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## longing for enough in a culture of more

by *Paul L. Escamilla*

### ***Discussion Guide***

**Longing for enough in a culture of more** by *Paul L. Escamilla* (Abingdon Press, 2007)

*Escape the lifestyle and attitudes of a weighed-down world. Brief, thoughtful chapters explore The Good Book, The Good Life, The Good Work, The Good Society, and The Good Earth. Whether read privately or with a group, these probing essays invite rather than indict the reader—making the “life of enough” seem not only possible but a natural next step in our lives as Christians.*

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### Part One—The Good Book

#### Chapter 1: The Modesty of God

1. Read Genesis 1:1 through 2:3. Notice the absence of introduction to the story or to its main character, God. Observe the story’s simplicity and brevity. Note the simple and unembellished ways God appraises God’s own handiwork. Notice the absence of accolades or other ascriptions of virtue to God. Finally, notice that God takes a break on the seventh day. Having studied these aspects of the creation story, what do you think of the idea that the opening pages of Genesis portray God as characterized by a certain modesty?
2. Do you find the idea of a modest God comforting? Empowering? Unsettling? How so?
3. Sometimes “good” words are bypassed for “awesome,” “incredible,” or “great” words. Think of the last time someone described something to you as merely “good” rather than “great” or “awesome” or “incredible.” What was your impression when “good” was the descriptive adjective?
4. Now think of a time when a person, at life’s end, was described by others merely as a “good person.” Was the phrase heard as negative or positive? In what sort of way did this description frame the person’s life?
5. As mentioned in the chapter, the Bible speaks often of God in superlative terms—great, powerful, almighty, everlasting, wise. Do you think it is possible for God to be all of these things and also merely good?

6. Many verses in the Bible show God not as super-heroic, but merely present in reliable, dependable, and transparent terms, providing help in simple and basic ways rather than grandiose. Here are some examples: God's song is with me in the night (Psalm 42:8). Though five sparrows are sold for two pennies, "not one of them is forgotten in God's sight" (Luke 12:6). When we are restless in the night, God keeps count of our tossing and turning (Psalm 56:8). Jesus was born of a handmaid, laid in the manger of a barn, and announced first to shepherds on the night shift (Luke 2:1-20). Are there other examples of this characterization that come to mind? How would conceiving God in such ways affect your understanding of your relationship with God and of serving others in God's name?

**For praying:**

*God of creation then and now, make plain my eyes that they may see the sheer wonder in your ordinary goodness, and behold the simple beauty of your everyday faithfulness.  
Amen.*

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## Chapter 2: Paradise in the Balance

1. Close your eyes and imagine the paradise you would have pictured *before* revisiting Genesis 1 and 2. What are some of its features?
2. What do you make of the idea that paradise, in the biblical sense, is at least as much about work as relaxation?
3. How does this square with the idea that the goal of life is to work as hard as we can now so we are able to enjoy complete relaxation at some future time?
4. Think of the word “balance” as it applies to leisure and work in your life. Would you describe your life as balanced in this way? Why or why not?
5. If you could attain that sort of balance or harmony between work and rest, what would that ideal rhythm look like?

### **For praying:**

*Work-giving God, may we grow to love the work you give us as well as the rest that accompanies it, that we may come to know that harmony between the two that some have called paradise. Amen.*

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## Chapter 3: What We Need Is Here

1. Recall a time in childhood when you discovered the meaning of the phrase “too much of a good thing.” Were you or someone around you eating too much of something really good, but really rich, or into some sort of mischief that got carried away, or teasing someone, gently at first, then less so? Describe the circumstance.
2. What about as an adult? Can you remember a recent experience in which you were reminded—the hard way—of the truth of that same axiom?
3. Clearly appetites have their purpose, and ambitions can be healthy. How do you suppose we might achieve a balance between yielding to our hungers or ambitions and repressing them?
4. Is there a standard/criterion by which we might measure a “good” appetite or ambition? If so, what might it be?
5. Ponder for a moment this phrase from Wendell Berry’s poem: “to be quiet in heart, and in eye clear.” Spend a few minutes in silence, allowing the two images from that phrase to find their way into your heart and mind’s eye. You may find it helpful to close your eyes for this purpose.
6. Finally, reflect on the phrase “what we need is here,” with reference to your own life. Take a mental inventory of the features and resources in your life that are life-giving and that provide well for your basic sustenance and well-being. If it is helpful, write these down.
7. What are some ways you might keep this awareness before you as a companion in your choices about whether and when to acquire or consume something more?

