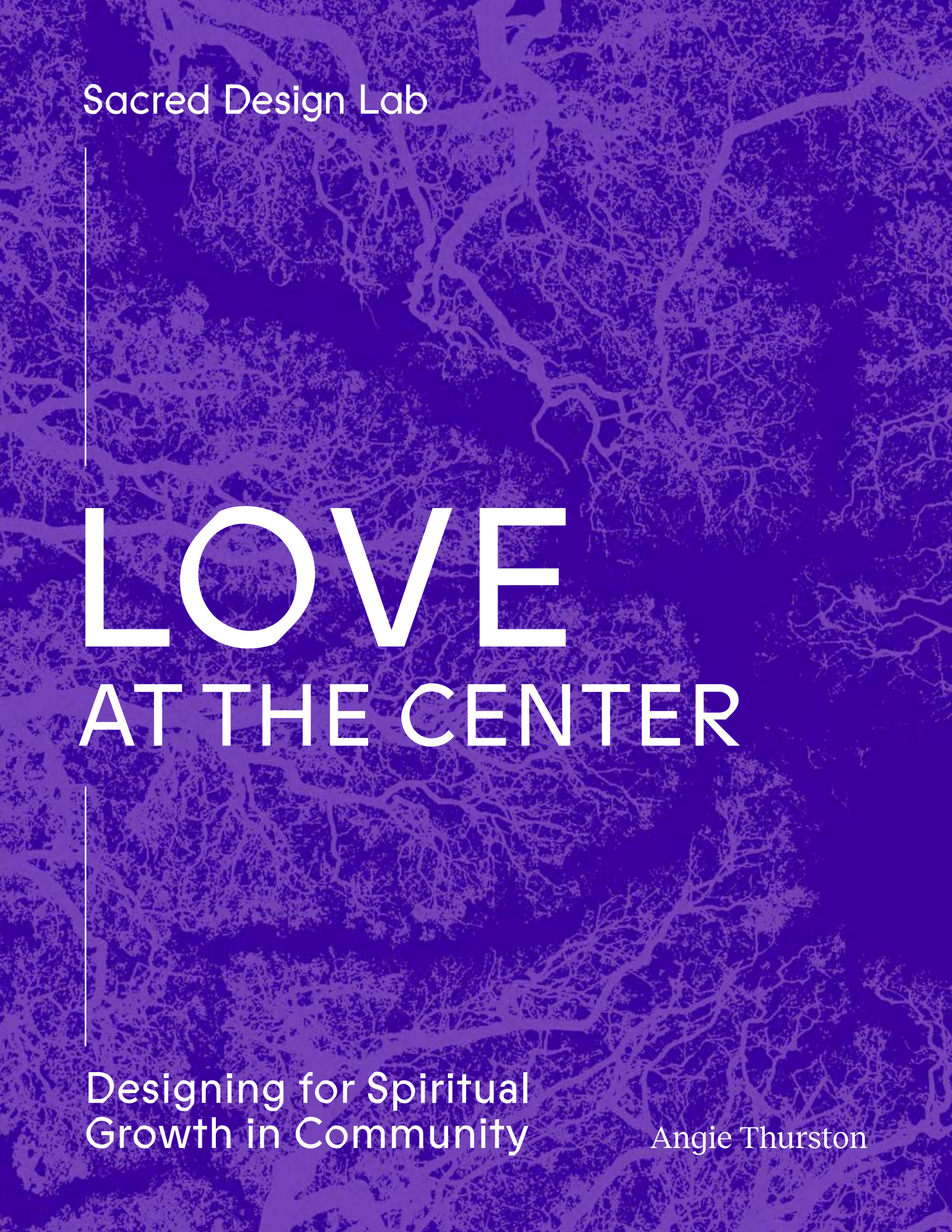


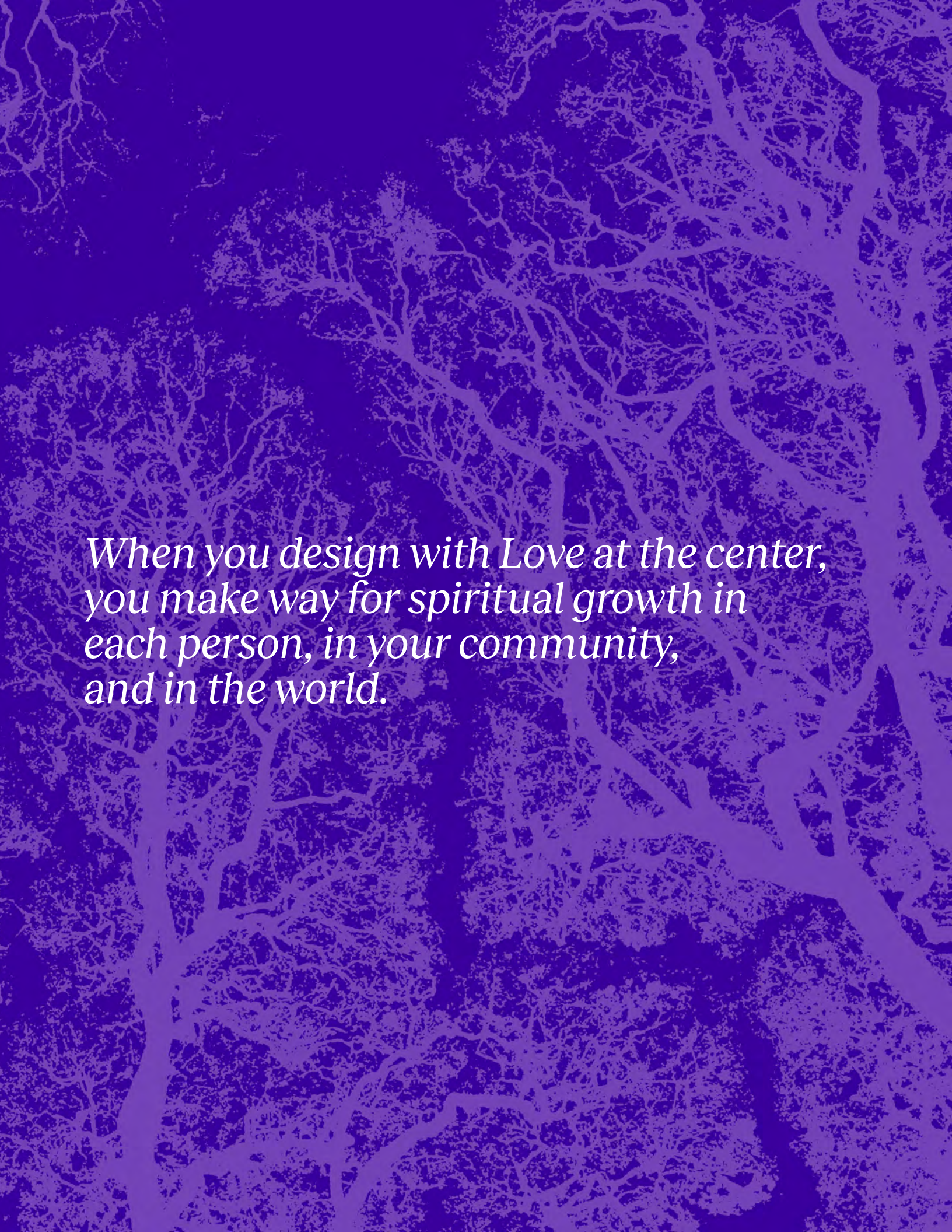


Sacred Design Lab

LOVE AT THE CENTER

Designing for Spiritual
Growth in Community

Angie Thurston



*When you design with Love at the center,
you make way for spiritual growth in
each person, in your community,
and in the world.*

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LOVE

AT THE CENTER

Every gathering you host shapes the people in it. Whether you're leading an ongoing community, a workplace, or a one-time experience like a retreat or festival, you are forming souls when you bring people together.

