

Study Guide

for

*In the Midst of Chaos:
Caring for Children as a Spiritual Practice*

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INTRODUCTION

Discussing a book can be a stimulating and enlightening experience. In a good conversation, we delve more deeply into the material an author has presented. Just as important, we question it and wrestle with it. We apply it to our own situation, adding our own insights to those on the pages and discovering how the ideas we have encountered can make a difference in our lives.

The books in the Series on the Practices of Faith are especially suitable for group discussion. This is partly because of the nature of practices themselves. Practices are activities that are shared with other people. We do them with and for one another. Therefore, growing in our understanding of practices is something we must do with other people too. Moreover, practices are not abstractions. Practicing our faith requires us to look hard at the everyday realities of our lives--not in general, but in the specific places where we live, work, worship, and play. We see these realities more honestly when we look with more than one pair of eyes.

So conversation is crucial. But excellent conversation is not inevitable. Excellent conversation is more likely when a discussion is carefully tended, and this takes some planning. Excellent conversations are structured to allow space for attention to the particular contexts and thoughts of participants. They are attuned to the life situations and learning styles of those who will gather in search of deeper understanding and more authentic action. They need to be set within the framework of a certain period of time, a certain physical space, and a certain commitment to persevere when tough issues emerge. It is the task of a leader to attend to these needs.

This guide is for you, the leader, as you assume responsibility for hosting such conversations. We hope that it will be helpful as you think through how specific occasions can help a specific group of people, gathering in a specific place, to explore what steps would make it possible for them to appreciate more deeply their own practices of caring for children and how these practices transform them. We trust this exploration can get people talking theologically about faith active in the chaos of everyday life. We do not intend to provide you with a set curriculum and detailed instructions, however. We

hope instead to provide the kind of guidance that will help you to structure conversations that are appropriate for your own group.

Part 1 offers an orientation to your role as a leader, together with some guidelines for structuring group exploration of Christian practices for opening the gift of time.

Part 2 provides an assortment of resources that can be used to help groups draw on their own experience and explore their own context in connection with each chapter of *In the Midst of Chaos*.

The Series on the Practices of Faith began with the book *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. It is no accident that *Practicing Our Faith* was written by a team of thirteen authors, rather than by an individual. We found that talking about Christian practices together helped us to see our way of life more clearly and to envision fresh possibilities for faithfulness more imaginatively. *In the Midst of Chaos* brings a new approach to the Series that considers how a constellation of practices creates openings within which the grace of God can be known by those whose daily lives are deeply shaped by the presence of youngsters in need of their care.

Now it is a joy to invite you to discuss *In the Midst of Chaos* in your community. We are confident that readers will bring to it a range of insights wider than the author's, because they bring wisdom rooted in other traditions, knowledge drawn from other fields, observations made in other places, and lifetimes of experience. We hope that your discussion of this book will be full of discovery and the beginning of a richer experience of children for whom you care and who in turn transform you.

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HOSTING THE CONVERSATION

In the Midst of Chaos can provide a focus for reflection in a wide variety of contexts. Many church groups--including Bible study groups, sacramental preparation classes, youth groups, retreats, and governing boards--will find it germane to their concerns. It can also be used in classrooms, within families, at the workplace, and in nonprofit organizations. Less formally, a group of friends could agree to read and discuss this book together, or an individual could partner with an other, conversing about the book face-to-face or by telephone or e-mail.

Whatever the setting, it is important that the person or persons hosting the conversation honor the hopes and longings participants will bring to this disciplined consideration of children. This person is charged with shaping a community of learning--one that may last only a few weeks, to be sure, but one whose structure will be an important factor as participants seek to help one another to learn and grow. After all, every group will not only *study* Christian practices during its time together; it will also *engage in* some of them in a preliminary way--saying yes to clearing time for reading and talking, discerning together what action will result from their learning, offering testimony about their convictions, forgiving one another for the misunderstandings that will surely occur at some point along the way, and, perhaps, honoring one another's bodies by exchanging hugs or sharing a meal. Certainly, the community will consider how their interactions with kids transform them. These are small acts in a way, but how the leader helps them to take faithful form is a crucial matter.

Leading as Teaching

When you take responsibility for leading a series of conversations or even a single session, you become, in effect, a teacher. Whether you are a solo teacher or part of a leadership team, it becomes your special charge to foster a situation in which those present can help one another grow in the practices of faith. This does not require that you be an "expert," for your role is not primarily to impart information to the participants. *In the Midst of Chaos* will provide much of the "information" your group needs--the cultural, ethical, biblical, historical, theological, and narrative material that will fuel your

process of reflection. (You may want to find other resources as you and your group advances, but these are not essential as you begin.) Becoming a teacher/leader does, however, require that you give deliberate attention to the specific nature of your group.

As a teacher/leader, you will be guiding a specific group of people on a specific day for a specific period of time. This is the "live event" of teaching. In that live event, energy will surge and recede, momentum will develop and ebb, the flow of conversation will twist and turn, and any number of planned and unplanned things will happen.

Creating a good educational design is an artistic process. It is a process that is unique to each situation--as unique, indeed, as the teacher, the participants, and the local culture are unique. A fruitful educational design will connect all of these elements--teacher, participants, and local culture--with the larger contexts discussed in *In the Midst of Chaos*.

Preparing to Lead Educational Events

The following pages offer suggestions for charting a single group session. In most cases, such a session will be one in a series--so a few words about creating a series are important as well. Many different formats are possible: a weekly study group (possibly during Lent), an intensive process of reflection during a weekend retreat, a day-long workshop, or a year-long series with meetings once each month--any of these, or others, may suit your situation. Whatever format you choose, help the group be clear about what it promises to do over the term of the series as a whole.

These suggestions are offered to help you, the teacher/leader, as you prepare an educational design for any given session. Use it in conjunction with other sections of this Guide. More importantly, rely on your own common sense and educational experiences as you chart the educational course of your group.

Develop a clear sense of what the session is about. Read carefully the relevant chapter(s) in *In the Midst of Chaos*. How does the author define the problems people face regarding caring for children, and what practices does she commend? What stories, songs, quotations, and Biblical material touched you in this chapter? How is caring for children something that people do together, not just something an individual parent does alone?

Wrestle with the material in the chapter. Allow your reflection to go beyond the discussion in the book. What other examples of this practice occur to you? What other Biblical stories are relevant? What questions do you have? Where do you resist entering this practice as the author has portrayed it? Do you need to do further reading or talk with someone who is more familiar with caring for children as a spiritual practice?

Reflect on your personal and institutional involvement in this practice. Try to identify the ways in which you are already involved in the patterns of activity described in this chapter, both positive and negative. Some may be hard to recognize because you take them for granted. What assumptions, prejudices, and passions do you bring? What yearning, pain, or experiences of new life do you bring? What responsibilities do you have regarding this practice within your own community, and what are your hopes and fears about exploring the practice in light of these? Do you have a special perspective on caring for children that arises from your denominational, spiritual, or cultural identity?

Think about the people with whom you will be in conversation. Teaching only works when it is designed with these participants and all that they bring to the event in mind. As you chart an educational event, reflect on who is likely to be present. How do the communities and traditions that they represent already engage this practice? What life circumstances are you familiar with that may resonate with this chapter? Do you suspect that they have experienced pain in relation to family? Joy? Confusion? What prejudices and passions do you anticipate they will bring? What gifts and wisdom? Where do you think they need to be challenged about their relationship to family? What styles of learning and group structures will be comfortable for them?

Identify your hopes for the session. Try to articulate in your own mind what you hope for those who will gather. The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* had certain hopes about the kinds of reflection that book might generate. These hopes now inform the Series on the Practices of Faith. As you identify your own hopes for the group you are leading, you might find the hopes of those authors helpful.

The authors hoped that readers would develop a way of thinking about their lives and the life of the world. And we hoped that this way of thinking would lead them into a way of living. Breaking that large hope into parts, we hoped that readers would:

- come to greater recognition that God is active in the world, in our communities, and in our lives;
- become more aware of their yearning for a way of life that is whole and holy;
- understand more deeply the rich resources biblical faith and Christian tradition hold for shaping a way of life that can be lived with integrity today;
- become more aware of the various forms of practices developed by faithful people in history and around the world today;
- reflect critically on the deformations of practices that exist in church and society;
- grow in the skills and language that will help them engage in these practices with greater fluidity;
- discover fresh forms of the practices that are responsive to God's activity in the changing circumstances of our world, communities, and lives; and
- be challenged and motivated to engage in practices with greater intentionality, energy, and commitment.

