

## Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature

### DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

#### ***For Religious and Spiritual Study Groups***

These discussion and activity suggestions are designed to guide an 8-session study based on a close, shared reading of Kathleen Dean Moore's new book, Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature. The discussion prompts -- which raise questions about prayer, immortality, God, praise, suffering, meaning, spirituality/religion, and the sacred -- draw on the stories Moore tells about wet, wild places and the grounded wisdom (and unanswerable questions) she finds there. Each set of discussion questions is followed by suggestions for activities that explore or embody the ideas and collective insights of the group. Participants will want to read all of Wild Comfort before the sessions begin, and then return to the essays as they arise in the questions.

For other ideas, please consult DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS for Writers and Writing Groups, and DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS for Book Clubs, both also posted on [www.riverwalking.com](http://www.riverwalking.com).

#### **1. PRAYER**

In "Winter Prayer," the author says she doesn't know how to pray. Does she?

She speculates that prayer may be what happens when night falls over thought. What could that mean? Have you ever experienced such a night?

Is a child's prayer a kind of prayer, or is it something else, as the author suspects? How is it prayer, how not?

The author writes blessings and sets them on fire. What is the burning intended to accomplish? What is the relation between silence and prayer? Compare Mary Oliver, who writes that stillness creates a space in which another voice can be heard. Is there a difference between silence and quiet?

The essay ends as the branches of a fir tree lift, flinging off snow. Is that a prayerful motion? People around the world take various prayerful postures. What differences in belief do they signal?

Can a forest pray? Can a desert?

Do you know how to pray?

Activities:

- Write a prayer, using only verbs.
- Lead people in prayer, using only your body.
- Go to a quiet place. Listen for a very long time. Later, remembering, draw a map of the sounds.

#### **2. IMMORTALITY**

“Dog Salmon Moon” is partly a reflection on mortality and immortality. In what ways is a salmon immortal? One presumes that a human is at least as immortal as a salmon and in perhaps the same ways. Does that provide any comfort? How so or how not?

When a cabin is dismantled and the planks are used to build a boat, where is the cabin? When you die and your cells are dismantled into elements that become, say, an oak tree, where are *you*?

The author says nothing about the immortality of the soul, probably because she doesn’t know what to say. What would you tell her?

When he was asked by his pastor whether he believed in life everlasting, the author’s father replied, “I am willing to be surprised.” Are you?

The essay ends with an image of the moon overwhelmed by the shadow of the earth. In fact, death is often represented as the passing of a shadow. What sense does that make?

Activities:

- Imagine yourself five years after your death. Write down what you see and hear, smell, taste, in whatever circumstances you imagine you will be.
- Given what you believe about mortality and immortality, write a letter instructing your loved ones what to do with your body after you die. Assume no legal or cultural limits. Just let the disposal of your body be entirely true to what you believe.
- Catch a beautiful salmon. Kill it kindly. Broil it with butter and lemon and share it with friends. What is the grace you say before you eat?

### 3. GOD

In “Never Alone or Weary,” the author talks about “the one, beautiful, mysterious thing” that we (and the snow, and the bear, and the memory of birds) are part of. Some people might think that this is a ‘pretty good’ description of God. Do you? If so, say more. What is God? If not, say more: How is this description different from or similar to the God you know?

What difference does it make whether you do or do not call the “one, beautiful, mysterious thing” God? What do you gain from the label? What do you lose?

The author never says she believes in God. So does she or doesn’t she? But wait, there’s evidence: later, in the same essay, she says she feels alone without the God who supports her sister. So clearly, even if God exists, he is not present to the author. Right?

In “The Time for the Singing of Birds,” the author describes a friend who waited on the beach to hear the voice of God and went home disappointed. Did he hear the voice of God? Have you heard a seagull cry?—can that really be the voice of God? How so? Or, how of course not – that squawk!?

Landscape is deeply associated with the presence of the divine. What are the characteristics of the geographical places where God is said to have revealed himself to humans?

Activities:

- Go to a place where you think God is likely to be. Spend the night there alone. Write a psalm in the morning.
- Create a space that you think is likely to welcome what is holy. Really: create it physically. Build it, plant it, dig it, or whatever you need to do as long as the place embodies *your* ideas, not traditional ideas or somebody else's ideas of the divine.
- You get seventeen syllables – five on the first line, seven on the second, five on the third. In those syllables, describe the divine. No other rules, except there has to be an image of nature in there somewhere.

