



# Give Me a Word



By Christine Valters Paintner, PhD, REACE

## *Small Group Leader's Guide*

### **Dear Dancing Monks,**

Welcome to the Give Me a Word journey of reflection and growth. I am thrilled to offer this free resource to support your efforts leading a group of contemplatives through these materials. This guide is based on my book *Give Me a Word: The Promise of an Ancient Practice to Guide Your Year*.

The journey is spread out over 4 sessions, each exploring a different section of the book: Introduction, Part One: Listening for a Word; Part Two: Receiving a Word; and Part Three: Carrying the Word with You. Parts 1-3 include ten suggested practices each for a total of thirty. I suggest meeting weekly or every other week to allow the group time to engage with the practices on their own.

This guide is intended to be used for small groups of 5-8 participants to allow ample time for reflection, sharing, and connection.

It is recommended that participants bring a journal to each session to free-write about their experience with the prayer and meditation prior to group sharing. In addition, Week 4 includes time to create a collage mandala illustrating their word. Participants are encouraged to bring images, paper, pens, markers, glue sticks, etc. You may also want to select a quiet piece of music to play while participants create their mandalas.

Many thanks to our amazing Program Coordinator at Abbey of the Arts, Melinda Thomas, for compiling this leader's guide and writing some of the prayers. Many of the reflection questions are drawn from the free Give Me a Word Reflection Guide created by Abbey Assistant, Delaney Hart. The guide is available for download at [AbbeyoftheArts.com/Books/GiveMeaWord](https://AbbeyoftheArts.com/Books/GiveMeaWord).

My heart is full of gratitude for all the ways they support this community to thrive.

I pray that this resource will inspire you, kindle deep listening, and foster a spirit of community and discernment.

With great and growing love,

***Christine***

Christine Valters Paintner, OblSB, PhD, REACE  
Abbess for Abbey of the Arts

## WEEK 1

# Introduction & Listening for a Word



### **Preparation**

Encourage participants to read through the introduction prior to the group meeting.

A suggested time allotment of 60-75 minutes is based on a gathering of 5-8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

### **GREETING & WELCOME**

(10-15 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group.

### **Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer**

As you light a candle for the group if meeting in person or as you invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online, use this breath prayer text as a suggested opening prayer.

Breath prayer is a very simple practice of aligning a word or phrase with our inhale and exhale. It can be any words at all, but I am suggesting this prayer to begin.

As you breathe in, say the words *I wait* to yourself softly. As you breathe out, say the words *to receive* to yourself

Breathe in: *I wait*

Breathe out: *to receive*

Steep in this prayer for 2-3 minutes. Guide participants to notice when they find themselves striving or reaching for something and invite them to let their breath soften and return to a posture of openness and attending.

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME**

(5-10 MINUTES)

Read aloud or summarize the Introduction on pages XI-XV and Listening for a Word on pages 5-6.

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SHARED REFLECTION**

(10-15 MINUTES DEPENDING ON THE SIZE OF YOUR GROUP)

What are the ways you strive and reach?

When do you more naturally linger and allow for things to unfold slowly?

What can both of these teach you about what you need to inhabit a spirit of softening on this journey ahead?

### **LECTIO DIVINA: SACRED READING**

(10-15 MINUTES)

Invite participants to pray the four movements of lectio divina using the text and suggested guidelines below.

We will be praying with this text:

*A monk once came to Basil of Caesarea and said, "Speak a word, Father"; and Basil replied, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," and the monk went away at once. Twenty years later he came back and said, "Father, I have struggled to keep your word; now speak another word to me"; and he said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"; and the monk returned in obedience to his cell to keep that also.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Benedicta Ward, trans., introduction to *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cistercian Publications, 1975), xxii.



