I've been meaning to ask...

a series for curiosity, courage, & connection

Study journal with art, poetry, & prompts for fostering deeper connection

A Sanctified Art
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Week 1

I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

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We Are Not Strangers

If you ask me where I'm from,
I'll tell you about the South—
about sweet tea, church pews,

slow drawls, sultry summers.
And if you pause,
then I may go on to tell you

how I'm from a family of preachers,
how I stand on the shoulders of generations
who believed that love could be the answer.

And if you're still listening even then,
I'll tell you that I'm from strong women
with tall spines who have carried the weight

of inequality on their backs with children on their laps.
And then I'll tell you about
the kitchens that I'm from,

which have always cooked enough
food for unexpected guests—just in case.
Or I could tell you about the car

that carried us into the mountains, summer after summer
so that we could breathe again.
That's part of where I'm from.

And if you haven't given up yet,
then I may even mention the dirt—
the earth that catches me,

the earth that holds me.
The earth that reminds me of growth.
The earth that will eventually welcome me home.

You and I aren't really strangers after all.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

...where are you from?

Conversation prompts

Respond to any of the following prompts with a conversation partner, or choose one to reflect and journal.

1. How many places have you lived or visited? What place(s) have you loved? What place feels most like home?

2. Is there a story behind your given name or your surname? If you have a nickname or a chosen name, how is this name meaningful to you?

3. Share about a family member or close friend who has shaped who you are. How has this person impacted your life?

4. Share a memory from your childhood.

5. If you feel comfortable, share anything you know about your ancestry or ethnicity. What stories have been passed down to you? What stories or information are missing? In what ways does your story of origin hold pain, and in what ways does it hold promise?

6. What's something you love or celebrate about yourself?

Read Genesis 2:4b-15

Commentary | Dr. Raj Nadella

At some point in our lives, most of us have been asked that loaded question, "Where are you from?" I often wonder how Adam/humanity might have responded to it. Obviously, Adam was from the ground. But there are important details that merit attention, and God is in those details. God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, making Adam a living being. How exactly did God breathe into Adam's nostrils? God utters things into existence in Genesis 1 but is more hands-on in this chapter. God forms humanity, makes all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, plants a garden, and lets water flow from the garden. Later, God takes Adam and puts them in the garden to till it. So, I can picture God carefully crafting different parts of the body, then kneeling over Adam and breathing the breath of life into nostrils.

Much of this story is about mutuality, symbiosis, and interdependence. Adam was formed from the ground and was, in turn, asked to till it. The Hebrew word *abad* has the connotation of doing labor for the land and serving it. Adam comes from the land and is sustained by it, but also serves the land. Similarly, there is a symbiotic relationship between other parts of creation. The earth gave rise to the river and the river, in turn, watered the garden. God is in the middle of this story breathing the breath of life but also promoting mutual, life-giving relationships between different parts of creation.

