

# A FRAMEWORK FOR GATHERING

## CREATING THE CONTAINER

For each gathering, it is important to "create a container" for the group. A container sets the tone, establishes a rhythm for what to expect, and holds the experience. A good container will invite bravery and vulnerability, while reducing fear, shame, and guilt.

**Physical Space:** If possible, meet in the homes of people in the group or in public spaces like coffeeshops. If your group is affiliated with a faith community, try switching it up and refraining from meeting in your faith community's building.

**Ritual Space:** If possible, gather together in a circle so that everyone can see everyone. You might sit on couches or chairs or the floor. If it feels right, you can create a small table of intention in the center or off to the side where you place a few objects important to individuals in the group. Each gathering, trade off facilitating (or share duties) so that everyone feels empowered and responsible for the group.

## OPENING (5-10 MINUTES)

As you gather, invite each other to close their eyes and pay attention to their breath. (Let it be silent for 30 seconds.) Then, invite each person to bring to mind the emotion they are feeling most present with them right now. Invite people, as they are ready, to say their name, the emotion they are carrying, and "I am here."

Example: "My name is Andrew. I'm feeling a bit anxious. And I am here."

Afterwards, name a set of communal intentions for the group. Below are the ones I use. Feel free to ask the group to name their own intentions into the space if that feels more authentic.

1. Speak from the Heart (say what is on your heart, not just in your head)
2. Listen from the Heart (practice being curious - no advising, correcting, or fixing)
3. Say Just Enough (not necessarily short, but avoid the non-essentials)
4. Be Spontaneous (not rehearsing what we're going to say while others are sharing)

## BODY PRACTICE (10-20 MINUTES)

As a group, take some time to engage your body.

This might be through:

- a body scan,
- a breath practice,
- a walking meditation,
- centering prayer,
- or something else entirely!

The purpose of this time is to help to ground us in the present moment and help our nervous systems to settle. Make sure not to rush this – take your time!

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## SHARING (30-45 MINUTES)

Before introducing any prompts, remind folks to let people share uninterrupted – this might be difficult, but we want to let stories emerge from the person however they're going to. This creates space for sharing and listening without the expectation of engagement.

After sharing, you might allow for responses and conversation or not; ask the group what they want! (And this might differ person to person. You might create a ritual of saying "open for \_\_\_\_\_" (questions, comments, ideas, etc.) or "not open for follow-up" after sharing if a person wants or doesn't want engagement.)

Whoever is facilitating should make sure they have at least two or three prompts ready. Make sure the prompts are broad or vague enough to have multiple entry points. They should be centered on storytelling and heart-space; ask questions that open people up to sharing stories.

### Examples:

"Tell a story of when you experienced disillusionment or saw something in a new way".

"What crossroads in your life do you find yourself at right now?"

"What does this constriction feel like in your body or how does it impact you?"

"How are you experiencing expansion in your life right now?"

It's a good idea to always remind the group they can share whatever is most pressing and present to them in the moment, regardless of prompt. Silence is also always acceptable. The group may touch one or two prompts, or may veer off and follow where the group needs to go. "Reading the room", rather than imposing pre-determined topics, is best.

## WITNESS (5 MINUTES)

Before ending the gathering, spend some time wrapping up and closing the container. You can do this by having a "witness round" where each person is invited to share a short word or phrase or theme they heard/experienced during the group's time together. This is a way to sum up and contain (without fully containing) the experience. Similar to the check-in, this should be fairly quick.

Example: "Let's go ahead and do a quick Witness Round. This is where we can each name a theme or word or phrase that has popped out to us during our time together. Let's go clockwise, whoever wants to start can start."

## CLOSING (5-10 MINUTES)

As with most things in this structure, there is no prescribed way of closing out the gathering. The point is to link together in some form of solidarity. If you're in-person, you might choose to hold hands and take a few breaths together before ending with a poem/prayer/question. If you're having a virtual group, perhaps give folks a few moments just to look at the other faces in the group, seeking connection with them. Read the room and do whatever feels appropriate in the moment as a way of connecting and ending. You can always ask for help from the group if you get stuck!

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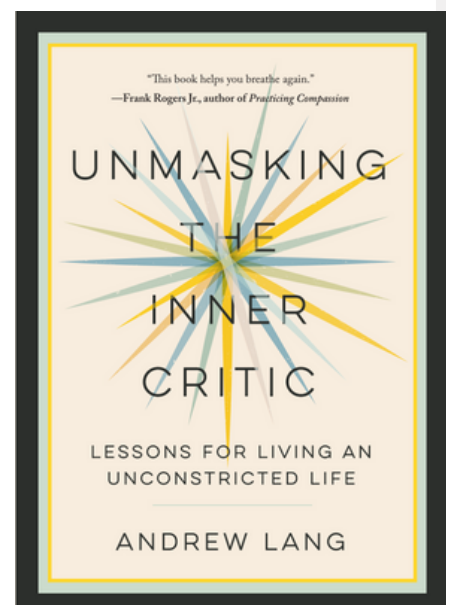
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“Andrew compassionately reminds his readers we're all in possession of inherent creativity, significance, and sacredness beyond what we may currently recognize or believe. Through intentional questions, engaging storytelling, and the wisdom of wisdom teachers, we're invited to release binding footholds and begin believing in the goodness that exists behind the critical masks we've long worn.”

—Sarah Southern, writer on spirituality and religion

“Andrew reintroduces us to an ancient-mystic-remedy for the bodily aches of internalized messages such as lovelessness, earned worth, grasping for control, and the false choice of conquer or be conquered. His guidebook is gentle, widely sourced, transparent, and prescient for these times.”

—Troy Bronsink, founder of The Hive: A Center for Contemplation, Art, and Action

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Lang is an educator in the Pacific Northwest, an alumnus of Richard Rohr's Living School for Action and Contemplation, and author of *Unmasking the Inner Critic: Lessons for Living an Unconstricted Life*. Along with writing regularly, he facilitates workshops helping people to navigate their inner lives and explore their sense of identity and spirituality.

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