



The Episcopal Community

Marked as Christ's Own For Ever

Spiritual Formation Study

An Altar in the World: Geography of Faith

by Barbara Brown Taylor

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Chapter 1. The Practice of Waking Up to God: Vision

1. What is the spirit of the place where you grew up? How do you think it has shaped you?
2. Can you think of a time in your life when you, like Jacob, have "woken up to God" (4)? Where were you? How have you marked or remembered those times and places?
3. When have you craved more (6-7)? Have you sought it inside the walls of church or outside? Or both?
4. Is it easier to confine God to a particular space in our lives? "Do we build God a house in lieu of having God stay at ours" (9)?
5. Have you been part of a church or belief system that taught you to choose between God and the world? Have you been part of a church or belief system that taught you that the whole world is God's house? Which one has more appeal to you? Why?

Chapter 2. The Practice of Paying Attention: Reverence

1. Have you ever had a close encounter with something that could kill you? How were you able to move from fear to awe (20)?
2. What in your life has put you in your place? What has cultivated a sense of reverence?
3. How often have you experienced real reverence in church?
4. Try Taylor's suggestion: "The easiest practice of reverence I know is simply to sit down somewhere outside, preferably near a body of water, and pay attention for at least twenty minutes" (22). What was it like?
5. Have you ever deliberately taken a detour or a time-out for the purpose of revering something? When have you been willing to take off your shoes and stay awhile to marvel at something?
6. Have you experienced the painful side of reverence – thinking about where your food, your clothing, your catalogs come from, and at what cost (30-32)?

Chapter 3. The Practice of Wearing Skin: Incarnation

1. What do you think your reaction would be to Taylor's comment about the hairless Jesus in the stained glass window if you were the woman polishing the silver (35-37)?
2. Why are we so uncomfortable talking about bodies, especially our own? How can we proclaim the Incarnation if we ignore our bodies or don't speak about them?

3. What is your relationship with your own body? Do you usually wear your skin with loathing or with gratitude?
4. What were moments when you have recognized your body as the temple of the spirit, "your soul's address" (38)?
5. When were moments when your body has served as a prophet, revealing imbalance in your soul?
6. When have you experienced God in your body rather than your mind?
7. How do you see the Incarnation proclaimed in our liturgy on Sunday mornings?

Chapter 4. The Practice of Walking on the Earth: Groundedness.

1. What kinds of direct encounters with earth have you had (like Taylor's walk in the dark or being on your knees in the grass or walking barefoot)?
2. What is the particular patch of earth you know intimately well?
3. Have you ever experienced difficulty walking for any length of time? What was this like for you spiritually?
4. What are the spiritual practices you have that are about the journey rather than the destination?
5. Remember Augustine's quote: "**It** is solved by walking." What have you discovered as your "**it**" through a practice that grounds you?

Chapter 5. The Practice of Getting Lost: Wilderness

1. What are the worn, predictable cow paths of your life? What keeps you on these paths—convenience? Fear? Economy of movement?
2. Have you ever gotten lost on purpose? What was the situation?
3. Have you ever gotten lost because of "one of life's big winds" (72) or been "truly, seriously lost, even though you know exactly where you are" (76)? How were you able to consent to this lostness?
4. Taylor writes: "I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path" (73). What have you found while you were lost?
5. Has being lost helped you exercise the muscles needed for radical trust? Has it taught you to say thank you and mean it? Has it helped you develop empathy for others who are lost? Why or why not?

Chapter 6. The Practice of Encountering Others: Community

1. Are you an introvert or an extrovert? When did you learn this about yourself? What is your relationship with coffee hour?
2. What communal experiences in your life have "saved [you] from the temptation of believing in [your] own self-sufficiency" (90)?
3. Practice the exercise on pages 94-95 or really see someone who might otherwise go unnoticed. What was it like?
4. Have you been able to see God in this same way, as someone you did not invent in your own image? What was your reaction?
5. Have you ever experienced religious rituals of another faith tradition? Did you find that relationship superseded ritual? What was your reaction?

6. When have you been able to see the face of God in your neighbor (or roommate or fellow committee member or...), especially the one who does not look, act, or think like you?

