

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

A Severe Mercy

by

Sheldon Vanauken

1. Sheldon Vanauken writes about his wife, Davy: “If any single word captures the essence of her—the *mot juste* for her, always—it is that: eager” (p. 26). What word captures your essence? What do you think your family and friends would say? What do you *want* your word to be?
2. Davy and Sheldon formulate many ideas about what their love should be in the early stages of their relationship, creating what they called “the Shining Barrier.” Do you agree with Sheldon’s statement that “the killer of love is creeping separateness” (p. 37)? How do you work to keep separateness out of your relationship?
3. Sheldon and Davy decide not to have children because children would be “separating” (p. 37). If you have children, have they been a separating experience for

you and your love? How might you counteract that tendency?

4. Sheldon and Davy develop the following principles for their marriage: total sharing, total trust, spontaneity, the affirmative, and courtesy. Which of these principles do you think is most overlooked in our concept of love today? Which do you find yourself struggling with the most? If you are married, what principles is your marriage based on?
5. At the beginning of their relationship, Sheldon and Davy agree that they cannot support Christianity. But once they reach Oxford, they come in contact with Christians who change their conceptions (p. 77). Have you ever had an experience where you assumed a group of people was one thing only to have your assumption refuted? Have there been Christians in your life whom you felt were helpful, positive examples to non-Christians?
6. As Sheldon and Davy explore the foundations of Christianity, Sheldon comes to an astonishing realization: now that he knows about the Christian God, he has to either accept or reject him. And while accepting him is a chasm he isn't ready to jump over, rejecting him feels unfathomable. Have you ever thought about the Christian faith that way? If so, how did you come to terms with this decision?
7. In a letter to Sheldon, C. S. Lewis says: "I think there is a great deal to be said for having one's deepest spiritual interest distinct from one's ordinary duty as a student

or professional man. . . . I've always been glad myself that Theology is not the thing I earn my living by" (pp. 105–6). Though it may not have been the thing he made his living by, theology is definitely what C. S. Lewis became known for. Do you agree with Lewis's statement? Why or why not?

8. Once both become Christians, Davy's dedication to her faith frustrates Sheldon, and he misses their days of being wrapped up in beauty. "I didn't want us to be swallowed up in God. I wanted holidays from the school of Christ" (p. 136). Have you ever felt this way about your faith? What do we sacrifice when we pledge total commitment to God?
9. When Sheldon learns of Davy's impending death, he has a pivotal moment when he prays for Davy's good, not his own good (p. 159). He later says: "That offering-up . . . was perhaps my nearest approach to holiness" (p. 188). How might her good have been different from his own? Have you ever selflessly given up what you wanted and prayed for what is best? How does that act define holiness?
10. As Sheldon grieves, he looks for meaning in Davy's death. Why do we seek to find meaning in our tragedies? How can this kind of investigation fuel our desire to keep on living despite the emptiness caused by the death of a loved one?
11. When contemplating the life that he and Davy led, Sheldon reflects on the human experience of being constantly "harried by time" (p. 203). He goes on to

describe heaven as the moment when “the ticking has stopped” (p. 204). In what ways do you feel hurried by time? How might you seek to experience more of eternity now by fighting that tendency?

12. The Grey Goose was the dream that Sheldon and Davy pursued in the early years of their relationship, before they became Christians. It was their “glimpse of joy,” and Sheldon later called it “a foretaste of eternity” (p. 233). What goal or experience in your life serves that purpose?
13. When C. S. Lewis writes to Sheldon after Davy’s death, he reflects on the fact that all love has to end. In response, Sheldon writes: “Would I not rather our love go through death than hate?” (p. 216). How do you respond to Sheldon’s statement? Do you agree? Or would you rather have more years with your loved one, even though your love might fade or die over time?