

Based on the book "An Altar in the World" by Barbara Brown Taylor
Week Five Reading - Chapters 9 & 10

Week Five Discussion Questions

*"Before enlightenment; chop wood, carry water.
After enlightenment; chop wood, carry water." - Zen Buddhism*

1. Begin by sharing any insight or benefit you gained from engaging last week's homework practices.
2. Taylor opens chapter nine by sharing her experience in an ice storm power outage. Read aloud the first two paragraphs on page 145 and then describe a situation in your life when you were without power or lost daily conveniences. How did you handle it? What did it teach you about yourself?
3. Taylor says, *"Necessity bound us together. It was our common language, one that did not require words."* (P. 144) And then on page 146, *"I was made to exceed my self-interest for a while, expanding my circle of concern to include every living thing in my vicinity."* Have you had an experience of necessity (accident, illness, loss of income, etc.) that brought you much closer to someone or to others in general?
4. Taylor writes about a little boy who visited her and how he fell in love with digging potatoes, just as she had. Taylor touches upon the theme of *finding the holy in the mundane* many times throughout the book. Can you remember a time in your life when a very ordinary activity turned into something extraordinary for you? If so, what do you think "opened the door" for you?
5. On pages 156 - 157 Taylor writes, *"Pain is provocative... I can try to avoid pain. I can deny pain. I can numb it and I can fight it. Or I can decide to engage pain when it comes to me, giving it my full attention so that it can teach me what I need to know about the Really Real."* Can you think of a painful experience that deeply affected your life? How would your life be different today if you hadn't experienced that painful experience?
6. *"Pain brings out the best in people along with the worst."* (P. 156) What questions does pain prompt you to ask? How does it bring out your best (compassion and resourcefulness)? How does it bring out your worst (bitterness, blame, broadcasting your hurt)?
7. In your experience, what is the difference between pain and suffering? How can we suffer less?

Notes:

Week Five Practices

1. At the bottom of page 145, Taylor writes a short prayer. Write a prayer this week - giving thanks for how you felt or recognized the activity and presence of God/Good.
2. Page 146, "*I was made to exceed my self-interest for a while, expanding my circle of concern to include every living thing in my vicinity.*" Find or create three things to do this week that cause you to expand your circle of concern to include every living thing.
3. It has been said, *pain is what happens to us, suffering is what we do with that pain.* Bring awareness to any pain and/or suffering you experience. Notice your reactions; notice your perspective on the pain you experience and how you relate to it.