### **First Movement - *Lectio*: Settling & Shimmering**

Find a comfortable position where you can remain alert and yet also relax your body. Bring your attention to your breath and allow a few moments to become centered. If you find yourself distracted at any time, gently return to the rhythm of your breath as an anchor for your awareness. Allow yourself to settle into this moment and become fully present.

Read the passage once or twice through slowly. Listen for a word that feels significant right now, that is capturing your attention even if you don't know why. Gently repeat this word to yourself in the silence.

### **Second Movement - *Meditatio*: Savoring & Stirring**

Read the text again. Allow the word or phrase which caught your attention in the first movement to spark your imagination. Savor the word or phrase with all of your senses; notice what smells, sounds, tastes, sights, and feelings are evoked. Then listen for what images, feelings, and memories are stirring, welcoming them in, and then savoring and resting into this experience.

### **Third Movement - *Oratio*: Summoning & Serving**

Read the text a third time. Listen for an invitation rising up from your experience of prayer so far. Considering the word or phrase and what it has evoked for you in memory, image, or feeling, what is the invitation? This invitation may be a summons toward a new awareness or action.

### **Fourth Movement - *Contemplatio*: Slowing & Stilling**

Move into a time for simply resting in God and allowing your heart to fill with gratitude for God's presence in this time of prayer. Slow your thoughts and reflections even further and sink into the experience of stillness. Rest in the presence of God and allow yourself to simply be. Rest here for several minutes. Return to your breath if you find yourself distracted.

### **Rest into Silence - 5 minutes**

### **Closing**

Gently connect with your breath again and slowly bring your awareness back to the room, moving from inner experience to outer experience. Give yourself some time of transition between these moments of contemplative depth and your everyday life. Take a few minutes to journal about what you experienced in your prayer.<sup>2</sup>

## **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SHARED REFLECTION**

(15-20 MINUTES)

What shimmered for you while praying lectio?

What parts of yourself do you resist bringing before God?

Are there other blocks you encounter when entering your heart-space?

What are ways you can engage with and listen to these blockages?

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Between now and your next gathering, invite participants to engage with the practices in Part One. They can choose to move through all of them or select a few that resonate. Encourage them to keep a journal of their experience and be ready to discuss the process at your next meeting.

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpted and adapted from *Lectio Divina—The Sacred Art: Transforming Words and Images into Heart-Centered Prayer* by Christine Valters Paintner xxii.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Guiding Wisdom, we thank you for bringing us together to listen for a word that will deepen our connection to the pulse of life within. Be with us in these coming days as we let go of striving and open to a posture of receptivity. May we pay attention to synchronicities, night dreams, conversations, and moments or experiences that shimmer. We commit to slowing down our timelines and move into the fullness of being. We support each other in this practice of listening with the ears of the heart.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> Closing prayer written by Abbey of the Arts Program Coordinator, Melinda Thomas - [MelindaEmilyThomas.com](https://MelindaEmilyThomas.com)

## WEEK 2

# Listening for a Word – Crossing the Threshold



### **Preparation**

Encourage participants to explore the practices from Part One: Listening for a Word

A suggested time allotment of 60-75 minutes is based on a gathering of 5-8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

### **GREETING & WELCOME**

(10-15 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group. (There will be more time for sharing about specific practices later.)

### **Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer**

As you light a candle for the group, if meeting in person, or as you invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online, use this text as a suggested opening prayer.

Loving God, we stand together at the threshold, eyes open, ears softly listening for what Terry Tempest Williams calls “one wild word.” We have returned in community to support each other in discernment. Fill these moments of companionship with grace as we await what shimmers in our awareness. Call to our hearts, we are ready.<sup>4</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME**

(5-10 MINUTES)

Read or summarize “Crossing the Threshold” on pages 7-10.

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SHARED REFLECTION**

(10-15 MINUTES DEPENDING ON THE SIZE OF YOUR GROUP)

What personal or global thresholds feel especially present and strong for you?

What are the liminal spaces in which you might be called to be midwife, providing presence and aid to the future’s birthing?

