



Leading a Group Experience with
A Tree of Life: A Story in Word, Image, and Text
by Katy Z. Allen

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A Tree of Life: A Story in Word, Image, and Text uses black-and-white photographs, poetic moments, and fragments of sacred texts to explore the universal emotional, spiritual, and psychological journey through trauma and into healing. The foundation of each two-page spread is a black-and-white photo taken by my mother, Mary North Allen, z”l, found on the right-hand side. The poetic storyline is on the left-hand side. A quote from Jewish tradition, most of them from the Bible, accompanies the photograph and complements the story. The three are meant to combine into a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.

Although you can read through this book in its entirety in about 10 minutes, it is actually meant to be experienced, which can be done either alone, with another person, or in a group setting. The book contains suggestions for how to use it, geared primarily for the individual reader.

In a group setting, the experience of *A Tree of Life* is enriched by the interactions among the participants, providing both additional insights and a sense of community in the shared human

experience of trauma and chronic toxic stress of life, and more particularly, in the face of climate disruption. This guide expands upon the suggestions for use outlined in the book and is meant to provide support and resources for those interested in leading a group experience of the book.

To lead such a group, it is helpful for the facilitator to have some experience and training in emotionally supporting people. Having insight into how to respond to participants' expressions of their emotional responses can be important. That being said, there are also ways to share the experience of *A Tree of Life* that anyone with sensitivity and a sense of compassion could lead.

A Note Regarding Hebrew, and Other Languages

Aside from the chapter introductions, all of the text in the book is in both English and Hebrew. But don't let this interfere if you don't know Hebrew. It is totally possible to use this book with only the English, so if you cannot read Hebrew, you can still lead a group through experiencing *A Tree of Life*.

Perhaps you know another language. If so, you may want to consider offering both the poetic and sacred texts in whatever language you do know. Why? Because hearing the words in a different language, even one that people in your group do not understand, adds another layer of depth to the experience, often in ways that are not conscious.

Time Frame and Venue

The first thing to decide is the time frame and the venue. These are influenced by the nature of the workshop. The main possibilities for how to run *A Tree of Life* workshop include 1) leading a leisurely and meditative nature walk; 2) running an in-person workshop for an afternoon, a full day, or even a whole weekend; or 3) facilitating an online workshop with a series of three or four sessions. The ideal choice is to have the workshop outdoors, but this may not be realistic, depending on the time of year and your location. However, for any in-person workshop, if you have an indoor location with an accompanying outdoor space, the ability to lead at least part of the workshop outdoors expands the options for experiencing the book and also provides natural space for participants to be alone for private meditation and reflection.

Getting Started

No matter what context and format you choose, it is good to provide time at the beginning for people to introduce themselves. I like to invite people to briefly share what brings them to the session, as this provides a good sense of what the main issues are for the group members. Generally, my experience has been that a combination of personal, communal, and global issues are named. In addition, I like to invite people to share something they are feeling grateful for, to set a positive tone as you create sacred space together.

I recommend setting privacy boundaries, letting people know that if anyone shares anything personal, that it stays in the group.

It is also important to mention at the start that if anyone begins to feel overwhelmed emotionally, that it is fine for them to step back and give themselves the time and space they need. If this happens, encourage the participant not to simply leave, because the trajectory of the book leads to a place of healing, and it is healing for them to get there, which won't happen if they stop in the middle of the more challenging parts of the book.

Closing Reflection

After completing the group experience of the book, provide participants with time and space for private reflection and meditation on their personal experience.

Once you gather back together, people can share their overall reflections. You can then invite them to identify their main take-away, and end with asking them how they might follow up on lingering questions or important insights.

Leading a Walk

The simplest way to lead a small group experience of *A Tree of Life* is by reading it together during a contemplative nature walk. If you choose this method, locate a trail that provides opportunities for stopping and gathering comfortably and that is suitable to the group in terms of difficulty. This will be a reflective walk, so it's important for it to be leisurely. You are not trying to reach a goal but to share an experience.

Determine ahead of time where you will stop and which chapters you will read at each stopping point. Each person should have access to a book, either shared or alone. At or near the beginning of the walk, gather for introductions as described above and share the "Before" section to set the mood, and invite people to share what brought them to this walk and something for which they are feeling grateful, as described above.

As you walk, encourage people to observe and listen, and to connect what they see and hear to what is in the book. At each stop, read one or more chapters and invite reflection and connection to observations from the natural setting.

Make your last stop near the end of your designated path, and invite reflection on the experience as a whole. End with providing time for people to share what they are taking away from your time together and how they might follow up on any insights or questions that linger with them.

You may also wish to use this book as one resource for offering a series of contemplative walks with meaningful and inspirational readings shared along the way. Some other suggested books include: *Being*

with Trees: Awaken Your Senses to the Wonders of Nature; Poetry, Reflections, and Inspiration by Hannah Fries; *Rooted: Life at the Crossroads* by Lyanda Lynn Haupt, and *How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons)* by Barbara Kingsolver. Or, you could curate your own selection of poetry or readings.

Leading an In-Person Workshop

An in-person half-day workshop is an ideal setting for experiencing *A Tree of Life*. The time-frame you choose depends upon you and your audience. It is possible to complete the book in three hours, but optimally it is best to have four hours and to follow it with a shared meal to give participants time to ease out from the intensity of the experience and back into everyday life. For a four-hour workshop, you will have time to go through the book one chapter at a time, using a different modality of expression each time, followed by time for discussion and reflection.

