

THE FURTHERING INSTITUTE

Members' Library

The Quiet Hour · Working With the Shelf · The First Season

2026

The Quiet Hour

The Furthering Institute · Members' Library

2026

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What a Practice Hour Is For

An hour set aside is not an hour taken out of your life. It is the part of your life you have decided to look at directly. Most of what any of us does happens at the edge of attention, carried out while something else is being thought about, said, or worried over. The practice hour is a small correction to that habit. It asks for one place, one time, and one thing chosen in advance.

The Institute keeps no doctrine of results. We do not promise that a season of practice will bring calm, health, insight, or good fortune, and a member who tells you otherwise is speaking for themselves. What we hold is a method and a tradition: that attention is a skill, that skills are built by repetition, and that repetition is easier to keep when it has a shape and a witness.

The hour has two modest purposes. The first is to give your attention somewhere to stand, so that for a while it is not being pulled in nine directions at once. The second is to give the work a record, so that you can see what you actually did rather than what you intended to do. Neither purpose requires belief. Both require showing up.

Treat the hour as a room. You furnish it once, with a chair, a table, a lamp, a book, and a pen, and then you return to it. Rooms become habitable by being returned to, and so does a practice.

Choosing the Hour

Choose an hour you can actually keep, not the hour you would keep if your life were arranged more kindly. A practice hour at six in the morning is worth more than one at nine at night only if six in the morning is a time at which you are reliably awake.

Morning suits members whose households are quiet before the day begins. Evening suits those who need the day finished before they can think. A midday hour suits those who work alone or keep their own hours. There is no sacred time of day in this library, only the time you will still be keeping in March.

When you have chosen, write the hour down where you will see it, and say it aloud to the people you live with. An hour that has been named is an hour that has been half kept. An hour that remains a private intention is an hour that will be quietly traded away the first time something else asks for it.

Begin with less than you think you can manage. Four days a week kept for a year is a stronger practice than seven days a week kept for a month. The object is not the perfect week. The object is a year in which the hour still exists.

Keeping the Hour

A kept hour is defended gently and in advance. The two enemies of a kept hour are the interruption and the invitation: the thing that arrives without warning, and the thing that arrives with pleasure attached. Both are best met at the door, before the hour begins.

Say the hour aloud to the household. Not as a claim on anyone else's time, but as a plain fact about your day. This hour is spoken for. Most interruptions are not hostile; they are the result of nobody knowing that you were occupied.

When the hour must move, move it and keep it. A practice that can only happen at seven o'clock is a practice with a single point of failure. Members who keep the hour for years are usually the ones who have allowed themselves two or three possible times, and a rule about which one to take when the first is lost.

Some weeks will take the hour from you entirely. Note that in the ledger, without commentary, and resume. The ledger is not a court. It is a map of where you have actually been.

The Shape of the Hour

The hour has five parts: settle, read, work, record, close. They need not be equal. In a short hour they may be five minutes each; in a long one the work may take the greater part. What matters is that the same five parts come in the same order, so that the hour does not have to be reinvented each time you sit down.

Settle. Sit, breathe, and put the day down. Three to five minutes is enough. This part is not decoration; it is the difference between an hour of practice and an hour spent sitting near your practice while your mind continues its previous conversation.

Read. Read a page slowly, then read it again. A page you have read twice is worth more than ten pages read once. If you keep a common book, a notebook of passages, copy out the one sentence that mattered, with the date.

Work. The work is whatever you have chosen for the season: a plant, a stone, a text, a habit of the hands. Work is done with the hands or with the whole attention, and it is better done small. One jar, one cutting, one page of notes. The hour is long enough to do something well and too short to do everything.

Record. Four or five lines are enough: what you did, what you noticed, what you would change. Write them while the hour is still warm. The record taken an hour later is a summary; the record taken now is evidence.

Close. Put the tools away, close the book, and leave the hour where it is.

Do not carry the practice into the rest of the day as a task. The hour is a room you visit, not a weight you carry.

