
Capacity

November 2023



Unity Church-Unitarian Spiritual Practice Packet



Capacity

“I am at...capacity!” How many times have you heard that phrase since March 2020? Looking back at that time, many of us wondered how we survived not only the dreaded Covid 19 virus, but the extraordinary demands placed on all of our institutions. Parents became full-time teachers; nurses and physicians worked overtime to the breaking point, all of our front-line workers were asked to work overtime; the pastoral needs of church members escalated. Everyone, it seemed, was “at capacity.”

Knowing the etymology of words can provide clues to a word’s deeper meaning. Capacity is drawn from *capere* + *capax* to take hold and that can contain. In other words, capacity is the maximum that something can contain. “The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,” wrote William Wordsworth. Indeed, we feel overwhelmed by the weight of the world’s dysfunction, we can feel that we can’t hold any more grief, or anger or fear or despair.

Although not a traditionally “theological” word, capacity is one with which religion, and religious life, continues to grapple. Religion asks the question “what is at the edge of our capacity? Can you go beyond that edge?” In that sense, being a religious and spiritual person asks us not to hold onto the world’s dysfunction but to enlarge our capacity to hold more. Capacity also means, paradoxically, emptying oneself out enough to expand the threshold of our abilities. It means building capacity for more love, more hope and more faith. But – how do we do that, exactly? How do we build capacity?

A lesson from electronics might be useful here. A capacitor is an electrical component that draws energy from a battery and stores the energy. Inside, the terminals connect to two metal plates separated by a non-conducting substance. When activated, they release electricity. Their main job is to guard the circuit against current spikes, so they are used to maintain stable potential in a circuit. We humans aren’t much different! We draw energy from sources which empower us. It may be from worship or music; reading or volunteering. It may be from community organizing groups or changing minds or hearts with legislation. These things can recharge our batteries. However, we also know that when we are at capacity – we have to guard against the spikes in expending too much energy. The circuits can get overloaded (see the picture above) and we fry ourselves out. The purpose of religious life – and spiritual practice – is, as we often say, is: to help you find and keep your balance.

The opposite of capacity is “incapacity,” a word which can have fearful implications. No one wants to be incapacitated, yet the truth of the matter is, that all of us – at some point in our lives – will be incapacitated; either temporarily or permanently. How do we deepen in our capacity to face that truth as well? How do we live within the limitations of time, space and gravity with honesty, grace, and with “curiosity and courage?” Once again, this is where developing a practice; and engaging with others can be helpful, because none of us can do this alone. We need to hear the stories from one another of “this is how I survived. This is how I made it to the other side.” This is the purpose of religious community and of small group conversations. How we find and build capacity for the demands of life, will be our focus for the month of November.

Reflection by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, with Rev. KP Hong, Drew Daniels, Nelson Moroukian, Rev. Lara Cowtan, Tom Duke, Rev. Andrea La Sonde Anastos.



Spiritual Practices

Option A Container

Choose an open container: a basket, a large bowl, a decorative box without a lid, a large clear vase.

Each day of the month, you are invited to select one item as a symbol of an experience of capacity and put it into the container. For instance, a photo of a sibling might represent the time when you reengaged after estrangement. A sock might be a symbol of a hike that tested your physical capacity. Perhaps you cannot find a tangible symbol of an event. Consider a word, instead: Focus, Courage, Friendship, etc. You could also draw a picture, or use a color.

Record the event in a journal or notebook. The explanation doesn't need to be long, just enough to remind you of the situation and your response. You can write a haiku or other short poem if prose doesn't capture your experience.

If you respond to ritual, you may want to choose a phrase that you repeat each day as you put your symbol into the container, such as

“Blessed be the capacity to _____.” (Love, Comfort, Empower, Grow, Relax, whatever.)

or

“This moment of capacity is a blessed memory.”

You may want to light a votive candle or sing a piece of music.

