these terms, and the circle format, may be unfamiliar. For more complete information on calling people into receptive listening/speaking space using the circle, see the free downloadable “Basic Circle Guidelines,” and also the booklets and Christina’s book, *Calling the Circle, The First and Future Culture*, all available through the PeerSpirit web-site.

Session One: Maintain Peace of Mind

Note to host: In this **FIRST SESSION** you will need to negotiate a few things about the group experience so people's expectations are expressed and clear.

- ❑ Are people committed to trying to make all seven sessions?
- ❑ Do you want a group that consists of the same folks each time, or may others join part way through? Drop in for one session? How will you explain that the group is complete with those present, or how will you welcome newcomers?
- ❑ After reciting the suggested generic agreements, please ask if anyone needs further agreements. (If so, make sure these get recited in the following weeks as well as reminding the group each week that agreements are in place for the conversation.)
- ❑ Make sure the times, places, and any refreshment duties are set in place.
- ❑ Depending on the setting and make-up of the group, you may want to suggest that each session have a volunteer host, or you may want to retain facilitation.

Instructional theme of the chapter: when we step outside the ego self and find the spiritual Self; then we can shift our perceptions to create peace of mind. (page 15)

Reflection or writing suggestion: write a brief description of what peace of mind feels like or means to you; OR list the internal characters of your mental committee, including characters residing in the spiritual Self. (page 12-13)

Questions for conversation: these are suggestions, follow the interest.

Would anyone like to read their writing?

Do you have memories of spontaneous mystical experiences from your childhood? Are such experiences are still happening to you?

Do you have a daily practice that fosters peace of mind?

What do you do? (Or what can you imagine exploring as a practice?)

Remember the breathing meditation (page 16-17):

What do you need to let go of?

What do you experience when you simply "be here?"

What image or story rises up in you when you ask: "Now what?"?

(What questions rise out of the group?)

Remember to leave time for a check-out round to close.

Session Two: Move at the Pace of Guidance

Note to host: It's helpful to remind people of the agreements, and then to follow the time format suggested in the introduction to this guide. As the weeks progress, co-creative direction and design is likely to emerge: you are holding the "container" for the conversation, not controlling it.

Instructional theme of the chapter:: We can rehumanize the speed of life (page 27) and use this slower pace to listen for spiritual guidance.

Reflection or writing suggestion: (page 29-30) As an experiment, ask the group to meditate for 5 minutes as you start this session: notice what happens in your thoughts, bring attention gently back to the breath over and over. Then write a "Godalogue" (page 31)

Questions for conversation: these are suggestions, follow the interest.

Would anyone like to read their Godalogue, or speak about what happened in their minds during the meditation period?

How have you experienced a sense of "call and response" with Spirit?

How do you tell the difference between a voice of guidance and other advice going on in your mind?

If you could design your own day to move at the pace of guidance: what would it look like?

How does pace and guidance already show up in your life?

What one thing could you change that would change a lot of other things?

When was the last time you really stopped to reflect?

What gift(s) came to you from that reflection? When will you do it again?

(What questions arise from the group?)

Remember to leave time for a check-out round to close.

NOTE: We would like to hear from people with any innovations you'd like to suggest. This guide may be revised from time to time based on your experiences. Thank you for undertaking this adventure of listening and learning. Contact us through: cbaldwin@peerspirit.com

Session Three: Practice Certainty of Purpose

Note to host: It's helpful to remind people of the agreements, and then to follow the time format suggested in the introduction to this guide. As the weeks progress, co-creative direction and design is likely to emerge: you are holding the "container" for the conversation, not controlling it.

Instructional theme of the chapter:: Certainty of purpose starts by believing we have a purpose to our lives. (page 44)

Reflection or writing suggestion: Once there was a man/woman who... (page 45)

Questions for conversation: these are suggestions, follow the interest.

Would anyone care to read their writing reflection?

Do you have a sense of the covenant you made with your angel? Why you are here?

What did you dream of doing or being when you were a child or at some other time in your life when you felt hopeful about who you are?

What is happening to that dream? Are there elements of it in what you are now doing?

How do you see 'the work' of your life? What values are important to you: contribution, service, success, family, religious belief?

What could you change in order to more fully express your values in what you do and how you live?

What are the life transitions you are currently living within?

What is your sense of "the next right thing" for you?

(What questions rise from within the group?)

Remember to leave time for a check-out round to close.