Consider how you can provide a variety of ways of engaging with the practices in each session. Reflecting on spiritual practices takes more than general conversation. It happens best as part of a process in which participants engage with this material in a variety of ways. Fruitful sessions will usually include activities, exercises, and questions that nurture various forms of personal and communal engagement. The following forms of engagement are crucial to exploring a practice fully:

- exploring participants' experience by helping them to identify formative memories, present realities, and hopes for the future;
- considering the emotions stirred by the practice--the group's yearning for it or joy in it, and the stories, dreams, and promises it evokes;
- thinking through the analysis set forth in *In the Midst of Chaos*, making sure that its main points are understood but giving participants an opportunity to affirm, question, or challenge issues raised by the reading;
- exploring the theological character of human life in family, biblically and as the author presents it, and relating this to God's activity and our faithful living;

- reflecting critically on how children can be denied agency and responsibility in our lives and in our society; and
- encountering a challenge to live more fully and faithfully, beginning perhaps with some change the group will decide to undertake together.

Create a design. Arranging elements like these into a design appropriate for a particular group is one of the chief challenges of the teacher/leader. Often, posing discussion questions seems to be the easiest way to proceed. But in most education--and particularly in education in Christian practices--other approaches must also be incorporated. Creative exercises, field trips, forms of artistic self-expression, rituals, songs, writing in a journal, interpreting a piece of art, reflecting in silence, sharing in groups of two or three, participating in intergenerational conversation or play--all these are activities that can enhance learning when used with good judgment. The second section of the study guide offers a number of such suggestions for nurturing reflection. Look through these as you prepare a session, but don't rely on them. Develop your own ideas, attuned to your hopes, the suggestions in this Guide, and--especially--the specific character of the people and place of your teaching.

There are no firm rules about how to design an educational event. Different groups are led by their own traditions or deep convictions to prefer one starting point vastly more than another; for example, in some churches it will be important to start with the Bible, while in other places starting with a contemporary ethical issue or an invitation to share a personal story would work better. Perhaps beginning with kids—playing with them, observing their play, participating in cooperative art projects—would be best. Use your common sense, experience, and powers of observation as you determine what will be most fruitful in your situation.

Two more words of advice arise from our sense of what kind of education growth in faithful practice demands. First, be alert to the *embodied* character of practices, and actually do something together. Play. Create. Read aloud. Interact with children. Second, be alert to the *challenges* inherent in faith practices. It is easy to get people talking about the chaos of family life. However, we hope that discussing *In the Midst of Chaos* will evoke much more than smiles of recognition. We hope to stir up some discomfort, too, by encouraging readers to think hard about how parenting must expand from an individual to

a communal effort and how the family must be oriented both inward and outward in the pursuit of justice. We hope you wrestle with the idea that kids have the potential to transform, deepen and unite persons and communities across cultures and through time. This requires facing the places where we have reduced children to cute objects of our affection or control. It also requires efforts to envision changes in our way of life in light of the biblical, theological, and ethical perspectives we encounter.

Set up the physical environment. Though it is easy to overlook, this step is a crucial one. A conversation among adults sitting in a classroom feels different than a conversation in the warmth of someone's home. Reflect with care about how the physical space available to your group can be arranged to enhance comfort and sharing. Prepare in advance whatever materials will be needed, such as markers, drawing supplies, writing utensils, paper, poster board, or multimedia equipment.

Create an appropriate emotional environment. The emotional climate of any educational setting is crucial to its success. But this is especially so when the topic at hand is the life of faith. How can the life of the group that will gather reflect the quality of Christian practices themselves? How will hospitality, forgiveness, testimony, healing, and other practices be practiced in the very shape of this small community of learning?

An atmosphere of mutuality is important. When people are treated with dignity and respect, they participate more fully in transforming and challenging reflection. Remember, as teacher/leader you need not have all the answers. Try to show respect for each member and instill in others a sense of mutual regard and gratitude for the variety of gifts and experiences members bring to the group.

Foster an atmosphere of trust. Sharing thoughts and experiences, people expose vulnerabilities and are sensitive to how they will be received by others. Attentive listening, a supportive word, and a nonjudgmental spirit help to create an atmosphere of deeper conversation and greater growth. In many groups, it may be helpful to make these expectations explicit and to agree not to repeat personal information shared in this setting.

Directive but non-controlling leadership can enhance your educational event. Conversation that meanders without any direction can be frustrating for everyone involved. One of the roles of the teacher/leader is to gauge the interests of the entire group and assist it in moving toward its goals. On the other hand, you should not act too

heavy-handedly or feel that you have failed if the group does not address all the issues you had charted. Stifling honest and lively engagement frustrates participants too. What you are seeking is a delicate balance sustained by close attention to the needs and interests of your particular group.

Honest questioning is another aim. The questions you will pose--including the ones you discover in this Guide--should have the purpose of opening up dimensions of human experience and reflection. They should not be used to trick participants into saying something you want them to say, and they are not meant as quizzes to which people might give answers that are correct or incorrect. Ask questions in order to open, not close, discussion.

Encourage shared participation. Everyone has been in groups where one or two members dominate the conversation. If we are lucky, we have also been surprised by an unexpected insight from a person who usually remains silent. Try to find comfortable ways of making it possible for everyone to participate, even if this means asking a dominant person to give someone else a chance to speak. Let the group be silent for a spell when that is helpful, too. Show that you think it is all right if there are some minutes when no one speaks at all.

Encouragement: Beyond the Guidelines

Reflecting on the practices of faith as they take shape in our lives and communities can be a generative experience. When you lead others in doing this, you are initiating a process far richer and lengthier than the group meetings themselves. As we have noted, your sessions are occasions when people practice many of the practices together. They are also times of planting, times when ideas are encountered that may lie dormant at first but later grow in unanticipated ways.

You cannot control the outcome of a single session or of the group's experience as a whole, nor should you hope to do so. But you are nonetheless offering a wonderful gift when you agree to serve as a host at the table of mutual learning. May you find this table to be one where you are a guest as well.

Christian Practice: A One-page Definition

A Christian practice is a cluster of activities, ideas, and images, lived by Christian people over time, which addresses a fundamental human need in the light of and in response to God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.

A practice

- addresses fundamental human needs and conditions through practical human acts.
- involves us in God's activities in the world and reflects, in the way we participate in the practice, God's grace and love.
- is social in character
 - we learn practices with and from other people
 - though we sometimes do some of the activities that comprise a given practice alone.
- endures over time
 - each practice arises out of living traditions, having taken numerous forms in the past and in various cultures around the world, and
 - will carry those traditions into the future, in specific forms not yet imagined.
- involves a deep awareness, a profound knowing; a practice
 - is imbued with thought; it is embodied wisdom
 - carries particular convictions about what is good and true;
 - embodies these convictions in physical, down-to-earth ways;
 - becomes articulated in concepts, ideas, and images, expressed through rich vocabularies and carefully developed bodies of thought;
 - incorporates both words and gestures, some of them grand but others apparently small and mundane.
- is done within the church, in the public realm, in daily work, and at home.
- shapes the people who participate in it
 - as individuals and as communities,
 - in ways that conform to the particular content and patterns of the specific practice, thus
 - nurturing specific habits, virtues, and capacities of mind and spirit.
- possesses standards of excellence
 - having that which is good as its purpose and goal
 - relying on certain competencies and embodying certain norms
 - though practices often become distorted and corrupt
 - and so are open to criticism and reform, particularly with reference to the shape of God's practice.
- comes to a focus in worship
 - which makes manifest in words, gestures, images, and material things the normative meaning of the practice and its place in the mysterious life of God, and
 - discloses the practice as gift, not task.
- adds up to a way of life when interwoven with other practices
 - through their mutual interdependence, as each practice strengthens the others,
 - and in their reliance on the God of Life.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR EVERY CHAPTER

In this section we offer a sampling of material from which you might choose as you design educational events using *In the Midst of Chaos*. This sampling is not a set of lesson plans but rather a collection of suggestions from which you should select whatever may address the concerns and stretch the thinking of your group. You should feel free to ignore some and alter others, depending on the needs of your specific group. You will also want to devise fresh questions and activities tailored specifically for your own situation, and often to invite participants to contribute to this creative process as well. In your own educational design, weave these suggestions together with other resources, including the activities suggested within the chapters of *In the Midst of Chaos* and your own sense of the issues facing your particular group. In addition, be creative about drawing on material beyond the book and this Guide. The references at the end of *In the Midst of Chaos* cite numerous books and articles, including children's books and poetry. You can also consult people in your community who possess life wisdom about the practices the book explores.

