

# river retreat

seeking the shape of flourishing life

grace farms



# What is the shape of flourishing life?

This is the most important question of our lives. As purposive beings, everything we do, say, and think aims at some answer to this question.

Our lives in every detail are oriented, whether explicitly or implicitly, toward some vision of life in full bloom, life *flourishing* for ourselves, our families, our communities, the global humanity community, and the natural world of which we are all a part.

For good or for ill, there is some vision that our lives are aimed at making possible. When we say we want to live “for good,” to “do good,” to “make a positive impact,” we are saying that we want our lives to aim at that life that is truly *flourishing life*. But we need to know: what is the shape of flourishing life?

This single question is the focus of the Faith Initiative at Grace Farms.

To be sure, this is not a “religious” question in the sense that one needs to belong to a religious tradition or believe in God in order to ask it. It is a human question. But human beings have been asking and endeavoring to answer this question for millennia. As we face challenges that demand that we answer it anew, we would be foolish not to avail ourselves of ancient wisdom.

So, the Grace Farms Faith Initiative pursues this question in the company of the world’s religious and philosophical traditions and in light of the world’s most pressing concerns. Through educational partnerships and public programming, we provide opportunities for people regardless of religious affiliation to reflect and enter into dialogue on life’s most important question across important and enduring lines of difference.

This retreat is an opportunity to take stock of your life, to ask this most central question in the company of wisdom gleaned from a breadth of human experience, and to take concrete steps to aim your life toward what you discern. It could be done over the course of a couple of hours, a whole day, a month, or longer. It can be taken multiple times. It is offered freely as an invitation. We hope you’ll find in it a path forward toward a life worthy of our shared humanity.

Matthew Croasmun  
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- 1 COURT  
What am I doing?
- 2 COMMONS  
Is what I'm doing creating the life I'm after?
- 3 LIBRARY  
What sort of life do I want?
- 4 SANCTUARY  
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- 5 LIBRARY  
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river building

grace farms

Whether as japa mala, misbaha, or rosary, people of faith around the world – Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian – have used strings of beads to frame their reflection.

The beads place physical structure around a spiritual quest, reminding the practitioner “where” she is on her journey. They supply material banks for an immaterial river to flow. Jewish *tallit* may serve a similar purpose, encoding within a physical structure the task of remembering the commandments.

This retreat proposes construing the River building at Grace Farms in an analogous way: a physical object to structure your own reflection. To be clear, the River building wasn’t designed or built for this purpose. This retreat doesn’t presume to “reveal the true meaning” of the River building. But it does invite you to encounter the building this way, to allow its various volumes and their relationship to one another as they flow up and down the hillside to frame a set of reflections on life – your life, at least at first; hopefully *all* life in the end.

The set of questions you’ll ask yourself are adapted from a model I (Matt) developed in teaching a course called *Life Worth Living* at Yale University and here at Grace Farms. I describe the model in a talk I gave here at Grace Farms called *What’s Worth Wanting*. If you have the time and inclination, you could listen to that talk; it would provide a good orientation to this retreat. In any case, here are the basics:

Most of the time, we live our lives on **auto-pilot**. That’s not necessarily good or bad; it’s just true. We have **habits**; we repeat them. But while when we’re in the auto-pilot mode we don’t really *think* about our habits, the fact is that they’re the most honest answers our lives give to a whole set of more fundamental questions. These questions can be grouped into one of three different “layers.”



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What’s Worth Wanting talk

The first layer, just below above the auto-pilot, is the **effectiveness** layer. Here, the questions are about **strategy**. Whether diagnostically (Is what we’re doing getting us what we’re after?) or proactively (How can we get where we’re going?), this layer is about effective *means*. Which is all well and good, so far as it goes.

But good means are only as valuable as the *ends* we put them toward. Which brings us to the second layer, **self-awareness**. Here, we ask about our goals: What are we really after? What sort of life are we aiming at? Whatever our strategies, what are our **values**? These are intensely personal questions; the name of the game in this layer is *introspection*. Only you know what you’re *really* after in life.

But there is a yet more profound question that the self-awareness layer can only gesture us towards. Just because we want something doesn’t mean it’s *worth wanting*. After all, plenty of people have reached the pinnacle of their lives only to find that, having all they ever wanted, they are still left wanting.

And so, lest we, too, dash our lives on the rocks of effectively-actualized self-awareness, we come to the **self-transcendence** layer. Here we ask: What sort of life is truly *worth* living? What’s worth wanting in life? In short, what is the shape of flourishing life? Here we’re talking about issues of **truth**. We are no longer the point. Finally, we encounter and find ourselves accountable to something or someone *outside* ourselves that can guarantee the *worth* of what we set our sights upon.

