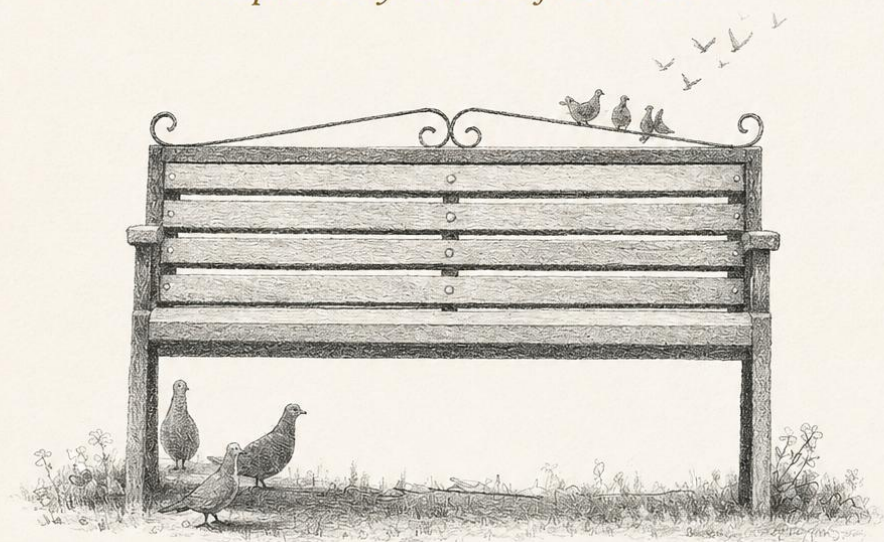


BECOMING PEOPLE WHO SEE



*Discussion Questions
Inspired by Theo of Golden*



LEARNING TO SEE.
HELPING OTHERS FEEL SEEN.
LIVING IN WAYS THAT HONOR,
CONNECT, AND VALUE PEOPLE.

*Drawing from Theo of Golden by Allen Levi
and How to Know a Person by David Brooks*

T*heo of Golden* by Allen Levi is the story of Theo, an older man who arrives as a stranger in the small town of Golden and, through simple acts of attention, curiosity, kindness, and presence, becomes deeply connected to the people around him. Along the way, Theo offers us a picture of what it looks like to help others feel seen, known, valued, and connected.

This discussion guide invites us to look beyond the story and consider what we can learn from Theo's example. What does it mean to truly see another person? How do we create relationships in which people feel heard, honored, and welcomed? And how might we become the kind of people who make our own communities a little more like Golden?

Along with moments and relationships from the novel, these questions draw on insights from David Brooks' *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, which explores the practices that help us know others and make them feel known.

The questions aren't intended to be covered exhaustively. Follow the conversation where it leads, allowing time for personal stories, thoughtful reflection, and honest discussion. Above all, remember that the goal isn't simply to appreciate Theo's character, but to consider how we might practice the same kind of care for others.



“He was obviously old but a ‘young old,’ in a way that would almost make a younger soul look forward to seniority.” (p. 30)¹

¹ Page references are to the 2025 Atria Books paperback edition of *Theo of Golden* (ISBN 978-1-6682-3651-2).

Getting Acquainted with Golden

Before exploring the deeper themes of *Theo of Golden*, let's spend a few minutes talking about our experience of reading the novel.

1. **Who introduced you to *Theo of Golden*?** What did they tell you about the book—and what did they leave out?
2. **When you picture Theo in your mind, does he remind you of someone you've known?** If so, who is that person, and what is it about them that makes them *your* Theo?
3. **If you could spend an afternoon in Golden, where would you go first?** Is there a particular place in the novel where you'd most like to sit, linger, or strike up a conversation?
4. **Which character in Golden would you most enjoy getting to know better?** What is it about that person that makes you curious about their story?
5. **When you finished the novel, what was your first reaction?** What stayed with you after you closed the book?

1. See: Give People the Gift of Attention

One of Theo's most distinctive characteristics is that he **notices people**. He remembers details, asks questions, watches faces, and seems genuinely interested in whoever happens to be in front of him.

David Brooks calls people like this **illuminators**—people whose curiosity and attention make others feel larger, respected, and understood. He observes that when someone shines the light of attention on us, we often begin to see possibilities in ourselves that we couldn't see before.