#### 4. PRAISE

In "Repeat the Sounding Joy," the author tells five stories about the natural world singing for joy. Have you ever heard the earth sing (with joy, or anger, and grief)? Tell that story.

Do you think the earth really does express any emotion, or is it simply, as the author speculates, resonating with human feelings?

It's a struggle to celebrate the world, isn't it, even as what we love is bulldozed, poisoned, slicked with oil. Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote, "There is no perfection. This is a broken world and we live with broken hearts and broken lives, but still that is no alibi for anything. On the contrary, it's when you have to stand up and say halleluia." Is he right? Then how do we sing and cry at the same time?

What are the traditional ways that religions celebrate? Is it time to invent new ones? What might they be? What would be reasons to create rituals of celebration outside of religious institutions, say in fish markets or cotton fields?

Can celebration be distinguished from gratitude?

Activities:

- Assemble the choir in an imperiled place – beside a wetland about to be destroyed for a highway, on the road into the clearcut. With all your beautiful voices, sing halleluia, sing praises, sing joy to the world, even if it isn't Christmas. Beckon people to join you; they will want to do this too.
- Take someone to a place that gives you joy. A child, an elder. Share the place. Share your feelings about it.
- Do a sound meditation in your group. One person begins by humming a tone. The others join in, responding in some way to that tone – creating harmony or dissonance, maybe a pulse. At some point the first person changes her pitch, and the others respond to this too. And so it goes. Sustain the chord, even as it changes. You have to listen and respond, to the whole and to the parts, and soon nothing exists but that chord, which is the world, which is hope, which is despair, which is halleluia.

#### 5. SUFFERING

In "The Recipe for Migas," the author asks the purpose of pain. This, in different form, is one of the perennial questions of theology: If God is all powerful, and God is perfectly loving, why is there innocent suffering in the world? What is Frank's answer? Might that biological answer be a theological answer as well?

Do you think that empathy, the ability to feel another person's pain, is inherent, part of our genetic heritage, like the ability to feel *our own* pain? How could empathy have survival value?

Why do you think the teaching of compassion is part of all the world's religions (as opposed, say, to all the world's economics)? What is religious about compassion?

Do you believe there can be unfelt pain? Do you see symptoms around you?

How would you address the dilemma of the closed and open heart? That is, can you close your heart to some things and open it to others? Or is an open heart open to all suffering, all joy?

Activities:

- Following the recipe in the essay, make migas together. Make them hot! Eat them at sunrise, some place outside where you can see the first shadows.
- Organize a story potluck. Each person brings a dish that has a story of a particular place. As they share the dish, passing it around the table, they share the story. You might choose a theme: Stories of compassion and friendship. Stories of ecological conservation and restoration. Stories of pain.
- Choose a group project to accomplish something tangible to reduce the amount of pain in the world. Don't just raise money and send it off. Do the work yourself.

## 6. MEANING

In a number of essays ("Wild Geese," "A Joke My Father Used to Tell," "If I Hadn't Stopped," "Possums"), the author struggles to answer existentialist questions of meaning. Why are we here? What is it all for? Why is there something rather than nothing? We see her calling "Help" to an empty sky. People of religious faith turn to God for answers to questions of ultimate meaning. But without God, where does the author turn?

What do you believe is the meaning of human life? Or do you think there is no meaning?

Or do you agree with Rachel Carson that "that truth" haunts and ever eludes us?

Or do you agree more fully with Dostoyevsky, who avoided the question, writing, "One must love life before loving its meaning. If love of life disappears, no meaning can console us."

Or again, what do you think of the author's answer, when she writes that meaning is in the experience of the geese, their sounds and smells, rather than in what they write in the sky?

People often argue that death robs life of meaning. Does it? Or is it death that gives meaning to life?

Activities:

- Just for the heck of it, because no one knows where answers come from, go to a place out of earshot of other human beings, maybe at night, and try shouting these questions of ultimate meaning. Shout them to the sky, shout them into holes in the earth, shout them into maple boles or creek stones. Listen closely. What answers to you get? How does it all make you feel (besides sort of sheepish)?
- As a group, think about what you would say to Alan Weisman, author of [The World Without Us](#), who asked, of what use are humans to the universe? Write him a letter to answer his question. Mail it.