Now, we’ve just described the first half of the retreat: step-by-step, climbing the ladder, ascending to our most important question. But, life is not lived up on the mountaintop. It is lived in the real world. And so, just as surely as we have to ask questions that move us from habits to strategies to values and to truth, there is a return journey we must travel as well. Insights into the truth of flourishing life have to become the desires of our hearts or they’ll remain isolated in our intellect, unable to shape our lives.

And we’ll need good strategies to take our refined and reformed values and put them into action. The hope is that we’ll eventually start to see new habits form that implicitly endorse and pursue all that we’ve endorsed explicitly up on the mountain top. So, this retreat invites you to retrace your steps, to return to each volume you visited on your way up the hillside, to take this return journey as well.

You may find that the questions of a given volume don’t end simply because you’ve left it. And you may find that you’ve already spent time in a volume wrestling with a question that the retreat proposes for another space. This is inevitable. The boundaries between these questions are like the glass walls of the volumes in which you’re invited to reflect: open, porous, in conversation with one another. As you reflect, allow your eyes to wander from where you are to where you’ve been: how is each moment of reflection in conversation with those that have come before?



# What am I doing?

Slave labor continues to build this country.  
Some people don't care.  
It's the game/the play/the luck of the draw/the gallop of unfettered capital

But for those who do care  
For those with empathy,  
Perhaps it's time to consider:  
Consider your privilege, along with its impact  
Consider who does what and why  
Consider making less and gaining more

Consider the men, women and children who make your lives easier,  
And theirs harder:  
The farmer and the worker,  
The butcher and the barber,  
The baker and the builder,  
The nanny and the nurse!

Consider the importance of change and why it matters  
Then insist upon change across all the platforms of life  
Consider what you want, what you need and  
Achieving it without exploiting others

Consider the role of industrialized nations  
Consider why empires collapse  
As colonies rise  
And know that mounting resistance to the imbalance  
Is the order of the day

– Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled* (2020)  
*Design For Freedom*, Grace Farms Foundation

This first station on our River Retreat is about pausing to observe. It's a chance to take stock of this moment in time, as we ask ourselves, "What am I doing?"

Often, our lives run on auto-pilot. We don't think too carefully about each and every one of our daily choices, or why we do what we do – we just do it. But, below the surface, what we do does in fact embody some set of values we endorse at least implicitly. That means they're great fodder for deeper reflection. As you answer the questions below, notice, without judgment, what answers immediately come to mind, and what thoughts surface after several minutes of reflection. Write down your observations, and feel free to jot down notes, key words, and phrases into a notebook or journal.

Take some time to look around and gather impressions of this room. What distinctive physical features do you see? How does it acoustically sound? Who else is in this place?

As you check in with the room around you, also begin checking in with yourself. How is my body? What are my dominant emotions? What thoughts have been occupying my mind?

Next, take stock of some key aspects of your life: how you invest your time, money, and attention. Feel free to check your sources – flip through your calendar, look through your recent expenses, or scroll through your news feed. Consider the following aspects of your life:

### time

What is your daily schedule like?

What events are on your weekly, monthly, and yearly calendar?

How much time is unscheduled?

What time do you give yourself for rest?  
Social connection? Spiritual practice?

### money

What are your largest expenses?

What do you splurge on?

To what sorts of organizations do you donate?

### attention

What websites do you frequent?

Whose voices and opinions are most present to you? (Consider newspaper columnists, TV or radio hosts, the people you follow on social media.) What are they saying?



For each of these, *notice without judgment* what comes to mind. Write down your observations, large or small, consequential or seemingly insignificant. Simply gather the facts.

When you look at your list above of your routines, consider how many of them are intentional practices. Are these choices that you've reflected on? Have you thought about why you do what you do? Is this "how you've always done it?"



When you feel ready, exit the Court and move uphill towards the Commons.



Is what I'm doing  
yielding the life I'm after?

If you observe their means, look at their motives, and examine where they find peace, where can people hide?

– *The Analects of Confucius*, 2.10

As you enter the Commons, find the art installation *Double Glass River* by Teresita Fernández, which features 10,000 hand-silvered glass cubes.

Pick one cube to study carefully. What do you see reflected in it? Then, move away from the wall and notice what the cumulative reflection reveals. What does the landscape look like? Look at the mirror wall from several angles – does the picture change?

