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Discussion Guide

Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred

by Victoria Loorz

Book Description

When faced with an unraveling vocation, identity, and planet, Victoria Loorz went in search of a spirituality by diving deeply into the sanctuary of the natural world, eventually co-founding the *Wild Church Network* and *Seminary of the Wild*. Her book, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred*, is both a memoir and an exploration, through an ecospiritual lens, into biblical narratives of wilderness and community. Along the way, Loorz offers readers a fresh look at the community larger than our own species. *Church of the Wild* uncovers the wild roots of faith, and helps us deepen our commitment to a suffering earth by falling in love with it — and calling it church.

Author Victoria Loorz has been a frequent guest and collaborator with The BTS Center. A recording of her [Fireside Chat](#) with the BTS Center's Executive Director Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill is available on our website, and materials from the programs [Wild Spirituality: Restoring the Great Conversation](#) and [Courting the Particular: A Lenten season Community of Practice](#) have been incorporated into this discussion guide. Find more information about the author at her [website](#), and more information about the Wild Church Network at the [Center for Wild Spirituality](#).

About this Guide

The practice of conversation is at the heart of *Church of the Wild* — conversation with the natural world, with the Divine, and with one another. Therefore, this guide — whether used by an individual or with a group — is intended to stir, promote and support conversation. Whether you are an adult education facilitator in a congregational or communal setting, a spiritual director, someone curious about the wild church movement, or a solo reader, we hope you will bring your own curiosity and questions to augment what we have offered here. This experiential guide includes prompts for reflection — written, or verbal — as well as practices intended to draw you deeper into conversation, and therefore relationship, with your particular place in the world.

Process and Guidelines

Each of the nine sessions is tied to a chapter of *Church of the Wild*, and has four sections:

1. an invitation to identify a section of text to which you, and/or members of the group, are particularly drawn (we also provide some suggestions);
2. a prompt to share a story with one or two other people, or to respond to by journaling;
3. a question to inspire wondering; and
4. a wandering practice to help pay attention to the earthly elements in the particular place each of us calls home.

If you are offering this in a congregational setting, you might want to add an opening and/or closing ritual such as lighting a candle, a few moments of silence, or a poem or prayer.

Depending on the size of the group, you may want to offer opportunities for small group conversations (2 - 4 people) for some of the prompts and questions, or even allow some time for individual reflection and writing before starting conversations.

As each reader/conversationalist will bring their own experiences, worldview and understandings to the conversation, we suggest the group establish some guidelines to support authentic and respectful discussion. A question we sometimes ask to prompt the group for this is “What do you need to authentically participate with your full self?”

Key themes of the book

As you read the book, readying yourself for conversation, you might track some recurring concepts and themes, and note your own understandings and experiences related to them:

- Story
- Reciprocity, mutuality, connection, relationship
- Belonging, home, place, familiarity
- Interdependence
- Love and intimacy
- Brokenness, forgetting, separation, loss
- Objectification, domination, misuse, abuse
- The sacred, mystery, the Divine, God
- Transformation

Sessions by Chapter

Prologue and Chapter 1: “A Communion of Subjects”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

If you're having trouble choosing, here are a couple of our favorites:

“The wax in their ears became hardened, and their hearts pretended that they were happier controlling the world than loving it.” (p. x)

“I longed for a church to be a place where Mystery is experienced, not explained.” (p. 4)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: A place that was secret, or magical, to me as a child was...
3. Wonder: How (in what ways) has a particular place beckoned you into a deeper conversation or relationship?
4. Wander: *Note: the Wander practices for all the sessions will incorporate visits to your own [Sit Spot](#), a place outside in the natural world (or, at a window where you can see outside), where you can observe and be a part of the ongoing flow of life. It should be a place that is near to where you live or work, so it's easy to visit, and a place you are drawn to because of the elements of which it is constituted: perhaps a significant tree, a body of water, the play of light and shadow, etc. For those using this guide in a group, the Wander practices are intended to be done by oneself, in between sessions. Each session will provide a) directions for the practice to be done, and b) a prompt for sharing when the group next gathers. For this first session, share information from this note so everyone understands the practice of Sit Spots, and share the first Wander prompt. You may also want to turn to the “Resources” section of Church of the Wild and review the practice of Terra Divina (p. 223-228), “divine conversation” with the sacred land.”*

Wander Prompt: Choose, and visit, your Sit Spot. Now, attune to one sense at a time to the presence of beings nearby — in succession, smell, hearing, sight and touch:

Hear a tree? Keep listening...who else do you hear?

