

## **The Cosmic Ocean Discussion and Activity Guide**

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### **General Overview**

*The Cosmic Ocean* explores diverse subjects such as empathy, rage, child abuse, nonviolent struggle, war, beauty, religion, philosophy, science, slavery, human sacrifice, video games, sports, and our shared humanity. This book also includes a deep discussion of trauma. This book offers many opportunities for discussion about many important issues in our lives and our community. The discussion questions developed are meant to be a “guide” to help discussion facilitators and participants think about this book. These questions can be adapted and changed to meet the needs of your discussion group. It would not be recommended to use all the questions in a discussion group but rather to decide what questions might work for your group. There are also many other possibilities when using this book. We offer this guide as an open educational resource. Please feel free to adapt this guide to fit your needs. We would hope that you would consider sharing your changes with us. Our goal is to develop a list of discussion questions and activities that would support this book series. We hope you find them useful and look forward to your thoughts.

Leading discussions is both a skill and an art form. There are many resources on how to lead good book discussions as well as how to facilitate group dialogue. Here are some sources to consider:

Iowa Center for the Book

<http://www.iowacenterforthebook.org/discussion-groups>

How to Facilitate Group Discussions

[www.uhs.berkeley.edu/home/news/pdf/groupdiscussion.pdf](http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu/home/news/pdf/groupdiscussion.pdf)

### ***Note of Caution***

***This book does include the author sharing some stories of the child abuse he experienced as well as racism in his life. There may be some participants who are not comfortable with these issues and/or for whom this may bring painful memories. Here are some helpful resources on leading discussions on these types of topics. It will be very important to discuss this with participants and to include warnings for those participating. Depending on the group setting, it may be important to establish boundaries on sharing of personal stories. We have included further notes about this within the questions.***

### ***Trigger Warnings and Trauma***

The topic of trigger warnings is receiving attention in college settings. We would recommend reviewing some of the thoughts on this topic. It may or may not be something you want to address with readers about this book. Here are a couple good articles to consider:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

<http://tah.oah.org/may-2015/trauma-and-trigger-warnings-in-the-history-classroom/>

We have included questions that ask participants to think about the materials, discuss how they feel about the book, and finally discuss action oriented questions. This is just one approach that some find helpful when leading book discussions.

Think Feel Act Approach

<http://www.6seconds.org/newstore/products/tfa-cards/>

## **Discussion Questions and Activities**

### **Preface “The Human Condition”**

*Developed by Katherine R. Rowell, Ph.D.*

1. The preface of this book starts with a very powerful sentence, “Trauma has been my greatest teacher, and it has a message all human beings need to hear.” What does trauma mean to you? How can trauma be a teacher? What have you learned experiencing trauma and/or helping others who have experienced trauma?
2. What are some of the traumas that the author experienced and introduces to the reader in the preface? In what ways has your story been similar or different? (Caution note)
3. What role did racism play in the past and what role does it play today as a form of trauma that many people still experience in the United States and the world?  
See research on racism and connection to post-traumatic stress disorder:  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/culturally-speaking/201305/can-racism-cause-ptsd-implications-dsm-5>
4. The author makes the point in the preface and in many of his books (as do others) that human beings are not naturally violent. Why do so many people want to believe that violence is human nature? What role does this belief play in increasing and justifying violence?
5. Do you agree with the author that our greatest human problems result from our search for purpose and meaning? (Review last paragraph on page 15 and Erich Fromm quote on page 16 and discuss.)
6. What contribution did Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, add to our understanding of the connection between purpose and meaning and survival (see p. 19-20)?
7. How can suffering serve a purpose? What historical examples are discussed in the preface to demonstrate the relationship that can exist between suffering and purpose? Do you know of others?
8. What is the difference between the author’s use of the term trauma in comparison to the term suffering? Is there a difference? If so, what? How do you think about these two terms?

9. On page 23, the author states that this book will discuss empathy and the role it plays in providing purpose and meaning. What role do you think empathy might play? How might cynicism interfere with empathy?
10. On page 23, the author notes that “happiness is not the absence of struggle.” What do you think the author means by this statement? Do you agree or disagree?
11. After reading and thinking about the preface, what most intrigues you about the potential of this book? What other thoughts do you have about this book? (Think)
12. How did you feel after reading this preface? (Feel)
13. Are there any actions you plan to take after reading this preface? If so, what are they? Why? (Act)

### **Chapter 1 “A Dark Night Filled with Predators”**

*Developed by Katherine R. Rowell, Ph.D.*

This chapter includes the author’s personal and very painful story of experiencing abuse as a child. This material may be very difficult for some participants to read and discuss in a group. As a facilitator, it is important to remind participants before the discussion that this may or may not be part of the discussion. (This would depend on the level of comfort and trust in the group.) It would be very important to establish trust with group members and to be familiar with trauma discussions. You may need to establish boundaries for this discussion. For example, given time limitations, you may want to request that personal stories of trauma not be shared in the main discussion group but be shared after if needed or to create a space for this to be shared outside the book group discussion. If participants need to share their trauma stories, it would be very important to create space for this to happen but to also allow for those unable to participate to leave the discussion.

1. This chapter opens with the following line, “Long after war has ended, it can cast a shadow not only on the minds of veterans, but also in the lives of their children.” How did the author experience this shadow? Do you know of other examples?
2. What does the author mean by “arrogance and hypocrisy” being the two most dangerous characteristics a leader can have? Do you agree? Why or why not? In another book, the author says that ignorance is not as dangerous when people know they are ignorant. Ignorance is most dangerous when it is combined with arrogance. Are there any other examples of things that become worse when people are arrogant?
3. On pages 29-31, the author describes a suicidal dream. How did the author interpret this dream? What role do dreams, metaphors, and symbolic language play in our lives? What role did they play in the author’s life?
4. What did you think about the quote on page 31, “As I became a young adult, I realized that my childhood suicide dream contained a metaphor about something more dangerous than arrogance and hypocrisy—the destructiveness of trauma”? (Just note that the topic of suicide may be difficult for some.)
5. What seven factors (according to the author) increase the severity of trauma? Plan to take some time in your group to discuss each one (see diagram on p. 45). How did the author experience

the seven factors? Would you add other factors? Please note that discussing these seven factors could be the major part of the group discussion for this chapter. As a facilitator you may want to make copies of page 45 and have participants break into small groups to discuss and/or spend more time on this part of this chapter.