At the end of the month, decide how to use the items. Perhaps you can create a collage or a small shrine. You might want to return them to their normal place in your life with a gentle thanks. You may want to leave them in the container for a period of time as a reminder of your capacity.

Option B A Cup of Grace

Choose a cup or mug, and think of your present life as this container that holds many things—positive and not-so-positive. Considering only your life and making no comparisons with others, write down your answers to these questions:

- How full is your cup right now?
- What is filling your cup?
- What drains you or robs you of the capacity for living the best life that you can? Consider how to empty your cup of these negative things.
- What fills your cup with purpose, self-worth, compassion, love, and other life-giving things?
- Consider how to expand your capacity for what makes life worth living, for the blessings which help you lead a life of integrity, service, and joy.

Above all else, leave room in your cup for grace, for the realities that may fall short of your aspirations and the reminder that you are worthy and valuable as you are. Come back to this from time to time to revisit your cup and remind yourself to fill it with what is important to you.

Option C

Cultivating Equanimity

In *Real Change*, Sharon Salzberg identifies equanimity as a capacity of the heart to be open to everything and able to hold everything; to be fully present without falling into the extremes of overwhelm and reactivity, or denial. It is the ability to find a calm steadiness, a spacious stillness that can accept things the way they are. A balance of equanimity and compassion allows us to care and yet not get overwhelmed and unable to cope because of that caring.

Choose one or two phrases below that are personally meaningful to you. You can alter them in any way, or use phrases you create.

To begin the practice, take as comfortable a position as possible, sitting or lying down. Take a few deep, soft breaths to let your body settle. Bring your attention to your breath to begin with. When you feel ready you can switch your attention to the silent repetition of the phrases you've chosen. Begin to silently say your chosen phrases over and over again.

Feel the meaning of what you are saying, yet without trying to force anything. Let the practice carry you along. You can call a particular person to mind—get an image of them or say their name to yourself, get a feeling for their presence, and see what happens as you silently repeat the phrases you've chosen, such as:

I care about your pain yet cannot control it.

I will care for you and cannot keep you from suffering.

May I offer love, knowing I can't control the course of life, suffering, or death.

I wish you happiness and peace yet cannot make your choices for you.

And then move on to consider the boundlessness of life—people, creatures—as you silently repeat one or two phrases that express our capacity to connect to and care for all of life and also know peace:

I will work to alleviate suffering in the world, and I know I'm not in control of the unfolding of the universe.

May I recognize my limits compassionately, just as I recognize the limitations of others.

May I remember compassion as I work to be undisturbed by the comings and goings of events.

When you feel ready, you can open your eyes. See if you can bring some of this sense of spaciousness and compassion into your day.

Questions to Ponder

Read through the questions below and notice which ones resonate with you. One or more of the questions might seem particularly compelling – or some might stir resistance in you. Either of these reactions might make the question fruitful to consider. Choose just one and take time to consider it, over several days if possible. Write it down on a piece of paper you carry in your pocket. Or take a picture of that paper with your phone. Or record it in your journal – and spend some time, each day if you can, reflecting on it in writing or otherwise, noticing where it leads you and what you learn from it, and your response to it.

Questions

1. How do you experience the physical feeling of capacity? And where does it reside in your body, mind, spirit?
2. Are there experiences, events, relationships, that seem to restrict your capacity? What is your response to the feeling of limited capacity? What or who enables you to push your limits?
3. If one can grow or expand capacity for compassion or love, how can we best do that?
4. What is at the edge of your capacity, and how can you go beyond that edge to build greater resilience and understanding?
5. Over time, have you grown in your capacity to cope with the demands of life? How has this growth happened? What contributed to it?
6. When you are under stress, what helps you find and keep your balance?
7. Have spiritual practices helped you build capacity to cope with pain or difficulty, or to love? Which practices have been the most important to you?
8. Has engaging with others increased these capacities? How?
9. When have you been incapacitated? How did you learn or grow from that experience?
10. What role does confidence play in your capacity to face what is before you?
11. Some people emerge from suffering empowered with a greater capacity to love, while others do not. How do we transform suffering into compassion?
12. Can you recall a time that called forth your capacity to hold conflicting truths together in your heart and mind? How has your embrace of paradox changed you?
13. Are there stories of adversity and survival that are particularly inspiring to you? Do you have models or mentors who have shown a great capacity to move through difficulty with grace and love?
14. Is there a particular capacity you would like to grow—your capacity for friendship, intimacy, creativity, awe, joy? How can you begin?

