

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Eyes of the Heart

by

Frederick Buechner

1. Frederick Buechner speculates about the meaning of life, death, and the afterlife. He concludes that given tragedies, betrayals, and losses, life is either a black comedy or a mystery. He chooses the latter, writing, “It feels as though, at the innermost heart of it, there is Holiness” (p. 16). Do you agree or disagree with Buechner’s conclusion? Why?
2. Buechner recalls his mother’s last words to him, when she said, “Why do you hate me?” and shortly thereafter, “You have always been my hero” (p. 20). Why would his mother regard him as a hero if she felt he hated her?
3. Writing about his late friend, the poet James Merrill, Buechner regretted that, in a particular publication, Merrill disclosed too much about the intimate details of his life. And yet Buechner himself has written sev-

eral volumes in which he discloses intimate personal details. For those whose lives have been challenging, do you think it is helpful or harmful to share details with the public? Why or why not? Are personal details ever inappropriate in a public forum?

4. Buechner reveals that during his early school years, he and James “Jimmy” Merrill called themselves the Ugliers: “Bookish, introspective, completely nonathletic and [who] tended to feel awkward and helpless and lost” (p. 45). Have you ever thought of yourself as someone who didn’t quite fit in? If so, how? Have you been able to overcome these negative feelings and embrace your identity?
5. Buechner talks about his “Magic Kingdom,” the corner of his home where he does his work and collects photos, first editions of literary heroes, and meaningful trinkets given by readers. He says these items speak to him in their silence (p. 50). Do you have a room or a place that is your magic kingdom? What is in it? How does it speak to you?
6. Buechner imagines what counsel he would have given his father before his parents’ marriage—something like “don’t do it. Get out of it any way you can” (p. 61). Why do you think Buechner would give such advice to his father? What advice might you give a lost loved one if you could turn back the clock?
7. His grandmother, Buechner remembers, shed tears over small things, but “when it came to the devastating things, I cannot see her crying, maybe because she was

- too busy surviving” (p. 66). What are your thoughts about Buechner’s grandmother’s reaction to difficult circumstances? Have you ever known someone who faced tragic events in similar ways?
8. When it comes to how we view ourselves before God, Buechner suggests that rather than being filled with self-reproach and sinfulness, we ought to pray (quoting Marcus Borg), “We are Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, and we beseech you for liberation” (p. 76). Does this perspective resonate with you? Why or why not?
 9. In Buechner’s imaginary conversation, his grandmother Naya describes the moment she left this world for the next as being like “stepping out of a dark house into the greater dark of night” (p. 78). What do you make of this description? Is this the way you would describe death and the afterlife?
 10. Contemplating Rembrandt’s beautiful painting *Return of the Prodigal Son*, Buechner notes a look of exhaustion in both the father and the son, concluding, “It hardly matters which is the father and which the son” (p. 92). If it doesn’t matter, what does this suggest about the meaning of the story?
 11. Buechner frequently mentions seemingly insignificant elements of everyday life that carry cosmic significance for him. As examples, he cites finding a heart-shaped stone and seeing a license plate bearing the word *TRUST* at a critical point when he needed encouragement. Do you believe in such “messages”? Have you

ever experienced a moment when you felt that something small actually carried much greater significance?

12. “If God lives and loves . . . it is in ourselves no less than everywhere else, in the godless no less than the godliest” (p. 97). In what way might God live and love in the godless?
13. Writing about his family of origin—both ancestral and immediate—Buechner asserts that each family on earth comprises its own “magic kingdom” and that the “spells it casts are long-lasting and powerful” (p. 100). How do you interpret this image? Would you say this is true about your own family?
14. Buechner quotes the verse in Ephesians 1:18 where Paul writes about “having the eyes of your heart enlightened that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.” Buechner then asserts that the eyes of the heart open up every kingdom of magic (p. 165). What do you see through the eyes of your own heart? Has reading this book contributed in any way to your own enlightenment?