This guide will help you design those gatherings with Love at the center.

Three convictions animate all that follows:

1. That there is a spiritual core in each of us, and its nature is Love.¹
2. That by connecting to Love within ourselves, tending it in our relationships, and expressing it in service, we grow spiritually—becoming who we're called to be and contributing to a more loving world.²
3. That in designing for spiritual growth, the means and the ends must cohere: any leader who would draw others toward Love must be cultivating a life of Love themselves.³ So this guide speaks to you first as a practitioner and then as a leader of others.

In the following pages you'll:

1. Learn principles to design for Love across the inner, relational, and service realms, and the research that grounds them;
2. Be inspired by communities already putting these principles into practice; and
3. Reflect on how to center Love in your own life and work.

But what exactly do we mean by Love?

WHAT WE MEAN BY LOVE

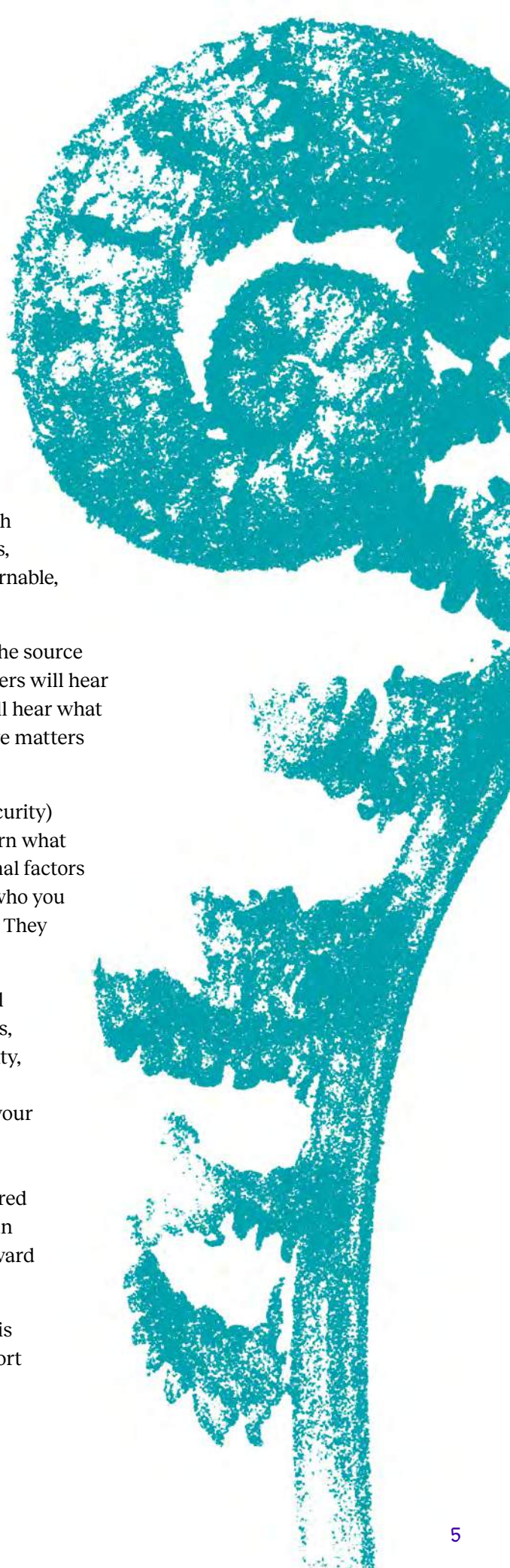
While Love may surpass understanding, there are certain things about it that we know. One of them is that Love gets expressed through qualities we will call spiritual values: compassion, courage, forgiveness, honesty, patience, generosity, humility, and [many more](#).⁴ These are learnable, practicable capacities, and together they form the content of Love.⁵

We capitalize Love throughout this guide because we see it as both the source of spiritual values and the destination to which they lead. Some readers will hear God in this, or the sacred, or the energy that animates life. Others will hear what we humans are capable of at our best. The work of designing for Love matters either way.

Spiritual values are distinct from material values (wealth, comfort, security) and social values (family, influence, achievement), in that those concern what you value. Your access to material and social values depends on external factors related to your situation in life. Spiritual values, by contrast, concern who you are becoming. You have intrinsic access to them whenever you desire. They are available to everyone, expressed in relationship, and lead to Love.

Love in this guide refers to the experience and expression of spiritual values. The more you experience a value, the more its meaning grows, and the more skillfully you can begin to express it. Forgiveness at sixty, after decades of marriage, means something different than it did at twenty-five amidst a friendship betrayal. The value is the same, but your understanding of it has matured, along with your capacity to offer it wisely. Part of what develops is your feel for the way spiritual values balance one another: courage tempered by prudence, honesty delivered with mercy. Over time you become more skillful at expressing Love in ways that move you, the people around you, and the larger world toward flourishing. That is the process of spiritual growth.

As a spiritual innovator, you can design experiences that cultivate this developmental process on purpose. The most effective designs support three concentric circles of growth, with Love at the center.



THREE REALMS OF GROWTH

Designing for spiritual growth in community means activating Love within each person, in their relationships, and through them in service. Practically, this means designing for Love to grow across three realms:



The Inner Realm

Engaging the Love at our core

Fostering experiences in which participants get to connect to the spiritual core—the Love at the center of the self. This is the foundation of everything else: a living connection to the source of all spiritual values. Here, design for participants to go inward regularly and practice opening the heart, and make space for them to reflect on and integrate their experience.



The Relational Realm

Choosing Love in our relationships

Creating opportunities for participants to bring spiritual values into their relationships, discerning which qualities of Love are called for and mustering the will to act accordingly. This is where most of the daily work of spiritual growth takes place, and where character is forged. In practice, your design might include community agreements, small groups, and containers for healing and repair.



The Realm of Service

Expressing Love in our world

Activating participants to express their unique capacities toward the flourishing of others and the world. Design for participants to discover and use their gifts, expanding the circle of service as they grow. Remember to balance service with regular chances to reconnect with inner and relational Love. This is what refreshes the spirit and sustains a life of service over time.