6. Why is human induced trauma the most painful trauma? Do you agree with this perspective? Why or why not?
7. Why should we not compare trauma? Why do people feel the need to compare trauma (p. 47)?
8. How does exploring human trauma offer additional evidence that humanity is not naturally violent (p. 47)?
9. What role did racial identity play in the life of the author? How does the author support the point that biologically speaking, there is only one race—the human race?
10. On page 52, the author asks, “If our flight response is stronger than our fight response when we are threatened with lethal violence, what is the most effective technique armies use to encourage soldiers to fight and not retreat? (See Band of Brothers discussion.) Do you see this technique being used with other groups in the world? Please discuss and explain.
11. The author notes on page 55 that our “primordial” brain is wired to protect our loved ones from the predators of the African Savannah (this includes a fear of the dark since most predators hunt at night). In what ways do we dehumanize our enemies? How are enemies portrayed as predators? Discuss both historical and current examples of war propaganda.
12. The author begins this chapter by discussing the importance of symbolic language and the use of metaphors. In what ways is the title of this chapter a metaphor? In what ways is the title of this book a metaphor (p. 57)?
13. On page 57, the author writes, “The cosmic ocean is a metaphor for the universe, and there are two ways to drown in the cosmic ocean. The first way is extinction . . . The second way is to lose our purpose and meaning.” Do you agree with the author’s perspective that there are two ways to drown as a species? Can any other species suffer from the vast amount of psychological problems that human beings are vulnerable to? Discuss how this second way of drowning relates to this quote (p. 74) from Homer’s *Iliad*, where Zeus says, “There is nothing alive more agonized than man of all that breathe and crawl across the earth.”
14. Why the metaphor of the ocean? What other religions have used this? Do you think it is a useful metaphor (p. 59)?
15. On pages 59-61, the author shares some of his adult struggles with experiencing violence as a child. He notes on page 61, “When people quote Nietzsche’s attitude, ‘That which does not kill us makes us stronger’, they often do not acknowledge how severe psychological trauma can maim and scar our mind.” How did reading these pages make you feel? What emotions do you feel when reading this chapter? How do people begin to heal psychological wounds? What wounds have you experienced and/or others around you experienced? How does one begin the healing process? (As noted earlier, this could be a very painful point of the group discussion. It would be important to acknowledge this possibility and to plan for this with your group.)
16. Paul shares that his painful experiences have helped him be a more empathetic person towards human suffering (p. 61). How can trauma help someone become more empathetic? Does this happen for all people? Why or why not? Unfortunately, research on violent people often reveals

a history of violence in childhood. Why does trauma affect people differently? Why was Paul able to use his trauma to develop more empathy and others not?

17. On page 61, the author turns to a discussion of the psychology of predators. What is the “posturing instinct” and what role does this play in making the author’s point that most predators try to prevent lethal violence unless they are hunting?
18. How can a deep understanding of aggression increase our empathy for human beings (p. 65-66)? Do you agree?
19. In the book, *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu notes the importance of “knowing your enemy.” The author of this book turns this around and writes, “when waging peace is concerned, the only way to truly know our enemy is through empathy” (p. 65). What happens when we become empathetic towards our enemies? Why is empathy an important skill in waging peace? It is recommended that participants be encouraged to read Paul Chappell’s article “Why Our World Needs Peace Literacy.” We would recommend having participants read this article as part of your discussion. <http://paulkchappell.com/articles/>
20. “The deepest way to know another human being is through unconditional love.” (p. 66) What does it mean to love unconditionally? Have you given or experienced unconditional love?
21. How are human beings like predators? What makes us different from other predators (p. 66-68)?
22. How did this chapter help you think differently about aggression? What new thoughts do you have after reading this chapter? What more do you hope to learn about aggression? What more do you hope to learn about empathy? (Think)
23. How did this chapter make you feel? What feelings did you have throughout the chapter? What feelings do you have after the discussion? Do you feel hope from reading the last paragraph of this chapter? Why or why not? (Feel)
24. Are there any actions you plan to take after completing this chapter and discussion? (Act)

## **Chapter 2 “Poseidon’s Wrath”**

*Developed by Katherine R. Rowell, Ph.D.*

1. The author begins this chapter by sharing that as a child he felt like a freak. According to the author, what is the difference between an outcast and a freak? Do you agree or disagree with his point? Have you ever experienced feeling like a freak or outcast? If so, explain. How might feeling different from others enable a person to see the world from a unique perspective?
2. In the beginning of Chapter 2, the author shares that he contemplated suicide during his junior year at West Point (he also references a suicidal dream in Chapter 1). He goes on to write on page 70, “No other species can become depressed, addicted to drugs, and suicidal as a result of being tormented by its self awareness, even when it has freedom, good physical health, companionship, and a belly full of food.” What are your thoughts after reading this? How did this make you feel? Do you know anyone who is depressed and/or struggling with addictions? To what extent does this apply to them? (Please note that as with the previous discussion on child abuse that this discussion on suicide and addictions may be painful and uncomfortable to discuss. You will want to make sure your group is comfortable with this discussion.)

