

SAMPLE: STRIPPED

JOURNEYING

TOGETHER a journey alone is robbed of wisdom before one step is taken.

Art demands a viewer. It has the power to take one artist's journey and create a larger dialogue in which all can engage. By its very nature art uncovers and makes visible the unconscious, the hidden, the taboo, the mundane. Art asks us to examine closely the things we pass by in a new light, to wrestle with ideas that disturb us, and to rethink our conclusions about the world.

Volume 1 of the Art & Soul series uses works by well-known painters to explore themes common to the human experience. In the dialogue between the painter's experiences and our own life and creative work, we'll delve into the truths each of us has embraced in response to life's questions—for each of us knowingly, or unknowingly has formed beliefs about the nature of life. In our exploration

we will also encounter journeys shaped by the words and images of the Biblical story.

From our diverse experience will emerge the fuel for our dialogue and growth as people on a spiritual journey.

This is a journey in the company of others.

A journey through art to engage our souls.

A journey of growth and change.

USING THIS BOOK revealing the image

Art restoration eventually reveals a painting full of amazing details and colors, previously hidden by layers of dirt and varnish. The questions in this book serve as the tools to uncover the hidden complexity and richness of your own experience with each artist's subject matter.

The Art & Soul series is intended to be used in community where divergent experiences and ideas will keep your journey honest.

Choose your tools:

Each study contains a myriad of questions intended to provide fodder and guidance for your discussion. Be selective with these questions, not comprehensive. It may be helpful to select one or two questions from each section in advance. Not every question asked will resonate with your group. Some will line

up easily with issues they have been pondering. Some require more vulnerability than others. And some will spark other questions not included here.

Though appropriate for a broader audience, the primary audience of this study is students involved in visual arts. As a result, some questions relate directly to their creative work. Depending on the make-up of your group you may want to skip over these questions.

Allow discussion to emerge:

No two paintings undergo the exact same restoration process. As each layer is stripped away, new facts and details emerge that influence the next step. As you begin your discussion ask one question and see what it

reveals. Select another, perhaps related question, and uncover a deeper layer. Your group may work through the progression of paintings in order, or decide to spend more time wrestling with or revisiting a particular theme. No order of questions is sacred. However, you may find the natural progression in this book helps your group keep moving on their journey. This book could take you weeks or months to finish. You decide.

If you're the one facilitating the discussion, be sure to read Appendix Q.

The discussion is divided into 3 sections:

ENGAGE: Uncovers our emotions, thoughts, and experiences, all of which inform how we

view life, God, and our spiritual journey. Included are ways to continue your exploration of a painting's theme through other media: film, literature, non-fiction writings, other paintings, and passages from the Bible. Here you'll find additional company for your journey—others who have wrestled with these questions and whose work reflects various roads taken.

UNCOVER: Pulls back the veil on the artist, the spiritual & cultural issues which the painting addresses, and poses some questions about the content.

CREATE: Provides an outlet for kinesthetic natures that need to "do" in order to engage. The ideas included are limited only by your imagination.



D'Où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?
(Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?)
PAUL GAUGUIN

ENGAGE

Letters before questions represent a suggested order for the discussion

EMOTIONS Without responding to them yet, what other questions does this painting surface? (B) How does the painting make you feel about the questions it asks? What emotions are stirred or evoked in you?

THE MIND (C) How would you describe Gauguin's emotions toward these questions—where do you think he was on his spiritual journey? (D) Do you think it matters how we as individuals answer these questions? What does it mean to be human? What robs us of our humanity? Why?

Gauguin completed this work as a last testament before he unsuccessfully attempted suicide by arsenic. What concerning his own conclusions to these questions do you think played into his suicide attempt? How does how we answer these questions matter to everyday living?²

EXPERIENCE (E) In your own life, which of Gauguin's three questions have you most thought about? (G) In your spiritual journey, what have you explored (philosophies, experiences, religions) to discover an answer to these questions? What drew you to explore that particular path? How did that exploration leave you feeling? Are there any experiences in your life which have affected how you'd respond to Gauguin's questions?

(H) What "answers" that others embrace have most resonated with you? Which have disturbed you? (I) What questions remain unanswered for you? (J) How does your own creative process

and work reflect your thoughts and conclusions on these questions? How do you feel about the different conclusions expressed by people in the group? What's one question you would encourage each member of the group to explore?