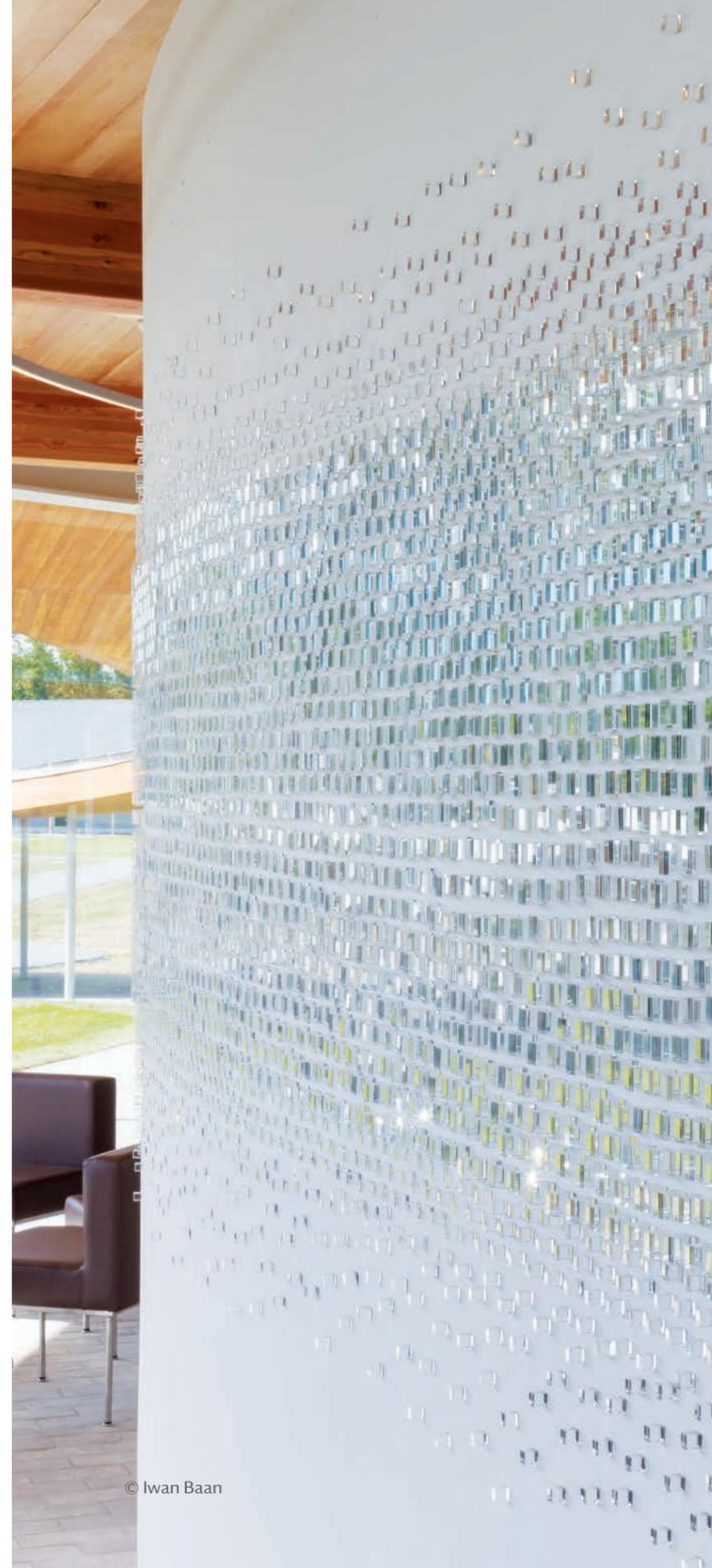
Now imagine that each glass cube on the wall represents one of the observations you made in the Court. Every calendar event, checkbook entry, and social media post is like one of these little mirrored blocks: they reflect back to us a piece of our lives. When we bring these pieces together and look at the fragments collectively, we see the shape of our lives.

This station is your invitation to carefully reflect on your choices above and consider whether these practices are contributing to your vision of flourishing life.

Look back to your notes from the Court. How do you invest your time, money, and attention? What does this say about your relationships, values, accomplishments, and the things

that are meaningful to you? *What does the composite image reveal?* Sketch or outline it briefly in your notes.

What emotions arise for you when you look at the picture of your life captured by these pieces? How does your body respond? Notice and write down how you feel.



How does the picture of your life captured in these events, expenses, and media compare to the life you're after? What questions arise for you about what sort of life you really want to pursue?

*Note: These last questions depend on a vision of "the life you're after" that may be murky at the moment. That's fine – we'll work to articulate that later. For this moment, just sit with your feelings and questions about the life you're living now.*



When you feel ready, exit the Commons and move uphill towards the Library.

# What sort of life do I want?

There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me.

– Charles Taylor  
*The Ethics of Authenticity*

## Enter into the Library and notice the two large-scale photographs by Thomas Demand.

These compositions, *Farm 56* and *Farm 88*, show the multitude of architectural models created by SANAA as they designed Grace Farms and offer insight into the iterative process between client and architect that produced the River building.

The completed River Building did not necessarily have to be the way it is today: there are many different shapes and forms it could have taken. Likewise, our lives have many potential shapes. Our lives could have been otherwise; they may yet be otherwise. We need to decide, at many different crossroads in our lives, *what sort of life do I want?*

Return to your notes from the Commons about how you felt when you envisioned the current shape of your life. What felt absent from the image? What felt like it absolutely belonged? When you consider what life you do want, these feelings can be a preliminary guide.