In designing for these three realms, remember that you can't force anyone to grow. But you can create conditions for people to experience, choose, and express Love, in increasingly significant ways.



IN PRACTICE

Learning from the Church of the Saviour

Working as a chaplain on the battlefields of World War II, Gordon Cosby saw first-hand the shortcomings of institutional Christianity. As he ministered to a generation of young men facing death on the eve of D-Day, he realized how poorly equipped they were to confront their own mortality, and how inadequately their faith had formed them. He made a promise to God that if he survived, he would give himself to building new structures for spiritual growth.

Safely home in the United States, Gordon and his wife Mary Campbell Cosby began hosting a Sunday evening gathering in restaurants and borrowed rooms around Washington, DC. They wanted to create a different kind of church: multiracial, cross-class, ecumenical, and deeply formative. In 1947, with a small group of others, they made their first membership commitment as founders of the Church of the Saviour.

From the beginning, the Church of the Saviour stood out from its contemporaries because it treated every member as a minister. Therefore, becoming and remaining a member came with significant commitments to inner growth, relational growth, and growth in service. The fruits of these commitments are the Church's defining legacy.⁶

Inner Growth

To formally join the Church of the Saviour, a prospective member completed two courses in the School of Christian Living, then entered a mission group on an interim basis. Mission groups consisted of three to twelve people and were the core relational and service unit of the community. Over the following year or eighteen months, the "intern member" finished three more courses, read about the community's history, worked with an assigned sponsor to examine their call and motives, and wrote a spiritual autobiography. In the week before joining



LEFT: Gordon Cosby in the early days of the Church of the Saviour.

the Church, they kept an hour's vigil in the chapel. Then they stood before the congregation, surrounded by the members of their mission group, and made their commitment.

That commitment was to a covenant: to meet God daily in a set time of prayer, to let scripture confront them daily, to worship weekly, to give proportionally beginning at a tithe, to grow in love for all people, to be a vital contributing member of one of the groups, and to confess and ask the fellowship's help when they fell short. Individual mission groups set disciplines of their own, and each member was expected to determine the maximum discipline suited to their own condition and pace—on the reasoning that a common minimum is inadequate for anyone's real growth. Many also kept a journal of dreams, prayers, resistances, and insights.

The Church named three minimal essentials of the inward journey: growth in meditation and contemplation rooted in scripture; growth in self-understanding; and growth in community.

Relational Growth

A mission group, which formed around a shared calling such as feeding the hungry, was small by design. It emphasized heterogeneity on the premise that the more different its members, the richer their common life.

Inside the group, spiritual growth was facilitated through loving accountability. Each member submitted a written report to the group's Spiritual Guide, a document that asked what blessings the week had held, how faithfully they had kept their disciplines, what word they had heard God speaking through community or scripture, and whether there was a relationship in which they needed to ask forgiveness, or offer it. Periodically each member would



ABOVE: The founding members of the Church of the Saviour committed to creating an interracial church back in 1947, when Washington, DC, was still strictly segregated. Here is co-founder Mary Campbell Cosby (left) with Esther Dorsey, who became the first director of [The Potter's House](#), one of the Church's central ministries.

BELOW: The Church of the Saviour purchased 200 acres of farmland and woods near Washington, DC, in 1952, as a site for silent retreats. Here, a volunteer group helps with organic gardening on the land at [Dayspring Silent Retreat Center](#).





ABOVE: The Festival Center, down the street from The Potter's House, became the hub for Church of the Saviour missions in 1989. Here, Matthias Everhope leads worship at the Festival Center.

Growth in Service

A mission group began with one person, or a small nucleus, who heard a call toward a specific unmet need: eliminate illiteracy, house the homeless, heal the sick, overcome racial injustice, rehabilitate those suffering from addiction. A call was understood to have the quality of an “impossible yes.” Simple to say, but like a mustard seed in that, when faithfully followed, it could lead a small group of people into a lifetime of working within interlocking systems on an incredibly complex issue. Even then, they might never see it resolved in their lifetimes. Sustaining this kind of commitment is part of what made the inner and relational work so important.

Any member could sound a call. If others also recognized it as their own, a group formed around it. If no one responded, the person waited, pursuing the call alone, and prayed for those who might one day hear it too.

Each mission group, once formed, became responsible for strategy, staffing, and fundraising to respond to their call. One of the group's first and most important tasks was the evoking of gifts: calling forth the specific capacities that each member would bring to executing their mission. They also invested personally in the work, each tithing a portion of their own income to the mission (rather than to the Church as a whole).

also share in front of the group. While these methods provided a structure for members to be seen, accompanied, and supported on their journey, they were not used as an excuse for shaming or punishment.

Leadership was distributed among five different roles within each group: The Prior held the vision and orchestrated the gifts of the others. The Spiritual Guide maintained the structure of discipline and held members accountable. The Shepherd cared for those outside the group who were drawn toward it. Two or three Activists carried the responsibility of reminding the group to keep extending itself in service. And the Pastor-Prophet both encouraged and confronted, sharing truth with love.

When joining a group, each member declared their willingness to be stretched by people whose ways might oppose their own, and to stay with the tension and pain of unresolved relationships until difference was transcended and hurt transmuted. Members held “unlimited liability” for one another. Leaving was always permitted, but not by drifting away; it required open decision, arrived at in prayer and in conversation with the group.



ABOVE: In 1976, the Church of the Saviour created a constellation of smaller church communities. Maurice Miles is a longtime member of Dayspring Church, which stewards the land and missions at Dayspring on behalf of the Church of the Saviour.

By this method, carried out over decades, the Church of the Saviour became responsible for swaths of the social service infrastructure in Washington, DC. More than forty ministries grew out of the original community, and many became independent nonprofits with their own boards and staff. Today they serve across the human lifespan: Jubilee JumpStart cares for children in their earliest years; Academy of Hope teaches adults from beginning literacy to a high school diploma; Jubilee Jobs provides job training and placements; Jubilee Housing offers affordable homes with support services attached; Samaritan Inns walks with people out of addiction; Christ House gives round-the-clock medical respite to homeless men; Joseph's House cares for unhoused people living with HIV/AIDS and terminal cancer. And the Potter's House, opened in 1960, has for decades been the hearth of the whole enterprise—a coffeehouse where the neighborhood and the church meet over a table.

No one at the Church of the Saviour set out to build successful nonprofits. Rather, they designed for spiritual growth in community, and the ministries came along as a result. Each began when two or three people recognized the same specific pain and were willing to give their lives to relieving it. This work was then sustained by people who had committed to deep inner disciplines and a high level of relational accountability and care for one another. The city was changed by mission groups of twelve.

Gordon Cosby refused the speaking invitations that came as his reputation grew, because he wanted the Church to stay small. And it did—the Church of the Saviour never scaled, and today is a network of small congregations, some with thriving ministries and some moving toward closure. The Church Handbook offers guidance to mission groups on how to end: review the history, give thanks for the years of the group's life, and celebrate its death. Yet much lives on, including the blueprint this community provides for designing with Love at the center.