3. Paul writes that our large brains have made human beings the most unusual creatures on the planet. We must seek purpose and meaning as other animals search for food and water (p. 71). What other evidence does he draw upon to support this point (Read through p. 75)?
4. On page 75, Paul notes, "Understanding our fragility and vulnerability as human beings increases my empathy for humanity." He references the work by Jeremy Rifkin on empathy as part of this discussion. Should you have access to technical equipment, you might want to consider showing the RSA animate clip (TED TALK) by Jeremy Rifkin. It is a 10-minute clip and a good way to facilitate a discussion on empathy and humanity.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/jeremy\\_rifkin\\_on\\_the\\_empathic\\_civilization](https://www.ted.com/talks/jeremy_rifkin_on_the_empathic_civilization)

5. On page 77, the author states the purpose of this book. What is the purpose of the book? What are you looking forward to learning more about?
6. "Ignorance may seem like bliss during the harmony, happiness, and innocence of our childhood, but when we make peace with the problem of the human existence and learn to live in harmony with the mystery of life and death, we can achieve a higher bliss than ignorance." (p. 80) What did you think about this point?
7. Name a problem (such as terrorism or poverty) and list every possible explanation you have heard from all political ideologies. Also list the explanations you do not agree with. Do you agree that human beings crave explanations?
8. Given the author's military background, we find military examples on pages 87-93 and then an example from baseball on pages 93-96 to explore that the underlying cause of superstition is not stupidity but lack of control (as part of the larger discussion on how humans try to make sense of the world). In the end (p. 94), what do the superstitious rituals in war and baseball have in common according to the author? (As noted prior, participants without military experience, familiarity with the sport of baseball, and/or lack of knowledge of Greek mythology, may struggle with these pages. As a facilitator, you may need to be prepared to explain and/or share other examples.)
9. In the end (p. 96-98), Paul writes, "that despite our differences, we all share a craving to understand the world around us. Without a worldview, we would not be able to function." How are the "Why" questions we ask both empowering and also problematic? Why is it so important to understand as much as we can about humanity?
10. What superstitions, stereotypes, or misinformation do we hold today that make it difficult to understand humanity? What role do superstitions, stereotypes, and misinformation play in war, injustice, oppression, racism, sexism, trauma and environmental destruction? (p. 98) This could be a very powerful group discussion and could possibly be a lengthy discussion.
11. "When we search for the underlying causes of problems and arrive at inaccurate answers, it can silence our empathy." (p. 98) How might this happen? Has your empathy ever been silenced? Have you seen empathy silenced in society?
12. On page 100, the author discusses the book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. Paul takes issue with the book. What concerns does he have with the book? How might Rhonda Byrne's emphasis on positive thinking be an example of a "superstitious belief that can silence our empathy?" How

- did Hippocrates have a more compassionate view? (p. 102-103) Paul goes on to note that Rhonda Byrne does express a piece of the truth. (p. 103) How might positive thinking be useful?
13. On page 104, Barbara Ehrenreich notes that believing that if people would just change their attitudes that their problems would just go away is a cruel belief. Why does she believe this? Do you agree or disagree? Have you ever experienced this in your life? Have you been on the receiving end of well-intentioned people telling you if you would just think more positively that things would be better? How did this make you feel? Have you ever found yourself participating in these types of thoughts?
  14. How can having accurate information about how our world works increase empathy? (p. 107)
  15. On page 108, the author writes, “for example, someone might say we can solve all the world’s problems by just thinking positive thoughts or simply praying for divine intervention but the civil rights movement and the women’s right movement serve as evidence that solving serious problems requires hard work.” What other historical examples of “hard work” come to mind? Do you think that we often don’t work hard enough to solve social problems? Why or why not?
  16. How can understanding the struggles of our ancestors increase our compassion for humanity? (p. 113)
  17. “The cruel kiss of mother earth” is a paradox of nature. (p. 116) What does the author mean by this? How might this paradox help us understand humanity better? How is this paradox embodied in other religions and stories?
  18. “Ultimately, when we describe nature as benevolent, cruel, or even indifferent, these are projections of human characteristics onto the great mystery we call the universe . . . As I explain later in this book, science can increase our understanding, leading us to more accurate answers to our problems, but every scientific discovery also leads to deeper mystery.” (p. 119) How have scientific discoveries reduced humanity’s “superstitious beliefs” or inaccurate beliefs over the years? How can an accurate understanding increase our empathy for those who are different (the outsiders and the freaks)?
  19. Near the end of this chapter, Paul references the science fiction film *The Matrix*. Depending on your audience this may be a reference unfamiliar to your group. However, discussing the quote from the movie, “Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague” could make for an interesting conversation. Why does Paul make the important point that this statement should not be taken too literally? Do you agree or disagree? How might empathy for our ancestors help us understand this quote differently?
  20. The chapter ends with a powerful statement, “We have become our own greatest threat to our survival, which is an alarming yet incredible fact. Despite my childhood trauma and the lingering scars it left in my mind, I have chosen to work with many people to end war, abolish nuclear weapons, stop environmental destruction, and save humanity from itself. What will you choose?” After reading this chapter, what will you choose? (Action)
  21. After reading this chapter, what new ideas or thoughts do you have? (Think)
  22. What new feelings do you have after completing this discussion? (Feel)

### **Chapter 3 “Tools Made of Flesh, Blood, and Bones”**

*Developed by Derek Petrey, Ph.D.*

This is a great chapter on the obstacles commodification places toward expanding our sense of universal empathy. The human desire to reduce the Other to its mere utility reduces opportunities for intimacy and kinship. When we understand the mechanisms that are used to destroy empathy, we can begin to change our environments and act as agents for expanding empathy and waging peace, creating ripples of positive action, thought, and empathy.

The author reinforces the positions taken earlier that all humans are kindred beings, that a change in attitude or mindset can be liberating and empowers us to act. He examines the role of solidarity in combatting the forces of oppression that divide humanity and also separate us from our animal companions.

1. The author sees great value in the analysis of paradoxes, “seemingly absurd contradictions” that can reveal greater insights upon further reflection. What is the paradox that lies within the title? When you normally think of “tools,” what comes to mind?
2. Think of a humanizing moment you had with an animal. Was it a pet you grew up with? An animal raised on a farm or one you saw in the zoo? How has entering into the space of an animal and connecting with it emotionally changed your perceptions of yourself?

Many works, especially those of Konrad Lorenz or E.O. Wilson, deal with ethology, the study of animal behavior, and its parallels to human behavior. Malcolm Gladwell’s chapter on César Millán, the Dog Whisperer, in *What the Dog Saw* is an especially telling portrait of another person who was “raised by wolves” and found new insights into human psychology.