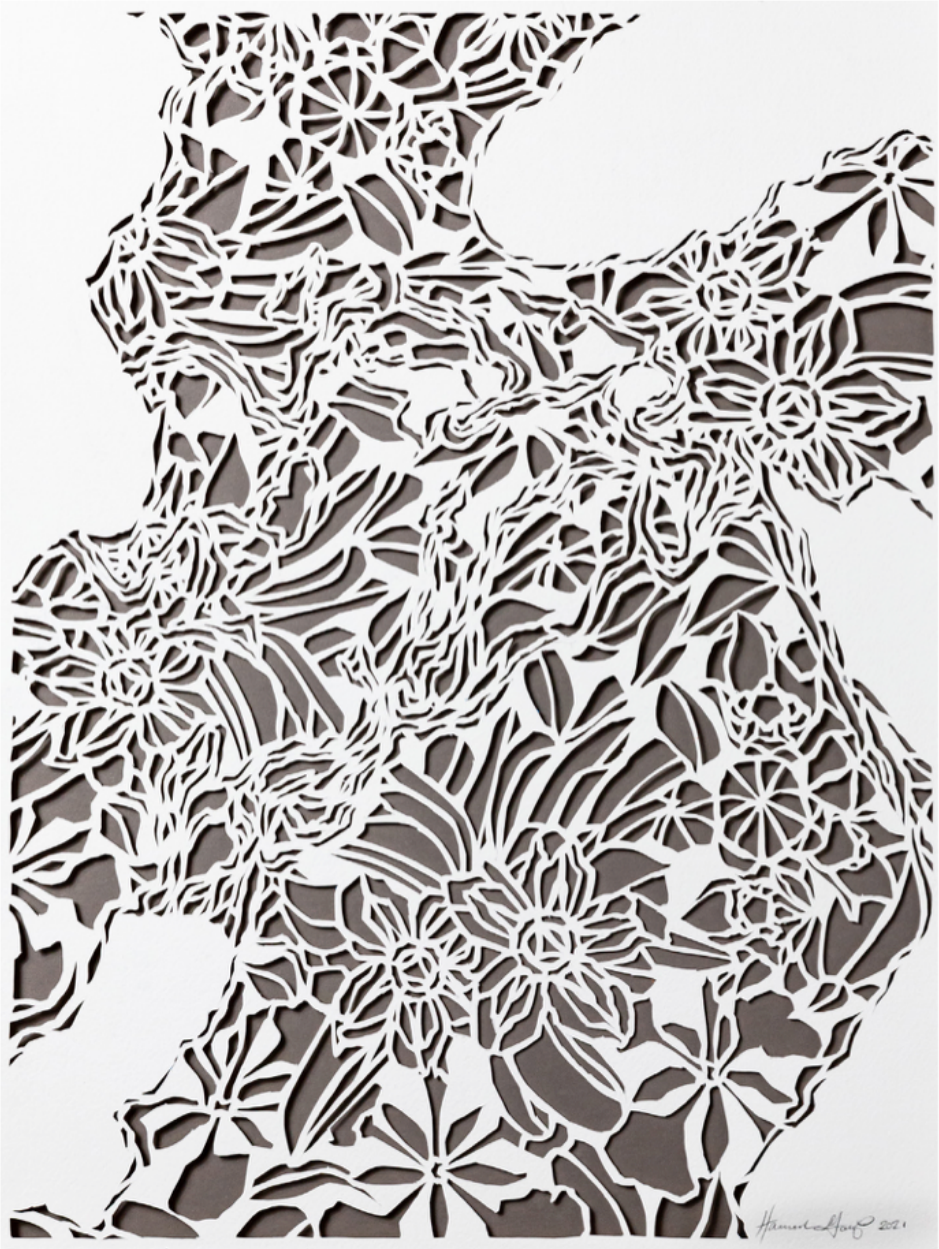
As I watched the image of Derek Chauvin kneeling over George Floyd for several minutes, extinguishing his breath and causing his death, I could not help but to juxtapose it with the image of God kneeling over Adam to breathe life into the nostrils of humanity, making them living beings. As people of faith, how do we foster relationships that are defined by mutuality? Are we engaging in life-affirming practices that breathe life into others—both human and non-human?

Genesis 2:4b-15
Reflection prompts

1. As a family of faith, our creation story grounds us in goodness. It tells us the truth about who we are and it helps us belong to something bigger than ourselves. How does this story of origin impact your sense of identity? How does it impact how you see others?

2. In Genesis 2:15, God settles the human in the garden of Eden to farm it and take care of it. The ancient Hebrew verbs used to describe these actions are *abad* (serve/work/till) and *shamar* (protect/guard/preserve). How does this verse inform your understanding of humanity's relationship to the earth?

3. Return to the last paragraph in Dr. Raj Nadella's commentary. Name examples of life-affirming practices that breathe life into others—both human and non-human.



Four Rivers of Eden | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

Read Genesis 2:4b-15

From the artist | Hannah Garrity

The natural beauty and wealth of the earth are poetically described in this passage. The valley of the Tigris and Euphrates weave inward, framed to the north and east by the Pishon and Gihon. The surrounding seas—Mediterranean, Persian, Caspian, Red, and Black—lean in on this land of Eden. Beauty and abundance burst forth from the earth. Where are we from? Here, we are from the earth and the water; we are from the Spirit. God reaches down and places the first humans here and molds them from the elements in this land of abundance.

This image is built on the patterning of flowers in Saudi Arabia, in Syria, in Iran. Indigenous to the area, the Blood Lily, Jasmine flower, Damask rose, Purple Crown, and Desert rose bloom among the rivers and the seas of Eden. Where are you from? How is it beautiful?