### **LECTIO DIVINA WITH THE MONK MANIFESTO**

You are invited to pray with the following principles from our Monk Manifesto for contemplative living. You are welcome to use as many or as few as you would like. The full manifesto with all eight principles can be found at

[AbbeyoftheArts.com/about/monk-manifesto/](http://AbbeyoftheArts.com/about/monk-manifesto/)

*I commit to finding moments each day for silence and solitude, to make space for another voice to be heard, and to resist a culture of noise and constant stimulation.*

*I commit to radical acts of hospitality by welcoming the stranger both without and within. I recognize that when I make space inside my heart for the unclaimed parts of myself, I cultivate compassion and the ability to accept those places in others.*

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<sup>4</sup> Opening prayer written by Abbey of the Arts Program Coordinator, Melinda Thomas

*I commit to cultivating community by finding kindred spirits along the path, soul friends with whom I can share my deepest longings, and mentors who can offer guidance and wisdom for the journey.*  
*I commit to a lifetime of ongoing conversion and transformation, recognizing that I am always on a journey with both gifts and limitations.*



### **First Movement - *Lectio*: Settling & Shimmering**

Find a comfortable position where you can remain alert and yet also relax your body. Bring your attention to your breath and allow a few moments to become centered. If you find yourself distracted at any time, gently return to the rhythm of your breath as an anchor for your awareness. Allow yourself to settle into this moment and become fully present.

Read the passage once or twice through slowly. Listen for a word that feels significant right now, that is capturing your attention even if you don't know why. Gently repeat this word to yourself in the silence.

### **Second Movement - *Meditatio*: Savoring & Stirring**

Read the text again. Allow the word or phrase which caught your attention in the first movement to spark your imagination. Savor the word or phrase with all of your senses; notice what smells, sounds, tastes, sights, and feelings are evoked. Then listen for what images, feelings, and memories are stirring, welcoming them in, and then savoring and resting into this experience.

### **Third Movement - *Oratio*: Summoning & Serving**

Read the text a third time. Listen for an invitation rising up from your experience of prayer so far. Considering the word or phrase and what it has evoked for you in memory, image, or feeling, what is the invitation? This invitation may be a summons toward a new awareness or action.

### **Fourth Movement - *Contemplatio*: Slowing & Stilling**

Move into a time for simply resting in God and allowing your heart to fill with gratitude for God's presence in this time of prayer. Slow your thoughts and reflections even further and sink into the experience of stillness. Rest in the presence of God and allow yourself to simply be. Rest here for several minutes. Return to your breath if you find yourself distracted.

### **Rest into Silence - 5 minutes**

### **Closing**

Gently connect with your breath again and slowly bring your awareness back to the room, moving from inner experience to outer experience. Give yourself some time of transition between these moments of contemplative depth and your everyday life. Take a few minutes to journal about what you experienced in your prayer.

## **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SHARED REFLECTION**

**(15-20 MINUTES)**

What shimmered for you while praying lectio?

What was your experience with one or two of the practices from Part One? What did you notice or discover?

Has any word started to announce itself to you?

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Between now and your next gathering, invite participants to engage with the practices from Part Two of the book. They can choose to move through all of them or select a few that resonate. Encourage them to keep a journal of their experience and be ready to discuss the process at your next meeting.

## CLOSING PRAYER OR BLESSING

### A Blessing for Discernment

O Holy One,  
I stand on a threshold  
and seek your grace  
to guide me in the direction  
of my deepest desires  
planted in my heart by you.  
Help me to see the signs and synchronicities  
which abound that let me know which is the good way.  
Let me hear the insight pouring forth  
from soul friends and strangers.  
Let me remember the ancient ones  
cheering me on from beyond the veil,  
may my ancestors bless my path  
and my seeking and choosing.  
Sophia, bless me with wisdom  
and the capacity to rest  
into the mystery and unknowing,  
to not rush the process,  
and to trust in the slow unfolding.  
Help me to dwell in the assurance  
that there isn't just one way I need to figure out,  
but the call to listen  
for the most life-giving option right now  
in this season of my life.  
Refine my vision so I can behold  
your shimmering presence around me.  
Expand my heart  
until I see that Love is my true call,  
and help me to say yes to all  
that is in service to Love.<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> Closing blessing from *A Book of Everyday Blessings: 100 Prayers for Dancing Monks, Artists, and Pilgrims* by Christine Valters Paintner (Ave Maria Press)