A NOTE REGARDING USE OF LANGUAGE

Part of the argument in this book is that our notion of “parent” needs to be extended beyond the so-called nuclear family to include “anyone who cares for kids and is changed by it” (*xvii*). The author expands the concept of “parent” to embrace “other mothers,” a wide network of people involved in the care of kids: teachers, coaches, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. In the preface, the author considers the commitment to the well-being of kids an essential dimension of the common good of the human family (*xv*). She carries this argument throughout the book, writing, “We have so isolated care of children as an almost exhaustively private concern of individual parents rather than an obligation shared by any wider circle of friends and community” (page 117).

The author also suggests the use of “kids” instead of “children” as a way to include teens and young adults in the contemplation of care in the midst of everyday chaos. Part of the argument for expanding our notion of children is to think of our interactions with children as transforming us in addition to transforming them in their development. Therefore, this study guide will use the terminology “kids,” in addition to an expanded notion of “parent.”

Like Hillary Clinton’s popularized phrase “it takes a village” to raise a child, othermothers contribute in important ways to the physical and spiritual growth and development of kids. In the questions of this study guide, think of the ways in which you are an othermother, in addition to thinking of yourself as a biological or adoptive parent, if appropriate. Consider the “family” to include all shapes and sizes. The author draws from her own experience of family life with a husband and three sons. As you read, consider how these concepts and suggestions apply to the practices of your family. Consider families in your church and in your community different from yours. Do the practices look the same?

Finally, it is important to note that the author distinguishes chaos between everyday chaos and a kind of chaos that is unjust and unredeemable. You could consider the difference between the “mundane chaos” of everyday life versus the “complete chaos” of violence, abuse, or war. The author points out that complete chaos is not good

for anyone (page 17, 44). As you read, consider the important difference between mundane chaos and complete chaos. Are there places of complete chaos in your family or community that need immediate attention?

Preface

Consider the questions that motivate the author to write this book. Do these questions challenge or affirm your assumptions about parents or kids? Have you asked these questions before?

1. How am I tempted to give attention to kids in a way that either indulges their every whim or puts their successes above those of other kids?
2. How do I try to give kids the kind of attention that cares deeply about their maturation into compassionate, faithful adults?
3. How do I tell the difference between these two kinds of attention?
4. How is my life of faith sustained, embodied, and alive in the midst of the chaos of everyday life?
5. How, when, and where is my (our) life of faith enacted and embodied in my (our) family life?

Select a favorite cartoon depiction of your family life from your refrigerator or local newspaper. How does this resonate with your experience of family?

The author claims that even parents with resources struggle with the chaos of life. What are your resources and how do they support you? Discuss the ways in which people with less and more resources than you might cope with the chaos of everyday life? At what point do lack of resources shift chaos from everyday chaos to complete chaos?

Using markers, crayons, or paints, create a picture of the ways in which you see yourself as a “kid,” a “parent,” and an “othermother.” Then, create a picture of your “kids,” “parents,” and “othermothers.” Discuss how these roles work together in your everyday life.

Where do you experience chaos in your everyday life? How is your life made difficult by living in the chaos? Do you agree that life is also chaotic and hard for kids? Why or why not? In what ways might life be hard for kids you know? Identify “times of chaos” in your family life this week. Was God present then? Could you discover God in the midst of chaos?

During one week of the life of your church, pay special attention to the places where and ways in which kids are incorporated into the life of faith (i.e., worship, prayer, bible study, Sunday school, etc.). Where and in what ways do you see, hear, and interact with kids?

The author’s book *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2003) anticipates *In the Midst of Chaos* by considering ways in which Christians have thought about kids and parenting in the context of complex cultural trends of our present uncertain times. How do you think of kids (for example, divine gift, responsibility, responsible, etc.)? How does your tradition or your congregation think of kids (for example, as expressed through baptism, in faith formation and education, in relation to the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper)?

Go to a local library or bookstore and peruse the parenting section. Note the kinds of views on parenting you see represented. Then go to a specifically religious library or bookstore. What are the differences and similarities? What are your views on parenting and how do they resonate (or not) with what you observed? In what ways does your

congregation try to sustain “the practice of just compassionate love”? What does this practice look like to you?

Do you agree both that the life of the congregation depends on families and that the life of families depends on the religion congregation? How do you envision families and congregations working together to further faith, justice, compassion, and love?

How have religious and popular self-help sources (i.e., Sunday School curriculum or magazines) made you feel like you need to do more to have a fulfilling life? Can you view your life as fulfilling without adding anything extra to it?

Chapter 1: Contemplating in Chaos

Read Psalm 46 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

The author contrasts a monastic ideal of spirituality (quiet, solitary, retreat) with a spirituality that occurs in the midst of juggling the demands of caring for kids in everyday life. What images or experiences evoke a monastic ideal for you? What images or experiences evoke the juggling of everyday demands of caring for kids? How do you experience spirituality in these two different realms? Do you prefer one over the other?

List the “regular, nitty-gritty, on-the-alert demands” on your time. Put a star next to the demands where you see the potential for a connection to your “spiritual” life.

Spirituality on the Inside

Read through the scriptural descriptions of family on pages 6-7. How does your tradition view the celibate life of religious heroes and saints compared to family life? Does your tradition or your congregation venerate either or both? In what ways?

What would your life look like if you were to live the “authentic life of faith”? Would you make any changes to your normal routine? Why or why not? Would your church community affirm your view of the “authentic life of faith”? Would this life be open to all members of your church of all ages and stages?

Create a non-traditional prayer that occurs in the midst of everyday family life (for example, nursing, folding laundry, carpooling). How could you practice this prayer?

Do you agree that it is possible to pray in the midst of life without necessarily making space for quiet, solitary prayer time? Parents feel burdened and pressured by not having enough time. Can scheduling prayer or devotional time with kids relieve this pressure? What are some other ideas of how to practice prayer in the midst of your space and time constraints?

The author claims that most Christian theology conceives of faith as something that happens outside of ordinary time, within the formal church institution, or in private, individual life. This implies a “bias against ‘outward’ forms of spirituality, as enacted by the body in the midst of family and community” that marginalizes many Christians (page 7). Do you see this split between “inside” and “outside” spirituality in your own life of faith? In your congregation? In your tradition?

Spirituality on the Outside

Describe “moments of awakening” in your life when you have found meaning in ordinary things.

The author critiques the view that silence and solitude are absolutely critical to spiritual growth. She lists the development of her son’s language as a place of awe in the midst of daily life. She writes, “silence can also lead to sin or stagnation and words can build a

home” (page 9). What do you think about these claims? What do they evoke in your own experience? Where are places of silence and solitude in your daily life? Where are places filled with words?

Read this paragraph from page 9 prayerfully.

Words traded back and forth, words mimicked, words slowly stitched into whole sentences. Recently, while cleaning out the attic, I ran across a note on my oldest son’s first full sentence: “Mommy come pick me up after work,” a life-saving sentence for him that I probably wrote down with mixed feeling about leaving him to go to work. Words in books, rhyming Dr. Seuss words, *Good Night Moon*, and books with only one or two words per page, picture books without words for which we make up stories. Words shared around the dinner table, words sung by heart on Mark’s lap with guitar about Casey Jones the railroad engineer, words rejoicing in worship, words debating language for God, words spilled in anger, words recanted. Words with holy potential. The Word as the holy itself. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

Does it feel like prayer? Think of your favorite book from your childhood, or a favorite book you give to children or read with kids. Do the words from these books seem sacred to you?

Widening the Circle of Faith

How can the church “widen the circle” for families who need help with spiritual needs and development?

Invite your group to a “home church.” Meet in a home, share a meal, and share a time of devotion together. Discuss what it may mean to consider the family a “domestic church” (page 11).

Does your experience of parenting or othermothering affect or change your participation in church and your desire for God? In what ways?

Make a slack line by drawing a line across a chalk board or piece of paper. At one end, write “work done” and at the other write “wisdom gained.” The author sets up a tension, or “slack line,” between our society’s value on “work produced” at one end and a sense of wisdom and depth to life at the other end. Ask each group member to identify their place on the line and how they walk the slack line in their life. If you have the resources (you may ask the youth group to help you), take this activity outside and practice walking on a “slack line” -- how does your embodied experience of the slack line resonate with how you feel about tensions you walk in your daily life?

Do you agree with the author that the key for faith and chaos is connected to finding balance between solitude and connection (page 13)?

Redeeming Martha

Read the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42 several times. Each time you read the story, take on a particular character in your imagination (Mary, Martha, Jesus). Does the author’s interpretation of Martha (page 16) surprise you or change the way you experience this story?