What is your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't name what life is asking of you now, spend the month listening to your heart to hear what your question is.

Inspiration

Recommended Resources

For Personal Exploration & Reflection

Here you will find a variety of resources to help you take a deeper dive into the worship theme. These offer you several ways to engage with the theme that invite you to consider it thoughtfully, to inspire thinking, and open you to new insights. They are optional. As you browse the packet, consider trying out several that hold meaning for you and, possibly, one or two that may feel challenging.

Word Definitions

Capacity—noun

1. The ability to hold, receive, or absorb.
2. A measure of such ability; volume.
3. Capability; the ability to perform some task.
4. The maximum that can be produced.
5. Mental ability; the power to learn.
6. A faculty; the potential for growth and development.
7. A role; the position in which one functions.

From Middle English *capacite*, from Old French *capacite*, from Latin *capācitās*, from *capāx* (“able to hold much”), from *capiō* (“to hold, to contain, to take, to understand”).

Source: Wiktionary

Wise Words

“For myself, cultivating the capacity to open my heart to hold more, has helped me to normalize change.... Gratitude, acceptance, resourcefulness and adaptability. These feelings and practices ask of us to expand the range and complexity of responses to our experience of change, to open our hearts to hold more. This means that those other feelings of loss and grief and longing for more are to be expected and absorbed and serve to inform the future as well as the present.”

—Rev. Karen Gustafson, “Celebrating Change: Holding More,” September 17, 2023

“Everything comes to us that belongs to us if we create the capacity to receive it.”

—Rabindranath Tagore

“The job of faith is not to alleviate loss or grief or

disappointment or sadness, but to expand our awareness so that we can see more fully the suffering and struggles of others.”

—Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, *The Job of Faith*©, November 6, 2022.

“Capacity-building is defined as the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity-building is transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within; transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes.”

—United Nations

“You don’t have to be a poet, you don’t have to be a politician or be in the White House to make an impact with your words. We all have this capacity to find solutions for the future.”

—Amanda Gorman

“I believe that is what the God experience does for us. It calls us beyond our limits into the fullness of life—into a capacity to love people we are not taught to love—and into an ability to be who we are.”

—John Shelby Spong

“Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

“Spiritual growth isn’t about a vertical ascent to heaven but about growth in every dimension at once. It’s spirituality in 3-D. Growth in spirit doesn’t

measure one's proximity to a God above, but rather the spaciousness of one's own soul—its volume, its capacity, its size.”

—Rev. Rob Hardies, All Souls Church Unitarian, Washington, DC. From “Reflection on the Third Principle,” UUA.org.

“The practices of breathing, walking, concentration, and understanding can help you greatly in dealing with your emotions, in listening to and embracing your suffering, and in helping you to recognize and embrace the suffering of another person. If we have this capacity, then we can develop a real and lasting spiritual intimacy with ourselves and with others.”

—Thich Nhat Hanh

“I feel the capacity to care is the thing which gives life its deepest significance.”

—Pablo Casals

“The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love, and to be greater than our suffering.”

—Ben Okri

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love...”

—Martin Luther King, Jr

Poetry

Capacity (excerpt)

Bernice R.

Maximum capacity level reached.

The warning label for most household objects

Is the same one on my heart

As it stretches to embrace

And encourage

And serve

Everyone around me.

I've learned the bounties of my love are not endless.

I need to fill my own cup up

Before I run on empty...

Full poem at

<https://medium.com/midform/capacity-8d5e16bcb4a1>



What do you have room to hold?

