

# *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*

-By Barbara Brown Taylor

## Chapter 1: the Practice of Waking Up to God

1. *An Altar in the World* begins with a vivid recollection of Taylor's relationship with creation—with her explanation of how she finds "altars" everywhere in her world. Where have you encountered God in the world? Describe the situation, the physical attributes of your sacred place, and explain the emotions, if any, the experience evoked in you?
2. Taylor recounts the Biblical story of Jacob and his dream in Chapter 1. Have you ever had a vivid, or even foretelling dream, like Jacob's—a dream that changed your life in some way? If so, describe it and how it altered your life. If not, do you believe that dreams play any significant role in our waking lives or spiritual lives? Why or why not?
3. On page 6 Taylor writes, "The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do. What if the gravel of the parking lot looks as promising to God as the floorboards of a church?" How do you respond to this contrast? Do you think God is more present in some places than in other places? If so, what do you think accounts for the difference?
2. Taylor writes about the way some of her early religious teachings reinforced her shame about her body. What is your first memory of feeling ashamed or embarrassed about your body? Was it in childhood or adolescence? If you are a member of a church, how have church teachings affected your attitude toward your body? Do you think that bodily shame is more of a cultural issue, a psychological issue, or a spiritual issue? Explain your answer.

## Chapter 2: the Practice of Paying Attention

1. Taylor writes about a memory from her childhood when she first felt awe for the universe. Her trust in her father was key to this experience. Share a memory from your childhood when you felt completely safe with another person whom you trusted without question. Have you ever felt this way in your adult life or do you believe it is something only a child can experience?
2. On page 26, Taylor quotes Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple*: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." Do you make time to notice things like the color purple in a field? Can you describe the last time you stopped and noticed something in your world as beautiful or unusual and therefore holy? Are you persuaded that paying attention is a necessary spiritual practice? Why or why not?
3. Along with the things we choose to notice are the things we choose to ignore. Taylor offers a list of things commonly ignored by most people, such as where our food really comes from or how our wool sweaters are actually made—starting with the sheep and ending with the rack at the store. What are some things that you choose to ignore and why do you think you ignore them?
4. The terms "paying attention" and "reverence" are used interchangeably throughout the chapter. How do you define reverence? How do you recognize it in your life and the lives of other people? After reading Taylor's take on reverence, do you think you will find a way to

be more attentive in the future? If so, name one practical way you might become more reverent in your life.

### Chapter 3: the Practice of Wearing Skin

1. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the actual flesh, the physical body, in which we all live. Taylor begins with a story about being in a guest speaker in a church where she noticed a painting of the risen Christ over the altar and shocked a member of the altar guild by observing that he had no body hair. Why is the human form so often a taboo topic in the sanctuary? Are you comfortable speaking about it right now? Why or why not?
2. Taylor addresses cultural obsession with body image by confessing “that it is time to do a better job of wearing my skin with gratitude instead of loathing.” She goes on to write, “This is no small thing, in a culture so confused about the body that most Americans cannot separate the physical from the sexual.” How do you differentiate between the physical and sexual? What do you think are the personal and cultural risks of failing to separate the two?
3. Taylor writes that we ask deep questions when we are in pain such as “Why me? Why now? Why this?” But she challenges us to ask these questions when we feel pleasure as well. Have you ever asked those questions about the *good* things that happen to you? In what ways might this practice of incarnation—of listening to your body when it is in pleasure *and* in pain—enhance your spiritual life?
4. Chapter 3 gives new meaning to the mundane tasks in life such as doing the dishes and digging in the garden. What is your least favorite mundane task? How might you “re-invent” it as a spiritual practice?

### Chapter 4: the Practice of Walking on the earth

1. Most of us, Taylor writes, walk without really thinking about what we are doing. We walk while talking on the phone, dragging a child, or attempting to text while holding onto a latte. Can you remember a time when you felt fully present and aware while walking? Do you have a walking “practice” such as the ones Taylor refers to? What are the spiritual benefits of multitasking for you? What are the spiritual costs?
2. In Chapter 4, Taylor introduces the spiritual practice of “going barefoot.” What is your response to her description of this practice? Do you think it is something you might try? Why or why not? Are there social stigmas attached to going barefoot where you live?
3. Taylor writes, “Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are.” What emotions does this statement stir up in you? Do you think it is possible to change—either personally or culturally—in this regard?

### Chapter 5: the Practice of Getting Lost

1. Ashumans, wetendnottoveeroffthecomfortableworn paths of our lives. Taylor refers to these as our “cow paths.” Do you think such paths serve positive or negative purposes in human life? Have you ever gotten lost with positive results? If you don’t have the desire to “get lost”

sometimes, what is it inside of you that is holding you back? Is it fear, lack of imagination, oblivion, addiction, habit, or perhaps something more constructive?

2. On page 80 Taylor writes, "You lose your job. Your lover leaves. The baby dies. At this level, the advanced practice of getting lost consists of consenting to be lost, since you have no other choice." Since getting lost is something we all get to do no matter who we are, how might "consenting" to it change things? If you have ever found yourself in any of the situations she mentions, what did you learn about yourself, about your loved ones, about God, and about the world in which you live?
3. In this chapter, Taylor delves into the Biblical stories of Sarah and Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Jezebel. Do you see these characters any differently in light of her descriptions of them? Have you ever felt like "the stranger" before? If so, describe the situation and how you felt both in the midst of it and in retrospect. Have you ever been the one to accept a stranger into your home or community? Was it a good decision? How did it change your life, if at all?