EXPLORE Read the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament or *Discovering Ancient Wisdom, Book Two: Pondering the Meaning of Life* (1998, IBS Publishing), the creation story: Genesis 1&2, paintings of Chuck Close or Matthew Ritchie.

UNCOVER

"In his testament painting Gauguin absorbed for art a core of spiritual tasks hitherto assigned to the institution of the Church: of asserting the fundamentally dolorous nature of human existence; of exploring the sorrows of self-consciousness and vice to which man and woman were inescapably consigned; and of offering through representation a partial, "imaginary consolation" and vision of redemptive suffering."³

Gauguin intended the painting to be read from right to left. He described its meaning in Catechistic form in a letter to Charles Morice.

"Where are we going?

An old woman nearing death.

A strange, stupid bird finishes.

What are we?

Daily existence

The man of instinct wonders

at what all this means.

Where do we come from?

Brook.

Child.

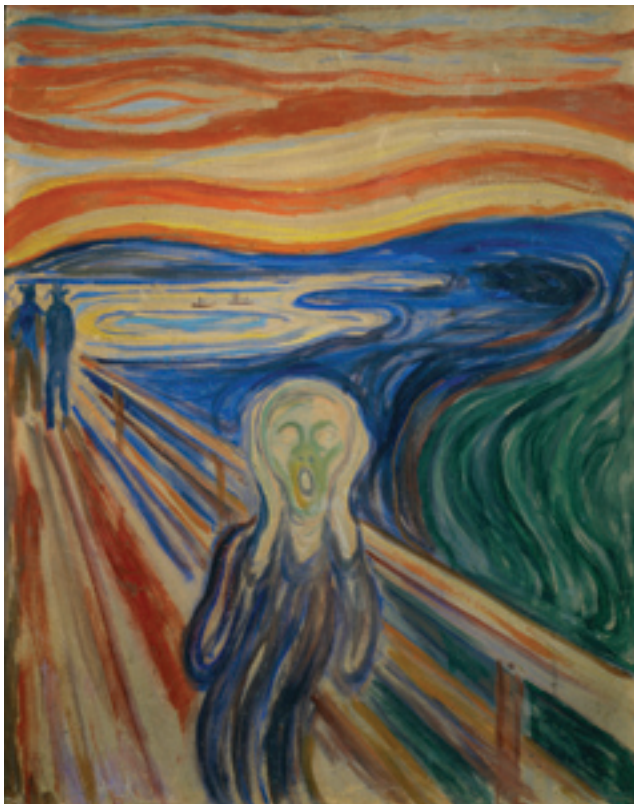
The communal life."⁴

(F) What do you think of Gauguin's response to these questions?

CREATE

Fill a page with other questions surfaced by Gauguin's painting; (A) Or using images from magazines etc., make a triptych collage responding to the questions posed by Gauguin; Or visually map your life journey using Gauguin's questions as a framework. (Share with the group.)

The Scream
EDVARD MUNCH



I'm connected.
I'm networked.
I'm surrounded.
I'm known.
I'm numbered.
I'm catalogued.
I'm classified.
I'm alone.

ISOLATION

ENGAGE

EMOTIONS (B) For you, what color represents isolation? What color is alienation? What feelings, words or associated images does *The Scream* evoke for you?

THE MIND (E) Why is isolation and disconnectedness such a part of the human existence? In the painting, the subject is alone, others being distant and unconnected to his anguish; what is it, in us, in life, that makes that kind of isolation such a common human experience? What causes us to feel isolated or

alienated? (F) What are ways humans try to assuage or deal with such feelings? (G) Do you think transcendence, a connection to the divine or something or someone beyond us, offers hope or help? How does a connection to the divine matter to our experience and feelings of isolation? Do you think the God portrayed in the Bible answers the heart cry of *The Scream*? How or why not? How does isolation and disconnectedness spur on or hinder your creative work?

EXPERIENCE Describe the scene of your “Munch-like experience.” (D) What events or experiences in your life have prompted you to creatively express (through writing or another medium) an experience like Munch’s journal entry? Describe (or show) something you’ve written or created that explores feelings of isolation, alienation, fear, melancholy? (H) When you feel isolated or alienated what do you do to deal with those feelings? (I) What do you see others do to deal with their experiences of isolation that intrigues you as something worth exploring?

EXPLORE Compare various literary responses: Jean Paul Satre’s *Nausea*, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, the Book of Psalms (139:1-18), Dante’s *The Inferno*. Other paintings: Picasso’s *The Absinthe Drinker*, Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, *Room by the Sea*, Gericault’s *Raft of the Medusa*, Wyeth’s *Cristina’s World*.