### **For praying:**

*Meditate on this paraphrase of Psalm 23:1: The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. Repeat this phrase in speech, chant, or free melody.*

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## Chapter 4: The Future of an Illusion

1. Recall some of your childhood illusions. Do you remember what precipitated some of those beliefs? What do you recall about when and how they began to come unraveled?
2. What are some common grown-up illusions in our society about God? About rich and poor? Work and prosperity? Health and illness? About different nations or people groups? About the earth?
3. Can you recall a specific instance in which an assumption or conviction you held, or maybe a certain behavior you practiced, was shown to be mistaken? Who or what was the source of that awareness? Did this result in a change for you? Why or why not?
4. Are you familiar with the prophets of the Bible? If so, when has the message of one of them spoken to you?
5. A central tenet of the Christian faith is that we are saved by grace through faith (see Ephesians 2:8). How has a confrontation that resulted in positive change in your life involved grace? And faith?
6. Look up the prophet Habakkuk 2:17. Is there any sense in which the earth carries its own prophetic voice?
7. In what ways have you been a prophet to another person with your words or practices? How have grace and faith been at work in these instances?

### **For praying:**

*Part the curtain of my soul, O God, that I may come to see the truth of who I am and how I live and what I really love. Wake me from my illusions, and set before me the way that leads to life. Amen.*

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## Chapter 5: Weaning the Soul

1. There is something contradictory, in the context of a highly patriarchal society, about a text written by a woman's hand being included in the psalter. Can you imagine a scenario in which this could have occurred? What does the Psalm 131's inclusion say to you about the nature of the Bible?
2. Can you envision some ways in which the first verse could be a gesture of surrender based on the fact that, as a woman, the writer has no access in the first place to "things too great and too marvelous" for her?
3. Henri Nouwen observes that our inner life often looks like a banana tree full of monkeys. Can you relate? Take a moment to meditate on the words *calm* and *quiet*. Imagine your soul as a child, weary with the day, turned home to a place of such calm.
4. The spiritual enterprise, or to put it in the psalmist's words, the calming and quieting of the soul, runs the risk of every other sort of enterprise: of giving it too much attention and accommodation. Do you agree that there are there ways in which we can go overboard in the attention we give to our interior lives? If so, what are some of these ways?
5. How do we avoid the opposite extreme, the unweeded garden of neglected prayer?
6. A friend has shared with me these reflections from her own motherhood: "I had probably read Psalm 131 many times, never really noticing it until I became a young mother. Then one day, after experiencing the joy of having my daughter sit in my lap, wanting nothing, not food, not play, not even talk but just the closeness of my presence, I read this psalm with an entirely different understanding. The moments we shared together just in togetherness were like restlessness grown into rest." Have you ever had a similar maternal or paternal experience? How would you describe that "together in togetherness" moment, where nothing is sought beyond companionship?
7. Think of the possibilities of that image for your relationship with God. Are there times in which simply being in the Presence is sufficient?

### **For praying:**

*As you pray Psalm 131, imagine your soul as a child grown strong and able. Turning outward now, imagine a place where is hoped needed, and you are offering it with these words: "O, \_\_\_\_\_, hope in the Lord . . ."*

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## Chapter 6: Risking Reverence

1. Think of an experience within recent memory in which you felt awestruck, overwhelmed with a sense of wonder or surprise. Was it in a religious context, such as a cathedral, in nature, a response to a story either from fiction or real life, or in some other setting? Were you with others or alone?
2. Can you recall any similar experience occurring specifically in worship or during a time of personal prayer?
3. Sailors who have crossed the Atlantic sometimes speak of the deeply satisfying sense of humility that comes from placing themselves in the midst of such a wide-open expanse. Can you think of a time when you have felt both humble and satisfied, both small and large, all at the same time? What do you suppose allows us to feel both at once?
4. Reflecting on the meaning of the word *hallowed*, consider some ways in which the first phrase in the Lord's Prayer sets the tone for what follows.

### **For praying:**

*Imagine the opening phrase of the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be your name," as illuminating every phrase that follows. Centering on the idea of God's name as whole and uninjured, pause with each phrase of the prayer to reflect on its meaning within that larger context of the hallowing of God's name. If it is helpful, speak this opening phrase following each subsequent phrase, then pause to reflect.*

