

a peace of my mind

American Stories discussion guide



rediscovering the common humanity that connects us



photographs by John Noltner | guide by Andy Tix, Ph.D. |

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What does it mean to live in peace?

How do we work toward peace during difficult times?

How do we create peace with those around us?



These are critical questions that we all ask ourselves, and they are the basis for what follows in this five-part study guide, based on the award-winning book, *A Peace of My Mind: American Stories*, by John Noltner.

A Peace of My Mind explores—through art and storytelling—different and unique personal perspectives on peace. Fifty-eight stories of inspiring individuals are featured, covering a range of themes and topics.

In this series, you will read a selection of these stories. Ultimately, this will allow you to discuss peace across faith, race, and other perspectives. There will also be significant time devoted to personal reflection and discussion so that you can consider how this rich body of experience relates to your daily life.

What follows is a five-part study guide for discussion of the book within a small or large group. Each session outlines a general discussion guide, and because your group is unique, please feel empowered to customize and adapt the material to fit the needs and interests of your group. Although not essential, it is recommended that discussions take place while enjoying food or drink, if possible. Your group also may be enriched if you bring in an outside speaker to address a particular topic of interest.

Of course, not all the problems in the world can be solved in a five-part discussion. Peacemaking is a long-term commitment that requires practice every day. We hope this discussion guide provides a space where your group can explore peace, and leave somehow better as a result.

session 1: introduction



This session, group members should:

- 1. become acquainted with each other**
- 2. understand the ground rules for the discussion**
- 3. begin to explore the concept of peace**
- 4. distribute copies of the book, *A Peace of My Mind: American Stories*, as well as any other materials necessary for the rest of the sessions**
- 5. become generally familiar with the book**
- 6. leave with their homework assignment for the next session**

Becoming acquainted

Take some time to make sure everyone knows everyone else's names in the group. There are a variety of "icebreaker" activities that might be used related to peace as well. One idea would be to simply have everyone share a little bit about themselves and discuss what inspired them to come to the discussion.

Ground rules

Group members might discuss amongst themselves what ground rules are important for them. At the very least, the following can be highlighted:

- This discussion is built on the practice of listening—listening to our best selves and the stories of others similar to, and different from, us. When listening to others, it is a priority to listen for understanding, even if that doesn't mean someone fully agrees.
- All questions and comments are welcome, but participation is never “demanded” of anyone.
- The group should be as fully present as possible. No cell phones.
- Allow everyone space to fully articulate their views. Please refrain from interruptions.
- Group members might strive to balance being honest with being respectful and aware of others’ differing opinions. “I” statements can help individuals “own” their questions and comments.
- If a discussion becomes contentious, turn to wonder. For example, group members can begin a challenging statement by saying “I wonder...”
- What is shared in the group stays in the group. Confidentiality is essential to a robust conversation.

The concept of peace

To begin exploring the meaning of “peace,” the following discussion questions can be used. Ideally, group members would possess a notebook or journal of their own to use throughout the five sessions to record their thoughts and insights. Notebooks or journals can be supplied for these purposes as well. To prompt greater depth, individuals might be given five minutes to write about a question, and then discuss with the group.

- What does “peace” mean to you?
- Who do you know that lives most “peacefully,” in terms of inner peace and/or in terms of creating peace with others?
- Is peace something you “find?” Is it more helpful to consider how to “make” peace?



A Peace of My Mind

Make sure everyone possesses a copy of *A Peace of My Mind: American Stories*, by John Noltner.

To introduce the book, one person from the group can read aloud John's introduction on page 10. If there is time, the same could be done for the foreword that appears on page 9, written by Terri Lee Freeman, President of the National Civil Rights Museum. After a reading, group members can discuss questions and comments.



Closing

The next session will focus on peace across faith perspectives. Group members should prepare themselves by reading the following stories. It would be helpful if individuals identified questions or comments they might like to share during the next discussion.

- Talat Hamdani (p. 26-27)
- Maham Khan (p. 40-41)
- Deanna Thompson (p. 44-45)
- Brandon Sheehan (p. 74-75)
- Elaine Baker (p. 126-127)
- Penina Bowman (p. 134-135)

A good reminder before departure would be that the goal of this work is to seek to understand others' stories, even if they are different or if they initially seem disagreeable.

Another option would be to end the session with a charge for group members to identify a question or struggle they have with regard to peace that they would like to work through as a part of this group. These can be kept private, shared, or turned in anonymously.

Peace is not just the absence of conflict.
–Deanna Thompson

session 2: peace across faiths



This session, group members should:

- 1. discuss the problem of interfaith prejudice and conflict**
- 2. discuss the stories assigned for the week**
- 3. leave with their homework assignment for the next session**

Interfaith prejudice and conflict

After settling in and exchanging some pleasantries, group members can be asked to write for five minutes about one or more of the following questions:

- What are the challenges to having peaceful relations with others from a different faith perspective?
- How was Maham Khan right when she said (on page 41) that “we fear that which we do not know?”
- How is peacemaking an element of your religious or spiritual tradition?
- How can we bridge differences across different faith perspectives?