*So how do you design for Love
to grow in and through your
own community? Let's start
with Inner Growth.*





DESIGNING FOR INNER GROWTH

Howard Thurman, the great philosopher, mystic, and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the sound of the genuine in each of us. “Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine in yourself,” he said. “Because that is the only true guide you will ever have, and if you don’t have that, you don’t have a thing.”⁷

Across traditions, sages and mystics have pointed to a soul, an inner teacher, a divine spark within. Forty years after Thurman, scientist Lisa Miller and her team at Columbia University determined that humans possess an innate spiritual core that is loving and guiding, and can be strengthened over time. Miller calls it our “docking station for spiritual awareness.”⁸

By any name, what matters is that we each carry a transcendent capacity to love and be loved, and this capacity grows the more we engage it.⁹ Studies show that consistently engaging our “awakened awareness” makes us 80% less likely to struggle with addiction and 82% less likely to attempt suicide.¹⁰

Inner growth begins with opening to the source of Love within. Design for your participants to slow down and make themselves available to the Love at the center of their being. Grounding in the body is often the first step. Breath, quiet, movement, singing, dancing, time in nature—all of these can help us to arrive and reconnect with what Miller describes as an “awareness of spiritual presence within us and throughout life.”¹¹

The inward journey can be intensely challenging, especially when pain from past experience has created what Recovery Café founder Killian Noe calls “scar tissue” over your core of Love.¹² Yet the potential to heal and transmute this pain is also what makes inner work so important.

“When you cease to fear your solitude,” writes poet and mystic John O’Donohue, “a new creativity awakens in you. Your forgotten or neglected inner wealth begins to reveal itself. You come home to yourself and learn to rest within.”¹³

Over time, sustained inner practice builds a capacity for receptivity that did not exist before. Early on it may feel one-sided, like putting in effort with no return, but with time, many describe a shift: access to a steadiness you’ve never had; insight that arrives unbidden; a quality of connection beyond yourself. Research on relational spirituality suggests that the sense of being met by the presence of Love in the inner realm is a widespread human experience, associated with resilience and flourishing.¹⁴

*How might you design
for this kind of deepening
connection to Love within?*



IN PRACTICE

Learning from the Center for Courage & Renewal

Inner growth tends to be messier and more difficult than any description could make it sound. Just finding the time to go inward, for instance, can feel near impossible—much less having a deeply-connected experience of accessing the spiritual core.

This is the challenge to which the [Center for Courage & Renewal](#) (CCR) has responded since its founding in 1997. Inspired by the Quaker tradition, CCR was born from an initial impulse to serve teachers who were losing the connection between soul and role, seeking to rekindle their passion for teaching and prevent burnout. Today, CCR's work has touched millions of lives, with a focus on creating supportive communities of reflection and practice that help people renew their soul connection and cultivate the courage to rise to new challenges. Their central methodology is the [Circle of Trust](#) retreat, which offers participants the immersive experience of taking time, together, to be in the presence of each person's inner teacher.

From a design standpoint, the Circle of Trust creates a powerful opportunity for participants to go inward, listen for the wisdom of their own soul, and encourage it into speech. Crucially, they do so in an intimate community of peers, where they are held, witnessed, and appreciated as they express their deepest truths. This yields a much higher likelihood that when someone has an insight in the circle, they will act on it once they leave. People regularly make transformative decisions and positive changes in their lives as a result of the clarity and courage that emerge from sitting in a Circle of Trust.

BELOW: During a Circle of Trust retreat, participants co-create trustworthy space to do their own inner work in community with others.

Retreats are led by Courage & Renewal Facilitators, each of whom go through an 18-month [Facilitator Preparation Program](#) that is designed to ensure they are living the qualities of authentic soul connection they seek to foster in others. Parker J. Palmer, CCR's co-founder, has been candid about his own struggles with depression and its profound impacts on his personal spiritual journey.¹⁵ This kind of honest inner life sharing from CCR leaders and facilitators is critical to the integrity of the practice they teach.



DESIGN PRINCIPLES

When designing for inner growth, the good news is that your participants already carry Love at their core! So your task is simply to create containers for them to connect with it, cultivate it, and integrate what they discover. This translates into three design principles:

1. Take time to go inward

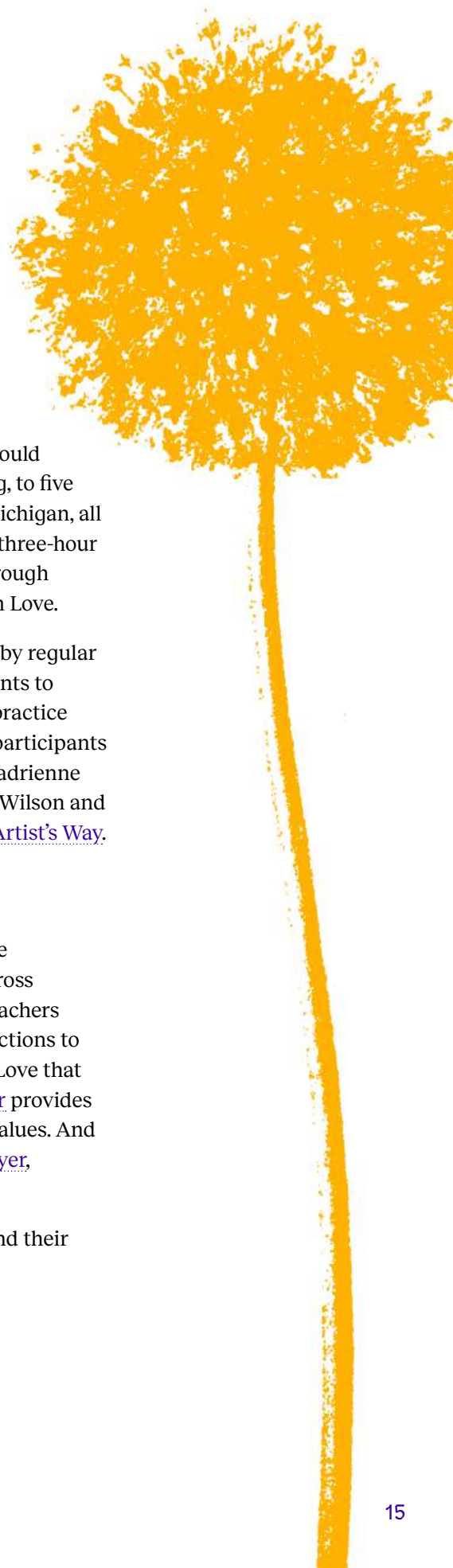
As simple as it sounds, make sure you are actually building in time for participants to go inward on a regular basis. Depending on your context, this could mean anything from five minutes of quiet reflection to start a Monday meeting, to five days of silent retreat to start the year. At the [Fetzer Institute](#), a foundation in Michigan, all staff are invited to a 20-minute meditation break at 2pm each day, as well as a three-hour gathering every Tuesday morning designed to foster spiritual development through learning, engaging in contemplative practice, and rooting their relationships in Love.