Image by Niek Verlaan from Pixabay.

Post-Assault Prescription When I Fear My Spirit Dying (excerpt)

Diana Tokaji

To Coretta Scott and Martin Luther King, Jr.; and to my parents

Here in the mud
of my history
beneath the rage
is counsel.

Where grace
expands like the air
under a bird's wings
all day it seems,

rising
soaring
gliding.

Willingness
to take the air
and ride it
is grace.

Riding,
being lifted
by air
is grace.

I seek grace now
as my rage deepens
exponentially
to hate.

As I see my own dreams –
the day ones
the night –

and witness my capacity
to do to another
real harm.

I return to silence
I am not saying
it is easy....

Full poem at
<https://bit.ly/3QqNOZw>

Dear Darkening Ground (Book of Hours, I 61)
Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Joanna Macy

Dear darkening ground,
you've endured so patiently the walls we've built,
perhaps you'll give the cities one more hour

and grant the churches and cloisters two.
And those that labor—let their work
grip them another five hours, or seven,

before you become forest again, and water, and
widening wilderness
in that hour of inconceivable terror
when you take back your name
from all things.

Just give me a little more time!

I want to love the things
as no one has thought to love them,
until they're worthy of you and real.

A Litany for Survival (excerpt)
Audre Lorde

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain

when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

Full poem at
<https://bit.ly/3MewEfr>

Still I Rise (excerpt)
Maya Angelou

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Full poem at
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>

The Bowl
Jane Hirshfield

If meat is put into the bowl, meat is eaten.
If rice is put into the bowl, it may be cooked.
If a shoe is put into the bowl,
the leather is chewed and chewed over,
a sentence that cannot be taken in or forgotten.

A day, if a day could feel, must feel like a bowl.
Wars, loves, trucks, betrayals, kindness,
it eats them.

Then the next day comes, spotless and hungry.

The bowl cannot be thrown away.
It cannot be broken.

It is calm, unclipsable, rindless,
and, big though it seems, fits exactly in two human
hands.

Hands with ten fingers,
fifty-four bones,
capacities strange to us almost past measure.
Scented—as the curve of the bowl is—
with cardamom, star anise, long pepper, cinnamon,
hyssop.

Articles

“Awaking Confidence in Our Capacity for LovingKindness: The Blessing of Dipa Ma”

by Sharon Salzberg

“Dipa Ma exhibited no pretense, no fabrication. She was quite simple and direct, and there never was a sense that she was assuming the persona of a great spiritual being. Her *lovingkindness* poured out of that very simplicity and graciousness.”

<https://bit.ly/472TgHK>

“The Human Capacity to Carry Many Things at Once”

by Jennifer Hijazi

An interview with US Poet Laureate, Ada Limón about her latest book of poetry, “The Carrying,” published in 2018 about the contradictory joys and burdens we all carry.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/the-human-capacity-to-carry-many-things-at-once>

Books

Owning Our Struggles: A Path to Healing and Finding Community in a Broken World

by Minaa B, LMSW. TarcherPerigee, 2023.

The author writes with compassion and experience about the process of building capacity to heal in the midst of community. She convincingly argues that self-help that does not involve relationship is merely a path to frustration and continued inner woundedness. Each chapter presents stories and practices that enable us to begin the healing process and, in doing so, to build deeper capacity for facing future struggles.

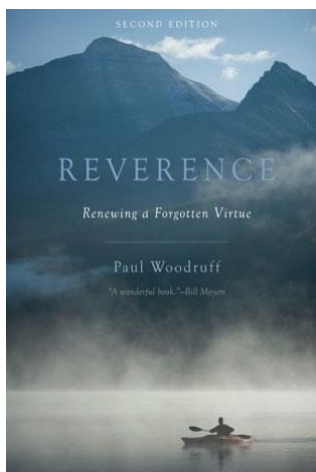
<https://www.minaab.com/books>

Drawn to Change the World

by Emma Reynolds. HarperCollins, 2023.