Redeeming Chaos

In the preface, Dorothy Bass writes about “trouble” that kids bring into our lives. In this section, the author writes about ways in which our world can be turned upside down by God’s peace. List times in your life when your routine or plan has been troubled or disrupted by the presence of kids or God, when the “spirit of God has disturbed you.”

The ecumenical Iona community in Scotland has transformed what it could mean to live in a cloistered community. A community of men and women live together in a restored monastery with centuries of history. They work together to provide resources for healing, social justice, and transformation of the world (www.iona.org.uk). Anyone can travel to the community and spend a week living in this community. But, as the author argues, we all can’t leave for a week and even at this progressive retreat center, there’s no childcare. Where are places in your community that bridge the realms of cloistered spirituality and spirituality in the mess of life? Do you feel like you need to go somewhere on retreat to experience spirituality?

The author points out that complete chaos is not good for anyone (page 17, 44). Are there places of complete chaos in your community that need immediate attention? List these and brainstorm ways of offering relief.

Redeeming the Waking, Walking Routine

In this section, the author lays out the argument for the whole book. “Faith takes shape in the concrete activities of day-to-day...Grace is active not only when we’re passive and

quiescent or tranquil and mindful but also when we are deeply involved in the activities of childhood and parenthood themselves” (page 20). Do you agree? Is this a relief for you?

Chapter 2: Sanctifying the Ordinary

Read Psalm 90 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

Name some “dirty diaper” experiences that have become sanctified for you.

How have you found ways to stop, notice, and know the sacred in the midst of your “quotidian” life? (For some additional sources that notice the surprise of the sacred in the midst of the ordinary, see “Joking with Jesus in the Poetry of Kathleen Norris and Annie Dillard,” by Peggy Rosenthal, *Cross Currents*, Fall, 2000; see also works by Anne Lamott, such as *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son’s First Year*, Ballantine Books, 1994.)

Protestant Historical America

How does your tradition professionalize faith and grace? How does technology individualize parts of your worship experience? Your family life at home? What areas of church and home serve as gathering places for communal interaction?

Recovering My Memory, Recovering Community Memory

Go to your local library or bookstore for a copy of *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Denis Linn, Paulist Press, 1995). Participate in the examen together as Linn describes it, asking: For what am I most grateful? For what am I least grateful? How could you incorporate this practice into your family life?

What a Friend in Luther

What have been the most difficult stages of your experience as a kid? As a parent? As an othermother? What resources from your tradition or from your church have given you relief? Do you find relief in the author's portrayal of Luther?

Parenting as a Spiritual Practice

Do you agree that parenting is as rich of a spiritual experience as rituals in the church, such as baptism or communion? Is tending to your family a religious practice for you? How might it be?

Parenting as Vocation

With markers or crayons, draw three concentric circles on a sheet of paper. In the center ring, write "ritual." In the middle ring, write "ordinary daily life." In the outer ring, write "vocation." Then, add to each ring ways in which you engage in (1) ritual, (2) practices in your ordinary activities (i.e., eating, bathing, speaking), and (3) your vocation (how you use your gifts and desires to glorify God and contribute to the good of your neighbor, page 33). Discuss your drawing with the group.

Parenting as Formative

The author cites her friend who said, "Babies give birth to their parents...also launching them into a brand new life" (page 34). How have you contributed to the formation of your parents? How have you been formed by your kids?

Cultivating Practices

As you read through the rest of the book, notice the practices, for example playing or reading, that you are already doing so that you may practice them more consciously.

Chapter 3: Pondering All These Things

Read Psalm 139 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

Take off your shoes when you enter your home and view your home as holy ground.

Attending All Along

Watch the movie *Babette's Feast* (1988). Note how Babette encourages awe in the practice of sharing a meal. Does this inspire you to view sharing a meal as a spiritual practice in the midst of mundane chaotic life?

Visit the infant nursery or a pre-school Sunday School at your church. Do an art activity together (drawing, painting, playing with clay). Participate in this exchange with an attitude of “pondering.” What do you notice?

The Catch of Time

Are there moments in your life that are filled with *kairos*, or the fullness of time? When you feel burdened by the constraints of time, what specific stress reducers do you use?

United Methodist Bishop Joe Pennel talks about “the relentless return of the Sabbath” from the point of view of a preacher who must preach every Sunday. Do you find this ironic? What part of your week exhibits this quality of relentless return? Monday morning?

Read Kathleen Norris's article, "In the Midst of a Busy Life"

(http://www.30goodminutes.org/csec/sermon/norris_4310.htm). What do you think of her interpretation of James 1:9-11?

Read Kate Daniel's poem, "Poetry and Presence" (accompanied by two poems, "What Is Broken Is Whole" and "Self-Portrait with God and Poetry," *Louisiana Literature*, Special Issue on God, Summer 1999). Does this resonate with your life? Write your own poem about a moment of presence in the midst of everyday chaos.

Pondering

How does your tradition view Mary? Where does she appear in the liturgical life of your church? How does the author encourage you to ponder about Mary?

Do you agree that pondering connects thought and action and that wisdom comes at the intersection of our bodies and our minds (page 48)? List ways in which parenting and othermothering are embodied activities. How do these activities involve the body?

Attentive Love

The author contrasts the famous saying of Descartes, "I think therefore I am," with a new interpretation, "We care for children, therefore we are who we are" (page 51). What do you think about this revision? What practices in your life (what you do) contribute to your identity (who you are)?

A popular commercial for the office supply store Staples imagines the existence of an “easy button.” However, the author notes that the practice of attending to kids is not easy. How do you love, care, and attend when you are most overwhelmed and exhausted? Are there places where you hope for an “easy button”?

Draw a family tree. Start with yourself in the center. In each direction, trace lineages of your families of support. One branch might be your biological family, work family, church family, college family, etc. Post this where it will remind you of the ways in which you are supported.

Do you agree that there is a basic biological, emotional, and social practice of care that stands at the center of human community and concerns both women and men (page 53)? What does this look like in your community?

An Art All Its Own

Collect two sets of random objects from your home that you don't need. Invite a kid to participate in this activity with you (or a group of kids to participate with your group). Give each person one set of these “found objects” and access to glue, scissors, or other craft supplies. Ask each person to create “found art” or a “found toy.” Discuss the activity and the differences and similarities between the creations of kids and adults.

Have you heard the phrase, “the art of parenting”? Draw two columns on the chalk board or on a large piece of paper. Discuss ways in which parenting is an art and ways in which parenting is a science.

Pondering = Faith in Time

What is the most spontaneous thing you have ever done? What is one thing you would like to do, but can't see how it would fit into your schedule? Do these stories and hopes involve kids?

Chapter 4: Taking Kids Seriously

Read Psalm 8 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

What is something you have learned from children you know? What is something you have learned from a teenager you know?

Redefining Children's Place

Walk around your church or your home and notice the different ways in which children are depicted in art and photographs. Do any of the children seem thoughtful and challenging? Do any seem cute and sweet? Discuss your thoughts as a group.

Scan your congregation's worship book. Note the images of and references to children in the hymns and songs. Do they "take kids seriously"? Discuss your thoughts as a group.

Do you agree that children have shifted in the modern day family from an asset to a drain on resources (page 61)? Give examples from your experience.

What were your chores as a kid? What chores do you expect of your kids or kids you know today? How are your children "active contributors" to your family welfare?

How do you relate the care of your own kids to an obligation to care for other kids? How are you or how could you be an othermother to kids in your community?

Knowing Children

As a group, construct a cultural image of kids. Refer to magazines, television shows or commercials, in addition to your own experiences with kids. In what ways are these images of “knowing children,” according to the author’s description?

Let Those Who Have Ears Hear

What is the most profound thing you have ever heard from a kid you know? Have you heard of stories from your family of profound things you said as a kid?

The author suggests that kids’ spirituality is “tactile.” What does this mean? Give examples.

What About Those Teens?

Name some defining moments when you think about your experience as a teen. What was the role of the church or faith in your life? How did you try to make sense of your reality?

In what ways do you embrace childhood and children, including your child within? In what ways do you try to get away from childhood and children, including your child within? Has this changed over time?

Invite a group of teens to meet with your group. First, split into groups of teens and adults. Have everyone write down three anonymous questions they would like to ask a

member of the other group. Put these questions in bag. Exchange bags. Remaining in groups, draw questions out of the bag and discuss responses to them. Appoint someone to take notes and someone to present the responses. Then, come together as one group. Alternating between teens and adults, present a question and the group response. Continue as long as time permits. What was surprising to you? What did you anticipate?