The Ledger

The ledger is a plain notebook, kept for one purpose. A page per session, or four sessions to a page, but always dated. It should be cheap enough that you are not afraid to write in it badly.

Four lines will do: the date; whether the hour was kept; what was done; what was noticed. A fifth line, on the days when it is true, may record what was avoided. Members who keep this fifth line honestly find it the most useful of the five.

The ledger is not a diary and it is not a performance. Write it for the person who will read it in five years, who will be you, and who will not be impressed by anything except the truth. If the hour was dull, write that it was dull. Dull hours, kept, are the ordinary substance of a practice.

Keep one ledger at a time, and keep it with the practice rather than with the household papers. A ledger that lives on the shelf beside the work gets written in; a ledger that lives in a drawer becomes a document.

The Missed Hour

You will miss hours. Everyone misses hours. The missed hour is the first of the three failures, and it is the least serious, because it is information rather than corruption. A missed hour tells you something about your week, your energy, or your arrangement of the day.

The danger is not the missing but the story you tell about it. A missed hour becomes dangerous when it is recruited as evidence that you are not

the sort of person who keeps an hour. That sentence is not a fact. It is a habit of speech, and habits of speech can be changed.

The rule we recommend is simple: never miss twice. One missed hour is an accident; two missed hours begin to be a pattern; three begin to be a decision. If you miss Monday, the most important hour of the week is Tuesday.

If you notice that you are avoiding the hour rather than simply missing it, write down why, plainly, in the ledger. Avoidance usually has a name: a task that has become tedious, a material you did not choose carefully, a standard that has quietly become too high. Named, it can be dealt with. Unnamed, it will simply keep happening.

The Hurried Hour

The hurried hour is more damaging than the missed one, because it teaches the wrong lesson: that the practice is a box to be ticked. An hour spent watching the clock and doing everything quickly will still appear in the ledger as an hour kept, and that appearance is the harm.

You will know the hurried hour by its signs. You are watching the time. You are reading to reach the end of the page rather than to read the page. You begin the moment you sit down and stand the moment the hour is over. You finish with a feeling of relief rather than of completion.

The remedy is to shorten rather than to hurry. Fifteen honest minutes, kept slowly, will do more for the practice than a breathless hour. Members who keep a short hour on working days and a full hour on one day of the week are not keeping a lesser practice; they are keeping one that survives.

If you find that you are hurrying through most hours, the fault is usually in the choice of work rather than in the person. Take on less. One

material, one text, one question for the season.

The Hour Spent Performing for Yourself

The third failure is the subtlest, because it looks like success. You begin to practise for the audience of your own ledger. You notice, as you work, how the session will read later; you write the hour you wish you had had; you choose the work that makes a better page rather than the work that needs doing.

The symptom is a certain fluency. The practice becomes smooth and impressive, and quietly empty. The notes grow longer and the work grows smaller. This is the point at which a member is most likely to mistake the record of a practice for the practice itself.

The remedy is plainness. Keep the ledger to its four lines. Do the dull repetition. Sit with the material that has not yet given you anything interesting, and let it be uninteresting for a while. Return, now and then, to the first exercise of the season, done slowly, with no intention of doing it well.

A teacher of ours put it this way: if your practice is impressing you, you are watching the wrong person. The hour is not a performance and the ledger is not an audience. Both are tools, and tools are not admired. They are used.

When a Practice Lapses

A lapse of weeks is ordinary, and it is not the end of a practice unless it is treated as one. Members lapse after an illness, a move, a difficult season at work, a new child, a long stretch of travel. The question is never

whether the lapse happened. The question is what you do on the far side of it.

Do not begin where you left off. Begin smaller than where you left off. If you kept a full hour before, keep twenty minutes now. If you worked a material every day, work it twice a week. The point of the first week back is to prove to yourself that the hour still exists, not to recover lost ground.

Expect the first week to feel strange. Attention is a skill and skills go slack. The material will seem unfamiliar, the room slightly wrong, the reading will not take. This is normal, and it passes in about a week of honest, unimpressive sessions.