Spiritual growth accelerates when community gatherings are complemented by regular personal practice, which you can support by incorporating shared commitments to inner life disciplines alongside relationships of loving accountability such as practice partners, sponsors, and small groups.¹⁶ In crafting a structured invitation for participants to go inward, you might draw on resources like the Nap Ministry's [Rest Deck](#), adrienne maree brown and Sonya Renee Taylor's [Journal of Radical Permission](#), Rainn Wilson and Shabnam Mogharabi's [Soul Boom Workbook](#), or Julia Cameron's classic, [The Artist's Way](#).

2. Practice opening the heart

Meditation, rest, and reflection have value unto themselves, but ideally you are creating conditions for people to make contact with the Love at their core. Across traditions, you can find practices that focus on opening the heart. Buddhist teachers such as [Tara Brach](#), [Sharon Salzberg](#), and [Oneika Mays](#) offer beautiful introductions to Metta loving kindness meditation. Sufi teacher [Omid Safi](#) offers a practice of Love that begins from within and extends into the world. The Jewish practice of [Mussar](#) provides a structured path to developing your inner character by cultivating spiritual values. And Christian mystic Thomas Keating created clear instructions for [Centering Prayer](#), a practice of opening to God's love and one's love for God.

Whether you draw on existing practices or invite participants to develop or find their own, intentional connection to Love is key.¹⁷



3. Make space for integration

Allow participants to integrate their inner experience by making space for them to reflect together on their interior journey and how it is impacting their life.¹⁸ This works best when trust is high enough to allow for candid sharing of the whole gamut of experience—from struggles and confessions to victories and breakthroughs. The Center for Courage & Renewal uses a publicly-available set of [Touchstones](#) to help create this kind of trustworthy space in a group. And while a consistent group container for this process is helpful, other supports could include a combination of personal reflection and journaling, pairing up with a practice partner for regular check-ins, and meeting with a guide such as a teacher, elder, or [spiritual director](#). Practices such as the [Jesuit Examen](#) can be helpful for giving structure to spiritual reflection, as can responding to stories, parables, music, art, and poetry as a way in.

Lastly, remember that the inner realm is not an end in itself.¹⁹ Design in this realm can go wrong when interiority becomes an escape, never reaching relationship or service. It can also become distorted when it turns into striving—another thing to be mastered for its own sake, or worse, for the sake of advancing in status. Keep the inner tethered to the other two realms, and remember that the greatest gifts of this work are in the opportunity to give more Love away.

As a leader, ask yourself:

*How am I cultivating
a living connection to
the Love at my core, and
how am I making way
for others to do the same?*





DESIGNING FOR RELATIONAL GROWTH

When psychologist Dacher Keltner began researching awe—“being in the presence of something vast and mysterious that transcends your current understanding of the world”—he assumed that the most common sources might be nature, or spiritual practice, or listening to music. But across 2,600 narratives from 26 countries, participants reported that they were actually most moved by moral beauty: exceptional virtue, character, and ability, marked by a purity and goodness of intention and action.²⁰

Over 95% of the moral beauty that stirred awe around the world was in actions people took on behalf of others.²¹ This is the Bantu-African philosophy of ubuntu lived out in practice: showing, by the way you treat someone, that your humanity is inextricably bound up in theirs. In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, if you have ubuntu, then “you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have.”²² Put simply, you express spiritual values in your relationships.

We each carry the potential to exemplify moral beauty in our lives, and community is the context in which we get to practice. Love grows in relationship over time, through the consistent and committed choice to show up for the everyday realities of knowing and caring about others.²³

Yet this is easier said than done! Relational growth is notoriously uncomfortable—so much so that it can sometimes seem preferable to opt out.²⁴ (And in certain cases, the loving thing may be to let a relationship go.) But the absence of loving relationships causes a kind of spiritual separation that is devastating to the human soul. Psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad's research indicates that social isolation increases premature mortality by nearly 30%—a danger equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day²⁵—and former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, faced with the American loneliness epidemic, spent much of his tenure prescribing social connection to combat “deaths of despair” from addiction, mental health crises, and suicide.²⁶

Communities that place Love at the center are critical for healing the wounds that keep us separated and creating conditions for our personal and shared transformation.

How might you design for participants to grow in their capacity to love one another?



IN PRACTICE

Learning from Recovery Café

Killian Noe was deeply formed by the Church of the Saviour community in Washington, DC, where she learned that being deeply known and loved transforms us. When she moved to Seattle, she set out to create a healing space where people from all walks of life could seek recovery—not just from drugs and alcohol, but from anything blocking their capacity to love and be loved. The first [Recovery Café](#) opened in 2004.

At Recovery Café, Noe says, “We believe that real relationships with those whose realities are different from our own—relationships that cross socio-economic, racial, religious, political, and other divides—are what change us and ultimately change our world.”²⁷

Anyone may walk into a Recovery Café. Membership is free, and asks three things: be drug and alcohol free in the space, contribute to the community, and attend a weekly Recovery Circle. [Recovery Circles](#) are small support groups where members are known, loved, and held to be their best selves. They are led by trained facilitators—many of them members with their own experience of stable, longer-term recovery—and are designed on the premise that where addiction thrives in isolation, recovery happens in community.

A newcomer, on her first day in a circle, shared: “Every morning at 9am for the past 15 years, I’ve met my dealer.” Without skipping a beat, an older member responded: “It’s okay. But tomorrow morning at 9am, you’ll be meeting me.”²⁸

The deep and authentic relationships that form in these circles open pathways to forgiveness, challenge assumptions, and support each person to heal from trauma and rediscover their gifts.

The [Recovery Café Model](#) offers radical hospitality and belonging through a healing community space with food and beverage service; loving accountability guided by clear [Membership Agreements](#); and a culture of contribution rooted in member-leadership. Members are provided pathways to grow through the [School for Recovery](#) and other facilitator training and mentorship opportunities.

Through the expanding [Recovery Café Network](#), there are currently 101 Recovery Cafés across the US, Canada, and US Virgin Islands. The Network trains, supports, and connects each of

BELOW: Team members from Raleigh Oaks Recovery Café, North Carolina, embrace during a Recovery Café Network gathering in 2026.