Discuss:

- What does Theo do that communicates, “*You are interesting to me. You matter*”?
- Asher's portraits are another kind of seeing. What does Asher see in people through his art? What do Theo and Asher have in common?
- Late in the novel, a character says his attitude toward another person changed when he finally looked at his face—not glanced but really looked. Why can genuinely seeing someone's face change the way we think about them?
- What gets in the way of our attention—hurry, distraction, discomfort, assumptions, phones, familiarity?
- Brooks writes, “*Respect is a gift you offer with your eyes.*” (p. 32)² What might it look like to practice that this week?

Practice: Look long enough to notice.

“Did you look? I mean really look? Not glance. Not a quick peek. I mean look?” (p. 258)

² Page references to David Brooks' *How to Know a Person* are from the Random House paperback edition (ISBN 978-0-593-23007-7).

2. Know: Become Curious About People's Stories

Theo is remarkably good at getting people to talk about themselves. Early in the novel, Minnette realizes that although she had intended to learn about Theo, he somehow kept the conversation focused on her. That isn't manipulation. It's curiosity.

Brooks argues that knowing someone requires more than knowing what happened to them. We need to understand **how they experienced what happened** and the meaning they've made of it. His wonderfully simple advice is: ***“Ask people to tell you their stories.” (p. 214)***

Discuss:

- Think about what you eventually learn about Theo himself. How does knowing his story change your understanding of the man you met at the beginning?
- Which character did you initially misunderstand because you didn't yet know enough of their story?
- What kinds of questions invite stories rather than one-word answers?
- How could curiosity change the way we encounter someone very different from us?
- Think about someone you regularly see but don't know well. What is one question you could ask that person—not to pry, but because you're genuinely interested?

Practice: Ask one more question.

3. Listen: Give People Somewhere Safe to Put Their Story

At one point, Minnette entrusts Theo with something deeply personal. Theo takes her hand and assures her that her words are safe with him.

That may be one of the greatest compliments that can be paid to a person: **My words are safe with you.**

Brooks advises us to sit with their experience (*p. 81*) before we begin offering our own. He also reminds us that people have a right to their own psychological space; trust requires respecting what someone is *not yet* ready to tell us.

Discuss:

- Why do people trust Theo with things they don't readily tell others?
- What does Theo *not* do when people tell him difficult things?
- What makes someone a safe person to talk to?
- How can our desire to give advice actually interfere with listening?
- How do we communicate, “*You don't owe me your story, but I'm here when you're ready*”?

Practice: Listen without planning your response.

4. Honor: Help People See the Good in Themselves

“This face belongs to one who is strong and brave and kind. It belongs to one who is capable of saintliness. You, my dear, are Gammy’s pride and joy, the gold of Golden, the wine of the Chalice, and, for an old man new to your town, a great blessing. I present to you this, the portrait of St. Minnette.” (p. 41)

One of the most moving scenes involves Minnette and Asher’s portrait of her. Theo tells her what he sees: strength, courage, kindness. Later, Minnette stands before the portrait and repeats those truths to herself.

Asher drew her. Theo **interpreted** her. And eventually Minnette could see herself differently.

Brooks says our friends sometimes provide an “*outside view*” of ourselves that we simply cannot see from within. At their best, friends hold up a mirror that allows us to see ourselves in ways that otherwise would remain inaccessible.

Discuss:

- Why does the portrait of “*St. Minnette*” matter so much?
- What does Theo see in Minnette that she has trouble seeing in herself?
- Who has named something good in you that you couldn’t yet see in yourself?
- If Asher created a portrait of someone you love, what quality would you hope the portrait somehow captured?
- Who in your life might need someone to name the courage, kindness, growth, faithfulness, or potential already present in them?

Practice: Say the good thing out loud.

5. Accompany: Stay Long Enough to Know

“There is no virtue in advertising one’s sadness. But there is no wisdom in denying it either. And there is the beautiful possibility that great love can grow out of sadness if it is well-tended. Sadness can make us bitter or wise. We get to choose.” (p. 214)

Brooks makes an important distinction: *“After the illuminating gaze, accompaniment is the next step in getting to know a person.” (p. 44)*

That's Theo. He doesn't swoop into people's lives, deliver wisdom, and disappear. He returns. He drinks coffee. He walks. He talks. He remembers. Relationships develop slowly.