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## Part Two—The Good Life

### Chapter 7: Longing for Enough

1. List in your mind or on paper the “appetites” that tend to appear most prominently in your life, such as for food, drink, recognition, wealth, influence.
2. Now take time to reflect on longings you feel deeply—hopes for yourself and your loved ones, dreams for others and the world, vocational directions, the desire to know God in a deep and personal way, or to be so known, to present your life more fully and completely before God.
3. Can you think of a time you ate when you were feeling something other than hungry, made a purchase when the need clearly wasn’t there, or entertained yourself when it wasn’t really entertainment you wanted?
4. What obstacles lie in the path of following through with one or more of the longings you’ve listed above?
5. It has been said, in relation to our marketing culture, “invention is the mother of necessity.” Can you think of appetites that have been fabricated in your lifetime, and are now regarded as needs? How does this relate to John Wesley’s observation from his own time that what were formerly luxuries are now regarded by some as necessities?
6. In his book *Here and Now*, Henri Nouwen wrote these words, “It is hard to stay in touch with our true identity because those who want our money, our time, and our energy profit more from our insecurity and fears than from our inner freedom.” How does this observation shed light on our discussion of longings and appetites?
7. Think of one small way in which you might begin to stay in closer touch with your “true identity,” paying closer attention to God, the needs around you, and the gifts you possess, in such a way as to allow some of the veiled longings to present themselves more clearly, and some of your appetites to begin to grow lighter, and even lose their interest.

#### **For praying:**

*Everlasting God, in whom we live and move and have our being, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Amen.*

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## Chapter 8: Temples Well-Aging

1. Are there times you have thought of your body either as foil, creature of comfort, or idol?
2. Which of these attitudes is the most personally familiar to you?
3. The word *old* is itself an ancient word that we think derives from an Indo-European root that means “to nourish.” Can you think of ways in which growing older is either an experience of being nourished in certain ways, nourishing others along the way, or both?
4. When the post-war Italian actress Anna Magnani was being made up for a scene, she is said to have told her make-up assistant, “Don’t take out a single line. I paid for each one.” Have you ever thought of your body’s markers—scars, wrinkles, and other blemishes—as something of which to be proud?
5. “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,” wrote Paul. If we “carry” the church within us throughout our lives, what implications does that have for the way we carry ourselves—the choices we make about self-care, attitudes we cultivate, habits we develop?
6. It has been said that we see fire in the eyes of the young, but light in the eyes of the old. What do you suppose is that light in the eyes of the old?
7. Very few toys survive into adulthood without a broken wheel or missing ear. If not done in by the rigors of childhood, then certainly by adolescence the dump trucks and stuffed animals are starting to look a little tired. Nothing is sadder than a grown-up body that has been largely spent as a plaything. Have you known such lives? Are there any ways in which you fit that description? What about bodies worn out in serving and self-giving—does this describe anyone you know? What is the difference between the two?
8. Delighting in the body is a wonderful place to begin a routine of care for our bodies and respect for others. How can you begin to regard your body as “wonderfully made” by God? (See Psalm 139.)

### **For praying:**

*Life-giving God, if my body is a temple, then let me be mindful of all that a temple houses—prayer and song, word and witness, tears and laughter. As the dwelling of your Holy Spirit, help me love this temple, that it may age gracefully and well, as well-loved temples do. Amen.*

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## Chapter 9: Holding Lightly

1. As a child, a light came on in my head when I discovered I could collect soft drink bottles and turn them in for money. Can you remember a time early in your life when you grew excited by the experience of earning money?
2. What about an early experience of helping other people in a fulfilling way by making a financial gift on their behalf?
3. What makes the difference between a life of grabbing and a life of “give and take,” in which acquisition is balanced by contribution?
4. Do you practice the discipline to live below your means in your life, or does it seem far-fetched? Do you know others who model this and could be a source of encouragement for you in such an undertaking?
5. With the exhortation to “give all you can,” Wesley takes this idea one step further—he knows that accruing wealth as a purpose all its own is a hollow and hollowing enterprise. Do you practice the discipline of parting with as much of your wealth/income as possible, or does the idea seem far-fetched? Do you know others who model this, and could be a source of guidance and insight to you in this “second step” of personal financial responsibility?
6. All of us have financial responsibilities, as well as unknowns in our future regarding how much to save for a rainy day. Who do you know who has negotiated that complicated peace between storing up resources for the future and freeing up resources for God’s work in the present? What have you learned from observing their practices and decisions?
7. In Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Sherman McCoy is a young, self-absorbed Wall Street tycoon who occasionally recalls a fragment from the Bible, but can never remember the rest of the verse: “What does it profit a man . . .” is as far as he gets. See Matthew 16:26. What does the rest of the verse say? And what is ironic in his inability to recall the remainder of the phrase?
8. John Wesley’s eighteenth-century London religious societies included, per capita, more people of means than the average London population. Why do you suppose this was true?