LEFT: Every Recovery Café offers a healing community space with food and beverage service. Here, team members from Recovery Café Longmont fill their plates.

these healing communities.²⁹ The [Guiding Principles](#) of the Recovery Café Model allow each Café to be unique while maintaining a shared framework for how participant organizations live out their mission and relate to one another. These are: connect with divine Love in ourselves and others; show respect; cultivate compassion; practice forgiveness; encourage growth; and give back.³⁰

As a leader, Noe maintains her own circle of loving accountability, as do all leaders and facilitators in the Recovery Café Network. She teaches that no one gets out of a deep pit alone—as she herself learned vividly when she fell 30 feet into one while hiking, was carried out by a stranger, and relied on countless others for support during her next seven years of healing.³¹

In the words of Jacqueline Conerly, co-founder of Recovery Café DC, “If you’ve lived life, somewhere you’ve encountered something you need to overcome. Our space is a space where everybody’s embraced, everybody’s welcome.”³²



LEFT: At the heart of the Recovery Café model is the belief that healing happens in relationship.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Designing for relational growth means creating structures for authentic encounter and deepening connection, with the intent for each person to be known and loved. It also means anticipating the inevitability of conflict and making space to move through it in a way that honors the sacred worth and dignity of every person. Design principles include:

1. Establish community agreements

For participants to go deep together, it is important to establish, practice, and regularly revisit a set of mutually-affirmed community agreements.³³ Ideally these are aspirational, like [the ones](#) at Recovery Café, and guide the community toward a culture centered in Love. The [12 Traditions](#) of Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, have united its fellowship for over 80 years, and Burning Man has birthed a global counterculture around its [10 Principles](#). Depending on the duration and intensity of what you are designing, your agreements might range from a few basic tenets to a community covenant, code of ethics, or rule of life. What matters most is that you establish these up front and give participants an opportunity to give input and consent to them wholeheartedly. Only then can you begin to practice them together and hold one another accountable in your efforts to live them out.

2. Incorporate small groups

Relational growth relies on the kind of intimacy in which participants truly come to know and care for one another. Small groups are the most effective structure to make this possible, especially in the context of a larger fellowship such as a course, congregation, retreat, workplace, or social movement in which community agreements are in place.³⁴ You have many options in designing these groups, depending on your mission and goals: peer-led or facilitated, open or closed membership, high or low commitment, affinity versus diversity among members, and shorter or longer duration and frequency.

At [Center DC](#), for example, [small groups](#) are offered as an annual commitment for a set period of time, with the goal of helping DC-area Muslims grow spiritually in a consistent micro-community. Groups of 8-12 people self-select at a kick-off event based on vibe and schedule. Once formed, they meet weekly, are facilitated by a Small Group Lead, and require full commitment with no drop-ins. In 2026, they ran for 12 weeks leading up to Ramadān.³⁵

Small groups can succeed with a wide range of purposes, but essential is that they focus on questions of meaning and value in the lives of participants and create space for each person to be seen and heard. Even if your gathering lasts only a few hours or days, don't underestimate the power of small groups to catalyze spiritual growth and spark soul friendships that may far outlast the initial event.



3. Create containers for repair

Growing in Love necessitates relationship, and yet relationship necessitates moving through conflict and harm.³⁶ As difficult as this can be, it can also catalyze some of the most transformative spiritual growth when handled wisely and well. In the words of relationship experts Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, “We are born in relationship, we are wounded in relationship, and we can be healed in relationship.”³⁷

While you can’t anticipate specifics, it is worth being prepared to hold anything from everyday slights to deep transgressions, including abuses of power. In your context, what would it look like to design Love-centered containers for truth-telling, reconciliation, and repair? At a high level, an ethics code that includes policies, procedures, and protocols—such as the one from [Upaya Zen Center](#)—can make a big difference. Equally valuable is establishing a regular practice of reflection on your community agreements. When participants know they have space to share honestly about how they or others may be falling short, and work through it with Love, many potential conflicts never escalate. There are wonderful resources available for designing and facilitating circles of healing, restorative justice, and peace-building, such as from the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) and the [Alaska Tribal Justice Resource Center](#).

In your design, be thoughtful about what a container can carry. Experiences can backfire when they try to manufacture depth without the conditions for it, such as icebreakers that demand disclosure before there is trust; sharing circles with no guidance on how to hold what surfaces; or inviting participants to give each other feedback with no recourse if harm arises. Love takes time to grow in a community, but if you design wisely, steward patiently, and are willing to take on the hard learnings, it will come.³⁸

As a leader, ask yourself:

How am I growing my own capacity to love and be loved, and how am I supporting my community in doing the same—especially when it’s hard?



DESIGNING FOR GROWTH IN SERVICE

Much like inner and relational Love, extending ourselves in service seems to be something we are not only wired for, but actually need to thrive.

Researchers at Harvard's Human Flourishing Program did a longitudinal study of nearly 13,000 older American adults to understand more about aging and health. Those who volunteered at least a hundred hours a year—about two hours a week—were, four years later, not only measurably more positive, purposeful, and connected to friends, but had better self-rated health and a 44% lower mortality rate. These findings held after accounting for how healthy, happy, and involved in volunteering they had been to begin with.³⁹

According to sociologist Matthew T. Lee of Baylor and Harvard Universities, we need not only to be loved, but to see our love make a difference in the world. Lee describes this as the realm of sacred gesture, in which we are moved by Love to contribute to the flourishing of others, the natural world, and the life-giving systems upon which we all depend.⁴⁰

Yet we all know stories about (or have experienced ourselves) how service can lead to burnout as well. What sustains a life of service over time?

Lee and his colleagues conducted 120 in-depth interviews with people known in their communities as exemplars of benevolent service. What they found was an ongoing cycle of replenishment, in which renewed experiences of divine Love fueled more benevolent expressions of Love in the world.⁴¹

“People would burn out except for the renewal that comes from a deep experience of love,” says Lee. “We saw this over and over again. I’m not saying that some people didn’t report getting depressed. They do have trials and tribulations, but even in hard times they have a sense that they’re not suffering alone. They’re part of a bigger story. This gives them a larger sense of meaning in their lives—even when they hit seemingly insurmountable barriers. They are refreshed by this ongoing encounter with divine love.”⁴²

The more spiritual values become real in people’s lives, the more service becomes a natural way of being.⁴³ Their outward expression of Love grows in proportion to their inner capacity. And their capacity grows based on the direct experience of loving and being loved.⁴⁴

How might you support your community members in cultivating this kind of sustained capacity to serve, buoyed by inner and relational Love?



IN PRACTICE

Learning from ServiceSpace

In 1999, [ServiceSpace](#) founder Nipun Mehta was in Silicon Valley in his mid-twenties, optimizing C++ compilers at Sun Microsystems and asking himself if it was really what made him come alive. That spring, he and a few friends walked into a homeless shelter in San Jose and said, “We want to help, we don't know how, we just want to give for the love of it.” They ended up building the shelter a website. It felt great, so they told their friends, who told theirs. Within months, four volunteers became forty, which became four hundred. Today the ServiceSpace ecosystem numbers into thousands of volunteers and projects reaching millions, all animated by a single question: What designs emerge if we assume people want to behave selflessly?

Mehta and his friends made three rules in those early years, which have become the defining creative constraints of all ServiceSpace projects: They are entirely volunteer-run, they do not fundraise, and they honor small acts of generosity, trusting that when they come together, something larger will emerge.