If the lapse was caused by a change in your circumstances, change the hour rather than abandon it. A practice tied to a life you no longer live will fail, and its failure will look like a failure of will, when it is only a failure of arrangement.

When you return, write one line about the return itself, and date it. Members who keep the record of their returns, and not only of their good months, find that the returns outnumber the lapses by a comfortable margin.

Working Alongside Another Member

Practice is kept alone, but it is not kept entirely alone, and it is not meant to be. The Institute exists because a shelf, a room, and a company of members make a practice easier to keep than a resolution kept in private.

Find one other member and agree to meet once a month, for an hour, in a room with a table. One hour a month is enough. What matters is that the meeting is regular, and that it is small enough for both of you to speak honestly.

When you meet, do three things. Read a page aloud. Say what you did during the month, in plain sentences, without qualifying it. Say what you did not do, and why. Then exchange one question each, not advice, a question, and write down the answers you were given.

Do not compare ledgers. Do not measure your season against another member's season. The purpose of the meeting is not to be assessed; it is to be witnessed. A practice that is witnessed once a month is a practice that is much harder to let quietly disappear.

A Closing Note on Patience

Nothing in this book will work quickly, and that is not a defect of the book. A practice is a thing built out of ordinary hours, and ordinary hours do not produce visible results on demand. If you are looking for a method that will change something by Friday, this is not it, and we would rather say so plainly than sell you the hope.

Patience here does not mean waiting. Waiting is passive and it ends in disappointment. Patience, in the sense this library uses the word, means continuing: keeping the hour when it is dull, keeping the ledger when there is nothing to record, coming back after the lapse, and doing the small work again in the same way you did it last week.

The hour will not always be good. Some hours will be tedious, some will be full of resistance, and a few will be so ordinary that you will not remember them a month later. Those are the hours that build the practice. The memorable ones are the fruit, not the tree.

So keep the hour. Keep the ledger. Shut the door for one hour and let the world wait outside it. Do this for a season, and then for a year, and then read back through the record, not to grade it, but to see what a kept hour actually looks like over time. That record, more than anything in this book, is the practice.

Working With the Shelf

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What the Shelf Is For

This book is about materials: dried herbs, oils, and stones. It is a book about buying them, cutting them, drying them, storing them, keeping notes about them, and working with them slowly. It is not a book of recipes and it is not a book of cures. Nothing on a shelf is a prescription, and nothing in these pages should be read as advice about the body.

What we hold, as an Institute, is a tradition of practice: that a material is best known by being kept, handled, and observed over a season rather than read about in an afternoon. A jar of dried leaf on a shelf, dated and labelled in your own hand, teaches more than a page of description, because it is the same jar on the same shelf in March and in September, and you are the one who has been watching it.

Treat the shelf as a small working library. A library is not improved by being large. It is improved by being known: a dozen materials you can identify with your eyes closed are worth more than a hundred you have to read the labels on.

Keep the shelf out of the kitchen's traffic and away from the body's traffic. The two rules that follow from this are stated plainly and repeated at the end of the book: nothing here is a prescription, and oils and dried materials are kept out of reach of children and animals.

Buying Dried Herbs

Buy small. A dried herb loses its character in the jar as the months pass, and a pound of leaf bought in enthusiasm is a pound of dust by the following spring. Buy an ounce, use it, and buy again. A shelf that turns over is a shelf that is alive.

Buy whole where you can. Whole leaf, whole flower, whole root, whole

seed. Powdered material gives up its scent within weeks and cannot be judged by the eye. If a material must be ground, grind it at home in small quantity, on the day you need it.

Smell before you buy, and if you cannot smell before you buy, buy from a shop that will let you open the jar. A dried herb should smell like itself, only quieter. A smell of hay, dust, or nothing at all means the material has been on the shelf longer than it should have been, whoever is selling it.

Ask when it was dried. A good supplier knows. An honest answer will often be a season, sometimes two. A vague answer is information too, and you are free to act on it. Where the year is given, prefer the most recent, and prefer a supplier whose jars are small, dark, and dated.