It may be that the things that foster feelings of satisfaction, joy, contentment, and peace fit into your vision, and things that bring about a sense of dissatisfaction, shame, guilt, or unease do not play a part in the life you want.

Spend some time reflecting, imagining, and dreaming about this ideal life. Don't worry about whether or not this vision of life is what you *should* want. We'll get to that later. For this station, we want to become present to what we *do* want. For now, answering the question *honestly* is more important than answering it "correctly." Take some notes as you reflect, and again, sketch or outline this vision.

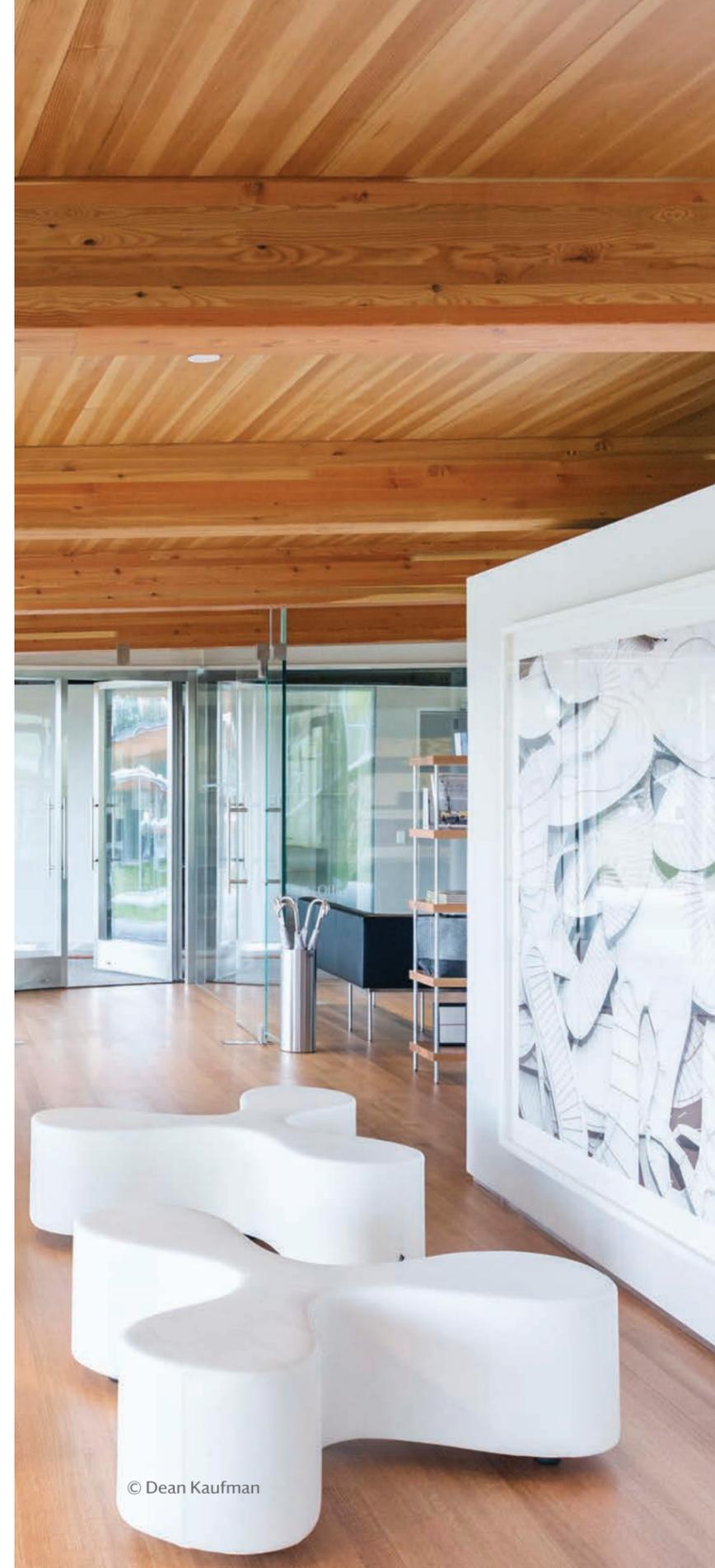
What sort of life do I want ...

In relationship to my home?

In my relationship to my work?

In my rest?

In my relationships – with my family, friends, and communities?



What would it mean...

For life to go well?

For life to feel well?

To lead life well?

What are my truest desires?

What do I crave from life?

What, when I imagine it,  
sets my body at ease?

If you are on this retreat with a partner, take a moment to share what surfaced. At this stage, your vision is completely your own – your wants, your desires, your cravings. Yet, notice if your visions overlap at all. Do you share anything in your visions of flourishing life?

 When you feel ready, exit the Library and make your way further up the hill to the Sanctuary.

# What sort of life is most worth living?

If I am not for myself, who will  
be for me?

And if I am only for myself,  
what am I?