Making Space for Kids and Faith

The author claims that there is something adults may do to “push kids underground” as they grow that stops encouraging them to be philosophers who engage in wonder and ponder big questions. How do you contribute to this? How do you combat it? What about your church? Your tradition?

Where is the place in your experience that provided your “all-time best space maker for wonder, for pondering big questions, for faith” (see page 71)? In what ways do you provide these spaces for your kids or kids you know? In what ways do kids you know discover these spaces for themselves?

Practice asking big questions. On an index card, write the biggest question you can. Then, allow your imagination to engage this question for a few minutes. Try not to analyze or doubt your ability to engage the question. Let your imagination surprise you. Then, write down a few thoughts or draw a picture on the card. Discuss what this exercise felt like.

Do you agree that “making space for children is never easy, never entirely successful, and always prone to distortion” (page 73)? If so, how could you help create “prolonged encounters” with kids you know? If not, how do you already participate in “prolonged encounters” with kids you know?

Knowing Children of Faith

The author suggests that children themselves might have a vocation. She writes, “Adults and parents bear the difficult task not only of modeling a new kind of mutuality between themselves but also of helping children find their own place in the complicated give-and-take of family life” (page 74). How do you model mutuality in your family life? How do you understand the vocation of children?

How does “unconditional self-sacrificial love” hurt kids?

Write a letter to your kid or a kid you know. Include the quote from *Gilead*: “I’m writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you’ve done in your life and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God’s grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle” (page 75). Elaborate on this quote the specific ways in which your kid or kid you know is more than a miracle to you.

The author suggests that the place of children in worship on the one hand can be representative and inclusive, and on the other hand can be a token that uses kids because

they are cute. What are the places of children in your worship experiences? In what ways are they included and in what ways are they used as a token?

Watch the sub-titled French film *The Chorus (Les Choristes)* (2004). How does the music teacher create space for wonder and joy? Think of other films or stories that encourage the encouragement of space for kids to develop their vocation (for example, *Billy Elliot*, 2000; *Girl Fight*, 2000).

Consider which of these images--created in God's image, sinful, agent, gift, task--best expresses your view of children? Which is the most challenging image to you? Which is most thought-provoking? Explain.

Chapter 5: Giving unto Others...But What About Myself?

Read Psalm 4 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

The author claims that “kids have a way of moving into your life and moving you right out” (page 78). Do you agree that kids clutter your life and squeeze out your space and time? In what ways? Name some funny and not so funny examples from your life.

The Giving Tree

In what ways are you a caregiver? Who cares for you in this role? How do you care for others who are caregivers?

How does sacrificial love lead to parental burn out? What can be done to prevent this?

In what ways does your church provide access to childcare? Talk to some parents of young kids in your church about their experience with child care. Is there accessible daycare in your community? Is it affordable?

Draw two columns on the chalkboard or on a large piece of paper. Title one column “flight” and the other “fight.” Brainstorm ways that you, your church, and culture advocate flight from the ideal of family or fight for the ideal family. Then, engage the author’s question: “How are we to create and sustain a balanced Christian life that is

neither entirely selfish nor entirely self-sacrificial *and* that doesn't leave anyone gasping for air?" (page 85).

The Dance of Mutuality

The author connects her many roles with cultural values and virtues:

Good person...virtue of following rules
 Good woman and Good mother...virtue of undying sacrificial love
 Good feminist...virtue of self-fulfillment
 Good man and Good worker...virtue of achievement
 Good scholar...virtue of detached objectivity

List your various roles and the ways that culture or the church expects you to be virtuous in them. In what ways do these virtues need to be challenged? In what ways do you challenge them as you enact your roles? Child psychologist D.W. Winnicott writes about the concept of the "good enough mother" (see, for example, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge, 1982; the author quotes Winnicott on pages 144-145). How does it feel to aspire to be a good enough person, a good enough Christian, a good enough kid, a good enough parent, and good enough in your many other roles?

How do you practice mutuality in the everyday tasks of cooking, cleaning, and laundry in your home? What role do kids have in these practices? How do you handle feeling overwhelmed or taken advantage of in these chores? How do you hear these same complaints from other members of your family?

Lopsided Mutuality

The author raises two important, often overlooked parts of raising kids in mutuality. She defines “transitional hierarchy” as “the temporary inequity of power and privilege in families,” and “transitional sacrifice” as “the temporary restriction and offering up of one’s own desires for the sake of one’s own children” (page 88). How do you understand these two concepts? Do you agree that they are troubling oversights in our conceptions of mutuality? How do you negotiate the task of differentiating between authority figure and friend as a parent or othermother?

How does raising kids with “mutuality” mean giving up on perfectionism?

How is a hierarchy in a family crucial to setting boundaries and limits?

Think through the stages of your life and your physical location for everyday family meals and special family meals. Did you sit in a highchair? Was there a kids table? Who sat at the head of the table? Did you sit at a round table? Now, imagine you are planning an everyday or special family meal. On a piece of paper, draw a seating chart, placing each family member at a table or series of tables. What factors contribute to your seating chart? How would you explain to each member of the family the reasoning behind their assigned seat? Does the author inspire any changes or surprises in your seating chart compared to your experience of past meals?

Salvaging Sacrifice

Do you agree that sustaining family life requires daily self-restriction or self-sacrifice? What image comes to mind from your experience of sustaining family life? What experiences come to mind when you think of self-restriction or self-sacrifice for the good of your family? Where do you draw the line with self-restriction or self-sacrifice for the good of your family? How and with whom do you *share* the sacrifices of raising kids?

How does the expectation of self-sacrifice burden parents? In what ways does your church support single parents in raising their kids? How do you *share* in the sacrifices of raising kids as an othermother to kids you know?

The author quotes Daniel Bell to make an important point about self-sacrifice: “The recovery of sacrifice hinges on revisioning it not in terms of scarcity, where giving necessarily entails losing, but in terms of abundance, wherein giving is a matter of sharing an inexhaustible surplus” (page 92). How do you understand sacrifice out of plenty, versus the sacrifice of depletion? How do you make sacrifices of yourself or your time in both of these senses? Do you need to make transitions from depletion to plenty in your life? How can you go about doing this? How can the church support you?

What do you think about the three justifications of sacrifice the author suggests and how these justifications may look in the practice of raising kids (pages 92-93)?

1. Sacrifice by the privileged for the sake of the oppressed
(Parents and other adults tell children what to do and where to go)
2. Sacrifice by those with less need for the sake of those with greater need
(Parents must provide for the basic needs of children)

3. Sacrifice in the context of a long-term relationship of mutual give-and-take
(Parents give to children in the hopes that they will eventually care for others)

Dual (At Least) Vocations

List your multiple vocations or “offices.” Do you view these as loves? Why or why not?

How do you manage your multiple “loves” (for example, family, work, friends, e-mail, etc.)? How do your “loves” glorify God? How do your multiple vocations bring your gifts to your community?

Do you see the “loves” of work and family as mutually exclusive? How have you experienced or heard of creative ways of balancing work and family? Do you share your work with your family? Do you share your family with your work? Give examples.

The author quotes Barbara Kingsolver, “I’d like to think it’s OK to do a lot of different things, even if we’re not operating at genius level in every case” (page 96). Are you happy being average in some of what you do? Were your parents and othermothers pleased with you regardless of your level of achievement? Are you pleased with your kids regardless of their level of achievement? In our culture of measuring perfectionism (for example, with grades, promotions, income level, level of education, performance reviews, awards, membership in societies, etc.), how do we nurture a sense of being OK with our imperfections?

In his theology, Reformer Martin Luther stresses the importance of God's acceptance and forgiveness, rather than our works or virtues. Matthew 3: 13-17 portrays the baptism of Jesus and God's declaration that God is pleased with God's child:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? But Jesus answered him; Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness. Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 3:13-17)

In a similar vein, a few centuries later, theological Paul Tillich preached the sermon, "You Are Accepted" (in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948). How do you feel accepted by parents and othermothers in your life? How do you let kids in your life know that you accept them for who they are?

Work and Family Interruptus

Think of the ways you have been interrupted in reading *In the Midst of Chaos* or in reading through this study guide. In what ways are these interruptions annoyances and in what ways are they divine surprises? Peruse a creativity book, such as *Creativity and Divine Surprise* (Karla Kincannon, Nashville, Upper Room Books, 2005), *The Artist's Way* (Julia Cameron, Penguin Group, 2002), or *Bird by Bird* (Anne Lamott, Anchor, 1995). How do these writers (or others you know of) encourage the transformation of interruption into divine surprise? Where do you draw the line and insist on uninterrupted time? How do you balance the different attitudes of disruptive interruption and transformative interruption?