Look at the colour. Leaves should be green, grey-green, or silver, according to the plant, and not brown. Flowers should hold some of their colour. Roots and barks should be dry, firm, and free of mould. Seeds should rattle. Any material that is damp, clumped, or musty is not a bargain at any price.

Keeping Dried Herbs

Dried herbs are kept from four things: light, air, heat, and damp. Every storage rule in this tradition is a variation on those four, and every failure of a shelf can be traced to one of them.

Light fades colour and scent. Keep materials in dark glass or in tins, and keep those in a cupboard rather than on an open shelf. A clear jar in a bright kitchen is the most common way a good purchase is quietly ruined.

Air carries moisture and scent away. Close the jar properly, with a lid that seals, and open it only to take what you need. Do not leave a jar

open while you work. Do not store materials in paper bags, which is how they are carried home and not how they are kept.

Heat speeds every process you are trying to slow. Keep the shelf away from the stove, the radiator, and the sunny window. A cool cupboard is better than a warm shelf, and a warm shelf is better than a windowsill.

Damp is the enemy of the whole enterprise. If you live in a damp house, keep the materials in tins with a well-fitting lid, and inspect the shelf at the turn of each season. One mouldy jar will spoil the mood of the whole shelf and can spread to its neighbours.

Label every jar with the name of the material and the date you bought or dried it. Write it on a paper label and stick it on the side, or write it on the lid in ink. A jar without a date is a jar you will have to guess about, and guessing is how shelves become museums of things nobody dares to use.

Once a year, take everything off the shelf. Smell each jar. Throw away what has gone flat without regret. Wash the shelf. Put back what remains, and note in your materia notebook what you discarded and why. The shelf is a practice, and this is the practice's annual maintenance.

Cutting and Drying at Home

Grow or gather only what you can identify with certainty, and identify it twice: once in the field, and once with a book on the table at home. If you are not certain, do not use it. There is no herb so useful that it is worth working with a plant you only think you recognise.

Gather in the morning, after the dew has lifted and before the heat of the day. Take from plants that are healthy and away from roadsides, sprayed ground, and the edges of fields that are worked. Take a little from many plants rather than a great deal from one, and leave the stand as you found it.

Cut leaves and flowers with a clean blade, into a basket that breathes. Never into a plastic bag, which holds the moisture the plant is trying to give up and turns a good harvest to rot within hours.

Dry in small bunches, tied loosely, hung upside down in a dark, dry, airy place: a cupboard with the door ajar, a shed, a spare room. Not an oven, not a sunny window, not a sealed box. Air moving past the plant is what dries it, and darkness is what keeps its colour.

If the air is damp, dry on a screen instead: a frame with muslin stretched over it, the material in a single layer, turned once a day. A screen dries roots, bark, and seeds better than a hanging bunch, and it lets you see what is happening.

The test of dryness is the snap, not the clock. A leaf should crumble between the fingers; a stem should snap rather than bend; a root should be hard enough to break with a small crack. If it bends, it is not dry, and if it is stored while it bends, it will mould.

Dry thoroughly before storing, and store the day it is dry. Put whole leaves in the jar and crumble them only when you use them. A jar of whole leaf keeps its scent for a year or more; the same leaf crushed on the day of storage is flat by the winter.

Date every jar with the day you dried it. Write the place as well, if you gathered it: the field, the garden, the hedge, the month. A note that reads 'garden lemon balm, June, second year' will be worth more to you in three years than any description of the plant.

Infusing Oils

An infused oil is a simple thing: dried plant material, a clean oil, a jar, and time. It is a way of keeping something of a plant's scent and character in a medium that will hold it. We describe it here as a method

of the house and not as a remedy; nothing in this section is advice about the body, and no infusion should be applied to skin without your own practitioner's view.

Use dried material for oil, not fresh. Fresh plant carries water, and water in oil invites spoilage. If you have only fresh material, let it wilt for a day or two in a dry place, then use it. This single rule prevents most of the failures that members bring to the shelf.

