

*An Altar in the World* by Barbara Brown Taylor

**Book Discussion and Spiritual Practices Guide**

*Introduction*

If you sought out this resource, chances are that you are searching for More. How is that taking shape in your life? What prompted you to seek out More?

Like

A pair

Of mismatched newlyweds,

One of whom still feels very insecure,

I keep turning to God

Saying,

"Kiss

Me."

-Hafiz

In the intro and first chapter, we get really beautiful images and questions about meeting God, about what different kinds of God language and God spaces might be possible.

But what stood out to me most of all was the simple question:

*"What is saving your life right now?" (pg xvii)*

What God language and God space is saving you? What ordinary practices, noticing, people, and things have been God's presence for you this week?

## **Chapter 1: The Practice of Waking Up to God**

This week our practice is to make an altar or prayer corner in our homes. If you have one already, spend some time considering it, and if it may be time to change or shift a bit, or just enjoy what's there. Any kind of spiritual practice or ritual can root us, and by intentionally acknowledging a place to encounter God at home, we are building the spiritual muscle that enables us to encounter God at little altars all throughout our lives.

This space can be as big or small as your space allows, and as simple as a designated chair or elaborate as a shrine. I know some folks who have an entire closet or room while others make a tv tray! Some ideas to include are books or a Bible, treasures that are meaningful to you, things from nature, a candle, icons or pictures – things that remind you of your connection to God and invite you to pause, breathe, and pray. (Remember that even as we intentionally cultivate a spot, we can hold this space loosely, as our author reminds us that we might be tempted to “build a house so that we can choose when to see God.”)

In Chapter 1, the author notes that she is not (and we are not!) in control or in charge of God's house—who is in our out, or what the rules of epiphany are (pg. 13-15). Have you had an unwelcome epiphany, a reluctant recognition of God's presence? What was that like? What brought you to see that God was near in an unexpected or unwanted way?

This week, what are you learning from paying attention to scripture? What are you learning from paying attention to the world? How can you follow the example of John the Baptist, who recognized who Jesus was, and proclaim these learnings about God?

## **Chapter 2: The Practice of Paying Attention**

As an Episcopal priest, the author connects frequently to Holy Communion, but in chapter 2, writes of grocery shopping and cooking a chicken.

*“Regarded properly, anything can become a sacrament, by which I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection.” (pg. 30)*

This week, choose a time when you will prepare food for yourself or others with sacramental intention. As much as possible, slow down in your selection, preparation and cooking, and serving. Consider the origins of each ingredient. Notice the motions and tasks required to assemble your meal. Give thanks. Eat without technology or distraction, savoring flavors and textures.

To remedy frustration with “particular humans,” pay attention to them when you can. (pg. 27) Today, pay attention to someone—close in relation or distant, a member of your household or the person next to you in traffic. What did you notice? What feelings or learnings were stirred up in the pause of that attention?

Read the story on pg. 32 of the woman who was afraid of the night. Have you ever had the experience of turning fear into attention and beauty? What happened?

### **Chapter 3: The Practice of Wearing Skin**

Take a moment to pause in your reading this week and check in on how this chapter makes you feel. Are you uncomfortable? Elated? Embarrassed? If any big feelings are coming up as you read, where are you feeling them in your body?

With a smile or with dread, you may have already guessed it: this chapter's spiritual practice is the author's own suggestion to take a look at your body, all of it, in the light of day. Let this practice be uncomfortable. Let it be full of wonder and gratitude. Let it be observant. Let it be a prayer. See what it is like to "practice a little reverence right there in front of the mirror," reverence for God and for yourself (pg. 38).

*In reading this chapter, I'm reminded of 1 Corinthians 6:19. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?"*

How have you understood that verse in the past? How do you hear that in light of this chapter from *An Altar in the World*?

Do you do any work with your body? Whether it's typing, lifting, planting, carrying, wiping, walking, looking...take notice today of the body's labor. Observe the connection of your brain and body, of functions that are unconscious and those that require intentional focus. Notice what motions are full of ease or discomfort. After you notice, remember Barbara Brown Taylor's simple observation, "This is good work, this prayer. This is good prayer, this work."

## **Chapter 4: The Practice of Walking on the Earth**

If you have access in your church or community to a labyrinth, pay it a visit. You can even search in your area--most churches or retreat centers with this prayer space leave it open to visitors. If this is not available to your home, schedule or body, print off a copy of a paper labyrinth and trace it with your finger. Notice the movement in and out, the winding about without getting lost. If this practice is new or strange to you, give it a few goes before passing judgement. See how it feels to acclimate to a journey that can be taken without worry for the destination.