And if not now, when?

– Rabbi Hillel  
*Pirkei Avot* 1:14

## THE SANCTUARY

Bread. A clean sky. Active peace. A woman's voice singing somewhere, melody drifting like smoke from the cook fires. The army disbanded, the harvest abundant. The wound healed, the child wanted, the prisoner freed, the body's integrity honoured, the lover returned ... The labour equal, fair and valued. Delight in the challenge for consensus to solve problems. No hand raised in any gesture but greeting. Secure interiors of heart, home, land so firm as to make secure borders irrelevant at last. And everywhere, laughter, care, dancing, contentment. A humble, earthly paradise in the now.

– Written by Robin Morgan, in collaboration with Perdita Huston, Sunetra Puri, Mahnaz Afkhami, Diane Faulkner, Corrine Kumar, Simla Wali, Paola Melchiarì  
From *A Woman's Creed*  
1994 WEDO Global Strategies Meeting

Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do.

– Robin Wall Kimmerer  
*Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*

While it is not true to say that men [sic] cannot get enough money, fame and power, it is true to say that men cannot get enough of these things when they want them greedily, when they make them the supreme forces of their lives. These are not the things men really want, and man can never get enough of what he does not really want.

– Huston Smith  
*The Religions of Man*



As you enter the sanctuary, let your attention find its way to Olafur Eliasson's *Mat for multidimensional prayers*, in the front of the space.

Prayer is a way of orienting ourselves to what is beyond our ken and capabilities. Our question for this station is just that.

Behind and within all of our actions, strategies, and desires is a vision of flourishing life – a vision of life as we would want it to be for ourselves and for others, a vision of life as we would want it to feel for ourselves, and for others, a vision of life as we would want to live it ourselves and as we would hope for others to live as well.

This vision is immodest and inevitably so. When we dream, our dreams spill out into the lives of others.

Consider your dreams for a young person you care deeply about. Whatever you hope for them becomes a hope for the world in which they live. Hope for good work (say, a particular career) and you are also already hoping for an industry and world of clients, colleagues, and customers. Hope for peace and freedom and already you are hoping for certain forms of government and policy.

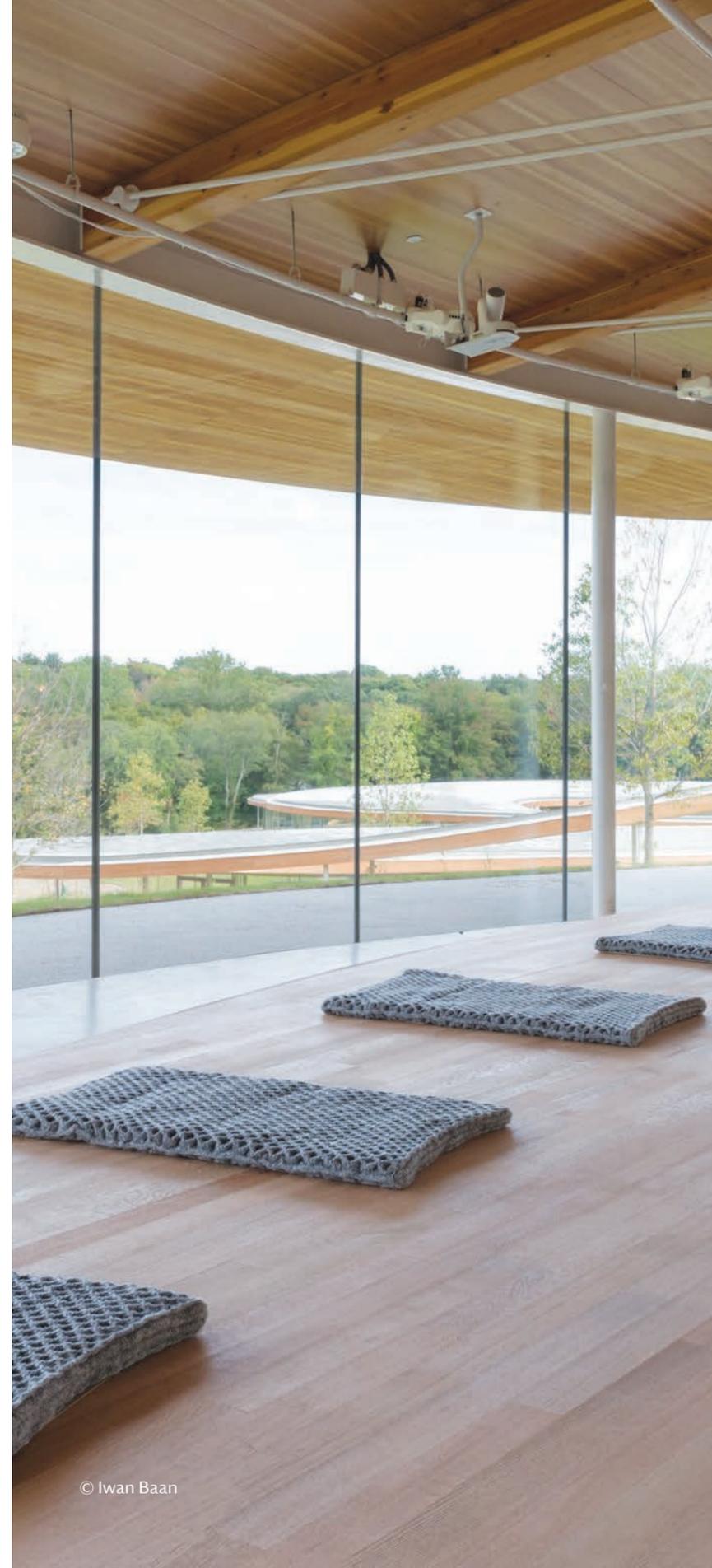
Consider carefully even your hope for joy and you will find that this, too, is woven into a tapestry of a *world* over which it would be right to rejoice. We dream a *world* even if we try simply to dream a life.