### **For praying:**

*Holy God, among the idols that loom over our lives, money is one of the most deceiving. Guard us from displacing genuine trust in you and others by such paper-thin means. Lead us to hold at arm’s length the sort of power money wields, and to turn our intentions instead to freeing our money for the life-giving work of the gospel. Amen.*

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## Chapter 10: Regarding Words

1. Without taking time to “count the words” you’ve heard or read today, list the various media by which they’ve come your way—such as radio, TV, billboards, and text messages. Which of these media were you giving your full attention at the time?
2. In *The Road Less Traveled*, Scott Peck has written that undivided attention is the primary way we express love to others. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” This saying is attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi. Think of ways you can apply this counsel to your own life.
4. Don Saliers speaks about “listening one another into speech.” Are there persons in your life who do this for you? Are there times you offer this to others? In what sense could we describe God as such a listener toward us? And do you ever afford God the gift of your ear in such a way?
5. In the Genesis narrative, through speech comes creation. Have you ever thought about word-crafting and world-crafting as so intimately related? In what sense was Mrs. Dale’s effort and result an expression of this relationship?
6. Alyce McKenzie teaches her students of preaching to “to talk less and to say more.” Does her lesson apply outside the classroom? If so, how?
7. Brother Thomas, in *The Mermaid Chair*, reflects on the unwelcome prospect of leaving the cloistered monastic life to return to the world “out there where normal people, even bank tellers, used the words ‘totally awesome’ to describe the most banal things.” How do his sentiments relate to Kierkegaard’s words about some things being true when whispered, but not when shouted?
8. In “The Flower,” when George Herbert wrote, “Thy word is all—if we could spell,” what do you suppose he meant?
9. As a “stream of consciousness” exercise, try your hand at writing a paragraph, or a poem, even a list of words that come into your mind as you reflect on your own direction, your personal commitments and responsibilities, or your relationship with God. When you’ve finished, reflect on what you have written. Do you see wisdom in your words? Are there words beneath the words you’ve written—a message of some sort for your life?

### **For praying:**

*Dear God, without words, I cannot speak my prayer, nor when there are too many. Subdue my voice, then, and in my depths let there be a ladder built, that a chosen few words may make their way upward to the light of day and utter with a yielding sigh the paraphrase of my soul. Amen.*

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## Chapter 11: The Courage to Say No

1. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the narrator describes a family of weaverbirds that spends months amassing an enormous nest of sticks and mud and eventually baby chicks until the weight of it brings the whole tree crashing to the ground. Have you ever felt that your life was a process of amassing more and more stuff—projects, details, obligations, hobbies, and amusements?
2. Can you think of a time in your life when you were called to say no to something very attractive or alluring? Think of the people or relationships that were among the reasons you refused this choice. Who was involved in the way of lending you courage for the decision? To whom did you have responsibilities in ways that also influenced your decision?
3. Studies have shown that a person can hold their foot in a bucket of ice water far longer in the company of others than when they are alone. Why do you suppose that is? And what does it teach us about the most helpful ways to face difficult decisions?
4. The Greek word for *wilderness* in Luke’s Gospel can also mean “open country.” In what sense can a moment of deciding against the mainstream be like stepping into “open country”? What are the possibilities and risks afforded by such an “open country” moment in our lives? And specifically in your life?

### **For praying:**

*By your grace, O God, I would keep company with others in this walk through life, that they and I may borrow one from another that courage without which we cannot say no, and with which every “no” is not only possible, but leads to your divine “yes.” Amen.*

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## Part Three—The Good Work

### Chapter 12: Usefulness

1. Take a moment to inventory in your mind or on paper your normal work responsibilities, spanning the gamut from paid to volunteer to household roles. With all of these roles in mind, how do you answer the question, “Why do you work?”
2. Would you agree with the phrase, “We work because there’s work to be done”? Are there at least some times when this is true?
3. *Workaholic* was a term coined by a pastoral counselor in reference to clergy whose overextended work patterns showed addictive characteristics. Do you know any clergy who fit this description? And others? Is *workaholic* descriptive of you? What is the difference between being devoted to our work and being enslaved by it?
4. Are you ever involved in work that feels pointless or unproductive rather than useful? How does that feel?
5. Is there work you do that continues over time to replenish you? Identify some of the reasons this is so.
6. One of the early monastics named Abba Mathois once said, “I want to find some easy but continual work, rather than a heavy work that is quickly finished.” What do you suppose he meant? How do you feel about such a philosophy of work?

#### **For praying:**

*Pray the Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. In the first section of the prayer, pause at each phrase and consider a situation of hatred, injury, doubt, or other emotions of which you are aware. Listen in a waiting spirit to discern how you might be led to bring the healing gifts named in the prayer to these situations. Then ask God to make you then and there an instrument of God’s peace.*

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## Chapter 13: Purpose

1. Are there times when you might say you fit into Foucault's category of knowing what you do, and why, but not the larger purpose behind or outcome beyond your actions?
2. When you ask that question of your primary work—what is its ultimate purpose or effect—what answers do you arrive at?
3. Can you see aspects of your own life's work in which you are repeatedly "giving someone a fish"? Are there other ways in which you are about the work of "teaching others to fish"?
4. How do you feel about the idea that fishing for people is about helping others to sever entanglements in their lives rather than creating new entanglements?
5. From India comes this saying: *If a fish could study, that last thing it would notice is the water in which it swims.* How does this apply to our own unawareness of "what what we do does"? In what sense is purposeful work about helping *others* to notice what they haven't before?

