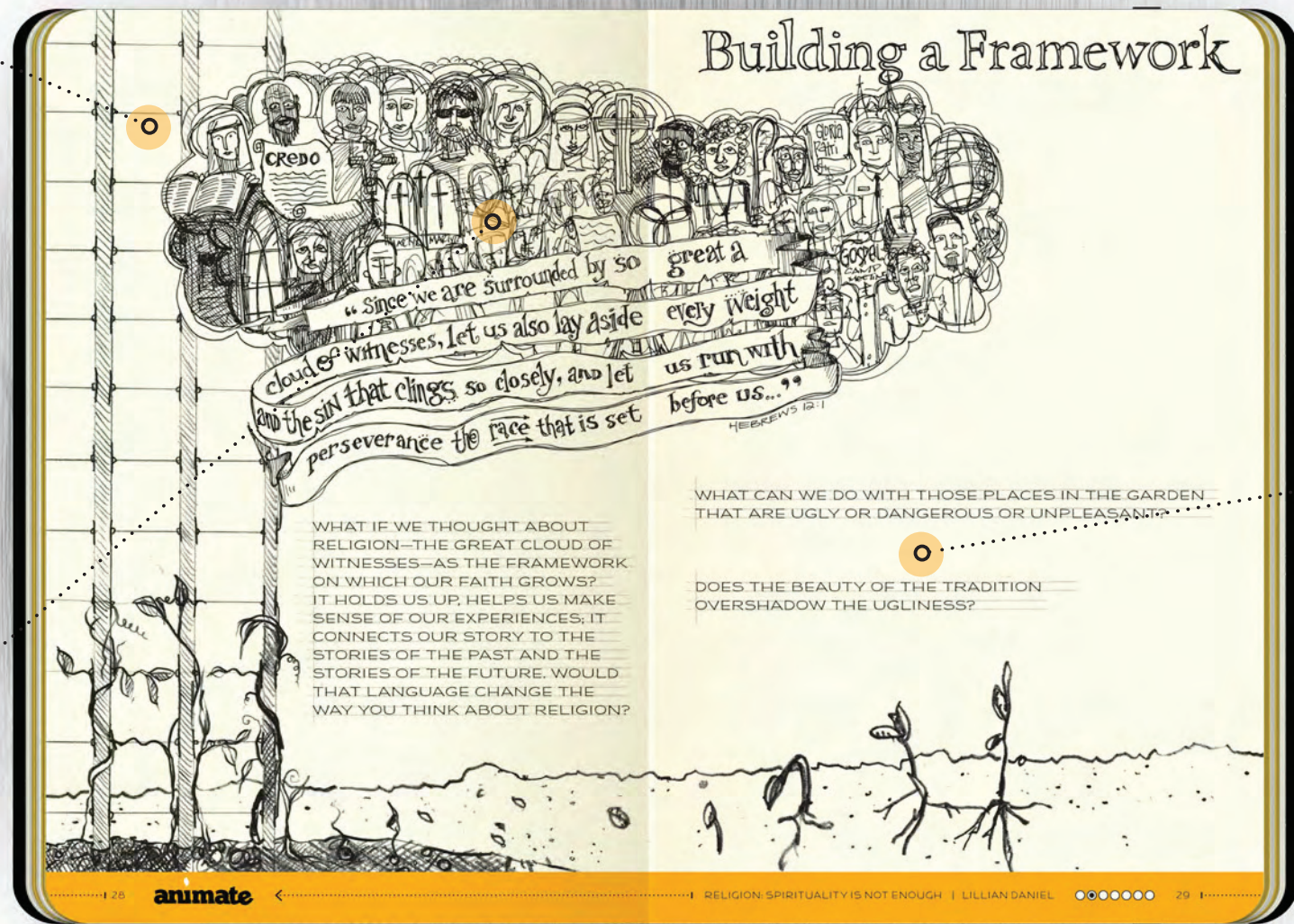


Read the quote in the middle of the page together. Hebrews 12:1-2 pictures the "great cloud of witnesses" — faithful folk whose faithful example supports us in our journey. Invite group members to share about someone who has influenced and inspired their faith. Some will be famous saints (Mother Teresa, MLK, St. Francis, et al.), but some will be everyday people. Have them add those people to the trellis. Then talk about the questions in the Journal together.

"I FINALLY FOUND SOME AMAZING [CHURCHES] THAT I COULD CALL HOME. AND THOSE PLACES DIDN'T JUST MEET MY NEEDS. I LIKE TO THINK THAT THEY CHANGED MY NEEDS—THAT THESE COMMUNITIES OF FAITH SHAPED ME AND CHALLENGED ME AND HELPED ME TO GROW CLOSER TO GOD."

If you are meeting in a church building, consider walking the hallways and sanctuary, noticing portraits on the walls, considering the people who have come before in that community, actually imagining "the great cloud of witnesses" in that church. If you are not meeting in a church, do the imaginative journey together, considering those who have gone before and what they've contributed to the faith life of your community. Do their voices affirm religious adherence, spiritual enrichment, both?



"IT'S PRETTY EASY TO PLAY BY THE RULES OF A RELIGION IN WHICH YOU WRITE YOUR OWN SCRIPT. MUCH HARDER TO FIND MEANING IN THE WORDS OF A BOOK THAT WE DID NOT WRITE FOR OURSELVES, FROM A VERY DIFFERENT TIME." — LILLIAN DANIEL

Lillian reminds us that the Bible pushes Christians out of narcissistic self-interest. Open Bibles in your group to Matthew 5:21-48 and read the "antitheses," the places where Jesus challenges us to go beyond normal expectations.

- What are the challenges in these verses?
- What impact does Jesus' high demand have on you?
- What impact has Jesus' high demand had on the world?
- How would your religious practices change if they were built on these words?

*** HAVE THE GROUP REVISIT** the plant growth stages at the bottom of this spread. Unpack the imagery: what's the soil, the trellis, the seed? Who or what is needed for growth? What's missing? Invite them to draw what they envision to be their next stage of faith development. Do they see their growth happening with or without the support of the trellis?

JESUS ONCE SAID, "ANYONE WHO DOES THE WILL OF MY FATHER IS MY MOTHER OR BROTHER OR SISTER." (MARK 3:31-35) MAYBE THAT'S WHY THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS CALLED ONE ANOTHER "BROTHER" AND "SISTER." THEY RELIED ON ONE ANOTHER AS COMMUNITY BECAUSE BY BECOMING CHRISTIANS MANY EXPERIENCED THE REJECTION OF THEIR FAMILIES.

Marry a Pregnant Virgin: Unusual Bible Stories for New and Curious Christians by Frank G. Honeycutt (Augsburg Books, 2008) is a great introduction to the Bible's inspirational stories of people's faith and life in God.