After the writing time has passed, group members can discuss their thoughts.

The stories of the week

Begin by discussing group members' general impressions of the stories of the week. A few volunteers then can share the story for the week that most resonated with them. They can read the entire story aloud, and then the group can discuss their questions and comments about it. As this occurs, focus on trying to understand the perspectives of those being shared.



Closing

The next session will focus on peace across races. Group members should prepare themselves by reading the following stories. It would be helpful if individuals identified questions or comments they might like to share next time.

- Hashim Garrett (p. 14-15)
- Angela Bates (p. 52-53)
- Julissa Arce (p. 76-77)
- Rashaad Arnold (p. 80-81)
- Clarence Moriwaki (p. 84-85)
- Eugene Joe (p. 98-99)

It also may be helpful to close this session with group members writing about or discussing the following question:

What would it mean for you personally to make peace toward others from different faith perspectives? What would that look like in your everyday life?

*Peace between
two people is
surely something
that can spread.*

—Maham Khan

session 3: peace across races



This session, group members should:

- 1. discuss the problem of racial prejudice and conflict**
- 2. discuss the stories assigned for the week**
- 3. leave with their homework assignment for the next session**

Racial prejudice and conflict

After settling in and exchanging some pleasantries, group members can be asked to write for five minutes about one or more of the following questions:

- What are the challenges to having peaceful relations with others from different races?
- How was Angela Bates right when she said (on page 53) that “I have a choice. How am I going to react to the world around me?”
- When have you observed an example of someone constructively reaching across a racial divide?

After the writing time has passed, group members can discuss their thoughts.

The stories of the week

Begin by discussing group members' general impressions of the stories of the week. A few volunteers then can share the story for the week that most resonated with them. They can read the entire story aloud, and then the group can discuss their questions and comments about it. As this occurs, focus on trying to understand the perspectives of those being shared.



Closing

The next session will focus on peace across other perspectives. Group members should prepare themselves by reading the following stories. It would be helpful if individuals identified questions or comments they might like to share next time.

- Laura Patey (p. 16-17)
- Cesar (p. 62-63)
- Michael Reid (p. 68-69)
- Bud Welch (p. 92-93)
- Jarell Wilson (p. 108-109)
- Fiona Orr (p. 114-115)

It also may be helpful to close this session with group members writing about or discussing the following question:

- What would it mean for you personally to make peace toward others from different racial backgrounds? What would that look like in your everyday life?

*I have a choice.
How am I going to
react to the world
around me?
—Angela Bates*

session 4: peace with others



This session, group members should:

- 1. discuss the problem of prejudice and conflict toward members of the LGBTQ community, immigrants, addicts, the mentally ill, people who have done you harm, and individuals of different ages**
- 2. discuss the stories assigned for the week**
- 3. leave with their homework assignment for the next session**

Prejudice and conflict toward others

After settling in and exchanging some pleasantries, group members can be asked to write for five minutes about:

- What makes it difficult to have peaceful relations with one or more of the following: members of the LGBTQ community, immigrants, addicts, the mentally ill, people who have done you harm, and individuals of different ages?

After the writing time has passed, group members can discuss their thoughts.

The stories of the week

Begin by discussing group members' general impressions of the stories of the week. A few volunteers then can share the story for the week that most resonated with them. They can read the entire story aloud, and then the group can discuss their questions and comments about it. As this occurs, focus on trying to understand the perspectives of those being shared.

*The opposite of love
isn't hate,
the opposite of love
is fear.*

—Clarence Moriwaki

Closing

The next session will focus on future action steps toward peace in group members' everyday lives. Group members should prepare themselves by reflecting on the following question:

- How specifically can I nurture seeds of peace within myself, my home, my community, and my world?



session 5: peace in the future



This session, group members should:

- 1. explore how to practically promote peace in the future**
- 2. learn about ways to continue reflecting on peace**
- 3. express their gratitude toward the group**

Nurturing seeds of peace

Last week's assignment was for group members to reflect on the following question:

- How specifically can I nurture seeds of peace within myself, my home, my community, and my world?

Most of this week's discussion will focus on this. Group members would do well to elaborate on practical steps they could take. As a part of this discussion, it may be essential to discuss what obstacles individuals face and what could be done to overcome them. Another avenue to pursue is how group members have changed as a part of their involvement - or what most resonated, surprised, or challenged them - during the five-part discussion.

Continued learning

Group members can be informed that A Peace of My Mind has resources for continuing to learn about the topics of this five-part discussion. These include the website (www.apomm.net) and social media sites Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. There also is a traveling exhibit.

Gratitude

End on a positive note. Each group member can take a moment to express their gratitude for the book, what they learned, what someone else said that sparked some inspiration in them, and how the discussion affected them.

Another option would be to discuss how the group could continue to get together in the future, to continue discussions, or – ideally – to work on a peace project of some kind that resulted from the group's time together.



*When I think about peace,
I think of tranquility and
calmness, of having come
to an understanding of
who you are and
what the world is,
knowing there's a place
inside of you that no one
can take from you.*

–Elaine Baker