### **For praying:**

*Call me, Lord, standing as I am alongside the boats and nets of my daily craft, and use me and these for holy purposes. May I become one through whom grace and freedom are conveyed to others and tangled lives are opened out to live abundantly in Christ. Amen.*

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## Chapter 14: Transcendence

1. The word *liturgy* is often used to describe the service of worship, and one of its source meanings is “the work of the people.” When in worship have you felt that you were working in a deliberate way—making a concerted effort to participate in the liturgy.
2. When, on the other hand, have you felt transported by worship, that is, taken up almost effortlessly and set down in another place?
3. If you’ve had this experience, when you “returned” what had changed? The furnishings in the room probably looked the same, as did the people around you. The language spoken hadn’t been altered. What was different for your having “climbed across” to another realm in worship, then returned?
4. What do you make of John Heywood’s words, “Much water goeth by the mill that the miller knoweth not of”? Do you believe there are hidden meanings in worship that teach and transform at levels beyond our awareness? If so, how might this be true?

### **For praying:**

*Dear God, sometimes worship is an effort, an obligation, a sacrifice; at other times it stirs us the way a breeze sets the maple shimmering. Either way, either time, whether in labor or in lightness, may your name be honored in our worship, and our lives transformed. Amen.*

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## Chapter 15: Rest

1. No ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest, or Sabbath, or “ceasing.” In what ways do you see Sabbath as a triumph for civilization? What do you suppose it means that our society resists the observance?
2. Think of your own life in terms of “spaciousness,” the sort of “embarrassing availability” of which my friend Wil Bailey spoke. Is there such a dimension to your life? In other words, are you approachable for a casual conversation or unanticipated need, or does the congestion of your lifestyle preclude such occurrences.
3. I once had a pastor on my staff (whom I very much enjoyed) who placed this message on his office door: *Ministry Is the Interruptions*. Is this true? In what sense? Could you argue a different perspective? Seeing that posted message, would you be more or less inclined to “interrupt” this pastor with an unscheduled drop-in visit? Would you welcome his?
4. E. Stanley Jones referred to coffee as “the pick-me-up that lets me down.” Can you relate? If you are accustomed to caffeine consumption, imagine your life free from that attachment. What energies and resources are required to sustain that practice? What does it model to others, especially those, such as children and youth, who are still making lifestyle choices? What might be some of the benefits of life without coffee? The trade-offs?
5. Think of an alternative lifestyle that would allow for more of an even flow of energy through the day. How do you think others would perceive the non-caffeinated you?
6. Leonard Sweet has been known to say that “taking a siesta is the most spiritual thing you can do.” What do you suppose he means?
7. As with the idea of God’s modesty, the Bible offers mixed representations regarding God as one who rests. Job certainly paints a picture of a God who is encumbered by the work of creation, and yet Psalm 121 asserts that the Lord “who keeps you will not slumber. [The Lord] who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” How is it that God can neither slumber nor sleep, yet still rest?
8. What do you make of the ancient saying, “In keeping Sabbath, the Sabbath keeps us”?

### **For praying:**

*Repeat this prayer with each exhalation of your breath: I rest in you, O God. Emphasize a different word for two or three repetitions, and reflect on its meaning for your life. Pray the prayer in speech, chant, or free melody.*

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## Chapter 16: Play

1. What are some of the first ways you remember playing as a child?
2. What were some early instances in which your play mimicked a grown-up's work, or was a way of lightly contributing to the work?
3. Think of ways you weave play into the context of your various work responsibilities.
4. In which instances would you describe play's function as helping get beyond the task at hand, and in which cases would you say play enriches the work you are doing?
5. Tom Driver has written that worship is "work done playfully." Can you recall an instance in which worship felt effortless, even playful? What made it so?
6. In an earlier chapter, we considered the idea that practicing Sabbath time is a means of declaring our emancipation from the taskmaster's rod. In what sense could the same be said of play?
7. In the movie, *Life Is Beautiful*, the eccentric uncle explains his collection of clutter and knickknacks in his extra apartment by saying, "Nothing is more necessary than the unnecessary." How does this idea apply to play?
8. Shakespeare wrote, "If all the year were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work." Do you agree? What are some other hazards of placing play at the center of our lives?

