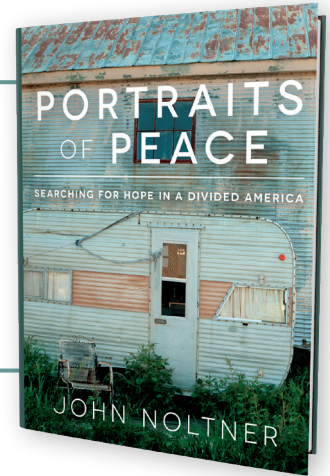

*Portraits of Peace: Searching for Hope
in a Divided America*

BY JOHN NOLTNER

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Portraits of Peace is rooted in active, intentional listening. As you go through this discussion guide, please practice listening deeply to one another. Ask questions. Explore ideas together. Make room for thoughts that may challenge you, and seek to understand.

The questions in this guide are grouped into four parts so you can read the book and lead conversations over several sessions. Feel free to adjust the groups to accommodate a different pace if it is appropriate and desirable for your community.

You are encouraged to keep these conversations rooted in the belief that something better is possible. Acknowledge honest struggle and grievance, but don't get lost in a negative narrative. Look toward solutions and learning.

Consider using these prompts to guide some journaling before your group session so you will have had a chance to think through some of these things in advance, and also as an exercise in self-reflection.

INTRODUCTION THROUGH CHAPTER 8

1. How have you responded to the increased polarization in our society?
2. In what positive and negative ways have the economic and social challenges of the 2008 recession and the 2020 pandemic impacted you?
3. Do you find that you make time for expanded conversations with friends and family? With strangers?
4. Have there been challenging moments in your life that eventually led to transformation?
5. What feeds your belly and what feeds your soul?
6. Respond to Rahelio's quote at the end of chapter 1: "Don't work against what you hate. Work for what you love." Do you see ways you have done this in your life? Ways you need to?
7. What does peace mean to you?
8. Have you ever felt a strong sense of calling?
9. Referring to the quote in chapter 3 from *Meeting the Buddha*, do you identify more as a pilgrim or as a tourist?
10. When have you set out on a long and uncertain journey?
11. Respond to Barbara's notion, in chapter 3, of being a beige piece of clothing so you fit in with everything in the wardrobe.
12. When have you felt like you were failing? How did you navigate that?

13. “When you follow your dream, there is a fine line between foolish and visionary, and you don’t know what side of the line you’re going to land on” (chapter 4). Respond.
14. When have you recognized your own bias?
15. Especially during the pandemic, have there been ways you were able to see a bigger world right in your own community?
16. Talk about any meaningful encounters you have had with people who are experiencing homelessness. Did this change your expectations or perceptions in any way?

CHAPTERS 9-17

1. It can be difficult to make new connections when you feel like an outsider. Talk about a time when you reached across a divide and connected with a new community.
2. What are the “currents that still steer you” (chapter 9) from your youth? Is there a mistake you made that still haunts you?
3. Do you practice a faith tradition? If so, how does it guide you in bridging divides or building community?
4. When, if ever, has your religious tradition come into conflict with your own morality?
5. When has someone acknowledged your own struggle? How did that feel?
6. What is your experience with people who have been through our country’s justice system? Do you see ways that our justice system could be more just?
7. How can we ask difficult questions more gently? Can you share a time in your experience when that didn’t happen? Or when you did it well?
8. John George says, “We all know what the problems are, and there are many. But to continue to focus on the problem and not create a solution is a mistake” (chapter 13). When have you found a path forward in a difficult situation?
9. When have you made the difficult decision to stay at the table?
10. Just for fun, share your worst car stranding story.
11. Do you struggle with disconnecting from media and other distractions to be fully present in the moment?
12. The author says that we can’t always control what happens to us, but we can control the way we respond to it. Share an example of when you have become aware of this in your life.
13. The author shares a particularly painful exchange at a conference where he caused harm in a conversation and made the choice to address it in pursuit of healing. Can you think of a time when you did this? Or when you should have?

CHAPTERS 18-24

1. Which story in this series most resonated with you? Challenged you?
2. Have you had to navigate difficult conversations around a loved one’s diagnosis? Your own? What parallels can we draw to conversations about race, politics, or faith?
3. When have you forgiven someone? Talk about the benefits you experienced from that forgiveness.

4. Are there voices you need to be more intentional about listening to?
5. There can be a disconnect between intent and perception. When have you tried to do something positive but it was perceived differently than you expected? Did you have to revisit your intention?
6. What are the pros and cons of our westernized individualism? Can you see unhealthy ways it is manifested in our country?
7. The author talks about his willingness to walk through the doors that open. When have you taken a risk and recognized a reward when embracing the unknown?
8. Just for fun, when have you had an uncomfortable food moment?
9. When did you first become aware of issues of race?
10. Do conversations about race come naturally for you, or do you find them challenging? Why?
11. How did you respond after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis? And to the events that have followed? Has it changed the way you consider issues of race and justice?

CHAPTER 25 THROUGH THE END

1. Cowboy Lyle had to slow down after an aneurysm. We all had to slow down during the pandemic. What lessons have you learned from that experience?
2. Have you found common ground with an adversary?
3. Have you ever held your own beliefs so closely and so loudly that they have done damage to another person?
4. The author shares his process of making peace signs at sites that require healing. Do you have a practice or a ritual that helps you to acknowledge the need for healing?
5. Have you visited historical sites that have helped you to grapple with painful truths?
6. When have you been misunderstood?
7. What else would you like to challenge yourself to do to resist injustice or work toward a more just world?
8. Have you had any experience with an intentional living community? What was appealing or challenging about it? Why?
9. What is your own family's immigration story?
10. What is required of a person for them to be considered American? How many of our current citizens meet those stated standards?
11. Talk about our current debate around Confederate monuments, the ways we are navigating that conversation well, and where we are doing it poorly.
12. Which story is your favorite. Why?