3. The author ties animal domestication and slavery to the human impulse to create tools, items that can be used for someone’s benefit. This concept is often called “commodification” when those tools have an economic function. Like the story of King Midas, this can lead to disaster. What examples can you see of this impulse going haywire in our society? In our history?

An excellent book that ties in themes from chapters 2 and 3 is Bob Chapman and Raj Sisodia’s book *Everybody Matters: The Extraordinary Power of Caring for Your People Like Family*. You could also have a discussion around the concept of “treating people like things and treating things like people.”

4. Herman Hesse categorizes unconditional love as “bliss” and “pure seeing.” The author proposes that adopting the unconditional love mindset is a combination of “a fulfilling sense of connection with others” (emotion), “calm, deep understanding” (thought), and “a yearning to serve our community” (action). How does that differ or coincide with your understanding of unconditional love? How has a feeling of connection or empathy led you to a new understanding about something? How has a new understanding or a feeling of empathy led you to service or action?
5. On page 139 the author says, “The greatest threat to an oppressive system is empathy. The tools oppressors fear most are not guns or tanks, but tools that empathize with each other.” Have you ever felt as if you were treated as a tool? Think of a time when you empathized with someone because you experienced the same hardship they were. Has someone ever tried to make you feel afraid of somebody else just so that they could control you?

Antonin Gramsci’s writings on cultural hegemony come easily to mind here, however any historical invasion or colonization could be examined through the lenses of fear, conquest, and control. An



interesting biological reflection on how plants changed human civilization is in Michael Pollan's early work *The Botany of Desire*, especially chapter 4 on control and the potato from Inca civilization, the Irish Renaissance and famine, and then McDonald's globalization of the Idaho strain are also insightful.

The neuroscience of empathy is well articulated in Daniel Goleman's book *Social Intelligence* and it refers extensively to the mirror neurons mentioned in this section, which are much more frequent in human brains than even other primate brains. Louis Cozolino's book *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships* is also helpful in understanding some of the newer findings in the context of anthropological psychology.

6. Note the expansion of Frederick Douglass' empathy as he moves from self-defense to the advocacy for others. Notice the power of his partnership with women suffragists. As two oppressed groups worked together, they found new understanding of both their own challenges and those of their collaborators. This type of partnership is called alliance. What do you think of Lucy Stone's quote, "Negro men, and all women, suffer a grievous, common wrong, and are glad when either class, or individuals of either class, can escape from it. Let the friends of both causes cheerfully give each other credit for real facts. Each bitterly needs the help of the other." How have you been an ally for others? When has someone been an ally for you?

Paul Schmitz's book *Everyone Leads* is an excellent connection for facilitating youth leaders to take a stand. Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* has several examples of organized protest movements and the positive changes they made to US society.

7. The author lists four methods oppressors can use to "bomb" or destroy empathy: cultivating negative emotions, adversarial competition, dependence on oppressors, and identification with oppressors. What is the role of propaganda in creating negative emotions? Have you ever seen propaganda that has made you afraid of another person or group of people?

8. Consider Henry Louis Gates' examination of the psychology of the fear slave masters had of their slaves and the power of literacy in changing the mentality of the enslaved. How did the objectification of people deform the mentalities of both master and slave? How does literacy empower people still today?

9. The author envisions a future with greatly reduced systematic exploitation. Is this practical? If the author defines state-sanctioned slavery as the right to rape or kill someone (without claiming self-defense) and the right to publically admit to it without receiving any legal penalty, how has our society already moved beyond state-sanctioned slavery, child labor, and other oppressive tactics? What further changes in values are needed? How would your life be different if you neither experienced nor practiced exploitation?

Further discussion may revolve around intentional societies that avoid exploitation, or religious groups such as the Jains or the Society of Friends (Quakers) who practice pacifism.

10. What do you make of the relationship between Alexander the Great and Bucephalus? What are other examples where humans are able to form strong bonds with animals? Why do you think some people see violent actions taken against pets as being worse than other violent actions?

11. How did you feel as you moved through the author's thought experiment regarding the little girl? Do you agree with the general principle that the more distance (psychological, emotional, and/or physical) there is between two people, the easier it is for one of the people to assault the other?

Gavin de Becker's book *The Gift of Fear* takes a different approach to some of these topics, but his thought experiments also lead us to the conclusion that all humans are capable of cruelty and brutality. Also, trauma can turn everything upside down. In Peter Vronsky's book *Serial Killers*, he says that if a woman is being threatened by a serial killer, that the woman should be careful not to compare herself to the serial killer's mother with the hope of summoning the serial killer's empathy, because many serial killers were abused by and want to murder their mothers. In many situations, trauma can cause us to hurt those closest to us. Peter Vronsky speculates that many male serial killers may murder women because deep down, they actually want to murder their abusive mothers.

12. Compare the account of the men in Police Battalion 101 and that of Eichmann. Do you agree with the author's definition of brutality as a "psychological blindness" that allows a person to cause harm from a distance? Do you agree with the author in his contention that neutrality or apathy causes more harm than cruelty?

Howard Zinn's memoir *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* is a personal glimpse into how this famous historian was moved to action after his World War II experience. Groups more interested in examining Nazi Germany and the Holocaust may consult the works of Elie Wiesel, Corrie ten Boom's *The Hiding Place* (movie or book), or Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*.

13. Using Erich Fromm's quote on killing animals, the author returns to his initial contemplation of how animals bring out our humanity and challenges us to expand our circle of empathy to include animals. What are additional ways in which we can practice compassion for our animal companions? Would you or do you practice vegetarianism or veganism out of humanitarian principles? You may also want to review the works of Peter Singer on animal rights.

Peter Singer: <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1979----.htm>

The works on ethology mentioned in question 2 may be relevant here. There is a touching video of a Brazilian boy who decided to become a vegetarian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJNntUXyWvw>

14. Albert Schweitzer characterized the apathy for life's well-being as thoughtlessness. How does this contrast with the popular notion of mindfulness? How can you "consult the mindset of unconditional love that shines within you" and strengthen your "muscle of empathy"?