Do you agree that a “theology of interruption” (page 99) can help you to be more attentive to other people, including kids?

Chapter 6: Doing Justice and Walking Humbly with Kids

Read Psalm 147 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

Think back to a time when you said, “It’s not fair.” Think of a time when a kid you know said, “It’s not fair,” to you. Think of your current life situation--what is there about which you can say, “It’s not fair.” What do these instances have in common?

Make a list with two columns: “justice in the home” and “justice in the wider society.” As you read this chapter, list the ways you already practice justice in each of these places, as well as any new ideas that occur to you.

Negotiating Justice

What songs do you sing about justice in your church? Select a hymn to sing or listen to a recording at the start of this session (for example, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (James Weldon Johnson, 1921), “Let There Be Peace On Earth” (Jan-Lee Music, 1955), “The Long Road to Freedom” (2006) Ladysmith Black Mambazo, “Freedom is Coming: Songs of Protest and Praise from South Africa” Wild Goose Publications).

In what ways does your church talk about social justice? In Sunday School? In Preaching? In Outreach? Through music? How do or how could you invite kids to participate in the conversation about social justice?

What are some practical ways to integrate justice and parenting? Are there mission opportunities that you have felt comfortable (or not) taking your children? Plan an intergenerational church family service project in which you engage the issue of justice in your community. Visit a place that “does justice” in your community.

The author refers to Audre Lorde to say, “All children must learn to stand up for themselves, to deal constructively with injustice aimed at them, and to protect and defend the rights, dignity, and well-being of others” (page 106). How did you learn this as a kid? How do you teach this as a parent and othermother? Give examples.

The author lets us into her decision process of buying a home. She refers to this as a matter of justice and an effort to balance commitments. Did you think about justice when you were deciding where to live? If not, are there other areas of your life in which a concern for justice factors into your decisions (for example, your work, volunteer opportunities, choice of schools, choice of church, etc.)? Give examples of where you struggle to make compromises in an effort to balance your commitments.

Consuming Spirituality (While Leaving Justice on the Plate)

Does anyone practice “pure religion” anymore (or ever in the past)? Is everyone a bricoleur, someone who shops around for spirituality (page 109)? How does creativity factor into the practice of spirituality and where on the pure religion/bricoleur spectrum is there room for creative interpretations and reimaginings of spiritual experience?

Do you agree that cultural practices of spirituality imply that doing justice is just too hard?

A Spiritual Mandate for Justice

Read Micah 6:8: “What does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” This author draws on this text to claim that we are all to make our spirituality public in the form of just action. Do you receive these words as burden or gift? How does your answer influence the ways you seek to do justice and love kindness?

Love One’s Children, or Love All Children?

“How exactly does one seek justice in the world without sacrificing one’s family?” asks the author (page 111). How do you try to nurture in your own kids a passion for justice and love of other kids? Share a story about how your kids or kids you know have inspired a passion for justice in you?

Some churches regularly provide an opportunity for the congregation to remember their baptism and to reaffirm their commitments promised at their baptism (or promised by their sponsors in the case of infant baptism). Using the liturgy from this service or creating one if your tradition does not have this practice, plan a worship service in which your congregation can remember and renew a commitment to justice seeking and peacemaking. Consider Bill Wylie-Kellermann’s story on page 112. Include a concrete practice of social justice as part of this service. What role will kids have in this service?

Craft intercessions or prayers for worship with children and or teens. Include concrete references to people, situations, and places currently in need of justice.

Care of One's Own Children

The author outlines the following four ways to actualize love of other kids through love of one's own kids (page 113):

1. we love our kids to learn how to love other kids
2. we love our kids for the sake of a better world
3. we teach our kids to care for others and to work for social justice
4. we model just love within our family

How do these four resonate with you in your experience as a kid? Does one stand out more than another? What about in your experience as a parent? As an othermother?

List the ways your church extends love to people in your community. List the ways that your church extends love to “your farthest and most marginalized neighbors.” List the ways that your church extends love to kids. Are there new practices you want to add to this list?

The author claims that no family stands alone in the obligation to provide for basic needs of children, yet we know that many in our modern-day context stand alone (for example, many kids are without basic health care). Who supports those who stand alone in your church? In your community? Who needs your support?

Read Matthew 25:31-46 from the point of view of a kid. Imagine ways to re-read this scripture based on your roles as parent and othermother (for example, I was a hungry baby and you nursed me...I was a hungry student and you taught me...). Sing or play a recording of “Cuando El Pobre (When the Poor Ones)” (Ediciones Paulinas, 1971). Do any of these various perspectives on this reading surprise you?

Parents as a Bridge, Home as Mission Field

When people join the United Methodist Church, they commit to give of their time, talents, gifts, and service to the church and wider community. Make a list with three columns, labeled family, church, wider community. List the ways in which you practice giving of your time, talents, gifts, and service in each of these areas. Do you agree that home is your mission base from which to give to widening circles of others?

The author claims “the Jesus of the gospels sees family like money and power, all dangerously tempting us to turn in and away from others” (page 116). How do money, power, and family turn you away from others? How do money, power, and family turn your church away from others? Suggest ways of turning outward toward others via your money, power, and family.

While movies like *Everest* (1999) and *March of the Penguins* (2005) and hiking guidebooks stress the importance of a base camp for replenishing resources, the church community serves as a mission base for replenishing resources for missionaries that go out into the world for week-long or multi-year mission trips.

- The author suggests that our homes are “mission bases” for caring for others. How does this image resonate with you? How is your home your mission base? How does your home prepare each of your family members to go out in care of others?
- Does the church serve as a mission base for families or vice versa? How does the church help support the mission base of families of all shapes and sizes?
- The author uses a Mezuzah (of the Jewish tradition) to remind her to go out into the world when she walks through the door of her home. Look at the doors of your home, especially the doors that lead outside. Do these doors prepare you to go out and care for others? Do they welcome you back home to your mission base?
- What practices bless your coming home and going out (see page 118)?

Doing Justice from Home to World

The author suggests some mundane, daily routes to the practice of justice, such as “table talk,” discussion of placement and use of television, and treating family members with mutual respect. The author draws on McGinnis and McGinnis to list both avenues of doing justice and obstacles to doing justice in daily life (page 119):

Avenue #1: lifestyle changes that contest dominant cultural values
 Avenue #2: “works of mercy” that minister to those in need
 Avenue #3: “works of justice” that advocates for wider social change

Obstacle #1: limitations of time, energy, and resources
 Obstacle #2: social context inhospitable to raising children (esp. poor families)
 Obstacle #3: isolation of the home and parents from community
 Obstacle #4: lack of imagination

How do you understand these avenues and obstacles to justice? How do your mundane, daily routines contain practices of justice? Which obstacle is most pressing to you in your experience? Do you think this description of avenues and obstacles to justice is missing anything?

Do you find the above exercise helpful? How does it make you feel? Many people feel overwhelmed, guilty, remorseful, and a sense of repeated failure with “so many choices, so little time.” How do we consider (Micah 6:8) to be a possible task, rather than an impossible task, both inside and outside our family?

Must justice include actual action, or can it stop at the heightening of social awareness?

Discuss the difficulties, especially for adolescents, in balancing encouraging justice while encountering peer pressure and materialism.

Doing Justice at Home

Do you agree that “families teach justice by the very way they structure the work and love of daily life” (page 121)? List ways that kids may learn injustice from their families.

How do you balance high expectations for kids’ participation in the responsibilities of family life with letting kids do chores in their own kid way? How did your parents and othermothers expect you to participate in the responsibilities of family life? How did they teach you how to be responsible? What about your expectations of kids you know?

Although she expects her kids would disagree, the author thinks she has let her kids down by not expecting more of them. Do you feel that you parents and othermothers let you down by not expecting more of you? Do you expect enough of your kids?

Draw a lifeline of a family. Indicate specific ways throughout the lifeline that kids may gain a “gradual, incremental transfer of power and responsibility for family welfare” (page 124). At each stage, consider the image of familial just love, the role of the gospel message, and communal support (for example, through resources, reflection, and encouragement).

Chapter 7: Playing the Field: Xbox, Soccer, and Other Fun Family Games

Read Psalm 104 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

Do you agree that it is difficult to imagine the connection between play and spiritual Christian practice? Where in your life, your church, your community, and culture do you see possibilities for this connection? Where do you see challenges to it?

The Battle over Play

How is play a part of your life? What are your “play habits”? What does it feel like to play? Have you fought over the role of play in your life? Have you ever considered play in depth? Are you struck by the life-giving potential of play?

