

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Alphabet of Grace

by

Frederick Buechner

1. In comparing the movements of God in everyday life to the apparatus of language (soft sounds, hard consonants, gutturals), Frederick Buechner calls his book “graffiti” through which “I have scratched up in a public place my longings and loves, my grievances and indecencies” (p. viii). Do you perceive God’s movements in this way? If so, which do you hear more of—soft sounds or hard consonants?
2. Buechner writes, “Part of what it means to believe in God, at least part of what it means for me, is to believe in the possibility of miracle” (p. 7). Do miracles play a part regarding your belief in God? If they don’t play a part, why not? Do you believe in miracles? Have you experienced any?

3. Buechner writes at length about the glimmers of grace appearing through mundane moments, such as the clacking of two branches in a tree (pp. 7–8). Have you ever experienced glimmers of grace in a mundane moment? How did you know that it was grace?
4. Poetry, history, the wisdom of the sages, and the holiness of the saints are made available and tangible to us in the alphabet, Buechner says—letters that form words that speak to us. He calls it “incarnation, breath becoming speech through teeth and tongue” (p. 11). What does this suggest about the power of both the written and the spoken word? Has the power of words been cheapened in today’s “texting” world? Conversely, has our language gained anything through modern technology?
5. In keeping with his overarching metaphor of language, Buechner says, when describing the way God communicates, that the alphabet of grace is full of gutturals: “There is no image too far-fetched, no combination of sounds too harsh, no spelling too irregular, no allusion too obscure or outrageous” (p. 13). What do you think Buechner means by this? How do gutturals, or seemingly harsh, obscure, or irregular moments in life, point to God’s good and holy grace?
6. To wake up to a new day, Buechner asserts, is to be given back the world and the chance to bring order to the chaos of our lives: “Out of many fragments we are called to put back together a self again” (p. 22). Do you

possess this sense of possibility when you arise to a new day? What fragments of your life have you tried to put back together?

7. Buechner tells us to watch our feet because where our feet take us, that is who we are (p. 25). Where do your feet take you? Do you like where you are?
8. Expanding upon the notion of what it means to wake to a new day, Buechner writes: “Life is grace. Sleep is forgiveness” (p. 25). How does this play out in your life, if at all?
9. Buechner suggests a prayer: “Out of the depths of my face I cry unto thee that of thy grace, thy mercy and miracle, thou wilt make me more than my face” (pp. 27–28). What might it mean to ask God to make us “more than our faces”? How might we pray something similar?
10. One of the most precious gifts of our humanness is the ability to act spontaneously, without “the paralyzing intervention of self-awareness” (p. 35). Can you recall a time in your life when you acted freely, without self-consciousness or uncertainty? How did you feel?
11. Buechner says there is power in somebody calling you by name, likening it to the image of God the Father touching holy life into Adam in Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* (p. 38). Does this describe how you feel when someone calls your name? If not, how does that act make you feel?

12. “The alphabet of grace is full of sibilants—sounds that can’t be shouted, only whispered” (p. 50). What might Buechner mean by this? Do you agree? Can you think of a moment of grace that was as gentle as a sibilant?
13. Buechner says that a miracle takes place when you shake hands with someone using your left hand, suggesting that it catches the recipient off guard and renders that person incapable of giving a bland, pat answer when you ask how he or she is (pp. 60–61). Have you tried this? Did it have the same effect? Can you think of another kind of personal interaction that might produce a “miraculous” effect?
14. Describing an individual from one of his novels, Buechner notes how the debris of this character’s life has accumulated to the point that it nearly buries everything inside him. Yet the character’s “tell-tale heart can go on beating still” (p. 75). In other words, despite the layers of interior struggle, the human heart keeps trying to live and grow in positive ways. Is there debris in your life that has built up over many years? In what ways has your heart “kept beating”—trying to grow positively? Have you thought about cleaning up the layers of debris?
15. “It is my game and I must believe also my calling in this high-ceilinged room to journey into myself, into the place where dreams come from, into the night, and not wishing to frighten anything away, I go there unarmed. Thus thoughts I do not choose to think choose me to think them” (p. 81). What do you make of Buechner’s

sentiment? What might it feel like for you to enter unarmed “into yourself”? What types of thoughts do you think you would encounter there?

16. Buechner says that, just as there is a will to be known in the human heart, there is also a will to remain hidden (p. 88). Is your heart more inclined to want to be known or to hide?
17. “The most crucial thing is always the thing that is not said” (p. 109). How can this be so? Have you experienced it?
18. How does *The Alphabet of Grace* help you understand God’s grace in new ways? Try choosing one aspect of language—whispers, gutturals, even sighs—through which you perceive God’s movements. Reflect upon this aspect over the next few days. Think about how, hearing it, you are growing nearer to God.