Works on mindfulness abound, but Jon Kabat-Zinn remains the most accessible writer in the field.

15. The author states that violence is a tool for communicating trauma when other means have failed. He posits that trauma, like many other extreme experiences, is incapable of being completely expressed through words or the arts. Have you had to work through a "failure to communicate"? Consider times when a situation turned violent and the communication (or lack of communication) that preceded it.

Look at examples of inmates who have worked through restorative and rehabilitative programs such as the PEN Prison Writing Project to explore new vehicles of self-expression: <http://www.pen.org/prison-writing>

16. The word “angel” comes from the Greek term for “messenger.” External validation of our talents can help us break the cycle of negative self-talk and improve our self-perception. Think of people who have touched your life. What personal messages of affirmation have they brought you? How can you be a messenger to others? Think of one person you know that you feel would appreciate a positive message about her or him and commit to telling that person. How do these messages of affirmation make you feel? What actions might you take to give more personal affirmations to those around you? What does this have to do with peace literacy?

#### **Chapter 4 “Soldiers as Christ Figures”**

*Developed by Derek Petrey, Ph.D.*

Oliver Stone once stated, in response to criticism about violence in his movies, that if he really wanted to make a violent movie, that he would have filmed *The Iliad*. It is a classic tale that looks unflinchingly at the horrors of violence, vengeance and war. The Greek hero as portrayed in such epics is contrasted with the Christ figure, the self-sacrificing martyr who lives a life of peace.

The author posits that these two figures have been fused into a deification of the soldier in Western civilization and that Christianity as interpreted through the lens of medieval to colonial Europe glorified a culture of war instead of a Prince of Peace. He shows this depiction in the modern glorification of war and the military war machine.

1. Many critics talk about how reality is distorted through the lens of Hollywood and other entertainment media. Can you think of other aspects of life where the reality of a situation was very different from its portrayal in the media?
2. Plato argued that *The Iliad* should have been censored because its realistic portrayal of war and warriors needed to be hidden from young soldiers and guards-to-be. Is it ever just to sanitize the truth to hide it from readers? What other cases of censorship are you familiar with and why did the censors wish to change the content of the work of art?

An annotated history of censorship can be found online at the [Beacon for Freedom](#) site. For modern examples, students may wish to consult George Roeder Jr.’s *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two*.

3. The author states that “war is the only competition in the world where the winning side can lose so much.” Does that correspond to the portrayals of war in movies or in history? Think about recent military conflicts; what did the winners win and at what cost?
4. The author links boxing and public speaking to the underlying phobia of potential human aggression. You may have even heard metaphors alluding that public speakers in a debate are “sparring” with each other or “slugging it out.” Have you ever felt stage fright? How did you deal with it?

*The Art of Waging Peace* deals with some strategies for empowering students to speak out on causes they are passionate about. You may want to have a faculty member who specializes in debate or communication talk about why people freeze up in public speaking situations.

5. Phobias differ from other types of fear in that psychologically phobias are considered to be irrational fears based on unlikely threats. Because there is such a low statistical probability of being killed by terrorism, and we have less fear of so many things that are far more likely to kill us, our fear of

terrorism can seem irrational. Why do you think US citizens are more afraid of terrorists than of accidental hazards? Do you agree with the author's responses?

Gavin de Becker's book *Fear Less* deals with the irrationality of excess fear and its paralyzing effect in the wake of 9/11. *The Science of Fear* by Daniel Gardner is a guide to the psychological factors fear plays in decision-making.

6. Do you see how people on both sides of the gun control issue are reacting to the same fear of human aggression?

Adam Winkler's book *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America* is an excellent guide to navigating extreme and moderate positions on gun ownership and control.

7. Love of country, family and comrades are powerful motivators that have inspired soldiers to fight. How can those loves be motivating forces to inspire citizens to wage peace? Think of peace activists who were motivated out of a sense of patriotism, family, or camaraderie.

Andrea Davis Pinkney's *Peace Warriors* is a profile of six peace heroes. For a rotating list of peace heroes, you can also visit the [U.S. Institute of Peace](#).

8. The author talks about the unacceptability of men crying in the Greek era and General Patton's tears. A military psychologist also spoke of the strong emotions felt by Marines and their inability to express them. Men in today's society still find it hard to discuss when they have openly cried. Why did Homer think it was important to show this reality of war?

9. Rage is an additional motivator in war. Compare the moments when Achilles displayed rage with the author's comments in Chapter 3 about how violence is used to express trauma that words cannot adequately convey.

10. Many other motivations to fight (money, revenge, rage, oaths, ideas, glory, fame, honor, etc.) are mentioned by the author. Have any of these motivated you to fight or take up arms in a time of war? Do you agree with the author when he describes a variety of motivations to "ingredients in a soup"?

For an examination of the desensitization effect in motivation to commit violence, you may refer to Lt. Col. Dave Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano's work *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*.

11. Compare the author's and Forbes' depiction of West Point with life at civilian colleges. Are the advantages of a West Point education worth the challenges?

12. Erich Fromm posits a "paradox of Christianity" in that a religion that idealized peace and martyrdom was so dedicated to war in the advent and development of Western civilization. The author poses the question, "Can people be Christians if their lifestyle opposes the ideals of Jesus?" What are some modern-day contradictions within Christianity? How have Christians addressed historical and modern-day injustices?

Some of the internal inconsistencies between Christianity's ideals and practices are summarized in *unChristian* by David Kinnaman, which relies on exhaustive research of Millennials' attitudes regarding the modern church. For perspectives outside of Christianity, you could consult *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks or Karima Bennouné's *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here*.

13. The author posits that the “Christ figure” of the modern-day soldier combines the non-Christian image of the Greek conqueror with that of the Christian martyr. Can you think of examples of this idealization in historical battles or Hollywood films?

14. The author provides many historical examples of Christ figures as self-sacrificing saviors: Prometheus, Leonidas, Socrates, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Do any of these examples inspire you? Can you think of others?

15. Hugh Thompson is an example of a soldier who rose above the motivation of camaraderie to report action he believed to be unethical. Why do you think such people are so rare?