On pg. 60, the author writes about walking meditation for those who can't walk. Have you ever had the experience of careful attention that she describes, watching others' movement and being caught up into it?

Today, even if it is just for a moment, watch someone walking. Notice their body physics, listen for the weight of their body leaving and arriving the floor. It could be your partner or your child or strangers at the store. Let the watching be a prayer of gratitude on behalf of yourself and on behalf of the walker.

I love the description of different ways of praying and body movement described on pg. 63-65. For many Western Christians, praying with our bodies is just plain odd. One prayer posture that might be familiar to us, though, is kneeling. If you are able, spend some time kneeling or sitting on the ground in prayer. See how the reconfiguration of your body posture affects the posture of your spirit.

## **Chapter 5: The Practice of Getting Lost**

Today, revisit the first two pages of the chapter. What is your cow path? What is your place of least resistance, the default, unthinking way? The cow path isn't a bad thing in itself--we make routines to live and flourish. But today, consider how this well worn, usual way serves you, and how it might be limiting you. Where is it life giving, and where is it keeping you away from unknown opportunities to see God at work?

*"In this culture, the point is to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible, even if that means you miss most of the territory, including the packed dirt under your feet. Sometimes this is because you are doing at least five other things while you are in transit, including talking on the phone, listening to the radio, drinking a mocha latte, checking your text messages, telling your dog to get back in the backseat, and checking out how good you look in your sunglasses." (pg. 85)*

This week, practice fasting from all of these things during your travel. Simply sit in the space (of your vehicle, bus, waiting room, etc.). Most cell phones have an option to set up "do not disturb." Try it out. Hit mute. Resist the urge to check your notifications or take care of that one little thing real quick. Notice if you get antsy about wasting multitask time. Notice what you can hear and see without all the extras.

This reminder (on pg. 82-83) is so powerful:

*"Anything can become a spiritual practice -- once you are willing to approach it that way--once you let it bring you to your knees and show you what is real, including who you really are, who other people are, and how near God can be when you have lost your way."*

Today, let the good and the bad and the mundane Monday things bring you to your knees and show you what is real. What can be a spiritual practice for you today?

## Chapter 6: The Practice of Encountering Others

In chapter 6 we get a quick look at the story of Mary and Martha as the author explains her own introversion. Today I invite you to read that passage (Luke 10:38-42) with a modified Ignatian exercise.

- If it's helpful to you, before you begin, check out the passages on either side of this one to get a sense of when and where Jesus was engaging these sisters.
- Read the text through a few times, maybe out loud.
- After you have spent a little time with the text, close your Bible (or your app) and close your eyes.
- Try to recreate the scene in your head, and don't hesitate to let your imagination fill in the details and fill your senses. Spend some time there. "Look" around.
- Notice what or who you are in the scene. What is your perspective? This does not have to be someone of your same gender. It doesn't even have to be a "someone"-- it might be a "something," and your perspective might move.
- Notice how you are feeling about or engaging with Jesus in this scene. See what's capturing your imagination.
- Let the scene conclude in your imagination, and spend a few moments in quiet. If comfortable doing so, open your hands in your lap, palms up in a gesture of openness to what this reading and prayer is speaking or questioning.

Have you ever gone to great lengths or big adventures to find "divine union"? (pg 92)  
What did you try? Where did you go? What happened?

*In the story of going as a guest to Shabbat meal, the author thinks about purity codes in the New Testament in a new way, and says, "[The ritual] was less the issue than who did it and how they encountered one another--with love or enmity, from the desire to include or divide? The issue was not the ritual but the relationships."*

Have you ever found yourself in the midst of a ritual and forgotten this truth? What reconnected you to the people in your community or to God?

## Chapter 7: The Practice of Living with Purpose

Today as we move into Chapter 7 and reflect on purpose and vocation for a few days, I want to offer this prayer, the Prayer of St. Francis, to accompany our reading:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

*"I thought there was one particular thing I was supposed to do with my life. I thought God had a purpose for me and my main job was to discover what it was...The one night when my whole heart was open to hearing from God what I was supposed to do with my life, God said, 'Anything that pleases you.'" (pg. 108, 110)*

Have you had the idea and drive that there was one particular thing? What did you think it was? Where did that lead?

What is the work that feeds your soul? What is the work that doesn't feed your soul, but still has to get done? This weekend and week as you do these different forms of labor, see how you might contribute to kindness, engage with others and the world.

*On pg. 119, the author talks about the ghost of life when we spend our time and heart focusing on a call from God that is not the work we are doing.*

How do you balance the pull to continually seek and discern with the call to be faithful and root where you're planted?



