

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Naked Spirituality:

A Life with God in 12 Simple Words

by

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PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

1. In the preface, the author talks about the meaning of clothing and nakedness. How do you respond to the word “naked,” especially when it’s linked with the word “spirituality”?
2. In what ways have you experienced a “dressed-up” spirituality, and in what ways have you experienced a stripped-down spirituality?

3. The author recalls the story in Genesis of Adam and Eve being “naked and not ashamed.” What role has shame played in your spiritual life?
4. What do you hope to get out of this book, based on this preface?
5. In the introduction, the author describes possible situations of his readers using the words “you may” or “you might.” Which of these descriptions come closest to your experience right now? Can you think of friends or family members who fit one or more of his descriptions?

CHAPTER 1: SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

1. Compare your own religious upbringing with the author’s. Did you remember having “an innate spirituality” in your childhood?
2. What people and churches have had a positive and negative effect on your spiritual life through the years?
3. How did the author’s telling of his spiritual experience in this chapter affect you? Were there elements of the story you could relate to, or elements that made you uncomfortable?
4. Have you ever had a spiritual experience that you never told anyone about? Why did you want to keep it a secret? Have you ever shared a spiritual experience with others, and what were the results—positive and negative—of sharing that experience?

5. What is your reaction to the book so far? How are you feeling at this point as an engaged reader? What questions have arisen for you? What concerns or objections are being raised?

CHAPTER 2: "BUT I'M SPIRITUAL"

1. How would you restate in your own words the four meanings behind "I'm spiritual" presented by the author in this chapter? Where have you seen or experienced these four elements recently?
2. The author makes up a word: "de-ligion." Define in your own words "religion" and "de-ligion," and point to examples of both.
3. Retell the three stories from the Gospel of John that the author explores in this chapter. Did he offer any insights on these stories that seemed especially helpful for you?
4. The author concludes, "The Spirit, then, is bigger than any particular religion or religion in general. Nobody has a monopoly on Spirit." Do you agree? Why? Why might this statement be hard for some people to accept?
5. Wine, wind, and water . . . talk about what these images say to you about the spiritual life.

CHAPTER 3: TWELVE SIMPLE WORDS

1. The author compares developing a spiritual life to learning a language, running a marathon, and playing a musical instrument. Respond to those comparisons.
2. In what ways does a spiritual life require individual, private, personal practice and in what ways does it require a group or community?
3. How have you experience “the tyranny of *not enough*” in your spiritual life?
4. “Complexity was overrated,” the author says. Have you ever grown disillusioned with the complexities of religion? If so, when and how? What happened as a result? If not, what do you enjoy about complexity in religion?
5. Briefly summarize the four stages introduced in this chapter: Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, and Harmony. What does the term “naked spirituality” mean to you now, in relation to these four stages?

CHAPTER 4: *HERE: STARTING RIGHT NOW*

1. The author describes the haunting experience of hearing his name called while out in the woods. In what way might you be metaphorically out in the woods, hearing your name called?
2. The author explains that he chose the word “here” to avoid having to name or address God too soon. Why is

he concerned about naming God? When you say the word “God,” what mental images are in your mind, and in what ways might they be helpful and unhelpful?

3. Is there a place—a particular *here*—where you predictably feel the presence of God? What makes that place special for you?
4. “Presenting yourself to the Presence”—respond to this phrase in your own words.

CHAPTER 5: *HERE: NAMING THE MYSTERY*

1. Try to put yourself in the story of Moses and the bush. How would you have responded?
2. If you had to name one thing or experience in your life that has been the most like your burning bush, what would it be?
3. The author talks about an essential balance between accessibility and mystery in our approach to God. Where do you struggle to maintain this balance? Which leaning comes more naturally to you?
4. Describe your own habits in naming the Divine. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the ways you normally refer to the Almighty? How could you expand your repertoire of names for the Holy One? Did any of the names in this chapter especially resonate with you?
5. Share your experiences in practicing with *here*, *who*, and *home*.

CHAPTER 6:
THANKS: THE HAPPINESS OF APPRECIATION

1. Respond to this statement—and give some examples of it: *It's not how much you have that brings happiness; it's how much you appreciate however much or little you have.*
2. Talk about the relationship between gratitude, consumerism, and addiction.
3. Try the author's "treatment" for the Big Yellow Taxi syndrome, starting with your body, possessions, family, other people, and so on. What stands out from this practice of gratitude? What have you been most taking for granted lately?
4. Has there ever been a time when you experienced the kind of ecstatic gratitude the author describes at the end of this chapter?

CHAPTER 7:
THANKS: DAYENU—ENOUGH AND MORE, AND MORE

1. What new insights can you offer about that phrase from the Lord's Prayer: *Give us this day our daily bread?*
2. The author speaks of the advantages of disadvantages. Can you think of some of those advantages that you're grateful for right now?
3. Share your experiences of practicing with *thanks*, *again*, *this*, or *dayenu*.