Every ServiceSpace project is a container for someone's gift meeting someone's need. One project, [DailyGood](#), began because someone wanted to send out a piece of good news a day, and it grew past 100,000 subscribers without a single solicitation. [Smile Cards](#), printed in 2004 as an experiment, now number over a million in global circulation—each bearing a simple instruction to do something kind for a stranger and leave the card behind. [Karma Kitchen](#), which opened in Berkeley in 2007, was conceived as a restaurant where your check reads zero and you can choose to pay for the stranger after you.



LEFT: Nipun Mehta and ServiceSpace volunteers feel the Love at a retreat in 2018.

Despite early doubts, the generosity chain held for seven years in its first location, becoming the top-rated restaurant on Yelp and a case-study at Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley. The Karma Kitchen model has since been replicated in dozens of countries from Austria to India.⁴⁵

“Service is not something I do,” says Mehta. “It is an expression of inner transformation.” He describes meditation and service as the two pillars of his life—the inhale and exhale of the same breath.⁴⁶ The gift economy, in his words, is a series of inner shifts: from consumption to contribution, from transaction to trust, from isolation to community, and from scarcity to abundance.⁴⁷

To support inner transformation, ServiceSpace volunteers host Awakin Circles around the world—local circles that convene weekly for an hour of group meditation, followed by a circle of sharing and a meal. Born from a single circle of friends who began meeting in 1996, Awakin Circles now meet in more than 90 cities globally.

ServiceSpace is a living expression of the principle that when your inner life changes, your relationships change. And when those relationships align in the spirit of service, a small group of people can profoundly impact the world.



ABOVE:
ServiceSpace
volunteers gather
in circles all over
the world, such as
this one in Hanoi,
Vietnam, in 2023.



LEFT: At Karma
Kitchen, your meal
was paid for by a
stranger, and you
can choose to pay it
forward for someone
you'll never meet.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Design in this area is most effective when, like the Church of the Saviour and ServiceSpace, it draws on the unique calling and gifts of each participant, rippling out from small acts to larger collaborations to systemic changes. In all of it, remember to refresh the spirit so that each participant is regularly renewed by listening to the sound of the genuine within themselves.⁴⁸ Design principles include:

1. Discover and activate gifts

Galvanizing a community in service begins with the belief that everyone has gifts to give.⁴⁹ For service to flow from Love, people need opportunities for their gifts to be discovered and put to use. The most straightforward way to surface gifts is to create a culture of contribution within your community. At [Moved By Love](#) retreats, there are at least 20 volunteers per gathering and often more. They care for participants through hundreds of creative, invisible acts of kindness, creating a field of Love that regularly changes lives.⁵⁰ There may be specific tools that could help surface gifts in your context, such as the [Spiritual Gifts Inventory](#) from Discipleship Ministries, but even a simple conversation can go a long way. [DeAmon Harges](#), a community organizer in Indianapolis, has built a practice as a “Roving Listener,” listening deeply for people's talents, passions, and hidden capacities and then connecting them to one another so their gifts can find expression. In your own community, what structures would let each participant's particular capacities be seen, named, and activated in service of something larger?

2. Stay rooted in relationship

Service that forms people the most tends to address the pain that most breaks their heart—whether that is due to their own or a loved one's experience with a particular form of suffering, or a calling they can't fully explain. That said, launching participants toward the largest or most distant version of a problem can sometimes do more harm than good. Rather, design for them to start where service is rooted in real relationship: supporting at-risk students, for instance, before taking on the interlocking systems that create educational inequity.⁵¹ At [Thread](#) in Baltimore, each student is matched with at least three volunteers who become extended family over a decade, doing whatever it takes to get the student the support they need. No surprise, high school and even college graduation rates skyrocket—but equally significant are the transformative friendships that emerge.⁵² Over time, as you and your community cultivate experience, networks, and expertise, the potential for contributing to larger-scale systems change will grow.

3. Regularly refresh the spirit

As research shows, joy in service is best sustained by regular reconnection with inner and relational Love.⁵³ Design for this by weaving contemplative and social time into the rhythm of the work itself. This can take the form of weekly gatherings, such as the Awakin Circles at ServiceSpace or the [Community of Freedom](#) gatherings at the Fetzer Institute. Or it might mean traditions like at Devoted Health, where every staff meeting of three or more begins with someone sharing a story of how they got to treat one of their clients like family.⁵⁴

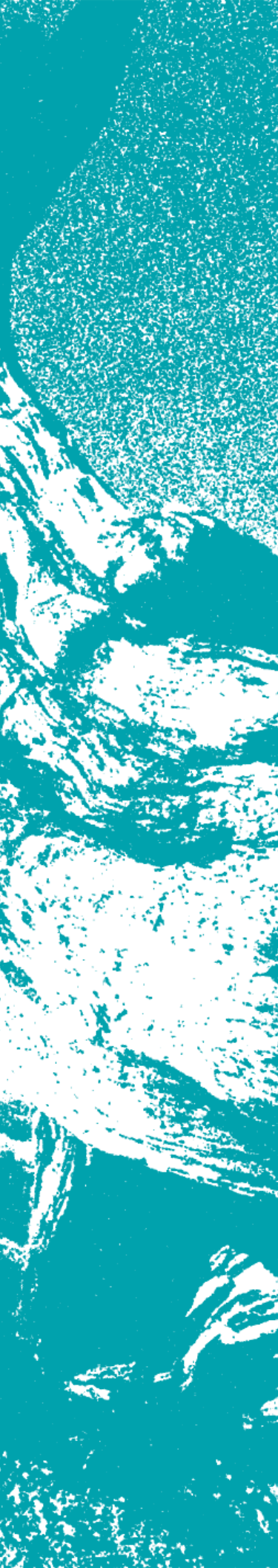
Time in nature can be especially powerful for healing and renewal. And remember that inspiration and fun matter as much as quiet and contemplation. How might you design for service to be refreshed by regular experiences of reconnection to Love at the core, in one another, and animating all life?

In this work, remember that sometimes—often—service is just hard. You don't always get to do what you're most gifted at, and even when you do, it can be uphill for days, years, a lifetime! There will likely be seasons of doubt or even despair. And yet, worse than the rugged challenge of service is the absence thereof. A community that exists only for itself becomes insular and, eventually, atrophies from lack of purpose. We are meant to be instruments of Love, not just carriers of it. The privilege of serving—especially shoulder to shoulder—is one of life's greatest sources of joy and satisfaction, as well as the means by which we contribute to advancing Love in our world.

As a leader, ask yourself:

How am I offering my gifts for the flourishing of others, and how am I inviting my community into service at the point of their gifts?





WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE

*I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness.*

Walt Whitman⁵⁵

When you design gatherings with Love at the center, you make way for spiritual growth in each person, in your community, and in the world.

As each person grows, character accrues. Spiritual values become more and more real in their life, and the deep reservoir of Love within them becomes evident as they begin to serve beyond their own reserves. A change comes about—one promised by our traditions but verified only in experience—in which they find themselves more joyful, peaceful, and fulfilled. These qualities arrive as the harvest of a life devoted to the cultivation of Love.