Use a clean, plain oil that will not fight the plant: olive, sunflower, safflower, or sweet almond. Use a jar that has been washed and thoroughly dried, and fill it no more than two-thirds with material, then cover the material completely with oil. Anything above the surface of the oil is the part that will go off.

Two methods are common. The slow method: seal the jar and leave it in a cool, dark place for four to six weeks, shaking it when you pass it and remembering to date the jar. The warm method: stand the jar in a pan of water over a low heat, for two to three hours, with the water kept below a simmer. The slow method is the one we recommend, because it is harder to spoil and it teaches patience.

Strain through muslin into a clean, dry bottle, and squeeze the last of the oil from the cloth. Label the bottle with the plant, the oil, and the date. Do not add water, and do not leave plant material sitting in the finished oil, where it will continue to work and eventually turn.

Store the bottle in the dark and the cool. A cupboard, not a windowsill. An infused oil that smells sharp, flat, or like a wet cellar has turned, and it should go out to the garden rather than onto anything else. Keep all oils, infused or not, closed and out of the reach of children and animals.

Stones: Choosing

A stone is not a cure and it is not a machine. In this tradition a stone is a material of attention: something with weight, colour, and presence that you keep on the shelf, handle in the hour, and come to know by looking at it. Whatever a member experiences while working with a stone, we make no claim about its effect on the body, the household, or events in the world.

Choose a stone the way you would choose a tool. Hold it. A stone worth keeping sits well in the hand, has no sharp edge that will catch in a pocket, and is pleasant to look at from more than one angle. Size matters less than you think; a stone you can carry is a stone you will handle, and a stone you handle is a stone you will learn.

Prefer a stone you can see before you buy it. Photographs flatter and colour varies between screens. If you buy at a distance, buy from a seller who will tell you plainly what the stone is, where it came from, and whether it has been treated or dyed. Treated stones are common and are not a scandal, but you should know what you have.

Choose by use and by company rather than by reputation. A stone that suits the work you have chosen for the season is more useful than one that is said to be powerful. If you keep several, keep them where they can be seen and handled together, and let the shelf teach you the differences between them.

Keep a plain field stone if you like, gathered on a walk, with the date and place written in your notebook. Some of the most useful stones on a member's shelf cost nothing at all and were chosen for no reason except that they were noticed.

Stones: Cleansing and Charging

Cleansing and charging are words from the tradition, and it is worth saying plainly what they mean here. Cleansing is the practice of putting a

new stone, or one that has been long neglected, in order: washing it, drying it, and giving it a place. Charging is the practice of keeping it where you will see it and handling it with intention during the hour. Neither is a claim about forces or effects. Both are habits of care, and care is what makes a shelf a practice.

For cleansing, use water and a soft cloth, and nothing harsher. Wash the stone in clean water, dry it thoroughly, and let it stand in the air for a day before it goes on the shelf. Some stones will not take water: soft, layered, or flaking stones, and anything that has been glued to a base. For those, wipe with a dry cloth and a soft brush.

Some materials will not take salt at all. Salt is abrasive, it draws moisture, and it leaves a residue in cracks that will not come out. Do not bury soft or porous stones in salt, and do not keep a salt dish on the shelf beside your stones.

Sun and salt are the two things we ask members to keep their stones away from. Strong sun bleaches colour out of many stones within a season and heats them in a way that cracks some of them. Salt, whether in a dish, a bowl, or a bath, is the commonest cause of a stone that has gone chalky, dull, or rough in the hand. Keep the shelf in shade, and keep salt at a distance from it.

For charging, in the sense this library uses the word, do this and nothing more elaborate. Set the stone on the shelf in the place you have chosen for it. Handle it during the hour, for a few minutes, with the attention you would give to any other material of the practice. Note in your notebook the date you set it there, and the date, some weeks later, when you notice something about it that you had not noticed before.

Some stones are harder than others and will scratch a shelf, a table, or a neighbouring stone. Keep the harder ones on a square of cloth. Some are soft and will be scratched. Keep the soft ones apart. A shelf is a set of small arrangements, and it is worth arranging deliberately.