### **For praying:**

*Ancient God, you are in the joy of a baby's laughter and in the sparkle of the centenarian's eye. In all the years between, you call us out to play, to join the stars in their picture-making, the spheres in their music-making, the words in their rhyming, the Lord in the dance. Do not tire of calling on us, until, weary with resisting, we give ourselves over to your great delight. Amen.*

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## Part Four—The Good Society

### Chapter 17: A Good Word for Navel Gazing

1. Briefly describe yourself in terms of personality characteristics, talents, interests, activities, likes and dislikes. On paper, this personal profile might be a list, a narrative, or a graph or drawing of some sort.
2. Look at each item on your list and think about where you came by that talent or interest. A parent? A teacher? A friend? Training? Genes? Write a name or initial next to each item tying it to a person or persons most responsible.
3. E. Stanley Jones wrote, “we are not called first to be or even to do, but to belong.” As you think about those words, hold them up to your own self-understanding. Do you tend to see your identity as having its source in who you are implicitly, in what you do, or in those groups to which you belong?
4. Reflect for a moment on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words mentioned in this chapter. How does it feel to think of yourself as responsible for others in such a way?
5. Look at your personal profile again, and think about which items on that list or in that drawing you convey to others in some form or fashion. Are you pleased with what you find, or are there things, such as qualities or skills, that are not being shared as you would like? What are these, and how might you begin to open them out to others?

#### **For praying:**

*Loving God, I know that before I do anything at all, even before I am, I belong—to you, to your world, and to the call you make upon my life. Claim me once again as your own in ways others can hear and I may overhear. Amen.*

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## Chapter 18: Retying the Lace

1. When you have heard the word “religion” in the past, what impressions or associations has it brought to mind?
2. How do you feel about the idea that religion is basically about bringing together that which has been wrongly separated?
3. The story is told of a woman of ancient Rome who asks a rabbi about his God. “What does your God do now that the world has been created and set in order? The rabbi answers, “God tries to match up couples.” “Is that all?” she says. “Why, I could do that myself.” “Maybe so,” the rabbi replies, “but for God it is as difficult as parting the Red Sea.”
4. In what ways is your praying, either in the worshiping congregation, a prayer sharing group, or alone, an act of “matching up couples,” of placing one thing into relationship with another?
5. Now think of the ways you live out your baptism in serving. In what ways is that ministry an act of gathering, of bringing separated things into new relationship?
6. How difficult is this “gathering” work in prayer? In serving?

### **For praying:**

*Use your hands to pray the words of Julian of Norwich. Left hand opened upward, “All shall be well.” Right hand opened upward, “And all shall be well.” Hands folded together, “And all manner of thing shall be well.” If you are in a group circle, let each extend the left hand, then the right, then with the final phrase clasp the hands of those on either side.*

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## Chapter 19 The Mean of Grace

1. “Wait for one another.” What does this message mean to you? In your own life? In your relationships with others in the church? What about in your life “between Sundays,” your activities and relationships at home and in the larger community of work, school, or civic involvement?
2. John Adams once reflected that America was “a great unwieldy body. Its progress must be slow. It is like a large fleet sailing under convoy. The fleetest sailors must wait for the dullest and slowest.” In what ways do his words describe the church as well?
3. A recently divorced parishioner, experiencing grief and ambivalence over her separation, said to me across the table at a church luncheon, “I’ve begun to realize that there are more things to love in marriage than the person you’re married to.” What do you suppose she meant? Could the same be said of a church relationship?

### **For praying:**

*Gathering God, reveal to me the beauty of the institution that has me tethered to its livelihood for my own. I ask you to ignore in just the right measure my claims for private privilege, leveling me in all honesty by the mean of your grace. Amen.*

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## Chapter 20 Greatness in a Shrub

1. How does it feel to think of the kingdom of heaven as a frumpy shrub rather than a great, towering tree?
2. A study conducted in the tropics of Thailand revealed that over a twenty-four-hour period three hundred birds and mammals across fifteen species drew near a single tree. Imagine the industry and activity of that scene. Now compare that image with that of your church's facilities during a given week. Is it a far-fetched comparison or fairly accurate? Explain.
3. Bishop Joe Pennel once identified the mark of a great church as not its budget nor its membership, but in the answer it gives to the question, "For whom are we cheering?" How do you relate this vision of the church to the picture of the mustard shrub overrun with an assortment of birds?
4. All of us could make our lists of the "birds" we would just as soon not have in the church with us (and we might well be on the lists certain others would make!). For the moment, think of one or two of these persons.
5. Now consider again Jesus' parable. He speaks of birds of the air, but a closer translation is "birds of the heavens." In Matthew, "heaven" is mostly associated with God ("kingdom of heaven," "heavenly Father," "Father in heaven,"). Could the word "heavens" in this parable be a code word for the divine? What would it mean to think of those persons on your undesirable bird list as sacred messengers whose very presence and participation in the church have a holy purpose? Compare this idea to Hebrews 13:2.
6. Erasmus wrote some words in Latin, *Fero igitur hanc Ecclesiam donec videro meliorem; et eadem me ferre cogitur, donec ipse fiam melior*, that have, fortunately, been translated into English: "Thus I put up with this church until I see a better one; and she is forced to put up with me until I myself become better." How does this dual perspective help move us to a place of generosity toward others who are in the church along with us?
7. In *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "The figure of the Crucified invalidates all thought which takes success for its standard." How do his words speak to the question of what it means to be a "successful" community of faith?