Select some duplicate copies of favorite photographs of “play” from your experience. Using scissors and glue make a collage on a piece of poster paper that depicts your “landscape of play.” You may want to supplement with images from magazines, drawings, stamps, stickers, words, etc. How would you describe your “landscape of play”? Relaxed? Chaotic? Fun?

What factors enhance or impede playing as a life-giving practice of faith for you? Consider the following possible aspects of play, circling the ones that factor into your play most directly (add any additional aspects that resonate with your experience).

Xbox, soccer, field, competitive play, sports, coaches, pleasure, friendship, skill, goals, music, fun, winning, alone, exercise, structure, success, individual, communal, video games, laughter, rules, time, concentration, mystery, weekends, uniform, gear, after school, busy, creative, practice, summer, defeat, happiness,

game day, recovery, energy, self-discipline, world, hard work, imagination, cost, health, neighborhood, joy, freedom, faith, companionship, self-esteem, connection, travel, e-mail, kids, parents, othermothers, church.

Do you agree that play is “often controlled by adults” and “structured to promote the success of individual children” (page 130)? Give examples.

Select a room in your house to map. On a piece of paper, draw the basic layout of this room. Then, draw in all of the ways that you employ technological “devices” (a device is something created through technology to expedite satisfaction of essential human needs, like fast food or electric heating, page 132). How do you recognize, embrace, and/or resist your dependence on these devices? In the margins of your drawing, list various factors that may contribute to the production of your device: Who made it? From where did it come?

How does “repetitious ritual” in the form of play (or e-mail!) form you and your spiritual life? Are you formed for the good by these rituals? Why or why not? Do they draw you toward or away from communal interaction?

Do you consider television a device? There is a bumper sticker that reads, “Turn off TV, Turn on Life,” and a website devoted to combating America’s “TV addiction” at www.tvturnoff.org. Yet, books like *The American Family on Television: a Chronology of 121 Shows, 1948-2004* (by Marla Brooks, Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2005) show how television impacts and reflects cultural images of family. When, where, and

how does television factor into your family life? Is this different now compared to your experience as a kid?

Transforming Play from Within

When you think of culture, where do you fall on the spectrum the author suggests between (1) culture as supportive and (2) the desire to reject culture? Drawing from theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, the author complexifies this continuum by considering the relation of faith to culture along a spectrum: Christ against culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, Christ transforming culture, and Christ of culture. Where do you, your church, and your tradition fit along this continuum?

Return to the map of the room in your house. Point out focal practices that occur in this room, or the potential for focal practices. Focal practices have to do with meaning, invoke skills and practices, connect us with nature and other people, inspire shared rhythm in the family, and help us connect with God in the midst of mundane daily life (page 136).

The author outlines a way of transforming mere devices into focal practices, especially regarding play. How would you suggest using the following four steps of recovery and transformation of specific kinds of play as spiritual practice (page 137)?

1. DISCERN (what is negative about this play?)
2. MODERATE (how do I balance addiction to and rejection of this play?)
3. BE PROACTIVE (is there another kind of play that is less isolating, self-centered, or violent?)
4. REPENT (where have I contributed to making this play less meaningful than it could be?)

Reclaiming Play as Focal Practice

Name instances of play in your experience that have brought you into conversation with life's meaning, have put your minor troubles into proper perspective, have renewed family bonds, and have allowed you to spend time in enjoyment and anticipation of joy and grace (page 139-140). Do you find God in the midst of play?

Read the following prayerfully, seeking discernment concerning play as a life-giving practice of faith (page 141):

Play involves immense pleasure, even joy, of a holistic sort. Mind, body, spirit--all are engaged together. Sometimes play results in the visible, tangible sensations of a smile, laughter, muscle ache, or cleansing breath. Play has rich interpersonal and intergenerational potential, connecting us deeply to others, and is wonderful when done together in a communal or cooperative context. But play also involves activity done by oneself. One must be able to play well alone in order to play well with others. Play sparks and fuels imagination and creativity. It suspends reality but doesn't supersede it. It can transform reality. It involves an attitude of delight and enjoyment--an embodiment of joy--as much as specific activity. In fact, any playful act can become work if the pleasure dissipates. Everyone should have equal access to play, regardless of talent, wealth, or the right outfit. Genuine play does not harm those playing or others around them.

How do these aspects of play resonate with you?

Play as Creation

Schedule a visit with new parents and their new baby or adopted child. Observe and participate in the play of new life. Observe the smiles, sparkly eye contact, and playful use of language in both adults and children. Observe the process of transformation and

creation of new knowledge within the new family. Could you be an othermother for this family?

Godly Play as Example

Participate in “Godly play” as outlined on pages 145-146. Select a parable and read it together while sitting in a circle. Using a variety of available craft materials or found objects, allow participants to create out of their imaginative reflection on the parable. End with a feast. Reflect on the transformative nature of play and its connection to faith. How does “Godly play” help you encounter God through play?

Play as Re-Creation and Resurrection

How do you think of the difference between play and work? Are there parts of your life in which these come together? Give examples.

Read *Jesus’ Day Off* (by Nicholas Allan, Doubleday, 1998). Does the necessity of play for the efficacy of work resonate with you? Are you surprised by the interpretation of the relationship between play and work? Relieved? Is it realistic in your life context? Why or why not?

Do you resonate more with the image of an “oasis of play” we create in the midst of our life or the “flow” of play that runs throughout life? How do you cultivate, recognize, and enjoy oases? How is play present in your experience in a more sustained way? Does flow surprise you?

The author compares play to liturgy in that they both mark and inhabit sacred space and time, in addition to engaging us in a way that makes us lose sense of time, place, boundaries, and rules (page 148). Name experiences in play and liturgy in which you have experienced both a suspension of the normal and an encounter with the sacred.

“Play believes in the resurrection,” Anne Thurston writes (p.148). Sing a joyful, playful song or hymn of resurrection life.

Chapter 8: Take, Read: From Seuss to Scripture

Read Psalm 78:1-8 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

Host a three-part movie and reading series. Select two movie/book pairs in which a movie has been made from a book. In the first meeting, read the book before viewing the movie. In the second meeting, view the movie before reading the book. In the third meeting, discuss the experience. How do these experiences differ for you? Which do you prefer? The author claims that “the written word allows one’s mind to wonder and hope in a way that most media do not” (page 160). Do you agree?

What books are on your nightstand? What other places would someone find books or reading materials in your home? What was the place of books in your childhood home?

Do you agree that in our culture, reading has become a chore associated with privilege and school? How have you seen the practice of reading change throughout your lifetime in your experience and in wider culture?

Do you agree that the practice of reading forms and changes lives?

People of the Word

Name experiences in which you have heard the voice of God through reading, telling stories, or writing. Have these practices ever given you the feeling of needing to remove your shoes before sacred ground?

How have you cultivated self-reflection through reading, writing, and telling stories?

Select a favorite passage of scripture, quotation, or story. Memorize it and practice reading it aloud. Speak this treasured word to one another. Allow your reading aloud to be transformative and to connect you with those listening to you.

People of the Book

We can think of the Jewish practice of Midrash as a digging into the scriptural text as if we were to take our thumb into a flower pot and dig into the soil, turning it over and over. The author claims that texts call to us to find our place within them (page 155). Where are you located in the favored word you shared in the above exercise? Interpret your experience of this word to the group. Dig into the word and let it both transform you and be transformed by you.

Take, Read; Take, Eat

Purchase or make some crackers, cookies, or bread, in addition to a container of honey. Choose a container of honey that can be squeezed out or transfer the honey you have into a pastry bag or squeeze bottle. Read aloud Ezekiel 3:1-3. Ask each person to write a word or phrase in honey on their cracker, cookie, or bread. Eat the treat and imagine the word going into your body so that you may speak a prophetic word back to the world. Discuss this experience with the group. How have words and foods both contributed to your nourishment and encouraged a response from you?

How do you find time and space to read in the midst of the chaos of your daily life? Do you agree that we cannot live fully without reading?

Tasting: Reading as Pleasure and Joy

Describe your ideal reading adventure, or your “perfect environment for reading.” What book are you reading? Are you at home, in the library, on a park bench, at the beach? Are you alone or with others? In this image, are you a kid or an adult? Are you sitting, standing, curling up? Are you warm or cool? What time of day is it? Are you reading by natural light or by the light of a lamp? What does your body feel like? Are you reading quietly or aloud?

Do you agree that everyday books about common life can evoke faith? Give examples from your experience.