Keeping the Materia Notebook

The materia notebook is the companion to the shelf. It is where a material becomes yours, because it is where you write down what you actually did with it rather than what you meant to do.

Give each material a page. At the top write the name, the date you acquired it, and where it came from. Below that, leave room, because the page will be filled over a year and not in one sitting.

Record four kinds of thing. What you bought or gathered, and how it looked and smelled on the day. What you did with it: dried it, jarred it, infused it, set it on the shelf. What you noticed: the colour after a month, the scent after three, the way a stone looked in different light. And what you would do differently, which is the line that improves the shelf.

Keep the notebook near the shelf, with a pen, and write in it while your hands are still on the material. A note made an hour later is a summary. A note made now is a record. The difference matters more than it sounds.

Photographs are useful and are not a substitute. A picture will not tell you how the jar smelled in March. Write the smell down in words, even badly. 'Like the underside of a log' is a better note than 'earthy', because in five years you will know exactly what you meant.

Working a Material for a Season

The practice of the shelf is seasonal, not occasional. A material is taken up for a season, worked with steadily, and then set down, and only then is another taken up. A member who works twelve materials in a year knows twelve names and no materials. A member who works four knows four.

A season is long enough for the material to stop being interesting and to become familiar, and that second state is the one worth having. The first weeks of a new material are easy; it is the weeks after the novelty has gone that do the work, and it is precisely those weeks that a practice kept for a day cannot reach.

Choose a material that suits the months you will work it in. Leaves and flowers in the summer, when they are to be had fresh and dried. Roots and barks in the late autumn, when the plant has finished and the year is turning. Stones in the winter, when the hands want something with weight. There is no rule here, only a fitness that members come to feel.

Work in small quantities and in the same order each time. Handle the material. Look at it. Note what has changed since the last time you looked. Do one small thing with it: a jar, a sachet, an infusion, a page. Then write four lines and close the hour. Repetition of this kind is what builds the shelf.

At the end of the season, write a page of closing notes: what you learned, what you would buy again, what you would not, and what surprised you. Put the material back on the shelf with its date, and let it rest. A shelf worked in this way is small, well kept, and full of things you actually know.

House Rules

These are the standing rules of the shelf. They are printed here so that no member has to guess at them, and they apply to every material and every practice described in this book.

- Nothing in this book is a prescription. No page here is medical advice, no material here is a treatment, and no practice described here is offered as a cure, a dose, or a course of any kind.

- Ask your own practitioner. If you are considering using any material in or on the body, in any form and in any quantity, speak to a qualified practitioner who knows you and your history first, and follow their view over anything you read here.
- Keep children and animals away from essential oils and from all infused oils. Store every oil closed, upright, labelled, and out of reach. A spill should be wiped up at once and the cloth put outside to air.
- Label everything with the name and the date, and throw away anything you cannot identify. An unlabelled jar is not a mystery; it is a hazard.
- Buy small, keep the shelf dark and dry, and work one material at a time. These three habits prevent more trouble than any rule that follows them.

Beyond these rules, the shelf asks only for attention: a place, a notebook, an hour, and the patience to work one material for a season rather than for a day.

The First Season



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The First Three Months

Welcome to the Institute. You are a member now, and this short book is what we would tell you if we had you in a room with a table for an hour. It is about the first three months, which is the period we think of as your first season: long enough to find your footing, short enough that nobody expects you to have found anything else.

The first three months are not for achievement. They are for three ordinary things: learning the shape of the practice, meeting a few members, and finding out what you actually do when nobody is watching. Everything else can wait until the second season.

You will be tempted to begin with more than you can keep. Almost everyone does. Read this book, then read *The Quiet Hour*, then choose one hour and one material and keep them for a month before you add anything else.

Nothing is required of you that you cannot do with a chair, a table, a notebook, and one hour a week. The Institute is not a school with a curriculum and not a lodge with grades. It is a shelf, a room, a library, and a company of members who keep a practice.