## WEEK 3



# Receiving the Word – Trust What You Love

### **Preparation**

Encourage participants to explore Part Two: Receiving the Word prior to gathering.

A suggested time allotment of 60-75 minutes is based on a gathering of 5-8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

### **GREETING & WELCOME**

(10-15 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group. (There will be more time to discuss specific practices later.)

### **Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer**

As you light a candle for the group if meeting in person or as you invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online, use this text as a suggested opening prayer.

You are invited into a breath prayer practice adapted from a poem by Rumi. Breath prayer is a very simple practice of aligning a word or phrase with our inhale and exhale.

Begin with a few rounds of natural, attentive breath. Now with your inhale say to yourself *Let the beauty I love* and with your exhale say *be what I do*.

Inhale: *Let the beauty I love*

Exhale: *be what I do*

Steep for 2-3 minutes in this breath prayer. Observe participants. If they seem to be tense or grasping, invite them to soften.

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME**

(5-10 MINUTES)

Read aloud or summarize “Trust What You Love” on pages 77-79.

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SHARED REFLECTION**

(10-15 MINUTES DEPENDING ON THE SIZE OF YOUR GROUP)

In a culture that idolizes the grind and the hustle, what are the obstacles you run into when letting what you love seek you?

What hurdles do you experience when trying to prioritize that which makes you come alive and satisfies your heart?

What radical acts of rebellious grace could you offer yourself to allow for the space you need to be nourished?

### **MEDITATION**

Read aloud the guided meditation “Give Your Heart that Which Satisfies” on pages 79-80.



## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SHARED REFLECTION

(15-20 MINUTES)



What shimmered for you during the meditation?

Reflect back on the journey thus far and the practices from this week. What practices “make you come alive”?

Where are you invited to expand, and where are you invited to ask for grace?

What attachments have you released or are beginning to release?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Between now and your next gathering, invite participants to engage with the practices from Part Three. They can choose to move through all of them or select a few that resonate. Encourage them to keep a journal of their experience and be ready to discuss the process at your next meeting.

Next week we will explore an expressive arts practice to illustrate the word. Invite participants to bring supplies to make a collage: paper, glue, scissors, magazine clippings or photographs, markers, and any other material they choose.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Creative and Creating God, you breathe life and passion into our being. We know we do not need permission to follow the deep love of our hearts, but with all the voices that clamor “no, not that!” we seek the wisdom and grace to follow “what makes us come alive.” As we listen for a word to guide us, let us enter into relationship with it, letting it unfold and ripen within. This is a long process, a slow process. We give thanks that there is no need to rush! Creation is ongoing. We receive and blossom in your time. We give thanks.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Closing prayer written by Abbey of the Arts Program Coordinator, Melinda Thomas. “What makes us come alive” is from Howard Thurman.

## WEEK 4



# Carry the Word with You – Illustrate the Word Visually

### *Preparation*

Encourage participants to read through and explore Part Three: Carry the Word with You. This week we will engage with an expressive arts practice to illustrate the word. Invite participants to bring supplies to make a collage: paper, glue, scissors, magazine clippings or photographs, markers, and any other material they choose.

**The rhythm of today's gathering is a little different, allowing for ample time to share their experiences with the Part Three practices and spend time creating their collage mandala in a group setting.**

A suggested time allotment of 75-90 minutes is based on a gathering of 5-8 people. Adjust as needed for the size of your group.