What arrogance would be required to dream a world? And yet, every dream we dream does just this. If we are going to live, we are going to dream. And if we are going to dream, at some point, we will have to ask ourselves: are our dreams *worthy* of our lives and of our world? This is a daunting question.

This question is about truth, not about what we want or even about our moral intuitions. Being honest with ourselves means entertaining the possibility of a gap between what we want and what is worth wanting. That can be uncomfortable. In this space of grace and peace, we can perhaps linger for a moment in that discomfort.

Look back on the desires and hopes you named in the Library. Consider the worlds they dream and ask yourself:

Which of these desires and hopes and the worlds they would conjure lead you to rejoice? Which elicit a profound "yes" from your soul?



© Iwan Baan

Which give you pause? Which are potentially diminishing of your humanity?

Our best hopes, the most refined of our desires have the potential to fall short – and not just a little. Around the world and over millennia, human cultures have returned time and again to the idea that ideals worthy of our devotion come from the capital-o Outside. The pace and shape of our lives make it difficult to hear this Other voice. Find a place in this large room and take a moment of quiet, look outside, and listen.

What did you hear? What came to mind? Particular memories? Images? Questions? Holding what you've heard with open hands, take the step to jot down what insight you may have stumbled upon:

I suspect that \_\_\_\_\_ may be part of living a life worthy of our shared humanity.

**If this station seems overwhelming, don't worry. The world's greatest traditions have been wrestling with this question for millennia. And few of us were educated in how to actually tackle questions this big and of this sort. Best to be patient with ourselves.**

**If you're interested in asking this question about the shape of flourishing life in the company of friends and many of the world's wisdom traditions, you might consider participating in a *Life Worth Living* course at Grace Farms.**

[gracefarms.org/life-worth-living](http://gracefarms.org/life-worth-living)

 When you feel ready, exit the Sanctuary and return down the hill to the Library.

# How can I learn to want a life worth living?

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

– Romans 12:2

## Enter the Library and find a place to sit and reflect.

Perhaps you would like to return to the same spot you occupied on your way up the hill.  
Perhaps you want to find a new place.

Hopefully, in the Sanctuary we've stumbled upon, remembered, or deepened important insights into what sorts of lives might be worthy of our shared humanity. But our goal is not just to discern the shape of flourishing life; our goal is to *pursue* it. Visions of the good life need somehow to become *good lives*.

We moderns are well aware that insights don't automatically turn into changed behavior. (Hence our endless propagation of "life hacks" and tips and tricks for better living.) But the ancients insist that insights don't even automatically turn into changed *desires*. There is work to be done to translate insight to desire. Once desire is transformed, actions naturally follow. We can call these ways of translating insight into desires "disciplines."

"Disciplines" are in many ways foreign to modern life. Left to our own devices, we moderns are perhaps inclined to go straight from the Sanctuary to the Commons – from insight to strategy. But strategies that bypass the heart are exhausting and unsustainable. (The New Year's resolution is the classic modern attempt to bypass the heart this way.) So, don't worry; we'll get to strategy. But first, let's take a moment to consider how we might align our desires with our insights.