How to Ask for Help

Ask early and ask plainly. Members who struggle in their first season usually struggle in silence, and the silence is what makes the difficulty worse. There is no question about this practice that is too simple to ask.

Ask one person at a time. A question put to a room will be answered by nobody, or answered by five people at once, which is worse. Choose the member you have spoken to before, or the one whose practice you have seen, and ask them directly.

Ask a question that has an answer. 'How do I begin' is too wide to be useful. 'I have twenty minutes on a Tuesday evening; what would you do with them' can be answered, and the answer will be worth having.

When you have an answer, write it down and use it for a month before asking again. The Institute has no shortage of advice and a great shortage of members who have tried one piece of it for long enough to know what it does.

If you are ever given advice that seems to promise an outcome in the world, a cure, a result, a guarantee, treat it as one member's opinion and nothing more. No member of this Institute speaks for the Institute, and the Institute makes no such promises.

What to Bring to a Conversation

Bring three things to any conversation about your practice: your ledger, one question, and an honest sentence about what you have not done.

The ledger, because the practice is made of ordinary hours and the ledger is where they are. You do not need to show it to anyone. You need to have looked at it yourself, recently, so that you are speaking about the practice you actually keep rather than the one you mean to keep.

One question, chosen in advance. Not three. One question, written down, so that the conversation has somewhere to go and somewhere to stop. A member who arrives with one question usually leaves with an answer. A member who arrives with a dozen usually leaves with a headache.

An honest sentence about what you have not done. This is the hardest of the three and the most useful. It might be: I have not kept the hour for three weeks. It might be: I bought a jar and never opened it. Said plainly and without excuse, it costs nothing and it clears the ground. Said evasively, it will sit in the room for the whole conversation.

Bring nothing else. Not a performance, not a summary of your reading, not a comparison with another member's season. Plain speech is the standard here, and it is easier than it sounds once you have done it twice.

Keeping Your Own Counsel

You are a member of this Institute and you are also your own person. Nothing you are told here is binding on your judgement, and nothing here relieves you of the responsibility of deciding what you will and will not do.

Keep your own counsel about your practice. Speak about it when it is useful to speak about it, and not otherwise. There is no rule of secrecy in this library, and there is also no obligation to explain yourself to anyone, member or otherwise.

Expect to disagree with something in this book, and with members you respect. Disagreement kept in plain speech is a healthy thing on a shelf of this kind. Disagreement kept silent for two years and then produced at a meeting is not.

Do not hand over your judgement to a member who seems more experienced, however experienced they are. Ask them what they do, and why. Then decide for yourself. A practice that is held by someone else's certainty is a practice you will put down the first time that certainty is questioned.

Some things are yours alone, and it is right that they stay that way. What you write in your ledger, what you work with in your hour, and what you make of it are yours. The Institute asks only that you keep the hour and keep the record. It asks nothing of your beliefs.

The Standard the Institute Holds

The Institute holds one standard, and it has three parts: small rooms, plain speech, and no performance of belief. Everything else is a matter of preference, and members are free to differ about it.

Small rooms. We work in small rooms and in small groups. A meeting of six is better than a meeting of sixty. A shelf of twelve jars is better than a cabinet of two hundred. What is small can be known, and what can be known can be practised. When the Institute is offered a large room, we usually decline it, and we would rather explain that plainly than pretend we could not fill it.

Plain speech. We say what we did and what we did not do. We do not dress a practice up in language it has not earned, and we do not use the vocabulary of certainty about things we do not know. When we do not know, we say that we do not know. This is not modesty; it is accuracy, and accuracy is the whole of our method.

No performance of belief. No member is asked to affirm anything, and no member is asked to pretend to affirm anything. If you believe something about a stone, an herb, or an hour, that is yours to hold, and you are not required to state it, defend it, or conceal it. If you believe nothing about any of it, you are equally at home here. The practice does not depend on belief, and we have deliberately built it that way.