4. What would your life be like if you were more grateful for the rest of your days? What most keeps you from practicing gratitude?
5. What questions do you still have about gratitude?

CHAPTER 8: O: PRACTICING JUBILATION

1. Have you ever had an especially meaningful experience of joyful celebration (what the author later calls a TAZ—Temporary Autonomous Zone)? If so, share that experience. If not, can you recall a time when, looking back, you wish you would have celebrated more joyfully?
2. What, in your opinion, might help poor people be so freely exuberant, and rich people so typically restrained, in their worship?
3. Is joy the primary emotion you associate with God? If not, what emotion or condition do you primarily associate with God? What would be the effects in our lives and faith communities if we understood God to be an essentially joyful being?
4. Respond to the author's discussion of worship and the brain.

CHAPTER 9:
O: NOT JUST A WORD—A WAY OF LIFE

1. What words, songs, sounds, visual images, and experiences most evoke joyful worship for you?
2. Respond to the author's overview of Paul's letter to the Romans, and especially to Paul's use of the word "O!" at the end of Romans 11.
3. The author offers several "firsts" that can help us worship God in our daily lives. Which of those firsts do you already practice? Which would you like to experiment with?
4. Consider visiting some different faith communities to explore their ways of worship. How would you be changed by becoming a more wholehearted worshiper of God?
5. Share your experiences with "O," "how," or other expressions of jubilation and worship.

CHAPTER 10:
SORRY: HOLIER THAN MYSELF?

1. Respond to this statement: *A secret to the spiritual life is desiring to actually be more spiritual than you appear to be. The secret to hypocrisy is desiring to appear more spiritual than you actually are.*
2. Why do you think pretending is so popular—inside and outside of religious circles? Can you think of a person in your life who stands out by not pretending?

3. The author describes the conscience as a moral nerve for the soul. How would you describe your conscience? Too sensitive? Too calloused? About right?
4. How do you feel about the term “naked spirituality” now, in light of this chapter’s emphasis on confession and coming out or coming clean?

CHAPTER 11:

***SORRY*: UNLEASHING OUR OWN BECOMING**

1. Think of your nation, political party, faith community, or family. If they were to engage in corporate confession, what would they need to address? Why do you think corporate confession is so unpopular, and what are the consequences of its unpopularity?
2. How might you encourage corporate confession in the groups of which you are a part?
3. The author suggests that an atmosphere of grace actually helps us change more than an atmosphere of pressure does. Why?
4. Talk about the dangers of what the author calls a “status mind-set,” and the advantages of a “becoming mind-set.”
5. Share your experiences of practicing with *sorry* and *mercy*.

CHAPTER 12:
HELP: SPIRITUAL JUJITSU

1. The author speaks of sabotaging our failures and our weaknesses. Describe how this sabotage works.
2. Petition is linked with the idea of expanding beyond our limitations. Talk about how this practice of petition could have an effect on you in relation to one of your real-life weaknesses.
3. Contrast immature with mature petition, and relate both to a situation in your life.
4. The author says that the book of Genesis and the theory of evolution teach us the same lessons. Explain.
5. Offer your own reflections on Jesus's prayer in the garden.
6. How do you respond to the idea of being a friend to yourself? What kind of friend are you to yourself?

CHAPTER 13:
HELP: TAPPING INTO THE CURRENT OF POWER

1. In what ways have you experienced labeling like the character Jabez? How could you respond to this labeling in a "bless me to be a blessing" way?
2. Talk about some limitations or weaknesses in your life, and how you could better deal with them, based on this chapter.
3. Name some current big and little anxieties in your life, and translate them into requests.

4. Name some common big and little wounds in your life, and translate them into requests.
5. Name some common big and little disappointments in your life, and translate them into requests.
6. Share your experiences with the simple word “help.”

CHAPTER 14:
PLEASE: AT LEAST TWO HEARTS CARE

1. Have you ever had an experience like the author’s in the kitchen, when you were touched deeply with an overwhelming sense of compassion?
2. The author lists several alternatives to compassionate intercession when we are faced with the sufferings of others. Which of these alternatives are most habitual for you?
3. The author uses the image of magnetizing a nail to suggest that by “rubbing up against” God’s compassion, we ourselves become more compassionate. If that’s the case, why do you think some religious people and communities seem to lack compassion?
4. Of the many ways that Jesus modeled compassion, which are most meaningful for you, and why?

