

Improbably. Impossibly. Imperfectly. Insistently. Intentionally. We are making our way to the midpoint of the 2020–2022 Friday Fellowship experience. The middle can be many things: landing place, lightning rod, linchpin, and launch pad. I wonder what will find us as we gather together in a new place in a new way. Will we continue to navigate the challenges, contradictions, and competing obligations of yesterday, today, and tomorrow? Per our practice, we will bring and receive the gifts of rest, reflection, reckoning, and relationship. May the following invitations serve or surprise or suspend or stir something in each of us. As we prepare to gather ourselves back in, may we continue to honor *the time we have, not that which we cannot spare*. Invitations that serve specific Seminar Three sessions will be marked below with an asterisk (*).

Meet you in the middle? What gifts will you keep bringing? And where will we go from here?

What We're Working With

- A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects (AHRO)* – Chapter 2 “Incense” (Plate)
 - Dub: Finding Ceremony* – Selections (Gumbs)
 - Fellowship framing and convening materials from Seminars One and Two
 - Seminar Three materials (provided on site)
 - Your fellowship journal
 - Your pinch pot
 - One another
 - Courage. Curiosity. Creativity. Connection.
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The Gift(s) of Fellowship – Yours, Mine, Ours, Theirs

- What's that I smell? Food and Fellowship (*)** *[Requested by July 14]*

In *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects (AHRO)* S. Brent Plate notes that memories come to us through our noses, too. Alexis Gumbs also encourages full-body listening. In honor of things that make sense and scents alike, would you share a favorite smell and related memory via our Seminar Three Awesome Box? Please upload a picture that represents a “scent memory” with a short note that remembers you to your cohort by Wednesday, July 14. We also welcome a favorite song you are currently enjoying. You can upload a picture and song to the secure Awesome Box platform at [this link](#). We'll use this collection of (sweet? sour? salty? strange?) smelling things to remember one another as we make our way to the middle.
- Going up in Smoke – From Building to Burning (*)** *[Read and Reflect]*

In the second chapter of *AHRO*, Plate describes one relationship between the first two objects: “Stones are marked by their relative permanence, their unchanging nature in the span of human life, while incense is temporary, ephemeral.” (p. 96) As you read the chapter on incense, consider the balance of what you are building in relation to all that is burning. What can we learn from things that flare up? And those that fizzle out? What about things that fade away? You will build on these reflections in a Seminar Three session.
- Practicing Presence – Known, Knowing, and No Longer** *[Read and Reflect]*

In *Dub*, Alexis Gumbs models a practice that listens across time, space, and species. In the process, her origin stories (and perhaps yours and mine, too) evaporate and eviscerate, ultimately empowering a new script. Gumbs acknowledges Sylvia Wynters' assertion that “we have the capacity to know differently” (p. xi), but what does it take to know anew? Gumbs suggests a practice of “letting go” (p. 249). What might you be holding too tightly? What about things taken and taking too lightly? From

sticks and stones to smoke and screens. What is beholden, held up, holding on? What about going, going, going gone?

❑ **Like Clockwork – Taking Time, Making Time**

[Practice and Journal]

Fellowship gifts an expansive approach to time: two years, six weekends, and also lifetimes upon lifetimes. Plate describes incense “not in a remembrance of time past but in a present way of structuring time. Burning takes time. With practice and observation, the timing can be predicted. In turn, burning makes time.” (p. 87) Light a candle or incense and watch it burn. Pull out your fellowship journal and note any observations. What kind of time does burning take and make? Consider Alexis Gumbs’ ancestral challenge: “we promise to make time more flexible if you give us all your time.” (p. 4) What kind of time do you have – to make? to take? to burn? to gift?

❑ **Middle Ground – A Practice of Relation**

[Read and Reflect]

To meet in the middle is a choice. It can also be a political act. Like most places, the middle does not serve everyone equally. Read Gumbs’ passage titled “relation” (p. 93) and consider what she finds in middle times and spaces: longing. loss. wound. and knowing. What does the middle – ground or otherwise – require of and return to you?

❑ **Birthright Briefs – Letters to an Ancestor (*)**

[Practice and Journal]

Dub: Finding Ceremony models many things, including a dialogue between author and ancestor, writer and word, between loving, learning, liberating, and letting go. In honor of a kind of communication that transcends this plane of being, write a letter to an ancestor. This might be someone you knew intimately or a name on your family tree. This could also be someone whose name you do not know. After writing this letter, listen. Should you hear a response, consider writing that letter, too. You will share these letters with one another in a Seminar Three session.

❑ **Queuing up Questions (*)**

[Reflect and Journal]

We will soon take up questions that matter – to you and your communities, and to the state, nation, and world. In your journal, brainstorm two questions you hope the cohort will take up in a future session. Why do these questions matter? You will ultimately put forward one question for the group’s consideration. For now, do some free-writing about what makes any question worthwhile: its asking? its urgency? its impact? its answering? Consider some of the questions that Plate and Gumbs are sharing, respectively: “If we smell it everywhere, is everything holy?” (p. 83) “What then? And by then I mean now.” (p. xiii)

❑ **The Value(s) of You – Gift Economies (*)**

[Reflect]

Plate’s second chapter highlights several gifts that are sacred to communities around the world. He also notes that “the value of incense derives from its disappearance. To get what is desired from this object means that it must be eliminated, burned up.” (pp. 96–97) What is the value of a gift, or of anything – given, gifted, or otherwise? Is there a relationship between purpose and price? What about use and usury? What makes something precious? You will build on these reflections in a Seminar Three session.

❑ **All Wrapped Up – North Carolina Objects, Revisited (*)**

[Wrap and Bring]

Please purchase (or grow! or make!) a “gift” representative of your North Carolina community. Please limit any purchase to \$15 and wrap your gift to share in a fun-filled swap session. Are finders keepers? What about fellows? Come prepared to gift and receive.