Discuss:

- How does Theo's repeated presence communicate care?
- Why isn't noticing someone once enough?
- What is the difference between helping someone and accompanying someone?
- Who has accompanied you through a difficult season simply by continuing to show up?
- Who might need your **presence** more than your advice right now?

Practice: Show up again.

6. Connect: Move People Toward Belonging

*“Nothing is what it’s supposed to be if love is not at the core.”
(p. 119)*

Theo enters Golden as a stranger. By the end, he belongs.

But something else has happened too: **Theo has helped other people belong to one another.** His relationships create relationships. The Chalice becomes more than a coffee shop because people are known there.

That’s where hospitality becomes larger than friendliness. Hospitality doesn’t simply say, **“You’re welcome here.”** It says, **“There is a place for you among us.”**

Discuss:

- Who welcomes Theo into Golden? How?
- How does Theo become a connector between other people?
- Why is *The Chalice* so important? What makes it different from simply being a place that sells coffee?
- How can a church, small group, workplace, or neighborhood be very friendly while people still remain disconnected?
- Who is currently standing near the edge of one of your circles, and what could you do to help that person move one step closer—not just to you, but to others?

Practice: Don't just welcome someone. Connect them.

7. Value: Choose Mercy Over Reduction

Near the end of *Theo of Golden*, Levi brings several of these ideas together. A person who had previously been reduced to an idea—a “thing”—becomes human again when someone really looks at his face.

It's a powerful illustration of another of the novel's memorable pieces of wisdom: when uncertain whether to choose justice or mercy, “*go the mercy way.*”

Discuss:

- Why is it easier to judge someone when we can turn them into an idea, category, label, or problem?
- Where does that happen in the novel? Where does it happen in our world?
- Can we disagree with someone's behavior and still refuse to reduce them to that behavior?
- What might it mean to “*go the mercy way*” without ignoring accountability or pretending that harm doesn't matter?
- Is there someone you've reduced to a category whom you need to begin seeing as a person again?

Practice: See the person before the problem.

Bringing Golden Home

“If a work of art makes us see something familiar in a new way or makes us feel something we ought to have felt all along or shows us our place in the world more clearly, maybe then it qualifies as ‘good.’ If it makes us better somehow, maybe that’s what gives it value.” (p. 118)

What has *Theo of Golden* helped you see differently?

And then the harder question: **What would happen if, instead of wishing we lived somewhere like Golden or had a friend like Theo, we became the people who make our communities more like Golden?**

Choose one:

SEE — Give someone your full attention.

KNOW — Ask someone to tell you their story.

LISTEN — Give someone a safe place to speak.

HONOR — Tell someone the good you see in them.

ACCOMPANY — Keep showing up.

CONNECT — Help someone move from the edge toward belonging.

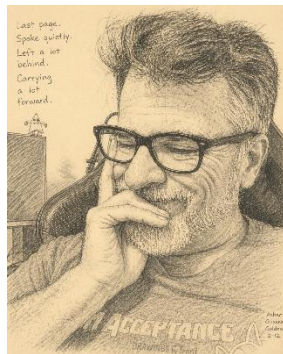
VALUE — Refuse to reduce someone to a label, problem, or disagreement.

Which one do you most need to practice—and who is the person you can practice it with this week?

About the Author

Bret Hammond is a preacher, teacher, writer, and avid reader who is rarely far from his Kindle.

His habit of highlighting memorable passages and collecting observations while reading helped give rise to *Becoming People Who See*. Drawing on extensive notes and highlights from Allen Levi's *Theo of Golden* and David Brooks' *How to Know a Person*, Bret developed this guide to help readers move beyond appreciating a wonderful story to practicing the qualities that make its characters so memorable.



He writes at **brethammond.com**.

The illustrations in this guide were created using artificial intelligence. The portrait of the author, reflecting on the final pages of Theo of Golden, was created in an imagined interpretation of the artistic style of Asher Glissen, the fictional portrait artist in the novel.

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