As your community grows, more Love is born in it than any individual could generate alone. The community starts to feel like its own entity, including yet transcending each participant.⁵⁶ People find collaborators, partners, and friends who help them carry what they could never have carried, heal what they never could have healed, and create what they never could have created on their own.

And through this process of personal and community growth, new possibilities open up for the world.

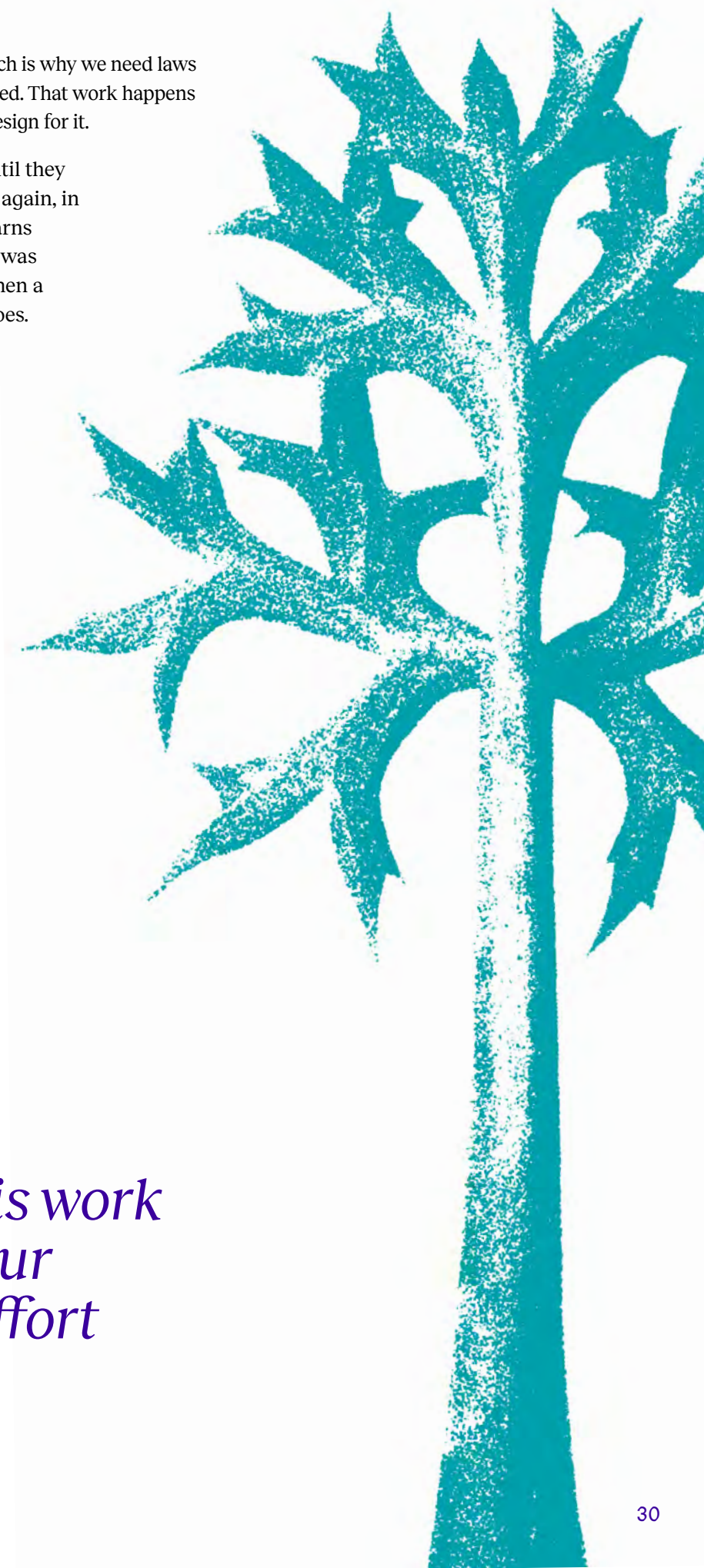
The people who built and sustained 40 ministries in Washington, DC, had been formed to do so, because the Church of the Saviour designed for Love in their inner lives and relationships. The same architecture has carried movements.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the [Beloved Community](#), shaped by his conviction that divine Love was operating in every person and in the arc of history, acted as a moral and strategic foundation for the US civil rights movement. The [Commitment Card](#) that King created for people to pledge themselves to nonviolence in 1963 listed ten commandments across the inner, relational, and service realms, including: “Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free,” “Walk and talk in the manner of love,” and “Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.” Those who signed were prepared to be jailed and beaten. Their daily disciplines formed them to practice Love in the face of violence, and the movement they sustained changed the laws of a nation.

King taught that morality cannot be legislated, which is why we need laws to restrain harm.⁵⁷ But moral beauty can be cultivated. That work happens in souls and in small groups, and someone has to design for it.

Spiritual values are only potential in a person until they become actual through being chosen, again and again, in the presence of others. What one community learns to do, another community can learn to do. What was once unimaginable becomes a demonstration, then a model, then simply one of the things a society does. This is how we create structural good.

Somewhere in your life right now there is a gathering you are responsible for. A class, a congregation, a circle of friends. The people in it already carry Love at their core. Your design helps to determine whether they get to find it, practice it, and give it away. Every community named here started with a small number of people and someone willing to design for their souls.



You get to carry this work forward, taking your place in the long effort to move our world toward Love.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Everything in this guide is an attempt to say something that exceeds saying.

I see Love as the energy animating the universe, so any description of it, including this one, is partial. I have written about souls and gatherings and design, and left out a great deal that matters. (You might be wanting more, for instance, about the body, or nature, or justice, or consciousness, or the traditions that have carried wisdom about Love for millennia!)

I hope that, while limited, this guide might offer something usable for you. And more than that, I hope you will augment what's here with your own wisdom about Love. If having written this means that we get to be spiritual co-conspirators as you design for more Love in your community, then it will have done its work.

As for you designing for more Love in your community... I sincerely believe that nothing is more worth trying!

Thanks for reading,

—*Angie*

GRATITUDE

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I 5 O 4

This guide was developed in collaboration with [1504](#), a narrative studio dedicated to fostering a more empathetic society through story.

Design by [inkcap](#)

NOTES

- 1 According to researcher and clinical psychologist Lisa Miller, the spiritual core is an innate, biologically hardwired capacity that can be strengthened. Engaging our spiritual core enhances our capacity to feel loved, guided, and connected to a higher power such as God, the universe, or a sacred force of life. See: Lisa Miller, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life* (Random House, 2021), 8-10 and 161-163.
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- 56 See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Scribner, 1970).
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Note on the use of AI: In addition to all of the human conversations that informed this guide, I worked with Claude, an AI tool by Anthropic, to help me research and organize material, think through the structure and arguments, draft early versions of select copy that I rewrote, and format and review citations. The convictions here are mine, as is the final text. Every source has been selected and verified by our research team.

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