Watch *Finding Neverland* (2004). Note how the presence of adults can make play come alive for kids. Note how the presence of kids makes play come alive for adults. Share experiences from your life in which adults helped play come alive through you. Share experiences in which you helped play come alive for adults. What is the role of storytelling in these experiences?

Do you come to the Bible with as much anticipation of delight and nourishment as you come to a good novel, poetry, or short story? Why or why not?

Ingesting: Reading as Formative

The author draws on theologian Rowan Williams to suggest that the practice of playful reading “creates a sphere of acceptable irresponsibility where children can try out adult choices without consequence and implication” (page 161). This, in turn, encourages all of us to see the world with fresh vision. What does this say about our need for the sometimes silly, unreal, imaginative, and extremely important contribution of the voice of kids in our ability to see with fresh vision? Do you agree that fantasy and imagination contribute to the ability to make moral and spiritual choices? How do we create places for fantasy and imagination for kids and adults? Explain.

Practice one of the forms of storytelling that the author describes on page 162. Which form did you choose? Do you see a connection between imagination and faith in this practice?

Tell aloud, in your own words, a story from the Bible that either continually delights you or forms and transforms you.

Do you consider reading to be a practice of faith? Have books you have read provided you an alternative to prominent stories of wider culture? How do you see in books the themes of love, violence, success, domination, profit, boundaries of gender, race, class, and material things, relief from suffering, “safe terror” (see page 169), common human struggles? How do books arouse you, challenge you to accept new ideas, and stimulate

new ideas? How do you choose the next book you will read? Are there books you to which you continue to return and re-read?

Digesting: Reading as Transformative

Read the Simone Weil article that the author quotes (“Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd). What insights emerge?

Reading as Evolving Process and Practice

Go to your local library and attend story hour. What does it feel like? While you are there, check out a book that appeals to you by sight or feel (the author suggests many titles in this chapter). Find a book to recommend to an adult friend and explain to him or her how children’s books can transform adult lives.

Identify a place and time for stories in your home. Arrange a story hour at your church. Discover ways in which stories already impact your life and view these ways as evolving spiritual practices for you. Hand on what you have received to kids and to adults alike. Pass on your gifts of reading, writing, and storytelling to those who may not have access to these gifts as easily as you do. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23 aloud. Take, read, share.

Chapter 9: Blessing and Letting Go

Read Psalm 121 slowly, prayerfully, silently or aloud, and ponder these things.

Read the following two poems.

Kindergarten Days

You'll be the first one on the bus.
 It goes to kindergarten, remember?
 Of course we'll wave.
 No, Mrs. Klose won't squeeze you to death if you talk in kindergarten.
 I promise.
 Who told you that?
 Yes, the house will still be here after school.
 OK, it's not called school.
 It's kindergarten.
 Yes, Mom and I will be here.
 Go ahead now.
 Remember, wave until you pass the pines.
 We'll stand right here.
 Yes.
 Good-bye.
 Don't forget to keep waving.
 Yes, we'll still see you.
 The bus windows aren't that dirty.
 Yes.
 Have fun,
 Good-bye.
 Yes.
 (quoted in *In the Midst of Chaos*, page 175-176)

Ascension

It wasn't just wind chasing
 thin, gunmetal clouds
 across a long sky;
 it wasn't the feeling that one might ascend
 on that excited air,
 rising like a trumpet note,
 And it wasn't just my sister's water breaking,
 her crying out,
 the downward draw of blood and bone...
 It was all of that,

mud and new grass
 pushing up through melting snow,
 the lilac in bud by my front door
 bent low
 by last week's ice storm.
 Now the new mother, that leaky vessel,
 begins to nurse her child,
 Beginning the long good-bye.

(quoted in *In the Midst of Chaos*, page 180)

How do these poems characterize comings and goings? Do they inspire or constitute a blessing? Do they speak to you?

The author lists several characteristics of blessing: *blessing* marks gratitude and care, grants peace and goodwill, speaks when words don't, consecrates religious rite or word, invokes divine care and protection, confers prosperity, closes worship, recognizes mystery, promises. How do you use the word *blessing*? How does your church or faith tradition use *blessing*? When and how do you both need and give *blessing*? Do you feel that *blessing* commits you to a way of being in community with others? Do you feel that *blessing* frees you and others to "live joyfully and gratefully within finite existence"?

In earlier chapters, the author distinguishes chaos between everyday chaos and a kind of chaos that is unjust and unredeemable. We could differentiate between the "mundane chaos" of everyday life and the "complete chaos" of violence, abuse, or war. In this chapter, the author distinguishes between the "tragic grief" of immediate loss and "mundane grief," "the daily nontragic grief so rooted in family life" (page 177). How

does mundane grief contribute to your family life? How do you move through the hurts of everyday life?

Recognizing Limits

All of the practices in this book come out of everyday life. To recognize how we are already caring for children as a spiritual practice, we must consider our everyday life context. The author argues that the first step in the habitual practice of blessing is to recognize our limits and to free ourselves of the burden of adding one more thing to our lives. List your limits, a description of your mundane chaos. What burdens, if lifted, would free you to live your life more fully?

Mundane Grief

The author connects tragic and mundane loss as unavoidable aspects of “parental spirituality” (page 179). Mourning, she argues drawing on the work of Bruce Vaughn, is part of every life, both in tragic times and in everyday times. How does your church support and ritualize mourning as an expression of both tragic grief and mundane grief?

Consider the following phenomenon:

1. For many who have experienced lengthy cross-cultural immersion, there is a strange phenomenon: As hard as it is to leave home and go abroad, it is even harder to come home. For, when one comes home, one comes transformed by the new experience, which in turn transforms the old, familiar home. We expect strange new places to be challenging, but we expect home to remain familiar.

2. The author says something similar about life with kids. As big of an adjustment as it is to welcome kids into a family, the adjustment connected to kids leaving is even bigger. Having babies, adopting kids, teaching a new class of kids all bring us into strange new places. When the time comes for summer or for college, we expect to recognize the familiarities of home. However, a major argument in this book is that kids transform those who care for them. When summer or college comes and kids who have been a part of our life move on to other adventures of their own, we don't just go back home. We go back home transformed which in turn transforms our old, familiar home.
3. Scripture depicts strange new places of and around Jesus. In turn, Christians believe that Jesus transforms our old, familiar homes.

Does this phenomenon resonate with you in your experience as a kid? As a parent? As an othermother? In what ways?

The author outlines an important ironic paradox on pages 180-181. Moments of loss and letting go, which we all experience, are both blessing and not blessings. Mundane grief mourns loss while celebrating new developments (for example, going to kindergarten or high school graduation). However, tragic grief cannot claim to contain a "blessing in disguise." What do you think about this paradox? Do you experience it in your life?

Mundane Failure

The author claims, "We are always standing in judgment of our own and other people's parenting and in judgment of our own and other people's faith" (page 183). How have

you experienced your parenting and your faith judged by others? How do you judge others' parenting and faith? How do you balance your finitude, limits, and vulnerability with a sense of parenting as a worthy person who is faithful and loving? How do you have faith in yourself as good enough? How do you instill faith in kids as good enough?

Offering and Receiving Grace

Consider the phrases “the intent [of spiritual practices] is love and grace” and “spiritual practices are doable in the midst of my chaotic life.” Do you believe this about your spiritual practices? Do you believe this about your life with kids you know?

How do you practice mutual respect, mutual self-love, and mutual apology in your family?

Bestowing Blessing

In our hurried culture, the question “How are you?” usually invokes the response “I am fine.” This is often the extent of our greeting, sharing, and leave-taking, even between friends. Take the author and Herbert Anderson up on their suggestion (page 192) to reconsider these words of greeting and parting and to think of ways to expand this vocabulary.

Letting Go

The author argues that letting go involves attention, blessing, trust, and hope of eternal return. She argues that we have to let go of kids in order to love them genuinely. Have

you experienced “letting go” as genuine love? How does letting go differ in the experience of kids, parents, and othermothers?

The author argues that it is not easy, but it is doable, to let go. Do you agree? There is a story about a mother who helps her child go to school by suggesting that every time she misses mommy, she put her hand on her heart and remember that they are connected. When the time comes for the mother to go on a business trip, her daughter remembers this story and makes the same suggestion that every time she misses her little girl, she feels her heart beat and remembers their connection. Have kids helped you leave or let go? Have you helped kids learn to leave or let go? Give examples.

On Eagle’s Wings

As a blessing and benediction to your study of *In the Midst of Chaos*, say or sing the words to the hymn, “On Eagle’s Wings” (by Michael Joncas, OCP Publications, based on Isaiah 40:31 and Psalm 91).