### Ask yourself:

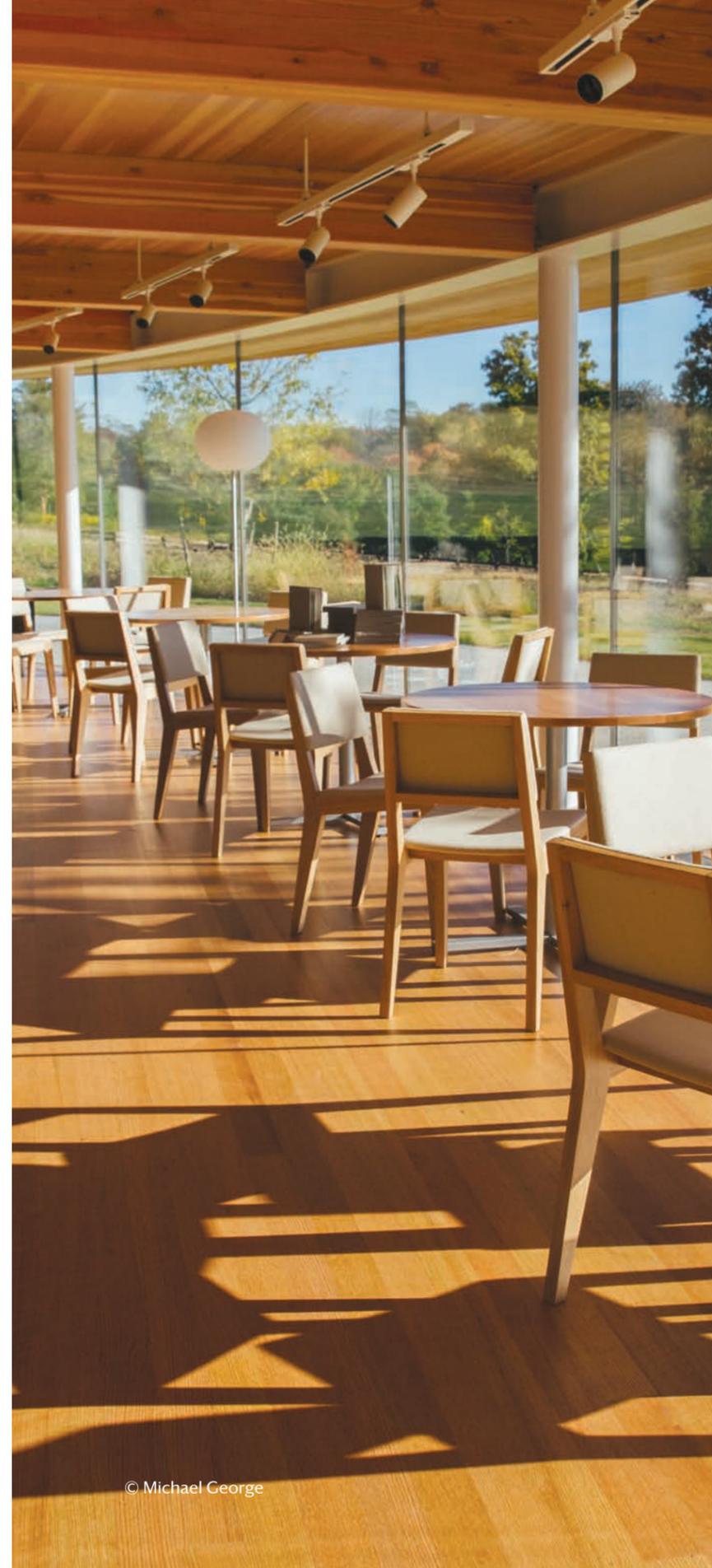
What insights have you stumbled upon today?  
This month? This year?

Where might your insights have leapt "ahead" of your desires?  
What do you believe you should want that you don't (yet)?

What desires have you seen embodied by others that you would like to emulate?

What disciplines could you adopt that would help you fall in love with what you believe to be most worthy of your humanity?

Classic "spiritual disciplines" include practices like solitude, meditation, prayer, silence, confession, gratitude, fasting, and celebration. You may find other practices are helpful to you. The goal is to commit to practices aimed not directly at shaping our behavior, but at shaping our desires so that the life we take to be worth living becomes the life we naturally desire.



Don't be too worried about being able to directly chart a chain of cause-and-effect from your disciplines to your desired behaviors. In many spiritual traditions, the goal of disciplines is to open ourselves to the transforming work of God or some other numinous presence, which can often surprise us.

In fact, consider once more the photographs by Thomas Demand documenting the iterative design process through which the River building came to be. It may be that the Divine or some other presence is inviting us into an analogous dialogue of revision and refinement as we seek to embrace ways of life worthy of our shared humanity.

In that spirit, take a moment to describe the discipline(s) you would like to continue or take up:

I have a hunch that \_\_\_\_\_ is part of living a life worthy of our shared humanity, so I will \_\_\_\_\_ to help align my heart with this insight.





# How can I live a life worth living?

The Master said:

“At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning.

At thirty, I took my stand.

At forty, I had no doubts.

At fifty, I knew the will of Heaven.

At sixty, my ear was attuned.

At seventy, I follow all the desires  
of my heart without breaking any rule.”

– *The Analects of Confucius*, 2.4

## Enter the Commons and find a place to sit and reflect.

Perhaps you would like to return to the same spot you occupied on your way up the hill.  
Perhaps you want to find a new place.

As Confucius says so eloquently, the goal of shaping our desires is so that we can do the good by doing what we want – because the good is what we want.