Chapter 7. The Practice of Living with Purpose: Vocation

1. Taylor starts the chapter by listing all her previous jobs and remaining vocational desires. What are your lists of jobs you've held and ones you still dream of?
2. What abilities and what clumsiness have your previous jobs revealed?
3. There is a line in several Godly Play stories:
"Then God came so close to Abraham/ Moses/_____, and Abraham/Moses/_____, came so close to God that he knew what God wanted him to do."
Taylor experienced this at the top of her fire escape. When or where have you experienced a moment of being so close to God that you understood what God wants you to do?
4. In what jobs – large or small – have you discovered a sense of purpose of being "good for something"? Was this work paid or unpaid? Did that make a difference?
5. Have you learned to say "I'm only human" as a blessing rather than a curse? What was the situation?
6. When have you been able to find solace and purpose in "the domestic arts" or in some other type of physical labor?

Chapter 8. The Practice of Saying No: Sabbath

1. Are you someone who is easily seduced by saying "yes" to doing too much?
2. Do you wear busy-ness as a badge of honor? How is busy-ness your Way of Life?
3. Do you agree with Taylor that "saying no is a more difficult spiritual practice than tithing, praying on a cold stone floor, or visiting a prisoner on death row" (125)? Why?
4. When have you experienced true Sabbath time by "saying no...to work, to commerce, to the Internet, to the car, to the voice in [your] head that is forever whispering 'More.'"(126)? Do you experience this on any regular basis?
5. What do you say "yes" to instead of Sabbath time, instead of God?
6. What are you afraid will appear when you slow down, when you "take one whole day off from earning your own salvation" (135)?
7. When have you experienced "Sabbath sickness" (136)?

Chapter 9. The Practice of Carrying Water: Physical Labor

1. Have you ever "lost power," literally or spiritually?
2. When have you deliberately placed yourself in situations – backpacking, travel to a developing country – where your attention is redirected to your basic needs?
3. What new abilities did you discover in these situations?
4. What is your experience with physical labor, the kind that involves dirt and sweat? Did you consider it a curse or a blessing?
5. What is your experience with "keeping the earth" (151)? Did it remind you of your origins or of your ultimate end? Why do you think this?

6. "If all life is holy, then anything that sustains life has holy dimensions too" (151). When have you ever looked at your daily tasks in this way, choosing them instead of resenting them?

Chapter 10. The Practice of Feeling Pain: Breakthrough

1. Make or imagine the graph of your life as suggested on page 157. Do you find that "the spikes in your pain bear some relationship to the leaps in your growth"?
2. Has pain led you to an encounter with the Holy? How did it change the way you see God or pray to God? How did it change how you see yourself?
3. Have you had an experience of "engaging" pain (as opposed to avoiding, denying, numbing, or fighting it)? What was the situation?
4. What do you use as "painkillers" in your life (to avoid, deny, numb, fight pain)?
5. What explanations (good and bad) of pain and suffering have you received from those who mean well?
6. Has surviving a painful experience delivered you into larger life (169)? What did you bury in the dust and ashes of your old, smaller life?
7. Have you ever known someone "in whom pain seems to have burned away everything extra, everything trivial, everything petty and less than noble, until they have become see-through with light" (170)? How did knowing this person affect you?

Chapter 11. The Practice of Being Present to God: Prayer

1. Have you ever felt like a failure at prayer, a "prayer-weakling" (176)? Are you embarrassed when people ask you about your prayer life?
2. What experiences, writings, or teachings have expanded your idea of what prayer is?
3. What in your life helps you "wak[e] up to the presence of God" (178)?
4. When have you experienced prayer without words?
5. When have you experienced an answer to prayer? How did you know? Do you agree that "divine response to prayer is one of those beauties that remain in the eye of the beholder" (182)? How has this experience remained in your life?
6. What practices of prayer or specific prayers are, for you, "the stitches that keep the quilt of prayer in place" (185)?
7. When have you ever prayed with your whole body, "entirely submerged in the act of surrendering [your] whole self to God" (189)?

Chapter 12. The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings: Benediction

1. On what occasions in your life have you been formally blessed?
2. Have you ever had occasion to bless someone or something else? In public?
3. Do you agree that we are "often embarrassed to do and say the things that really affect us" (197)? Why do you think this?
4. Choose an ordinary object that is near you right now. Look at it for awhile, find the holiness in it, and say a blessing over it if you feel so moved. What was that like?
5. Have you made the mistake of judging whether certain people or things "deserve" blessing?

6. Can you think of any chapters that were left out of this book? What are other ways we build altars in the world?

Study Guide adapted from questions written by the Rev. Rebecca Edwards, Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, San Diego CA; used with her permission with our many thanks.

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