CHAPTER 15:
PLEASE: BEARING THE STRETCHER

1. When have you been on the stretcher? Who was bearing the stretcher for you? When have you been a stretcher bearer for others? Share a story or two.
2. The author recounts a story about a dying animal that evoked compassion in him. Do you have a similar experience? How did it affect you?
3. What story of human suffering has seized your attention in recent days? What words would translate your concern into a request or blessing for these people, such as *peace, protection, strength, hope, comfort, stamina, patience*?
4. Who is persecuting you or causing you pain these days? Experiment with the author's counsel on praying for these "enemies," and share your experience.
5. The author talks about our intellectual problems and unanswered questions regarding prayer. Which issues or questions most trouble you? How has this chapter helped you deal with those questions or issues?
6. Share your experiences practicing with "please" and related words.

CHAPTER 16:
WHEN: HOW LONG CAN I LAST?

1. Do you feel you have hit this stage of Perplexity yet? Or would you locate yourself more in Simplicity or Complexity?
2. When do you recall feeling the agony of *when* or *how long* most acutely in your life? Have you ever felt the fear that your faith wouldn't last or survive a tough time, as described by the author?
3. Which line from the hymns in this chapter most resonates with you?
4. How would you describe the strongest spiritual aspiration in your life these days? Are there prayers of exasperation and desperation arising within you too?

CHAPTER 17:
WHEN: SURVIVAL IS UNDERRATED

1. How would you describe the gap between your dreams and your present reality at this stage in your life? What kind of desire can grow in this gap?
2. What pressures—of aspiration, exasperation, and desperation—can you acknowledge building within your soul in recent months? On a scale of one to ten, how would you describe the pressure level?
3. Where do you feel a void in your life? What could this void be making space for?
4. Share your experience practicing *when* or *how long*.

CHAPTER 18: NO: THE VOID EXPANDS

1. The author presents four possible resolutions to the problem of evil. How do you respond to these four options? Do you know people who have chosen each one?
2. Have you ever experienced a period of spiritual rage and refusal? What initiated it? What did it feel like? How did it end?
3. How do you respond to the Psalms presented in this chapter? What surprised you in them, and what comforted you?
4. If a friend was feeling *No!* but was afraid to express it, what would you say?
5. What would you want a friend to say or do—or not say or do—to help you if you were in a place of rage and refusal?

CHAPTER 19: NO: MAD WITH GOD

1. Can you put yourself in the place of people reading the Megillat Hashoah? What would this liturgy do for you?
2. How easy is it for you to distinguish, as this chapter asks you to do, between “the G-d we hope exists” and “the G-d who apparently exists?”
3. What’s the closest you’ve experienced to *peripeteia*? What temptations did you face in that “zone”?

4. What in the recounting of the Job story most touched, intrigued, or bothered you?
5. Have you ever written a poem or prayer of “lament and fury”? If not, why not, and if so, what was the experience like?
6. If you know that you would enter a zone of *peripeteia* six months from now, what would you write in a letter to yourself to help you cope?

CHAPTER 20:

WHY: WHEN YOU HAVE COME TO ZERO

1. Talk about the ironies and tensions in the simple word “why.”
2. Describe how the Bible would look to a person in Stage 1, Stage 2, and now at the end of Stage 3.
3. What line or image from the Lamentations passage most touches, inspires, helps, or frustrates you?
4. The author says, “To be abandoned is to find out how real you are.” How would you express this statement in your own words? Does it resonate with your own experience in any way?

CHAPTER 21:

WHY: HOLDING THE QUESTION OPEN

1. Are you surprised that Jesus would use the words “abandoned” or “forsaken” with God? Why?

2. The author distinguishes between two meanings of the word “reason”—cause (referring to a plan in the past) and possibility (referring to good that can be pursued in the present and future). Try to explain what this distinction means and why it’s important.
3. The author speaks of naked honesty in this chapter; how is naked honesty important to naked spirituality? Why do we often feel a tension between naked honesty and spirituality?
4. The author speaks of “falling into the G-d below you.” What happens when you shift your thinking from God being exclusively above you to God also being below you?
5. Experiment with the “expanding circle of empathy” described by the author near the end of the chapter. Share your experiences of practicing *why*.

CHAPTER 22:

BEHOLD: THE EMERGENCE OF THE MEDITATIVE MIND

1. Describe an experience of resurrection or a *behold* moment in your life.
2. Describe the four kinds of seeing mentioned in this chapter—dualistic, multiplex, relativistic, and meditative.
3. The author returns to a theme he has touched on previously: making a distinction between the God “out there” in reality and the image of God “in here” in our

thoughts. Why do you think this theme is so important in his exploration of naked spirituality?

4. The author says, “I can’t explain how the transfer of trust from God to G-d happened, only that it was messy, slow, reiterative and terrifying. And wonderful.” Does this statement make sense to you? Have you experienced anything like this in your spiritual life?
5. Go back and re-read the epigrams that begin each chapter. Pause on one that grabs your attention and practice the slow, meditative, receptive seeing described in this chapter.

