**Preparing to read and respond to journal assignments**

***Here are some suggestions for ways to prepare for reading journal assignments.***

1. Plan a time when you can give this assignment your full attention.
2. Use a spiritual practice beforehand that will center you and help you be compassionately attuned to the ways you react to this reading.
3. During your reading make sure you check in with yourself and track how you are doing emotionally. Take time out as you become aware of your body’s stress reactions and related emotions and use your spiritual practices, like prayer, centered breathing, looking at something restful (nature, a candle, a religious symbol).
4. Be an active reader by making notes and mentally engaging in dialogue with the person writing the journal. Make sure you imaginatively engage him or her as the resilient survivor whose story has shaped him or her in life-changing ways. In other words, while you will no doubt be emotionally responding to the suffering she or he experienced, make sure you envision the whole, complex person that has grown and evolved since this experience.

***Suggestions about taking notes***

1. Underline and put an = sign when there seems to be similarities between (1) your religious world/spiritual orienting system and the journal writer’s, and (2) the kinds of stressful experiences you have each described. Put an \* beside differences. Pay attention to your desire to look for similarities because you might be imposing your meanings on his/her story. Remember that paying attention to differences is a way of honoring the uniqueness of each other’s stories. Also remember that sometimes we accentuate differences between our stories and another person’s story as a way of coping with fear (“that kind of stressful event would never happen to me because I am different. I never would….so this could never happen to me”).
2. Highlight statements that surprise you (using an ! sign), are unexpected, that catch you off guard, or that trigger a strong responses (so-called jarring moments). It’s helpful to process these moments in order to appreciate why a detail was jarring, and whether such a moment opens up new ways of knowing and experiencing others, yourself, or even the sacred/God/ the transcendent.
3. Pay attention to details that help you understand or give you glimpses of how this person used spiritual practices (SP) and made meaning (MM) in ways seem to you to be life-giving ways (SP+, MM+) or life-limiting ways (SP-, MM-).
4. Draft some open-ended questions or invitations you might use in the outline of your spiritual care conversation (see sample questions). Do not hesitate to paraphrase/repeat these sample questions. Even though this may seem formulaic, and your partner will know the kinds of questions you are asking ahead of time, it’s a helpful way to open the conversation and begin to establish trust. Feel free to refer to your notes throughout the conversation; pausing, looking down at your notes and carefully formulating a question often creates a helpful space.

Remember that our goals in these conversations are to

1. Hear about what it was like for this person to write the journal assignment

Examples of initial open ended questions that follow an affirming statement.

* I’m impressed with how well-crafted your descriptions and reflections are. What was it like to write this?
* This seems like such a significant experience. What was it like to claim this as part of your story?

1. Explore what helped them cope (especially spiritually), and what might have been unhelpful ways to cope (in the short or long term).

Examples:

* One of the ways you seemed to survive was to [make sure you quote from their text. Don’t paraphrase or you’ll risk projecting your interpretation on his or her story]. Could you say more about this way of coping/spiritual practice?
* I wonder whether there was a down side to coping/this spiritual practice.

Start by affirming life-giving coping and follow up by exploring whether there was an underside to this coping. Then invite your partner to explore what seemed to be life-limiting ways of spiritually coping.

1. Explore what helped them make sense of this experience in life-giving ways; explore life-limiting ways of meaning making afterwards.

Examples:

* I was moved by the way you understood…[make sure you try and use his or her words to describe meanings. For example, use the word God if it is used in the assignment]. Could you say more about that?
* I found it really poignant that you experienced [God] as [judging] [again, use his or her terminology]. Where did that [experience of God/belief] come from?
* I was moved by your description of the kind of spiritual care you wished you had received. Does anything else come to mind when you think of this?
* You’ve done a lot of work in these reflections. I wonder what insight surprised you or was particularly meaningful?

Avoid questions that take a more therapeutic approach of eliciting emotional catharsis by going back into the past experience to explore the intense emotional dynamics of the original experience, or making meanings that only pertain to the past (e.g., what was the role of your mother or father?). Sometimes the questions we want to ask as caregivers come out of our anxiety to understand how all of the pieces of the narrative fit together. Try to let go of your needs to have their story make sense to you.

***Suggestions as you finish your reading and note taking:***

Do something good that helps you leave behind this work (like going for a walk, relaxing, etc.).

***Printing the assignments with your notes:***

Remember to completely destroy your print out to protect confidentiality.