UNCOVER

“The work depicts not so much an incident or a landscape as a state of mind. The drama is an inner one, and yet the subject is firmly anchored in the topography of Oslo - the view is from Nordstrand towards the two bays at the head of the Oslofjord, with Holmenkollen in the background. The evening landscape has been distilled into an abstract rhythm of wavy lines. The road with its railing, leading diagonally inwards, creates a powerful pull of perspective in the composition, and intensifies the disquieting atmosphere in the picture.”²

The first time Munch described the experience which gave rise to this painting was in Nice, writing in his literary diary. 22 January 1892 reads:

“I was walking along the road with two friends.
The sun set. I felt a twinge of melancholy.
Suddenly the sky became a bloody red.
I stopped, leaned against the railing, dead tired and I
looked at the flaming
clouds that hung like blood and a sword
over the blue-black fjord and city.
My friends walked on. I stood there, trembling with
fright.
And I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature.”³

Did it surprise you that Munch's painting originated from an actual experience in a real place? What role does “place” play in our emotions, our state of being? (C) Are there certain places which you associate with profound experiences of isolation?

CREATE

Collage with mixed media the causes or sources of isolation, disconnectedness, alienation, or fear.

Or with your eyes closed sculpt “isolation” in Play-Doh®. (A) Or using finger paints, paint isolation or alienation. Or using random objects provided, portray a scene from a movie that shows isolation.

The Return of the Prodigal Son
REMBRANDT van RIJN



ACCEPTED

RESTORED

FORGIVEN **LOVE**

RECONCILED

EMBRACED

THE
STORY

ENGAGE

EMOTIONS (A) What does acceptance feel like? Think of a time when you felt rejected by someone else: What colors, images, and words do you associate with that rejection? Imagine if that same situation had happened with the conclusion reversed—you experienced complete acceptance. How would you have felt and responded? What do you think the various people in the painting are feeling? Is there one person in particular you feel most drawn to in the painting? If this were a film, what do you think their back stories would be?

THE MIND (B) Can we live without experiencing love and acceptance? **(C)** Is acceptance dependent on us? Can you love someone without accepting them? Can we make ourselves unacceptable to others, to God? **(E)** What is forgiveness? As humans do we have an innate need for forgiveness? Can someone experience forgiveness without admitting their need for it? **(F)** What brings someone (like the prodigal) to the point of seeking reconciliation? What does forgiveness cost the person doing the forgiving? Why do you think the son says he's sinned against (wronged) both his father and heaven? How has he wronged heaven? (Who is heaven?) When Jesus told this story he intended to paint a picture of the nature of God—what does the story show God is like? What does forgiveness cost God?

EXPERIENCE (I) How have you explored (or portrayed) the nature of human relationships in your creative work? Have you ever experienced forgiveness in a relationship where you've been in the wrong? How did that make you feel? Have you ever experienced a broken relationship where the other person did not want to be reconciled to you or would not accept your forgiveness? How did you deal with that? Can you think of a situation where someone doesn't deserve to be forgiven? Why?

EXPLORE *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen, *Confessions* by St. Augustine, *Life@Large*—God's reconciliation story, the film *Magnolia*, the poems *A Hymn to God the Father* by John Donne and *Outwitted* by Edwin Markham.

UNCOVER

The biblical story on which Rembrandt based his painting comes from the Gospel of Luke 15:11-32.

What stands out to you in the story?

The original storyteller was Jesus. His audience was made up both of religious leaders who were antagonistic toward him and those who would have been considered moral and social outcasts by those same religious leaders. Jesus intended for the former to see themselves in “the older brother.” The focal point of the story is neither of the sons, but the “father” whom Jesus uses to communicate what God is like.

(G) What strikes you about the father? Does he connect with your image and concept of God?

Who do you think he meant to identify with the younger son? Why?

(H) What do you think Rembrandt wants the viewer to understand or experience through his painting?

CREATE

(D) On small slips of paper write down all the ways in which you have been wronged by other people. Make a pile of the folded slips of paper. Next write down all the ways you have wronged others. Make a second pile. (Allow 1 min for each.)

Or make a cube whose sides are covered with emotions, images and words reflecting the reasons people accept and reject others.

Or create the poster advertising the premier of the movie “The Return of the Prodigal Son” for today’s audience. (You can use your own renamed version of the movie title.)