See a spider? Who else...?

Smell something wafting? Keep smelling...

Feel a rock? Who else...?

Make note of the company you have in your Spot today.

Chapter 2: “When You Realize Something Is Missing”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

If there are too many favorites to choose from, here are two of ours:

“The voice said, ‘You could spend your entire life looking from tree to tree and indeed, someday, you may find a more perfect one to sketch. But you will have spent your life looking and never seeing. Stop and love what is right before you.’” (p. 31)

[Brother David Steindl-Rast] said, “You know that the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest?...The antidote to exhaustion is *wholeheartedness*.” (p. 47)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: When I see what’s happening to the natural world, what breaks my heart is...
3. Wonder: Where have you experienced a very real feeling of belonging: “a clan and a language and a culture?”
4. Reflection on the previous Wander: How did you choose your Sit Spot? Who called to you?

Wander Prompt: Choose a tree (or, allow yourself to be chosen by a tree) near or at your Sit Spot. As you approach Tree, ask permission to draw near and lean against Tree's trunk so that you're looking at the world from Tree's perspective. Linger in that posture. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you notice? What do you feel? (If you would like to deepen this practice further, see this article on “Befriending a Tree” in [Emergence Magazine](#))

Chapter 3: “Into the Mountains to Pray”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

Here are two of our favorites:

“...the difference between being *from* a place and being *of* a place...it’s the difference between hiking *to* a waterfall by hiking along a trail in the forest and consciously walking *into* a forest by investing time and attention to really get to know the waterfall, season after season, and establishing an authentic relationship.” (p. 58-59)

“The living world is where we can be opened up in receptivity to a divine encounter. There is an invitation here, offered to all of us: in order to listen for the holy, to engage in intimate conversation with the sacred, one goes into the wilderness. (p. 65)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: Some things I love about being alive on Earth are...
3. Wonder: What call have you received “into the wild?” In what ways are you yearning to respond?
4. Reflection on the previous Wander: What questions were stirred by your time with Tree?

Wander Prompt: Bring to your Sit Spot this verse of scripture to meditate upon: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” (Isa 40:3) Imagine the Sacred is calling you into relationship with the wilderness for a reason. Embrace the possibility that you may be allured into the wilderness to “prepare the way.”

Chapter 4: “Allured into the Wilderness”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

Here’s one of our favorites:

[John O’Donohue] says, “Reverence bestows dignity and it is only in the light of dignity that the beauty and mystery of a person will become visible.” The same applies to seeing the dignity of a tree or a place or even yourself. (p. 77)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: A time when I felt invited to saunter was...
3. Wonder: Is there some unlearning you need to do in order to “overcome a lifetime of compliance?” (p. 70)
4. Reflection on the previous Wander: In what ways are wilderness and the holy connected for you?

Wander Prompt: Standing at your Sit Spot, reach down and touch the ground, or as near to the ground as you’re able. Splay your fingers and press them into the earth. Then turn your palms to the sky and slowly begin to raise your hands above the earth, pausing every few inches to balance that patch of sky on your palms. Reach up as high as you’re able. Look up at your hands

and beyond your hands. What do you see? And what do you feel? Where does the sky begin?
And where does the sky end?

Chapter 5: “Restoring the Great Conversation”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

If you have trouble choosing, here’s one of our favorites:

... [David] Whyte shared, “...my identity depended not upon any beliefs I had...[but] actually depended on how much attention I was paying to things that were other than myself — and that as you deepen this intentionality and this attention, you started to broaden and deepen your own sense of presence.” (p. 90)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: Tell about the land or being who raised you (p. 97).
3. Wonder: How do conversations with more-than-human beings change your understanding of, and bonds with, Others? How do they change your understanding of yourself?
4. Reflection on the previous Wander: Did your experience of stretching from soil to sky shift an understanding of your place in the world for you? How?