This graphic book is the combined work of 16 youth climate activists and 16 artists. It is intended for middle school youth, but it could be used for anyone from 4th grade and up, especially as a family discussion spark. Each of the climate activists exhibits capacity for inspiring change. Regardless of socio-economic, educational, intellectual levels, each activist finds the inner power to act toward public good.

<https://emmareynoldsillustration.com/drawntochangetheworld>



Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue
(excerpt)

by Paul Woodruff. Oxford University Press, 2002.

“Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even

death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. The Greeks before Plato saw reverence as one of the bulwarks of society, and the immediate followers of Confucius in China thought much the same. Both groups wanted to see reverence in their leaders, because reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people’s lives. Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.” In the Anderson Library: 170 W.

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/reverence-9780199350803?cc=us&lang=en&>

The Book of Joy

by The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. Avery, 2016.

This book explores the human capacity for joy even in difficult circumstances.

<https://bit.ly/46ZoiAb>

Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto

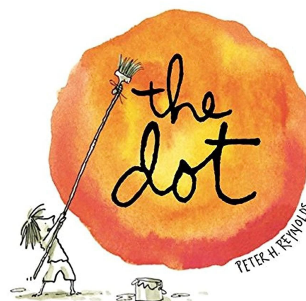
by Tricia Hersey. Little, Brown Spark, 2022.

What would it be like to live in a world where we are not incapacitated by lack of rest and rejuvenation? Rest Is Resistance is a call to action, a battle cry, a field guide, and a manifesto for all of us who are sleep deprived, searching for justice, and longing to be liberated from the oppressive grip of Grind

Culture. In the Unity Bookstall and Anderson Library: 155.2 H.

<https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/tricia-hersey/rest-is-resistance/9780316365536/>

Children’s Books



The Dot

by Peter Reynolds. Candlewick, 2003.

Vashti doesn’t think she’s capable of creating art but when her teacher tells her to “just make a mark and see where it takes you,” it leads to the

discovery of a great capacity to paint.

<https://www.candlewick.com/cat.asp?mode=book&isbn=0763619612&browse=title>

Blue Floats Away

by Travis Jonker, with pictures by Grant Snider.

Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2021.

A story about capacity for change.

From the publisher:

Little Blue lives at the North Pole with his parents until, one day, he floats away and strikes out on his own. Along the way, Blue encounters new things (sharks) and beautiful things (sailboats). He starts to wonder which way is home when something unexpected starts to happen. Little Blue is getting smaller and smaller until ... he transforms!

After mixing with the warm ocean water, Blue reappears as a cloud. He encounters new things (airplanes) and beautiful things (birds). He charts a course for home. As it gets colder and colder, Blue gets bigger and bigger until ... hey, is that a snowflake?

A story about the water cycle, *Blue Floats Away* explores the power of transformation and growing up.

https://www.abramsbooks.com/product/blue-floats-away_9781419744235/

The Tree in Me

by Corinna Luyken. Rocky Pond Books, 2021.

This is a child's exploration of the amazing capacity we each have for imagination, creativity, and abundance. Without being preachy, it speaks of interconnection and the recognition of the full humanity of others. Simple enough for 3 years (with its rhymes that delight that age), but equally good with 6-7 year olds. Visit the author's website for more books that explore capacity.

<https://www.corinnaluyken.com/books/the-tree-in-me>



What it looks like to be full up, out of space.

Nino Carè

Movies

14 Peaks: Nothing is Impossible

Starring Nirmal Purja, Directed by Torquil Jones, Netflix, 2021.

The film follows Nepalese mountaineer Nirmal Purja and his team as they attempt to climb all 14 eight thousander peaks within a record time of under seven months. (The previous record was over seven years.) The capacity for human achievement is often greater than we realize.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14079374/>

Fisherman's Friends

Directed by Chris Foggin, 2019.