### **For praying:**

*Unglamorous God, join me to the tree that takes all kinds, and that I pray would take me. Refuse my ego any size larger than befits my shared and shaded place in that given tree. Then grant me arms like those of Jesus, as mangled by love as the branches of a shrub and infinitely kind. Amen.*

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## Chapter 21: The Whole World Home

1. How do you feel about the assertion that there are two “great commissions” in Matthew?
2. When God tells Abram and Sarai to leave their home so that God will bless them, and all the nations of the earth through them, the narrator tells us that “Abram went.” Thomas Cahill asserts that these are two of the boldest words in all of literature. What do you suppose he means?
3. Buechner’s metaphor of God’s people as a fire ascribes to them two properties: warmth and light. What are some ways the church is a source of warmth? And light?
4. A light not only serves as a beacon but also causes shadows to become more pronounced. In what ways does the church’s presence and witness serve to call attention to evil or immorality in the world?
5. Think of Karl Barth’s words about prayer in light of our earlier discussion of prayer as a loom that weaves things together like fingers interlaced. How were prayer and social action woven together in East Germany during that period of transition? Can you identify ways the same is true in your congregation?

### **For praying:**

*Holy God, kindle within me a flame of compassion for all who suffer want or cold, all who are in turmoil, all who are lost from you. Let me, together with all your church, be a fire by which the world, cold and lost, might warm its hands, and find its way to you. Amen.*

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## Part Five—The Good Earth

### Chapter 22: Earth's Possession

1. We've already thought about that Indian proverb, *If a fish could study, that last thing it would notice is the water in which it swims*. Apply this to our existence on the earth. If the "water" can be thought of as our natural environment, what are some of the ways we routinely overlook its presence? Think, for example, of the air we breathe, the gravity that keeps us from floating into space, the sun that warms but doesn't broil us, the nutrient-laden soil that produces delicious and nutritious foods. What are some other aspects of our environment we often take for granted?
2. Do you remember instances as a child in which you took natural resources for granted, such as leaving the lights on or the water running? Was there someone in your life—perhaps a teacher, a parent, a neighbor—who modeled a more responsible awareness of the earth?
3. In thinking of your own life, have you found ways to practice such conservation yourself? What about modeling this for others?
4. The prophet Habakkuk speaks of God's judgment in the wake of "violence to the earth" and "the destruction of animals" (Habakkuk 2:8, 17). Have you ever thought about the Bible having a concern about the mistreatment of the earth? Try your hand at writing or voicing a prophet's message to our world today—one which focuses on our treatment of the earth and its inhabitants great and small. Consider writing this in the earth's voice.
5. Bill Bryson has written that "worlds are precious," by which he means that in the entire universe there are an infinitesimally small number of planets in relation to available space; further, an infinitesimally small number of those planets contain the necessary ingredients to sustain life as we know it. How does this realization affect the way you think about the earth?
6. What do you think of Madeleine L'Engle's assertion that we are "portion, not pinnacle" of creation?
7. God makes the sun "rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Consider how these words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount speak to our history of exploiting the natural environment in the face of its largely silent and generous compliance.

#### **For praying:**

*Creating God, of all the worlds your hands have made, we are awed to consider that this world houses us, and so generously. Forgive us the presumption that we possess this life-giving planet, when we know that in truth it possesses us. In your mercy turn our hearts to its care and consideration, that we might tend it as we would love our own mother, and so honor you. Amen.*

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## Chapter 23: Following Seasons