Session Four: Surrender to Surprise

Note to host: It's helpful to remind people of the agreements, and then to follow the time format suggested in the introduction to this guide. As the weeks progress, co-creative direction and design is likely to emerge: you are holding the "container" for the conversation, not controlling it.

Instructional theme of the chapter:: We set intention and claim purpose for our lives within an environment where life is constantly 'surprising' us toward fulfillment. (page 54.56).

Reflection or writing suggestion: Write about one life surprise that is significant to you: what were its unexpected treasures? Challenges? Gains and losses? And now, insights?

Questions for conversation:

Would anyone like to read their writing about surprise?

What have you learned about your own resilience as you deal with life surprise?

Do you see your response and resilience as part of your spiritual practice?

How do you hold surprise in a spiritual context?

How is where you are now in your life a preparation for whatever is coming next in your life?

Hemingway said, "Life breaks most people, and then makes them stronger at the broken places." Have you lived through an experience like this?

What's the happiest surprise that's ever happened to you?

(What questions rise from within the group?)

Remember to leave time for a check-out round to close.

Session Five: ask for what you need and offer what you can

Note to host: It's helpful to remind people of the agreements, and then to follow the time format suggested in the introduction to this guide. As the weeks progress, co-creative direction and design is likely to emerge: you are holding the "container" for the conversation, not controlling it.

Instructional theme of the chapter:: Every action is an act of exchange.
(page 68)

Reflection or writing suggestion: Think of a giving person and describe him/her: think of a receiving person and describe him/her. What do these people teach you about asking and offering?

Questions for conversation:

Would anyone like to read their writing?

What do you need? What do you have to offer?

How are you aware of the sense of exchange on a daily basis?

When you practice little acts of kindness, what do you receive in return?

How do you celebrate the phenomenon of reciprocity?

What would you donate from your own lifestyle to make a better world?

What would you need to receive/give to create a sense of social justice?

Equity?

(What questions rise from within the group?)

Remember to leave time for a check-out round to close.

Session Six: Love the folks in front of you

Note to host: It's helpful to remind people of the agreements, and then to follow the time format suggested in the introduction to this guide. As the weeks progress, co-creative direction and design is likely to emerge: you are holding the "container" for the conversation, not controlling it.

Instructional theme of the chapter: One of the social challenges we accept on the spiritual journey is to look for the good and lovable in most of the people we meet. (page 79)

Reflection or writing suggestion: Write a character sketch about someone you met that at first you didn't expect to like, or where there wasn't a sense of commonality: what happened? Where are you now in relationship? (You might want to use first name only or write anonymously if you intend to read this reflection.)

Questions for conversation:

What have you learned from "loving" the difficult people in your life?
What skills have you learned? What spiritual gifts have you received?
What would feel different about these relationships if you could internally thank them for the lessons and gifts they offer?
Have you considered that you might be on someone's list as "a difficult person?" What insight does this consideration bring?
In what ways do you interact with your neighbors?
In what ways do you interact with your working colleagues?
In what ways do you interact with strangers/acquaintances at church, or in community settings (the PTA, civic clubs, etc.)?
In what ways do you interact with your extended family?
What might you do as a spiritual practice to shift one of these relationships?

Remember to leave time for a check-out round to close.

Session Seven: Return to the World

Note to host: It's helpful to remind people of the agreements, and then to follow the time format suggested in the introduction to this guide. As the weeks progress, co-creative direction and design is likely to emerge: you are holding the "container" for the conversation, not controlling it.

Instructional theme of the chapter: this whisper is an invitation to see ourselves as part of Nature, belonging to the physical world, part of and caring for its well-being. (page 96)

Reflection or writing suggestion: write about a time in nature when you felt really at home.

Questions for conversation:

Describe where you live now, and how you live now: what is your current relationship with Nature? The natural world?

What do you think Nature has to teach you?

What are your fondest memories of being outside, or way out in the wilderness, as a child?

Are you still visiting the places of wildness in yourself? In nature?

If indigenous means belonging to place, where is the place you most belong?

If you had the relationship with Nature and the earth that you most want, how would you live? Where would you live?

Have you ever had an experience of vivid dreaming like Christina describes? (page 110-111)

What have you most appreciated about this seven week experience?

In this LAST SESSION the group has the opportunity to ask if people are complete with the conversation or if all or some like to continue meeting. If so, what would be the intention of that ongoing group?

Whatever the outcome of this question, this evening offers an opportunity for people to appreciate the process you have all been in the group. As a final check-out take the time to speak to each other about this.

THANK YOU for taking this risk, for making this commitment to deepen your own spiritual practices.