To shorten the time, group the chapters, limiting the number of discussion and reflection time periods. Suggested groupings are: 1) Before and Beginnings; 2) Trauma Unbeknownst and Fog; 3) Shutting Down and Turbulence; 4) Embracing Light and Darkness, Coming Home, and After. But feel free to adapt this to suit your situation.

If you wish to lengthen the time frame to a full day or longer, you can add time for people to re-read the chapter on their own and to engage in personal reflection time, journaling, or otherwise spending time alone reflecting on the ideas, images, and words. Additionally, you can either supplement each chapter with additional writings or images of your own choice or read through each chapter more than once, using different modalities of expression with each reading. You can also provide longer periods for personal reflection, which can be particularly helpful in an outdoor setting, or invite people to bring their own resources. If you are a meditator, you may wish to intersperse group meditations of one sort or another, including guided meditations.

You could potentially also schedule a series of shorter workshops over a period of time, as recommended in the section on leading an online workshop.

Choosing Modalities

Choose ahead of time the modalities you wish to use. You can choose from the list on pages *viii-ix*, or you can come up with other ideas of your own. There is no one set or order of modalities that is better than another, though varying them throughout your time is a good idea. Once you've decided, determine what materials you will need.

You can invite participants to bring things; in particular, they may want to bring drums or other musical instruments or their favorite writing or drawing utensils. Some may have a journal in which they'd like to put any written or drawn materials. If you use textures, they may want to bring items of meaning to them that have different textures.

For movement, it is helpful to project the book onto a screen, which you should be able to do with the ebook.

Going Through Each Chapter

Experiencing this book is a meditative experience, and you want everyone to be focused. So before you begin reading, inviting everyone to breathe deeply and allow themselves to release the tension in their body can assist with getting them, and yourself, focused. You may wish to repeat this before beginning each chapter.

It can be helpful to participants to be reminded that the goal is for them to express the emotions they are experiencing in response to the book. This is not about creating great art, though that may happen, but about allowing deep pain, grief, despair, and also joy, love, and compassion, as well as other emotions, to be expressed. Encourage them to take their time.

By using a different creative response method for each chapter, you give participants the chance to experience the emotions and ideas in the words and images with different senses, and different parts of their brain and body. This both enhances the experience of the book and provides insight into the variety of their own sources of resilience.

You will likely find that people engage more fully with those modalities with which they are more comfortable, and may even choose to switch from the modality you suggest. While this is fine, it's good to encourage people to stretch themselves. However, if their discomfort is getting in the way of experiencing the book, it is better for them to shift to expressing themselves in a way that is more comfortable to them. In particular, with movement and vocalizing, some people may be shy or embarrassed about others seeing and hearing what they do. It can be helpful to give people time to warm up their bodies or voices, or instruments if they brought them, before beginning.

If the weather and your setting allow, taking the book with you outside and inviting participants to interact with the trees and other natural surroundings can add additional dimensions to the experience. They can compare their in-the-moment experiences of trees with their experiences of the photographs of trees in the book.

Encouragement Along the Way

You may wish to add suggestions and reminders to participants as you read the book aloud. Offering one or two of the ideas listed below (adapted from the list on page *viii* in the book) can assist people in deepening their experience. You may also come up with additional questions.

- Pay attention to the interplay between the images and the words.
 - How does the image impact your experience of the poetic words?
 - How does the image impact your experience of the sacred text?

- How does the sacred text impact your experience of the image?
 - How does the sacred text impact your experience of the poetic words?
 - How do the poetic words impact your experience of the image?
 - How do the poetic words impact your experience of the sacred text?
 - How does the presence of the Hebrew affect you?
 - How do all of the parts interconnect and interact?
- Pay attention to your emotions as you meditate on a set of pages.
 - How are you feeling physically as you see and hear the words, images, and text?
 - How are you feeling emotionally?
 - How are your physical and emotional feelings interacting with each other?

Reflection and Response

During the reflection time, it is likely that people will express feelings related to events in their personal lives, as well as what is happening in their communities and across the world. These intersect in all our lives, and personal loss can accentuate the sense of loss in regard to climate change or other global or national crises.

It is important to be supportive of people without trying to fix anything. Listening carefully and acknowledging and validating expressions of grief, loss, and pain are critical to helping people feel safe in the space you are providing. Wherever possible, noticing and articulating connections that grow as the workshop progresses can add positive feelings and a sense of community within your group. By contrast, you may also have people expressing varied political points of view, and you can keep those from becoming part of a group conversation by accepting and naming the differences in the group, but also setting limits if needed. Your role as the group leader is to hold the group at the same time that you express value and worth for each individual within the group.

Leading an Online Workshop

All of the information related to leading an in-person workshop applies online, so you will find the section above helpful. However, due to the nature and limitations of being online in a group, I have found that a three-part workshop, with sessions running 1 ½ - 2 hours works well. Nevertheless, if you are working in particular with a group of people you know and who know each other, I could also envision running a longer online workshop, with appropriate breaks off screen. I have found that a positive group dynamic can develop on Zoom, and people can bond. Whether this is in spite of or because of the inevitable distance that an online experience creates, I do not know.

Summary

Ultimately, *A Tree of Life* is an invitation to a journey, and so, I invite you to take this journey with others, and to allow everyone to take their time and not to rush. Participants may be drawn back to specific photos, words or quotes, or they may notice that certain images or texts, or the combination of words and image, touch them in some place beyond words.

Please feel free to reach out to me with questions or support rabbikza@gmail.com as you prepare to lead a workshop, and thank you for engaging with *A Tree of Life: A Story in Word, Image, and Text*.

Wishing you well on life's journey,

Rabbi Katy Z. Allen