1. In 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes, in reference to photography's emerging ability to bring us the world in images, wrote that "We have got the fruit of creation now [in pictures], and need not trouble ourselves with the core." In what ways did his observation anticipate our gradual detachment from the natural realm?
2. Perhaps you can identify with Woody Allen's description of his relationship with the environment: "I am at two with nature." Do you ever feel such a distance or difference from the natural world?
3. In September 2005, the Gulf Coast suffered major catastrophes with the arrival of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Less than a year earlier a tsunami brought enormous tragedy to the Asian rim. Did these events alter your way of thinking about the natural world and its interaction with the human species? If so, how?
4. A parishioner of mine tells of his four-year-old grandson asking, "Grampa, is there a dog Jesus?" Given Jesus' attentiveness to the natural world, and the Bible's regard in general for all creatures great and small, is there a sense in which this question may be instructive? How so?
5. Think of some ways in which you and others—family, friends, coworkers—might observe more deliberately the passing of seasons. Reflect on ways each of the four seasons may, in its own way, instruct our souls. Perhaps you are a perennial gardener, with an eye to things growing and changing in your yard. If not, think about some of the things that grow right around you. Based on the setting in which you live, try filling in the second half of Jesus' phrase: "Consider the . . ." Then reflect on what that item may have to show or teach us about life.
6. Think of specific ways in your own life in which you can "walk more softly" on the earth. What are some of these?
7. Does your congregation follow the seasons of the Christian year? If so, reflect on ways in which that practice teaches the art of waiting. In which season are you presently? Ordinary Time? Advent? Lent? Eastertide? In what ways are hymns, readings, preaching, visuals, and other means used to mark the passages from "now" to "nearly," and from "nearly" to "now."

### **For praying:**

*Eternal God, your reign has come among us in ways we can surely see and be certain of, but we are just as certain that it is yet beyond our reach, beyond our grasp, beyond our time. Guide us by the seasons of nature, life, and church to live faithfully between now and not-yet, ever aware of your presence, always awaiting your coming. Amen.*

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## Chapter 24: Following Seasons

1. “Prosperity gospel” is the name given to the belief some Christians hold, which considers personal material wealth to be a reward or blessing from God. How could such a view be used to justify the disparity between rich and poor? How does the view run counter to Jesus’ assertions about wealth as a danger to the moral and spiritual life? (See, for example, Mark 10:23-31, Luke 12:13-21, and Luke 16:19-31.)
2. Jesus once said, “to whom much has been given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48). Apply these words to the dynamic of “rich Christians in an age of hunger.”
3. Managing personal resources in ways that are both responsible to one’s own needs and generous toward the needs of the world population can be complicated. How so? What are some ways these obstacles may be overcome?
4. Think of the person to whom you would *least* want to be tied for a whole year. Then thank your lucky stars you don’t have to be. Now imagine an invisible string that ties every person to every other on the planet, a web of connectedness. Every move you make, another feels. Every time someone sneezes, you feel a tug on your line. The strings also convey sound, conversation, and information, making the earth a virtual whispering gallery. Besides being a scenario Kafka would have been proud to write, would it have any redeeming features? What might they be?
5. Thinking of the phrase from John Oxenham’s hymn, “his service is the golden cord close binding humankind,” in what sense does serving Christ bind us to one another in a proactive rather than a reactive way?
6. Robert Frost, in a poem entitled “America Is Hard to See,” speaks of the challenge of “how to crowd and still be kind.” In what ways did his poem, written in the middle of the twentieth century, anticipate the twenty-first?

### **For praying:**

*Creating God, with hands that also fashion whole worlds you fashioned me, knitting me together in my mother’s womb. With hands that fashioned me, you fashion every other creature, great and small. I pray that those same hands would turn me from walking by the false ways of isolation, and knit me to all with whom I share this world. Amen.*

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## Chapter 25: The City and the Garden

1. The very first cathedrals were forest canopies, the first fonts rivers, the first of Jesus' signs, an agricultural miracle—water turned to wine. Worship and devotion were birthed in natural contexts. If the city has become the principal reality for the majority of us, how are we to integrate the “garden” dimension of reality and faith into our lives of worship and prayer?

2. In many of our church sanctuaries, natural elements are present in the architecture. Floral arrangements, water, bread, and cup all find expression. Church mice still inhabit many an organ chamber, and the human community never fails to gather without the dust of the world on its feet. Are there other ways our worship can include the “garden” as well as the city? What about our study, works of justice and serving, and social gatherings?

3. In Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale*, a silver tray is inscribed with these words, “For what can be imagined more beautiful than the sight of a perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone.” Take a moment to imagine that city. Think about that city as the one to which the prophets pointed with their harsh condemnations and hopeful assurances. Now consider that city as the one Jesus was imagining when he spoke of the city on a hill that cannot be hidden.

4. Is your city such a place? In the place you live, are there ways in which justice waits to be done, waits to be rejoiced in? In what ways can you contribute to such a vision, such a reality?

### **For praying:**

*O God, how great and wonderful are your deeds, and how steadfast your love for your people and your creation. Guide me to do my part in bringing together garden and city in this world as you long to do in the next. Awaken me, and all of us, to means by which we might draw the two closer yet, and in ways that are life-giving for both. Amen.*

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