*The Forgotten Hero of My Lai* by Trent Angers is a biography of Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson. A detailed profile of him is also available online through the [Americans Who Tell the Truth](#) site. You might want to compare it with Ted Rall’s *Snowden*, a sympathetic portrayal of whistleblower Edward Snowden.

16. The blindness US citizens often have when portraying all US soldiers in all wars as heroes is called *war eclipse* by the author. How would you compare this to the ethical blindness mentioned in Chapter 3 that the author labels as *brutality*?

17. Human sacrifice and other superstitious behaviors, according to the author, arose from inaccurate beliefs. He also reminds us that this is a reason for unjust policies. Can you think of examples of injustices based on inaccurate beliefs? Since you have started reading this book, have you become convinced that some of your beliefs may be inaccurate? Are you ready to make changes in some of your attitudes or actions because of these new beliefs?

18. The author quotes Sun Tzu and agrees with him that “All warfare is based on deception.” How does the war system deceive military opponents? The civilian population? The soldiers themselves?

Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* is a very short read, with many current accessible translations available. One is available for free at the [MIT Classics](#) site.

19. The chapter ends with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s quote honoring soldiers while opposing the war system they are a part of. Do you agree that it is possible to respect just individuals that are part of an unjust system? Can you think of other paradoxical situations with other systems whose individuals might be much more worthy of trust than the system as a whole?

## **Chapter 5 “Beauty and Belonging”**

*Developed by Katherine R. Rowell, Ph.D.*

This chapter is one of the more powerful chapters in the book. There is so much in this chapter and it is such a beautifully written piece. This chapter could work as a stand-alone chapter and support courses that examine bullying, race, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, gender, and concepts of beauty. This chapter could also be adapted for use and discussion with all ages. There are some activities noted that could be adapted for younger children. The discussion on empathy in this chapter is also very important for understanding peace literacy.

1. What role can suffering play in helping us become more empathetic, hopeful, and peaceful people? What is radical empathy? There are many readings and various ways to discuss suffering. You may want to ask participants to share examples of movies or books that demonstrate the positive role that suffering can play in the lives of humans.
2. What were the author's experiences growing up as an Asian-looking black child in Alabama? In what ways have you or others you have known suffered from prejudice, discrimination, or stereotyping? Do you think Paul's experiences would have been different if he had not grown up in Alabama? Why or why not?

You may also want to discuss implicit bias and have participants complete the implicit bias test. <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>  
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

3. How many times have you looked in a mirror and wished you looked different? In what ways have you wanted to look different? Do you think there are gender differences in this experience? If so, how? Do you think there may be racial or ethnic differences? What other types of differences might there be for the "looking in the mirror" as a common experience?

In Sociology, there is a concept called the "looking glass self" by Charles Horton Cooley, and W.E.B. Dubois wrote about double consciousness. (This notion that we perceive ourselves as we perceive others perceive us.) Read more here: <http://www.popularsocialscience.com/2013/05/27/the-looking-glass-self-how-our-self-image-is-shaped-by-society/>

4. Why is beauty about belonging?

Dr. Terrell Strayhorn has a great book called *Creating a Sense of Belonging*.

5. What role does empathy play? Why are younger children more able to be empathetic towards others compared to adults? What examples does the author share? What other examples come to mind?
6. Given that children can feel so much empathy for outcasts, why is bullying so common in schools? What does the author suggest? What do you think?
7. Paul notes on page 287 that bullying makes us feel alienated. How does the author define alienation? In what ways do prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and bullying create feelings of alienation? This chapter could be very useful in discussions on bullying with teens and young adults. This could become the major part of a discussion with younger participants. You may want to review some of the work on bullying:

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/what-is-bullying/>

8. Is craving a sense of belonging a basic human need? How does the author use Socrates, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. as examples? What other examples come to mind?

9. In what ways does the outside world define beauty? You could do an entire discussion on just beauty for this chapter by focusing on questions 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, and 21.

Many college and high school students complete a gender advertisement analysis in sociology, psychology or gender studies. I would recommend students to watch the film *Killing Her Softly* about gender and advertising as well as the website. Here are some examples of activities and films. (If you search the internet for gender advertisement analysis, you will find several good examples for various ages.)

<http://genderads.com/>

<http://jfmuellet.faculty.noctrl.edu/crow/activitiesgender.htm>

10. As part of your discussion, review the quote on page 289. What feelings or thoughts does this quote bring to mind? What parts of this quote speak to you? Why do we hurt people when we are confused, insecure, and angered by our own suffering? How might we turn the tightrope of beauty into a wide road?

“My painful childhood experiences have fueled my empathy for all human beings, regardless of whether they are deemed attractive or unattractive by societal standards, because we all share a common humanity. We all crave to belong, to not feel alienated, to possess self-worth, and to be treated with respect and empathy. Yet we hurt each other unnecessarily when we are confused, insecure, angered by our own suffering, and taught to hate. Together we must turn the tightrope of beauty into a wide road where we can all walk side by side as one human family. The survival of our fragile future depends on it.” (p.289)

11. According to the author, serious issues like racism, sexism, environmental destruction, and war are often symptoms of deeper issues in our society. What are some of those issues?
12. In what ways does the author use the example of *Star Trek* to make the point that human beings of all races have inherent dignity? What other examples from popular culture come to mind when you think about the message that all people have inherent dignity?
13. In what ways have societal standards changed for beauty? What are some cultural differences in beauty? How is the concept of beauty a social construction?
14. In what ways are eating disorders systemic of the larger cultural standards of beauty? On page 295, the author makes the point that our society has narrowed the standard of beauty in a way that denies human dignity. According to the author, why is the tightrope of beauty in our society so narrow? What examples are used by the author and what other examples come to mind?
15. Why are standards of beauty more flexible for men than women? What role does advertising play in all of this? Reference Question 9.
16. Compare and contrast the concept of commodified beauty to that of priceless beauty (p. 299-300). According to the author, how does the Dr. Seuss book, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* connect to the concept of commodified beauty?