So, how do you want to live differently? Again, we're not thinking here about New Year's resolutions. Resolutions are painful because they often boil down to trying to do by sheer force of will what we genuinely don't want to do.

The difference here is the work we committed to in the Library: disciplines in which we actually reshape our desires. Then, in this step we are simply looking for strategies to help us live the lives we *actually want to live*. In the Library, we were looking for strategies that will form habits of the heart. Here, we're looking for strategies that will form habits of behavior consonant with the best desires of our hearts.

What commitment might you make that would *feel like a gift* to that part of yourself that you're intentionally trying to cultivate through the disciplines you described in the Library?

Perhaps you might want to commit to regular times of reflection, a weekly walk, or intentional conversations with a trusted friend? If you're inclined to fill this part with *resolutions* – things you wish you genuinely wanted to do, but actually dread doing – you may need to return to the previous station.

Similarly, if you're inclined to make promises about your emotional states or reflexive responses, those are probably better addressed back in the Library – that is, through disciplines of the heart. (It's okay, you can always take this retreat again!)

Take a moment to capture your response:

As I align my heart with what I believe to be worthy of our shared humanity, I commit to \_\_\_\_\_ to enact what I believe and what I love.



I beg you, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.

Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is to live everything.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

– Rainer Maria Rilke  
*Letters to a Young Poet*

# What are the habits of flourishing life?

Waste no more time arguing what a good  
man [sic] should be.

Be one.

– Marcus Aurelius  
*Meditations*, 10.16

## As you return to the Court, notice what has changed since you first began the retreat.

How is the light different? The sounds? The temperature?  
The people in the room with you?

How is your body feeling now that you've gone through this journey?  
What emotions are you feeling?

Gaze up past the balcony and look back towards the Commons to see a new perspective of the *Double Glass River* piece.

What does this holistic perspective of your life look like from this far-away angle? What might you hope to see reflected back when you return again in a new season?

This final station on our journey explores the daily habits of a life worth living. Once the rest of our priorities, values, and visions are in order, our hope is that these habits may come naturally to the point where they become our new auto-pilot – that is, that our actions will align with our vision of flourishing life.

Return to the basics from where we began: the ways we invest our time, money, and attention. How might these change as you move closer to flourishing life as you understand it?

As I move closer to a life marked by \_\_\_\_\_ (which I take to be part of a life worthy of our shared humanity), I would imagine that my checkbook, calendar, and media diet might change in the following ways ...

The final and most important thing to do on this retreat is to exit gracefully, with compassion and peace. Go live your life! Take a stroll on the nature trails, partake in a game of pickleball, read a book in the library, or return to your home. Call a friend, take a nap, care for your children, or cook something nourishing for your soul.

As important and restorative and as it is to spend time contemplating our lives, we can't stay in this mode forever. Reflection on flourishing life only matters to the extent to which it helps us live genuinely good lives and make a way for others to find their way closer to flourishing life.



Friends, go live well, knowing that you are always welcome to return here and ascend the hill again. You are always welcome at Grace Farms. Just as our lives change, the answers to these questions are not static. This retreat may stir up new emotions, insights, and reflections each time you come back and consider the art, architecture, texts, and questions from a new angle.

Perhaps you could make this a quarterly or annual practice, a discipline of discovery, to listen for new pieces of wisdom. Bring a friend along with whom to share these questions, or notice how your journal entries and notes change over time. We hope this retreat has been a time of meaningful discovery for you, and that you'll come visit again soon.



# grace farms

Grace Farms Foundation's interdisciplinary humanitarian mission is to pursue peace through five initiatives – nature, arts, justice, community, and faith – and Grace Farms, a SANAA-designed site for convening people across sectors. Our stake in the ground is to end modern slavery and gender-based violence, and create more grace and peace in our local and global communities.

Grace Farms was established as an essential platform for the Foundation, serving as a welcoming place where individuals, not-for-profit organizations, and government entities come together to collaborate for the common good.

To learn more visit [gracefarms.org](http://gracefarms.org)

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## get involved

Created as a peaceful respite with an active and engaged community, Grace Farms inspires people to connect with one another, engage with nature in all seasons, and advance good in the world.

## membership

Grace Farms Members enjoy special access to our site, experiential activities and thought-provoking programs – and the opportunity to be a part of our mission to pursue a more peaceful world.

Learn more at [gracefarms.org/membership](http://gracefarms.org/membership)

## donate

One hundred percent of charitable donations directly fund the Grace Farms Fund unless directed otherwise. Visit [gracefarms.org](http://gracefarms.org) to support our initiatives and publicly available space for all.

## share

If you want to share your reflections or insights you gained, feel free to post on social media and tag [@gracefarmsct](https://twitter.com/gracefarmsct) or let the Faith Initiative know what you've discovered.



Scan QR code to share what you have discovered.