## **Chapter 8: The Practice of Saying No**

Today as we dive into the chapter on saying "no" and sabbath, think of the most recent things you have said "yes" and "no" to. Focus on recent, not necessarily significant, as recent as this morning and as small as "yes to cream in my coffee," "no to the comment I felt like making but wouldn't have been constructive," or "yes to my alarm and no to the snooze button." Think about the impacts large or small of this small choice.

What does "Sabbath" mean to you? What have you been taught about this idea? Do you keep Sabbath? If so, what does that look like?

*On page 124, the author describes the kind of frantic thoughts that keep us from rest, and says, "I know you do not sleep well."*

Do you sleep well? If so, share your habits and attitudes that help good sleep. If not, consider whether a different sort of rhythm and practice might better serve that basic need for rest.

*"There is no talking about the loss of the Sabbath, then, without also talking about the rise of consumerism." (pg 130)*

How did this line sit with you? What experience do you have in saying "no" to stuff, possessions, buying? Do you find that physical clutter impacts spiritual space?

## **Chapter 9: The Practice of Carrying Water**

Chapter 9 opens with the author's vivid description of snow days without power and the manual labor that required. Have you had an occasion for un-chosen physical labor? Or does your daily life hold manual labor? How did the snow story connect or diverge from your own experience?

This chapter reminds us: "From dust we came and to dust we shall return," and we are encouraged to get in touch with earthiness. This week when you find your fingernails dirty or sweat on your brow--whether that's from gardening or caring for children or exercising or cleaning--take a moment to pause before you wash. Notice the soiling of your body in its work, and give thanks for the work.

*"I did not want to get dirt under my fingernails. I did not want to sweat." (pg 148)*

Have you ever come to manual labor reluctantly? What was the chore, and how did it affect you?

*"Life offers no shortage of opportunities to engage in physical labor...However the openings come to you, they offer you the chance to bear the reality of the universe in your flesh like a thorn." (pg. 153)*

What are the opportunities or openings to physically work and engage today? They may be small and routine or large and taxing, but see how it feels to see them as a chance to bear reality, to greet them with love.

## **Chapter 10: The Practice of Feeling Pain**

This chapter might be a tender one for some--all the anxiety of the chapter on bodies plus a healthy measure of fear and aversion. As you read this week, pause at the

sentences or descriptions that catch your attention or catch your breath. Sit with a journal or some quiet and think about experience of pain, whether physical or emotional, that you are remembering. If it doesn't hurt too much, jot down what you remember, the sensations in your body and feelings in your heart and mind. Hold this hard practice and hard chapter as a prayer and labor of love.

The problem of evil, called "theodicy," is one that doesn't go away. Individually and as a whole community and history of believers, we come back to it again and again. What answers to the problem of evil have you heard? Which ones were helpful? Which ones are harmful? How has the question of suffering changed for you over the course of your life?

*"I began the kind of bargaining with God that I do not even believe in, and when that did not work I called God's honor into question. I begged God to do something. I dared God to do something. Finally, close to dawn, I found myself turning away from the God in charge of pain removal toward the God who had stayed with me through the pain no matter what I said." (158)*

Have you experienced this path of prayer from ideas of God you don't even really affirm or trust through to the God who is, simply is?

## **Chapter 11: The Practice of Being Present to God**

What is your definition of prayer? What does prayer do or what is it for?

*"We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed."*

— Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

What little thing(s) can you do for the love of God today?

*"I do not know anyone who prays very long without running into the wall of God's apparent nonresponsiveness." (181)*

How do or when have you experienced God's apparent nonresponsiveness? How do you manage to keep showing up when it seems like maybe God isn't?

Have you waited on God as a form of praying?

Today, read the author's description of her altar on page 191, then revisit yours (the spiritual practice in the first chapter). Take a few moments to simply be there and wait. Even if nothing emerges, no epiphany comes, remember that the waiting is a prayer.

## **Chapter 12: The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings**

There is a vulnerability in pronouncing blessings, in earnestly expressing goodness and gratitude over a person or thing. Today, think about where or to whom you can give a blessing. Does it feel a little scary? Why?

*"Anyone can do this. Anyone can ask and anyone can bless...the world needs you to do this." (208)*

As we part ways after this sweet, rich, sometimes challenging six weeks of reading and praying along together, may your journey with the Spirit be full of surprises, maybe you stretch and strengthen your muscles of attention and empathy, and may you never cease to be amazed at the beauty, goodness, and presence of God. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, and go in peace to bless the world in which you live!