

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Healing Spiritual Wounds:

Reconnecting with a Loving God After Experiencing a Hurtful Church

by

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This study guide for *Healing Spiritual Wounds* by Carol Howard Merritt was designed with two unique characteristics in mind. First, Merritt has already included a healing process at the end of each chapter and inserted her own questions and exercises there. Many of the activities she has created will work for both individuals and groups. Primarily, they are meant to carry one through a healing journey. The questions we've added here touch on the topics Merritt covers in her book, but from more of a discussion, rather than a process, standpoint. Feel free to use both resources or pick and choose based on what's right for you or your group.

Second, given the sensitive nature of the book, these questions can be calibrated to the purpose and demeanor of your group. Please be aware that the subject of spiritual wounds calls for an especially respectful and cautious approach. Some participants may be learning about the subject while others are living it. Set ground rules for listening and confidentiality. Know the limits of discussion versus advice. Consider beginning and ending times together with prayer or silence, based on your tradition.

STUDY QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1:

A TREE GROWS IN MY BEDROOM

1. How did Merritt's initial story about her family (pp. 1–5) set the tone of the book for you? Why is her credibility as someone who has suffered spiritual wounds essential for her readers?
2. Merritt describes a moment when she no longer heard her parents fighting and was flooded with an overwhelming sense that things would be okay. "As if I entered the eye of a tropical storm, peace blew its hot, humid breath" (p. 3). Describe a moment in your life when an inner peace held an outer chaos at bay.
3. Merritt "calls the question" others would obviously ask: "Why are you still a Christian?" (p. 8). Which of her answers resonate or don't resonate with you?

CHAPTER 2: FINDING *SHALOM*

1. Merritt shares the story of a man who was ostracized by his church because of his sexual orientation. She quotes two statements he makes: “I hate Christianity” and “Unless I make peace with Christianity, I’ll never have any peace” (p. 19). How did Merritt respond to this person’s suffering? Why did she want to “[recognize] and [incorporate] his faith” (p. 23)?
2. Merritt begins to outline the journey of spiritual suffering by listing painful questions people ask as they try to find a way back to their faith (p. 25). What are some of those questions? Do you find them helpful?
3. Merritt defines *shalom* as peace and wholeness, but not as a state of perfection (p. 33). According to her, where can we find *shalom*?

CHAPTER 3: HEALING OUR IMAGE OF GOD

1. “Here is the crux of spiritual healing. The reason religious wounds can cut so deeply is that they carry the weight of God with them” (p. 42). Why is it so critical that people are able to separate their belief in God from the experience of being wounded? What happens when people can and cannot do so?
2. Merritt lists some of the characteristics people attribute to God, such as demanding, loving, forgiving, and pun-

ishing. What characteristics do you typically attribute to God? Are they similar to the ones Merritt talks about? Who and what taught you to picture God in the ways you do?

CHAPTER 4: RECOVERING OUR EMOTIONS

1. Recalling a particularly appalling lecture at Moody Bible Institute about submitting to abuse, Merritt speaks of her paralysis and the callus of numbness formed by her own wounds (p. 74). What did you learn about others or yourself through that story?
2. Merritt credits the Psalms as being an avenue into her deepest feelings. “I read through the poetry, often aloud, and let the anguish of the writers shake my bones” (p. 86). What uncovers awe and emotions in you? Is it being in church, singing, praying, and studying holy texts in community? Is it through intellectual challenge or creativity? Identify some moments that reveal the anatomy of your soul.

CHAPTER 5: REDEEMING OUR BROKEN SELVES

1. One of Merritt’s subheads in this chapter is “Learning to Love All Humanity—Including Myself” (p. 100). What do you remember from her story about trying to evangelize others, and the subsequent wisdom she gained about

God's world and herself? How was her encounter such a powerful symbol of her own redemption?

2. "Pick out a metaphor for yourself," Merritt recommends to a wounded friend. "You need a new one. Your old one is all crushed, worn, and damaged" (p. 115). What new spiritual metaphors have you tried on for yourself?
3. In the closing exercises for this chapter, Merritt reminds us of her machine metaphor about loving God, self, and neighbor as the antidote to spiritual wounding (pp. 116–120). Has this image been helpful for you? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 6: RECLAIMING OUR BODIES

1. What do you make of this chapter title? How do you think it fits in with the greater message of the book?
2. According to Merritt, St. Augustine poisoned Christianity with his views on women (p. 126). Do you agree?
3. Two stories in this chapter illustrate religion's disparate messages regarding our bodies. The first story is about the lessons Merritt received at Moody regarding how to dress in order to avoid seducing men. The second story is about foot washing and reclaiming our bodies and love for one another. What do you make of these stories? Have you experienced anything similar? How do these stories embody Merritt's revelation: "I realized

though toxic streams flow in the Christian tradition, there are also life-giving beliefs” (p. 133)?

CHAPTER 7: REGAINING OUR HOPE

1. Merritt delineates two Gods that different ends of the religious spectrum proclaim for the future—a God of vengeance and devastation, and a God of justice and hope (p. 166). How are these two points of view reflected in our society today?
2. Merritt explains that we can heal our suffering at the hands of religion by “breathing deeply and opening ourselves to God” (p. 166). When have you breathed deeply while reading, talking about, and engaging with Merritt’s book?
3. Look at the “Finding Hope Exercise” on page 166. Follow Merritt’s instructions to write your ideas completing the writing prompt “The world as it ought to be,” and talk about your answers together. You may just want to create your list as a group exercise on a whiteboard.

CHAPTER 8: REASSESSING OUR FINANCES

1. “Economic insecurity can cut us off from our neighbors so that we lose sight of how to measure our real worth, as loving and beloved people” (p. 181). Were you surprised or not surprised to find economic security as a particular iteration of spiritual woundedness in Merritt’s book?
2. Transactional relationships are those in which one person judges another by their success or failure to meet the first person’s expectations. Does that seem like too simplistic a construct to describe the relationship between Renita and her mother (p. 173)?
3. Merritt poses some excellent questions on page 176: “Why do people so often equate money and love? Why did I seek God’s blessing in my financial security or see divine disapproval in the lack thereof?” How would you respond to these questions?

CHAPTER 9: BEING BORN AGAIN

1. When Merritt complained to a friend about patriarchal religion in her faith community, her friend assured her that there were other churches. She found another church with answers that spoke to her soul (p. 194). Have you had a similar experience in which you

needed to explore a different faith community that could speak to your soul?

2. How has this book provided a window for you on others' religious experiences or given you a sense of community for your own experience? What do you feel called to do in response to this book? Recommend it? Reread it? Take action for justice in this realm? With whom will you share your sense of calling?
3. Do you think it is possible to heal wounds inflicted by the church while remaining in the church? Why or why not?