**Reading**

Alice Walker, “Saving the Life that Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life,” from *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 3-13. Included, with permission, in Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be,* second edition (Eerdmans, 2020), 543-8.

**About the Author**

Alice Walker was born in rural Georgia in 1944, the youngest of eight children of sharecroppers. Walker was awarded an academic scholarship to Spelman, a historically Black college for women, in Atlanta; there she met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and embraced a lifelong commitment to activism for justice and peace. Walker finished her college education at Sarah Lawrence, from which she graduated in 1965, but she soon decided to return to the South. She published her first book of poetry in 1969 and her first novel in 1970, and she was a pioneer in the teaching of Black literature and history. Her best known novel, *The Color Purple,* was published in 1982; it won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She has continued to write in multiple genres and is the author of numerous books, including novels, stories, nonfiction, essays, and poetry.

As much of her literary work demonstrates, Walker has been especially committed to lifting up the experience and advocating the well-being of Black women. In the same essay collection where our text appears, Walker coined the term “womanist,” meaning a Black feminist or feminist of color.

As Walker describes in the short essay we’ll discuss, encountering the work of Zora Neale Hurston marked a crucial breakthrough in her own work and identity, since Hurston was a Black woman who was a literary forebear who would become for her a model. Hurston, who was trained as an anthropologist, wrote several books, including the well-known novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which was not widely read before Walker discovered and promoted it during the 1970s.In 2018, Walker wrote the foreword to a previously unpublished book written by Zora Neale Hurston in 1931, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo.”*

**Commentary**

In this short essay, Walker places the story of a key moment in her own professional and personal development in the context of a wider concern: the need of artists to have models, forerunners whose own creativity and commitment convey companionship and courage in the midst of the arduous, solitary work of making art. Speaking for herself while also drawing on the experience of Vincent Van Gogh, Walker explores the pain and limits that can emerge when models are not available. She also communicates the joy and sustenance that can come from finding a model—and indeed, not just one model but a great cloud of exemplary forebears, who together provide crucial sources and supports for one’s work.

Even those of us who are not artists need models of this kind. Some people grow up with models or find them close at hand; others, like Walker, discover them “almost by accident."  Only after finding models did Walker understand how much she needed them. Her story of discovery may make us wonder about our own individual need for models—and also about how congregations and other communities might help people who need vocational models to find them.

**Discussion questions**

Have you ever had a strong experience of lacking the models you need, similar to what Van Gogh suffered from or what Walker describes? What did, or what does, that feel like?

Walker says she discovered, early in her career, “a desperate need to know and assimilate the experiences of earlier black women writers, most of them unheard of by you and by me until quite recently.” Why do you think this need was such a desparate one for her? What was she missing without models of her own race and gender, and what did she gain in finding them?

If you were lacking a model, did you ever seek models deliberately? Or did they just accidentally enter your life?  If you discovered a model at some point, did you know right away or only in retrospect that this was a good model for you?

What are the differences, if any, between (1) a model, (2) an ideal, and (3) a kindred spirit?  Which one or two or three of these things did Zora Neale Hurston provide for Alice Walker?  Think of those who have most influenced your life and work.  Were they models, ideals, kindred spirits, or some combination?

Do you think you have the models you need? Who are they? If models are lacking, where might you seek them?

We are teachers, parents, elders, friends, family members, neighbors, citizens. Have we ever done things that supported others in finding good models?  How might we do so today? How might our congregation support this process?