As I studied the satellite maps of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the water, topography, vegetation, and human efforts to control them create a powerful sense of flow. The land appears in motion like water. From afar, the lines begin to look like patterns; repeating with variation, they remind me of the incredible intricacy of life, the omnipresence of God. There are visual parallels in the macro and the micro. A wide view of the lands and the waters of Earth are reminiscent of close-up images from within the human body. The layout that I chose for this image reminds me of dancing, of flowing to music, to the beauty of life. Where are you from? What energy and emotions do you feel about that place?

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

Read John 1:35-51

Commentary | Dr. Raj Nadella

Curiosity runs rampant in this story and Jesus is the primary focus of such curiosity. John had already known Jesus as the Lamb of God and invited his disciples to meet him. The two disciples who follow Jesus apparently want to know where he is staying, but they ask questions only after he gives them permission. They are respectful of his space and enter it only at his invitation. It is the kind of healthy curiosity that is eager to engage others but is unintrusive.

But the disciples call Jesus a Rabbi, a term that does not capture his true identity in John. Instead of answering their question (where are you staying?), Jesus says, "Come and you will see." The Greek word for seeing in this context is *horaw/oida*, which literally means "know, perceive, understand." Jesus seems to suggest that the disciples called him Rabbi because they did not fully perceive him. He invites them to his place so that they can perceive him. Jesus is inviting them to a deeper level of curiosity, one that entails a willingness to learn as well as unlearn prior assumptions. Such curiosity transcends superficial knowledge and requires greater investment of one's time and resources. The disciples spent the day with him and called him Messiah.

Curiosity is contagious. Andrew, who followed Jesus, introduces him to his brother Simon. Philip introduces him to Nathanael, who wishes to know if anything good can come out of Nazareth. "Come and see," says Philip. The subtext is: "Don't arrive at premature conclusions about anyone, or otherize them based on insufficient knowledge." Curiosity is also a two-way street. Nathanael hears about Jesus and approaches him, but Jesus had already learned about him enough to call him a person without deceit.

How do we cultivate deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others, especially those who look, dress, and think differently? It requires investment of sufficient time and resources to learn about them, a commitment to unlearning prior assumptions when needed, and a healthy curiosity that engages others while respecting their space.

John 1:35-51
Reflection prompts

1. When Nathanael first hears about Jesus, he asks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46) When have you, like Nathanael, made a harmful assumption about a person or place?

2. Despite Nathanael's initial judgments, Jesus sees only goodness in him. Consider a time when you have felt known and honored for your unique identity.

3. "Come and see" becomes a refrain in this passage. In your own life, how are you cultivating deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others?

Come & See | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

Week 1 I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

Read John 1:35-51

From the artist | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

This text paints a parade of shifting identities and assumptions, starting off with John the Baptist doing what he does best: pointing people to Jesus. One after the other, these men follow Jesus, despite the fact that not one of them has a full picture of who he is. There is something compelling about Jesus which brings all of these different people together on a common path. As the disciples come together, each with their own experiences and particularities, a patchwork understanding of Jesus is pieced together.

In this image, I drew Jesus' followers each wearing a pattern that references their identity and their understanding of who Jesus is. John the Baptist's clothes contain patterns of his unusual diet—locusts and honey—as well as three droplets of water, representing his baptism of Jesus. The unnamed disciple identifies Jesus as Rabbi, and so his clothes are patterned with scrolls. Andrew identifies Jesus as Messiah or anointed, so his clothes are patterned with jars of oil. Andrew, Simon, and Philip are all from a fishing town called Bethsaida. Each of their clothes contains a reference to their hometown: Andrew with waves of water, Simon Peter with swirling fish, and Philip with fish scales. The fish on Simon's clothes swim around rocks which reference the meaning of his new name, Peter. Philip refers to Jesus as the one "about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote." (John 1:45) His clothes are patterned with the stone tablets etched with the Ten Commandments. Nathanael's clothes are patterned with the very fig branches Jesus saw him under.

Jesus' clothes include the colors of all the followers' clothes and his halo contains imagery referencing the many attributes the disciples use to describe who Jesus is. Jesus, half in the frame, cannot be fully known or contained by our patchwork understandings.

Pray

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.