#### Chapter 6: the Practice of Encountering others

1. Are you an introvert or an extrovert? How does this orientation play out in your daily life? Did it affect your career choice? Do you gain energy from encountering others or does it drain you? How do you respond to Taylor's notion of encountering other people as a necessary spiritual practice?
2. Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to or should have expressed compassion toward a stranger? Were you able to do it? If so, how did it affect you? If not, how did you feel afterward? What do you think held you back from expressing kindness or love to that stranger?
3. At the conclusion of Chapter 6, Taylor challenges us to get over ourselves and to wrestle with loving God and our neighbor the way Jesus taught us to—without obeying the rules of society that bind us to certain codes. How doable is this in your day to day life? What rule would be the hardest for you to set aside? If Jesus were coming to supper at your house tonight, who would be on your ideal guest list?

#### Chapter 7: the Practice of living With Purpose

1. Taylor writes, "Earlier in my life, I thought there was one particular thing I was supposed to do with my life. I thought that God had a purpose for me and my main job was to discover what it was." How do you respond to this statement? Have you found a single purpose in life or many? What purpose would you say defines you or defines your life?
2. Taylor addresses the fact that many of the people she has encountered feel as if they lack a sense of purpose in their work. Do you feel this way? Why or why not?
3. Taylor concludes the chapter on a profound note: "It may be chopping wood and it may be running a corporation. Whatever it is, perhaps you will hold open the possibility that doing it is one way to learn what it means to become more fully human, as you press beyond being good to being good for something, in a world with the perfect job for someone like you." Have you found work that allows you to be "good for something" or can you think of something that might fall into this category? If so, what is it? If not, what do you hope for?

## Chapter 8: the Practice of Saying No

1. How good are you at saying no? What helps you say no? What hinders you from saying no? How has this affected your life?
2. The practice of observing the Sabbath is a main theme in Chapter 8. Do you think it is possible for anyone but orthodox Jews to practice Sabbath in America today? Does Taylor's description of practicing Sabbath appeal to you or not? If it does, what is one practical way you might change your behavior to get closer to observing the Sabbath?
3. Did your family observe any Sabbath traditions when you were growing up? What were they? Was your experience with them positive or negative? Explain your answer.
4. On page 138 Taylor proposes an exercise. "Make two lists on one piece of paper. On one side of the paper list all of the things you know give you life that you never take time to do. Then, on the other side, make a list of all the reasons why you think it is impossible for you to do those things." Take time to do this exercise right now.

## Chapter 9: the Practice of Carrying Water

1. Describe a situation in your life when you were robbed of daily conveniences. How did you handle yourself? Did you adapt? Did you surprise yourself? Did anyone else surprise you? What did you learn from the experience?
2. Think of a time in your life when you surprised yourself by dealing capably with an unexpected situation. What was the result of this experience, both at the time and in retrospect?
3. 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?

## Chapter 10: the Practice of Feeling Pain

1. When do you allow yourself to feel your pain fully and when do you use a coping or defense mechanism to lessen it? What is your most reliable defense? What do you think will happen if you do not use it against your pain?
2. On page 157 Taylor writes, "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 felt that pain? Would it be better or worse? Why?
3. Chapter 10 addresses both physical and mental pain. In your life, which has been more prevalent? What is the greatest physical pain you have encountered (in yourself or someone else)? What is the greatest mental pain you have encountered (in yourself or someone else)? How did you handle those hurts? How did they change you?

4. After reading the story of Job, would you say that death is the worst that can happen to a human being or is there pain and suffering worse than death? In Job's place, how do you think you would have handled yourself? How might you have spoken to God? Would you have wished for death, or is a life like Job's worth living?

#### Chapter 11: the Practice of Being Present to God

1. On page 176, Taylor writes, "To say I love God but I do not pray much is like saying I love life but I do not breathe much." How do you respond to this statement? Is there another way you might say the same thing?
2. Taylor's candid admission of being really bad at the practice of prayer makes her extremely relatable. How would you candidly answer the same question about your prayer practice?
3. How essential do you think the practice of prayer is to the life of the spirit? Is there room for an "alternate" prayer life? Taylor lists things such as stewing tomatoes and working in the garden as her alternate prayer practices. Do you have any alternate practices of your own? What makes them prayer-like for you?
4. Taylor writes that it's tough to speak of "answered prayers" without sounding cheesy. Do you believe in answered prayers? Have any of your own prayers ever been answered? How do you know? In what way?
5. Name one thing or situation in your life that you thought you could control, but found out that you couldn't. What was the result of your inability to control the situation, both at the time and in retrospect? Name one positive thing that wouldn't have happened if your plans had worked out as you originally hoped.

#### Chapter 12: the Practice of Pronouncing Blessings

1. Are you comfortable saying blessings things or would you rather excuse yourself from the task? Why?
2. On page 199 Taylor writes, "I am not sure that you have to believe in God to pronounce a blessing. It may be enough to see the thing for what it is and pronounce it good." How do you respond to this statement? Is belief in God a prerequisite for saying a blessing? Why or why not?
3. Is there something or someone in your life you feel might need to be blessed—even if it's something sad or makes you uncomfortable like the man with the recurring dream about the demon at his door? What is it? What would you say to it if given the chance to bless it?

#### Concluding Exercise:

*An Altar in the World* is an action guide for our whole lives. Each chapter challenges the reader to change. Write down one practice of your own invention for each chapter that you truly believe you can incorporate into your life.

**From Harper One Reading Guides** ([www.smallgroupguides.com](http://www.smallgroupguides.com))