

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Now and Then

by

Frederick Buechner

1. Frederick Buechner opens this memoir with an assertion: “If God speaks to us at all other than through such official channels as the Bible and the church, then I think that he speaks to us largely through what happens to us” (p. 3). What has God spoken to you about through the events of your own life?
2. Writing about his conversion to Christianity, Buechner indicates that he astonished almost everybody, including himself. Further, he had no idea whom he was going to serve, “if anybody” (p. 5). How can one convert, yet not have a clue about what it really means? If you consider yourself a Christian, what were your initial reactions after you decided to follow Christ?
3. Buechner quotes theologian Paul Tillich: “No particular religion matters, neither ours nor yours. But I want

to tell you that something has happened that matters, something that judges you and me, your religion and my religion. A New Creation has occurred, a New Being has appeared. . . . [H]ere and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ” (p. 14). If no religion matters, why do you think Tillich rounds out his statement by claiming Christ as the one through whom the New Creation is manifest?

4. Buechner’s professor, James Muilenburg, once exhorted his students: “Before you reaffirm your faith in the majesty of a loving God, before you say *I believe* for another day, read the *Daily News* with its record of the latest crimes” (p. 16). What is the benefit of such an exercise? Perhaps try the exercise yourself and discuss what you find.
5. As a teacher at Exeter, Buechner challenged his students to consider a life of faith, quoting Kierkegaard: “What no person has a right to is to delude others into the belief that faith is something of no great significance, or that it is an easy matter, whereas it is the greatest and most difficult of all things” (p. 50). In what way might this passage encourage others about the life of faith?
6. Comparing Buddha to Christ, Buechner describes the former sitting under the Bodhi tree, eyes closed, seeking emotional detachment. He then describes Christ kneeling in the garden of Gethsemane, “his face lost in

the shadows” and his eyes also closed. “The suffering that Buddha’s eyes close out is the suffering of the world that Christ’s eyes close in and hallow. It is an extraordinary difference” (pp. 53–54). How do you understand the difference between Buddha’s closed eyes and Christ’s? What does it help you understand about the character of Christ?

7. Buechner says his novels begin “with a lump in the throat” (p. 59), spilling onto the paper the deepest human truths, as he understands them. Why do you think the process of writing the human story begins “with a lump in the throat”? Does your story begin that way?
8. Buechner wrestles with the notion that inside everyone there is a voice of doubt and disbelief that seeks to drown out prayers “even as we were praying them” (p. 63). What does your voice of doubt whisper to you? Which voice wins the battle—the praying voice or the doubting voice?
9. “I am such a hopelessly verbal person that even as I pray, I hear myself praying and worry about the words. I find it all but impossible to rise above the paragraphs of my own blubbing” (p. 64). Do you ever feel this way when you pray? Can deep prayer be silent? Or do you think prayer is more effective when spoken aloud?
10. Buechner exhorts us to listen to our lives and see the fathomless mystery found in both pain and gladness (p. 87). What do you hear your life saying when you take time to listen?

11. “Words—especially religious words, words that have to do with the depth of things—get tired and stale the way people do” (p. 93). Can you think of a new way to express old religious truths? For example, what might be a fresh way to communicate the well-known phrase from John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”?
12. Buechner explains how his use of the first-person narrator in his *Bebb* novels liberates him and enables him to recreate himself through that character. If you were to create a first-person narrator of your story, what would be three liberating attributes this character might possess?
13. Creating the character Bebb, Buechner says, taught him how to be braver about exposing himself (p. 101). What might a character you create teach you about yourself?
14. Buechner asserts that in the long run, whether you call on him or not, God is present with you. If our eyes were open, we would see that all moments are “key moments” (p. 108). Do you agree with the notion that God is present whether we call on him or not? Can you think of any key moments you might have recently overlooked?