This question could be related to conspicuous consumption (Thorsten Veblen, *Sociology*) and there is some good work by Sut Jolly (*Advertising and the End of the World*) that would make a good connection.

Here are some sources for activities that might be helpful:

<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/anti-racism-activity-sneetches>

<http://www.cpalms.org/Public/PreviewResourceLesson/Preview/41535>

<http://www.conspicuousconsumption.org/Thorstein-Veblen.html>

<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=101>

17. What role can priceless beauty play? Why is developing an understanding of priceless beauty a difficult journey? Have you started this journey? What does this journey look like for you? If not, how might you start this journey? What actions might you take after reading this chapter?
18. Take a few minutes and review this quote on page 300. After reviewing, take some time to discuss this quote. How did it make you feel? What role does dehumanization play in war, genocide, and violence? How does the concept of priceless beauty make it difficult to bomb others? What other thoughts do you have? What is the relationship between empathy and priceless beauty?

“Protecting our fragile future requires us to develop our perception of priceless beauty, because seeing beyond the shallow surface allows us to experience deep connection with others and transcend the boundaries that divide us. Any system that dehumanizes us based on how we look produces both cruelty and brutality. To combat unjust systems, the perception of priceless beauty repels dehumanization like light casting out shadow. Because the perception of priceless beauty recognizes the dignity inherent to the mystery of life, the more we expand our perception of beauty, the more we threaten all unjust systems, including the war system. It is difficult to bomb people when we perceive them as beautiful.”

19. In your group, take some time to have everyone read the last two paragraphs of this chapter and share their thoughts on the conclusion to this chapter. What heavy boxes do you carry with you? How might you be able to let go of your heavy boxes? What heavy boxes do you see those around you carrying? How might you work to help others with their heavy boxes? What heavy boxes do you notice in your community? What are some ways developing radical empathy and an understanding of priceless beauty can help you help others lighten their load?

## **Chapter 6 “The Sanity of Humanity”**

*Developed by Katherine R. Rowell, Ph.D.*

1. The chapter begins with the following line, “The most difficult opponent a human being will ever face is the demon in one’s own heart.” What demons did the author have to face in his life? What demons have you faced? How can confronting the demons within us help us gain realistic hope and radical empathy?



2. How is it possible to gain strength through adversity? How did the author use video game playing to begin to understand the idea of strength through adversity? How do video games reflect human psychology and ancient mythology? Did the discussion on video games surprise you? Why or why not? What has been your experience with video games? What types of experiences helped you begin to understand the relationship between strength and adversity?
3. On page 307 Paul writes, “Just as doctors who want to promote health must confront rather than run away from the causes of illness, those of us who want to promote peace must confront rather than run away from the causes of violence. We must not be afraid to explore and understand trauma, war, injustice, diseases, and injuries. A peace activist unwilling to learn about trauma is like a doctor unwilling to look at a cancer patient or broken bone.” Why do you think the author believes understanding trauma is instrumental in peace literacy? Do you agree or disagree? What happens when we run away from trauma and adversity?
4. How does understanding trauma enable us to be more empathetic? What is meant by radical empathy? (p. 307-310) How is radical empathy different from your understanding of empathy? How are we all in this together? What teachers have you found in the most unlikely places? How might you work with others towards understanding trauma and increasing your own radical empathy?
5. How might you overcome darkness? How do we find light? How is light a metaphor for truth? Paul notes that a truth that affects all of us is that human beings crave self-worth. What reasons make it difficult to have self-worth? (p. 313- 321) What role can positive and negative stereotypes play in reducing self-worth? You could have an initial conversation on the causes of negative self-worth with this question and/or move to question 7.
6. In understanding how to help children, Paul cites the work of psychologist Carol Dweck (p. 320-324). It may be worth reviewing Carol Dweck’s work on mindset as part of this discussion. Why does the author include this discussion? How does this discussion help you think about “self-worth”? You might want to have your group watch Carol Dweck’s Ted Talk on mindset and then discuss:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/carol\\_dweck\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_believing\\_that\\_you\\_can\\_improve](https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve)

<http://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/about/>

7. What are the causes of low self-worth? (See Figure 6. 1, p. 325) This could be a lengthy discussion and as a facilitator you may want to focus on each factor and/or just have a discussion overall about this.
8. On page 325, the author includes a discussion of the “muscle metaphor” from his book *Peaceful Revolution*. As a facilitator you may want to read this book prior to leading a discussion, however, it is not required. This is a point you may or may not want to make when discussing the “nine spiritual organs of our shared humanity.”
9. On page 326, the author shares that as we have been reading this book, he has been unveiling the “nine spiritual organs of our shared humanity.” After reading the book, do you recognize the nine spiritual organs? Why does the author choose to use the word “spiritual”? Why do you

think he chooses the word “organ”? (These questions would take participants to the end of the chapter.)

10. On page 327, Paul writes, “When scientific evidence, timeless religious teachings, and philosophical wisdom intersect and agree on something, this intersection can serve as a compass pointing toward truth.” What does the author mean by this? Why does he think it is important to acknowledge science, religion, and philosophy? Do you agree? Why or why not? How did you feel when reading this discussion? Why does the use of “spirituality” make some people uncomfortable?
11. How can we feed our spiritual organs? Why is this important? Do you agree with the author that spiritual hunger pains cause more violence, cruelty, and brutality around the world than anything else? Why or why not?
12. Overall, what do you think after reading this chapter? What parts of this chapter were helpful to you? Are there any actions that you may take after reading this chapter?