CHAPTER 23:

BEHOLD: FAITH BEYOND BELIEF

1. The author repeats the terms “slow” and “reverent” and keeps referring to “wonder.” Why are these words so important in relation to meditative beholding? What makes this kind of beholding so rare among us?
2. The author playfully invents a word: “wonderstanding.” What does that word say to you?
3. Respond to the story recounted by the author about beholding the goodness of God. What feelings and thoughts are evoked within you from this story?
4. Try one or all of the three beholding experiments proposed in this chapter—a public place, a natural place, and an uncomfortable place. Share your experiences.

5. Did you have any *behold* moments while reading this chapter? Were you tempted to hurry through them? Were you able to slow down and savor them?

CHAPTER 24: YES: A UNIVERSAL SPIRITUAL VOCATION

1. This chapter begins with the idea of moving downward, descending from meditation to service. How do you respond to this idea of downward mobility?
2. Have you had decisive moments of commitment and consecration in your spiritual life? Describe what led up to them, what they involved, and what they led to.
3. The author says, “... our *yes* must become, not simply an event, but a practice.” In some ways, that is a primary theme of this book. Talk about the relationship between events (or decisive spiritual *experiences*) and practices (leading to ongoing spiritual *experience*) in your life.
4. How have public worship gatherings and special rituals, days, and seasons helped you in practicing the *yes* of consecration? Have other practices helped you more?

CHAPTER 25: YES: DO YOU LOVE ME?

1. What most struck you in the story of Peter and Jesus on the shore?

2. Peter evades Jesus's call by referring to a fellow disciple: "What about him?" In what ways are you most tempted to evade your callings to growth, sacrifice, and service?
3. The author links the *yes* of consecration and surrender to an acceptance of death. Reflect on this linkage, and on your own attitudes to death.
4. *Yes* is a response to a particular invitation: *to join God*. What does it mean to you *to join God*?
5. Share your experience practicing *yes*.

CHAPTER 26: [...]: NAKED, CLOTHED IN SILENCE

1. *Blank canvas, empty space, silence*—the author describes these as good and precious. Describe in your own words why silence would have such a special value in the spiritual life.
2. What person in your life has been a great listener? What role in your life has this person's listening played? In what ways can you see God as Listener?
3. The author describes his frustration with contemplative silence, especially in his younger years. Have you shared that frustration? Why or why not?
4. Reflect on the experience of the guitarist and pianist described in this chapter. What does this story tell you or help you understand?
5. The author concludes this chapter: "And could it be that contemplation is the pause button that freezes time

so that we listen to the Listening and witness the Witness?” Respond to this question.

CHAPTER 27:
[...]: FULL CIRCLE

1. Follow the spiritual director’s advice in this chapter. Share your experience.
2. Try holding in your imagination the image of the resting child from Psalm 131. As you hold this image, with you as the child and God as the mother, what emotions arise within you?
3. Restate the author’s description of the contemplative and charismatic approaches to experiencing God. Which of those approaches comes more naturally to you, and why? What might you gain by exposing yourself to the alternative approach?
4. Respond to this statement: “There is nothing more radically activist than a truly spiritual life, and there is nothing more truly spiritual than a radically activist life.”
5. Why do you think the author concludes this chapter with the image of diving naked into a river? How does that image affect you?

AFTERWORD:
THE SEA TOWARD WHICH ALL RIVERS RUN

1. “Love is the last word,” the author says. Looking back over the hours you have invested reading this book, how has your understanding of the word “love” been enriched?
2. Respond to the statement, “Spirituality is love.”
3. What have been the highlights of this book for you? How has it affected you? What do you think you will do differently as a result of reading it?
4. Who do you think would enjoy reading this book? Why would you recommend it to them?
5. In an online interview about the book, the author said, “My prayer and hope for this book is that it will render readers more vulnerable to God’s presence in their daily lives.” Why do you think he used the word “vulnerable”? To what degree has his hope been fulfilled for you as a reader?
6. If you have a schedule or a calendar program on your computer, pick a date about one month, three months, six months, and one year from today. Choose four passages from this book that you would like to remind yourself to go back and read at each date, and enter a reminder to read the relevant page number on those four dates. What pages did you choose, and why do you want to be reminded of them?

APPENDICES

1. Who would you like to invite to form a reading group to practice the twelve simple words?
2. How could you make use of the body prayers in Appendix B socially in a small group, class, church service, retreat, or privately in your home?
3. How could the twelve simple prayers be incorporated into a small group, class, church service, retreat, or family time?
4. Have you checked out the additional resources on the author's website? What resources were helpful to you, and why?