Based on a true story. A London music executive heads to a remote Cornish village on a stag weekend where he's pranked by his boss into trying to sign a group of shanty singing fishermen. He struggles to gain the respect or enthusiasm of the band and their families who value friendship and community over fame and fortune. As he's drawn deeper into the traditional way of life he's forced to reevaluate his own integrity and ultimately question what success really means. The group is signed and achieves a top ten hit with their debut album, "Sea Shanties." An unlikely story that tests the capacity of the executive and that defines the capacity of community.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1648186/>

For Sama

Directed by Waad Al-Kateab and Edward Watts

This is a PBS Frontline documentary: "In a time of conflict and darkness in her home in Aleppo, Syria, one young woman kept her camera rolling—while falling in love, getting married, having a baby and saying goodbye as her city crumbled."

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/for-sama/>

Podcasts

"Sharon Salzberg: The Healing Is In The Return"

On Being with Krista Tippett, October 22, 2020.

Salzberg explains that equanimity is being able to hold everything: "It's such a huge capacity of our hearts to see what we're going through, to see what others are going through, and to just have this perspective of, there is change in life, and there is light in the darkness and darkness in the light. And we're not avoiding pain, because some things just hurt. That's fundamental. But we're holding it in a way that it's like the love is stronger than the pain, even. And then we can really be with things in a very, very different way."

<https://onbeing.org/programs/sharon-salzberg-the-healing-is-in-the-return/>

“Matthew Sanford: The Body’s Grace”

On Being with Krista Tippett, October 5, 2006

In the introduction to this podcast, Tippett talks about Matthew Sanford’s “insistence that it’s not possible to live more deeply in your body—in all its grace and all its flaws—without becoming more compassionate towards all of life.” Sanford is an adaptive Yoga instructor and author, and has been paralyzed from the chest down since age 13.

<https://onbeing.org/programs/matthew-sanford-the-body-grace-2023/>

Music

“Capacity” Spotify Playlist

<https://spoti.fi/494fYRw>

- “The Limit to Your Love” —Feist
- “enough for you” —Olivia Rodrigo
- “Bad” —U2
- “Limits” —Big Boi Deep, Byg Byrd
- “Take it to the Limit” —Waylon Jennings & Willie Nelson
- “End of the Line” —Traveling Wilburys
- “Good Enough” —Sarah McLachlan
- “If You See My Saviour” —Georgia Tom
- “I Didn’t Know My Own Strength” —Whitney Houston

Art

The Buddha

Odilon Redon

The Symbolist artist Odilon Redon's charcoal drawing “The Buddha” explores the capacity for inner enlightenment and peace.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/369642>

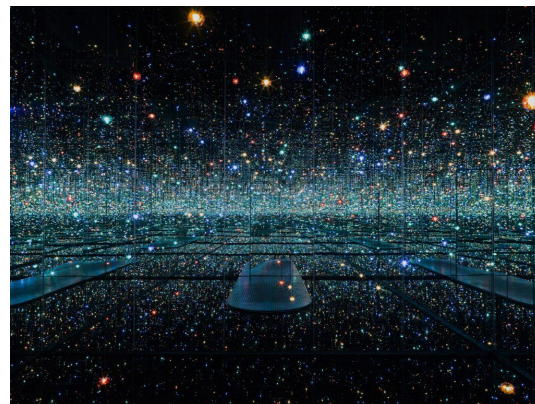


Las dos Fridas (The Two Fridas)

Frida Kahlo

This iconic painting depicts two versions of Frida Kahlo, connected by their hearts. For some it reflects the idea of emotional capacity and the duality of human emotions. Compare with Rev. Kathleen Rolenz's sermon of October 15, 2023, where she suggested that we need to build up capacity to hold two opposing truths in our hearts, both at the personal and societal level.

<https://smarthistory.org/kahlo-the-two-fridas-las-dos-fridas/>



Infinity Mirrored Room—The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away

Yayoi Kusama

<https://hirshhorn.si.edu/kusama/infinity-rooms/>

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Cover image, “Gullah Geechee Baskets at Charleston SC Market,” by Ellen Wold.