- The “Joke” essay makes much of the qualities of a blue feather. The lesson drawn is this: “Maybe there is no meaning in the world itself . . . Maybe what there is, is the individual way each of us has of transforming the world, ways to refract it, to create of it something that shimmers from our spread wings. This is our work, creating these wings and giving them color.” If that is your work, what is your new to-do list? Write it and post it. Do number one.

## 7. SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

In “The Water and the Wave,” the author expresses envy for people in organized religious communities. Why? What do you think the values of church membership are?

While the author is not religious, she does call herself a spiritual person. Are you? What does that mean? Theologian Marcus Borg says that spirituality is to religion as love is to marriage. Do you agree?

Why are art and music so much a part of religion?

Chet Raymo, an astronomer, says that as a result of the schism between science and religion that manifested in the trial of Galileo, science lost the language of celebration, and religion passed up the chance to participate the greatest adventure of the human mind. What do you think science could learn from religion? What do you think religion could learn from science?

Consider the metaphor of the water and the wave. Waves can dash us down, but water can hold us up; make a vessel, the minister said. We know what waves are; we get bashed around all day. But what is the analogue of the water that holds us up? And what is this vessel of a church made of?

Activities:

- Invite some scientists to join in a discussion of the role that a language of celebration might play in science. How might poets and scientists collaborate to convey a sense of wonder and celebration for the world the scientists describe – emotions that might translate into protective action?
- If there is a secular sacred, as the author suggests, then perhaps there can be secular rituals of honoring and celebrating. Invent some and take them into the community.
- Make your church a true sanctuary, a place of safety for all of God’s creation. Can that sloping, green (poisonous) lawn become a bird sanctuary, planted with native, nourishing wildflowers and trees? Could it be restored to marshland? Could your congregation call on all other congregations to celebrate and honor God’s creation by forswearing death-dealing landscaping, and transforming their land into places of renewed and vigorous life? And why should this new sanctuary movement be limited to church land? Call on all believers to make their land into places of safety for all life. Start with your own.

## 8. SACRED

In “The Time for the Singing of Birds,” the author defines ‘sacred’ and argues that, even without any reference to the divine, the earth is sacred. First of all, what is at stake here? What difference does it make if the earth is sacred? What, in our culture, is the opposite of sacred? How do our labels change our actions?

Now, how would you define ‘sacred’? By that definition, is the earth sacred?

‘Sacred’ comes from the same etymological roots as ‘sacrifice.’ How are the two ideas connected, do you think?

Of all the things she could have chosen to illustrate the secular sacred, the author chooses birdsong and frogsong. Why, do you suppose? What would you have chosen? Why?

Aldo Leopold, a great conservationist, said that we cannot love what we cannot know. Do you think that is true? If so, does our love of the natural world increase as our knowledge increases?

A sense of wonder is central to a number of the Wild Comfort essays. Find some of the passages that celebrate the wonder of the universe. How is a sense of wonder related to a sense of the sacred, do you think, or to a sense of obligation to the earth?

If the earth and all its singing, swirling life are sacred, then we are called to radical change, are we not? – we will walk differently on earth, when we truly understand that we walk on sacred ground. This is going to be a long to-do list, but how does it start?

Activities:

- First, examine the actions of your church as a place. In its choices of heating, cooling, landscaping, cleaning supplies, paper, building materials, even altar flowers -- does it embody (literally that) a reverence and gratitude for the sacred earth? If not, here's a place to start.
- Second, examine the actions of the church as a moral institution. From abolition to the civil rights movement, churches have been the moral core of movements for social change. How can you use the powers of the church – the music, the poetry, the moral center, the strong community – to affirm and celebrate our obligations to the sacred earth and our obligations of compassion and justice to people whose lifeways are destroyed by the profligate and unrestrained actions of those who would mine and despoil the earth.
- The sacred is a call to sacrifice, (again, literally) to make sacred, a call to restraint. In a world where the possibilities of self-gratification seem without limit, here is a chance to renounce that way of life and, by linking our interests to the well-being of the sacred earth, find a different kind of fulfillment. We hear of books and seminars on Epicurean Simplicity and voluntary simplicity, but here is the chance for sacred simplicity. List all the categories of decision-making in which you live mindlessly and without gratitude, degrading and profaning the sacred earth – food, clothing, housing, energy, travel? Choose one. Transform your life around it and, by that means, transform your relation to the sacred.