### **Chapter 7 “Sailing the Night Sky”**

*Developed by Katherine R. Rowell, Ph.D.*

1. “If we want to find solutions to any problem, we first have to ask the right questions.” (p. 334) What are examples where asking the rights questions is necessary to solve a problem?
2. Why do people play video games?
3. Why is the ability to throw objects an important survival trait of humans? What evidence is cited by the author? Why is this important in understanding why people play games? Paul writes that people are not drawn to violent video games because they are naturally violent but rather because they are natural throwers. (p. 343) What did you think about this statement? Do you agree or disagree? What concerns do you have about violent video games? Do you think playing video games can be both positive and negative? Do all human inventions have a dark side? Why or why not?
4. What are the nine survival abilities in games? (p.345) How might the nine survival abilities serve as a metaphor for life?
5. On page 350, Paul writes, “To survive in the twenty-first century and beyond, we must learn to throw more than just physical objects. We must learn to propel truth, love, and justice with enough accuracy and force to shatter unjust systems. This kind of throwing does not rely on the muscles of our body, but the muscles of our shared humanity. Only by cultivating this kind of strength can we become powerful enough to defeat an enemy as mighty as war.” How do you work to strengthen your muscles of humanity? How might you work with others to do so? How have people used their muscles of humanity to shatter unjust systems? What examples come to mind in your community (not just historical)?
6. Why does the author make the point that the war system cannot be killed? (p. 350) How does the author use Greek mythology to make this point? Do you agree with the author that the war system cannot be killed but can only be overthrown and imprisoned? Why or why not?

7. On p. 356, the author discusses the problems with humanity causing destruction to the environment. Why is a discussion of environmental issues important in understanding our humanity? In what ways is the environmental movement connected to the peace movement? Why is the relationship important in understanding our shared humanity?
8. "The struggle to end war is an underdog journey (p. 357) . . . but we can win." Why is the author hopeful we can win this struggle? Are you hopeful? Why or why not?
9. How is the struggle to end war a "challenge"? What is the greatest human challenge? (p. 358) Do you agree or disagree? How can "challenge" be both delicious and deeply fulfilling? What challenges have you faced and overcome? How did it feel to do so? How do challenges strengthen us? How might failure at overcoming a challenge be difficult? Why is peace work difficult? Do you agree that there is a lack of integrity in our society and a lack of role models? (p. 362)
10. On page 363, Paul notes that if we do end war and solve our global problems, humanity will still need to be challenged in the future. What are the two endeavors that Paul believes can continue to challenge us in the future? Do you agree that these might be two important challenges? How is the chapter title a metaphor for these challenges? Do you think we need to wait to solve the problems of the world before thinking about these other challenges?
11. What is the practical step discussed in this chapter that can help us solve a wide variety of human problems? Do you agree or disagree? What are examples of unclear communication that you have seen, which has resulted in misunderstanding or conflict?
12. Why does the author include a detailed discussion of what he means by violence near the end of the book? What is violence according to the author? Why does the author make the point that poverty is not the worse form of violence but rather one of the worst forms of brutality? (p. 364-365) Do you agree or disagree? What thoughts do you have about violence after reading these pages? Depending on the participants, this part of this book could make for a good discussion about the concept of "structural violence" in comparison to the author's perspective. Why does the author believe we need to clearly communicate what is meant by violence? This part of the book could make for a powerful conversation on the use of "structural violence" in peace literature.
13. How can we find wisdom and answers in video games, sports, mythology, military strategy, the history of waging peace, the mysterious universe within us, the deepest darkness, and the timelessness of truth? Where else do you go to find wisdom and answers in how to imprison the unjust systems that harm us? Where do you find your strength and courage?
14. What thoughts and feelings do you have after reading this chapter?
15. What actions might you take after reading this chapter?

## **Chapter 8 “The Mystery Beneath the Waves”**

*Developed by Katherine R. Rowell, Ph.D.*

1. What has been your journey in search for “immortality”? How is it similar to the author’s story? How is it different? Do you agree that humanity has a natural fascination with immortality? What examples come to mind?
2. Because of our heightened awareness of mortality, our ability to perceive it extends to our entire planet. (p. 374) Do we recognize how fragile our future truly is? Do you think most humans realize that if we do not protect our fragile future by waging peace, humanity will destroy itself? Why or why not?
3. The author includes a brief discussion of animals and their ability to feel pain on p. 375. Although not stated in this book, how might you think the author feels about topics like animal cruelty and the consumption of animals? (The author does discuss this in the later books of the series.) What might this suggest about vegetarianism or veganism? Why are many peace activists also environmentalists as well as animal rights advocates? What is the connection? Why might this be important to discuss?
4. How is human behavior much more complex than Maslow’s hierarchy of needs? What thoughts do you have about this discussion in the book? (p. 376-384)
5. Compare and contrast the Maslow model to the Paul Chappell model on page 385. How are they different? How are they similar? Why is it so important to understand the “spiritual cravings”?
6. How do people seek to fulfill their spiritual cravings? How does the religion of war offer to fulfill this craving? How can war be seductive? What are some negative ways people seek to fulfill their spiritual cravings? (Depending on the participants, you may or may not want to discuss the role sex can play in this. It is a good discussion but may or may not be comfortable depending on the group.)
7. What does the author mean by the following statement, “The psychological blindness of brutality is the apathy that sustains racism, sexism, poverty, war, abuse of animals, environmental destruction, and all the injustice in the world.” (p. 390)
8. Do you agree that we have the power to solve our national and global social problems? If so, why do you think many people believe that we do not? What makes it difficult for us to believe this is true? If not, why not? How might the four practical steps help?
9. What does Paul mean by “change the quality of our suffering”? How did radical empathy help him have a different perspective of his father? How have you changed the quality of your suffering? How long is this journey? Is it always possible? Why or why not?
10. What are some of the ways that people feed their craving for transcendence (timelessness)?
11. What does it mean to make peace with one’s self? How do you strive to achieve this peace? What challenges do you face in making peace with yourself? Why is this peace an important part of being human?
12. How do you maintain a balance between self and community (family)?
13. In your group, have someone read out loud the excerpt from Dr. King’s book, *Where Do We Go From Here?* on pages 402-403. After reading, ask each participant to share their thoughts on this

reading. After sharing, it would be appropriate to ask participants to share their thoughts on “Where do they go from here” after participating in this book dialogue. What are next steps? What have they learned? What are they thinking? What actions are they planning to take? As a facilitator, this may be a good way to bring closure to your book discussion. It would be important to discuss “closure” with participants and to close this dialogue with an action plan.