The standard cuts both ways. It is a promise the Institute makes to you, and it is a promise you are asked to keep in return: speak plainly to us, and do not perform for us. A member who performs for the Institute has misunderstood the whole arrangement, and the fault is ours if we ever made performing seem worthwhile.

What the Member Program Is

The member program is a standing arrangement rather than a course. It has no beginning, no end, no certificate, and no rank. It is a set of ordinary things held in common, and you may use as much or as little of it as suits the season you are in.

The program is: an hour kept, a ledger kept, one material worked at a time, a conversation once a month with another member, and access to the library and the shelf. That is the whole of it. There is nothing hidden behind the curtain, and there is no further degree to be attained.

The program is also a place to be, which is more useful than it sounds. A room with a table, a lamp, a shelf of jars, and a few members who are quietly working is a considerable thing in a noisy life. Members come to the room for the room as much as for the instruction, and that is by design.

What the Member Program Is Not

The member program is not a treatment, a therapy, or a course of care. Nothing here is offered as a remedy for anything, and no member of the Institute is qualified by membership to advise you about your health, your body, or your household. If you need care of that kind, seek it from a qualified practitioner.

It is not a school, and it will not teach you in the sense you may be expecting. There are no classes to pass and no exams to sit. There is a shelf, a method, a tradition, and other members. What you take from those will be what you put into them.

It is not a brotherhood, a lodge, or a secret society. We have no oaths, no degrees, no hidden knowledge, and no ceremony that a visitor may not see. Members who arrive looking for an inner circle are usually disappointed, and we would rather disappoint them in the first month than in the third year.

It is not a substitute for anything: not for medical care, not for friendship, not for work, not for rest. A practice hour is one hour in a life, and it is not asked to carry more than that. When members begin to lean on the practice for everything, we say so, and we mean it kindly.

And it is not an obligation. You may keep one hour a week or five. You may come to the room monthly or rarely. You may work one material for a year or a different one each season. The Institute asks only that you be honest with yourself about what you are actually doing, and that you not ask us to pretend it is more than it is.

Keeping Your Own Record of the Work

Keep a record, and keep it yourself. The Institute does not keep a file on your practice, and we do not ask to see your ledger. The record is for you, and it is the single most useful thing you will make in your first season.

The record has two parts, and they are different in kind. The first is the ledger of hours: dated, short, factual, one line to a session. The second is a page or two at the end of each month, written more slowly, about what you noticed over the month as a whole.

The ledger answers the question, did I keep the hour. The monthly page answers a different question, what is happening. A practice can be kept faithfully and still be going nowhere; the monthly page is where you find that out, and it is where you decide what to change.

Write the monthly page on the same day each month, and date it. Read back over the previous months before you write. You are looking for two things: the hours you missed and why, and the material or the question that has quietly become interesting to you. The second of those is often the beginning of the next season's work.

Keep the record for a year before you judge it. Three months is long enough to find your footing and too short to see anything clearly. A year of ordinary pages is a document of a real practice, and it will tell you more about yourself than any conversation about practice you are likely to have.

A Letter to the New Member

You have joined a small thing. That is not an apology; it is the point. The Institute is small by choice, plain by preference, and slow by method, and it will not grow into something larger while you are a member of it. What it will do is keep a room, a shelf, and a standard, and hold them steady while you find out what your practice is.

In your first season you will be tempted to do too much, and then, having done too much, to stop. Expect this. It happens to nearly everyone. When it happens, cut the practice down until it is small enough to keep, and keep it. Fifteen minutes kept is the whole of the method; the rest is elaboration.

Ask for help before you need it. Speak plainly when you speak. Keep your own counsel about the things that are yours. Do not perform, either for us or for yourself. And if you are ever offered a promise about what this practice will do in the world, decline it politely and come back to the shelf.

You will not be asked for your beliefs. You will be asked to keep an hour and keep a record, and you will be left to make of it what you can. That is a small request and it is the whole of what we have to offer. It is enough for a lifetime if you let it be ordinary.

Welcome. The room is yours on the days you come to it.

The Furthering Institute, Members' Library, 2026