### **GREETING & WELCOME** (5-10 MINUTES)

Honor the presence of everyone gathered. Invite a brief check-in from everyone in the group. (There will be more time for sharing about specific practices later.)

### **Lighting a Candle & Opening Prayer**

As you light a candle for the group if meeting in person or as you invite each participant to light a candle if you are meeting online, use this text as a suggested opening prayer.

Wisdom, we thank you for bringing us together again. We have traveled far on this exploration with each other. In community we listen. In community we struggle and affirm. In community we witness ripening. In community we carry forth. Bless our final gathering with grace and laughter knowing that whatever word chose us, it does not need to be such a serious endeavor. We balance firm commitment with surprise and delight. For the joy of being, we give thanks.<sup>7</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME** (3-5 MINUTES)

Now that you have received a word, let it ripen, prayed with it, and listened to its wisdom for you, we will focus in this last gathering on ways to carry the word with you into the year ahead.

In a few moments you will be invited to create an image to help illustrate your word. The practices in Part Three include ways to allow poems and songs to help inspire you.

Imagine your word is like a treasure to carry with you each day. Enfold it with care and unwrap it in quiet moments or moments of transition between activities, letting it speak to you. Behold it shimmering before you, full of promise and wisdom.

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SHARED REFLECTION** (10-15 MINUTES DEPENDING ON THE SIZE OF YOUR GROUP)

What practices from Part Three resonated with you?

Is there anything you would like to share such as an acrostic poem, breath prayer, or rule of life?

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<sup>7</sup> Opening prayer written by Abbey of the Arts Program Assistant, Melinda Thomas

## EXPRESSIVE ARTS EXPLORATION: COLLAGE MANDALA

(15-20 MINUTES)



Read or summarize the guidance for “Illustrate the Word Visually” on pages 141-144.

Limit this time to 15-20 minutes. This can help keep the spirit of prayerful play alive and soften internal judgment and perfectionism.

### Materials:

- Paper or cardstock cut into a circle about 10-12 inches in diameter (depending on the size of your paper).
- Magazine clippings, photographs, or other images
- Scissors
- Glue stick
- Colored markers, pens, crayons, and/or other writing material

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS, PRACTICE, AND SHARED REFLECTION

(15-20 MINUTES)

Invite participants to share their collage mandala. Looking at the word and images, ask them to ponder:

What if the images were your wisdom council?

How do these images further reveal the dimensions of your word?

Going forward, commit to a word-rooted practice. Once a word has chosen you, consider if there is a spiritual practice that would help you to tend its unfolding in your soul for the year. Read “Commit to a Word-Rooted Practice” on page 159 for guidance and inspiration.

What are the rhythms of spiritual practice that have begun to emerge over the course of this journey?

What are ways you can continue to cultivate the life-giving rhythms with intentionality?

Participants are also invited to check in with a friend from this group, perhaps on a seasonal basis, to explore together how your words are unfolding in your daily lives.

## CLOSING PRAYER OR BLESSING

### Blessing for New Beginnings

We call on the Holy One of newness  
who reveals all that is fresh and alive and wondrous,  
bless us as we cross this threshold  
into a new beginning.  
May the word that has arrived to our inner shores  
glimmer and guide the way into the season ahead.  
In moments of uncertainty, let the word be an anchor,  
in times of grief, let the word carve out space in us  
to lament and weep,  
in times of celebration, let the word confirm  
all that is good and beautiful in our lives.  
Let this word call us back always to Love,  
echoing our heart’s deepest desires.  
Let it weave its way through  
all the holy ordinary moments  
so that we might remember our wholeness  
and respond with generosity to a world in need.  
May you be blessed and a blessing to others.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Closing blessing by Christine Valters Paintner from *Give Me a Word: The Promise of an Ancient Practice to Guide Your Year*