Wander Prompt: Find a place to sit (near your sit spot, if possible) with a tree branch (or a telephone wire) in sight. Look for a critter or a bird perched on the branch. Even if there isn’t a creature in sight, imagine that there is one sitting up there, gazing back at you. What does that creature see? Follow her sightline in your mind. Imagine how you might be regarded as a peripheral part of the landscape she sees looking out from her perch. (For more guidance with this practice watch the [Occupying Space Trailside Practice](#) video)

Chapter 6: “In the Beginning Was the Logos”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

Here’s one we are drawn to:

Logos is similar to what biologists are revealing now about the way trees talk to one another and what quantum scientists have discovered at the center of molecules: not things, but relationships. *Logos* is about that divine relationship between all things. The system of their connection: conversation. (p. 108)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: Tell a story about something you “used to think,” but now have a very different view. What happened to transform your understanding?
3. Wonder: What metaphors for God resonate for you in this time, and in your place?
4. Reflection on the previous Wander: Did the being you observed have something to say to you about what life is like for them?

Wander: “Then the Lord God formed a human from the dust of the ground and breathed into the human’s nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being.”
(Gen 2:7). Sitting in your spot, take some breaths.

Inhale. Then hold, pause and think: “I am animated by the divine.”

Exhale. Then hold, pause and think: “I contribute to the earth.”

Repeat this pattern* for as long as you like, knowing that you are one of the many inspired expressions of our animate earth. (*You may recognize this as a variation of [Box Breathing](#).)

Chapter 7: “Courtship of the Particular”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

Here are some of our favorites:

“The only way to grasp the conversation of sacred connection is to move beyond caring and risk falling in love.” (p. 131)

“Robin Wall Kimmerer, in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, writes ‘Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.’” (p. 139)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: Name some place or being you love; name one you’ve fallen in love with; and name one who loves you back.
3. Wonder: What feelings arise when you contemplate changes that “may feel, at first, like sacrifices, yet in the end are only the surrender of privileges that were never ours in the first place?” (p. 128)

4. Reflection on the previous Wander: In what ways did your breath meditation animate your relationship with your spot?

Wander: What stories do you know about this place? What was it like here...a decade ago? a century? a millennium?

Chapter 8: “Love Is as Strong as Death”

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

Here are some of ours:

“We humans in the Western world have built walls so thick between us and the rest of the world that we can no longer feel the vulnerability that we actually share with all the others.” (p.151)

“We can’t shut off *parts* of our hearts...Love requires that we feel the pain of our beloveds.” (p. 163)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: Bring to mind a place that you love — whether it is where you live or elsewhere. What are your hopes for the future of that place? Your fears?
3. Wonder: Where do you most feel the walls constructed and maintained that keep you from the direct experience of mystery, wonder, or awe?
4. Reflection on the previous Wander: What stories or questions have been given to you by your Spot?

Wander: When you visit your Sit Spot, look for signs of wounds, damage, or violence done to your surroundings, and allow yourself to feel whatever arises — grief, sorrow, anger, sadness, shame? Look, too, for signs of healing — scars, or new growth, and allow yourself to feel whatever arises — wonder, hope, possibility?

Chapter 9: “Wild Ordination” and Resources

1. Deep dive into the text: What is a favorite quote, sentence, or (short) paragraph in this chapter? Why?

Here are some of ours:

“Calling requires a reckoning with who you are in your most wild essence, paying attention to your unique vulnerabilities. What breaks your heart and makes you cry? There’s a clue. Authentic callings are usually unexpected and also somehow deeply familiar. At first you may be shocked by the glimpses of who you actually are capable of being. Eventually, though, the call settles in and you are like, “Ah yes, I have been preparing for this all my life.” (p. 171)

“At this threshold of collapse and new life where we are standing now, our full engagement is too urgently needed to mess around with false humility. It takes a degree of arrogance, holy arrogance of belonging, to say yes and step into the unknown that you will know what to do as you take the steps. Holy arrogance is also paradoxically humble. As part of a great, interconnected story, we are never called to act alone.” (p. 174-175)

2. Tell a story/writing prompt: Tell a story about a time you followed the promptings of your heart.
3. Wonder: What is your role in this love story of reconnection, restoration, and compassion? What part of the sacred wild is calling you to be ordained into service on her behalf?
4. Reflection on the previous Wander: What role does grief play in your relationship with the natural world?

Wander: “What else can you offer the earth, which has everything? What else can you give but something of yourself? A homemade ceremony, a ceremony that makes a home.”

– Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

In many faiths and cultures throughout history, in many places around the world, the ritual of offering libations to Earth has been a sacred practice. Today, bring a small bowl or pitcher of water to your Spot. Pour out this libation — this water, which connects us with the origins of Life, with the vast oceans, with our own tears — onto the ground, making it holy ground, blessed with your attention, intention, care — and perhaps your sorrow and sadness as well.