

# Telling Stories in the Dark

Finding healing and hope in sharing  
our sadness, grief, trauma, and pain

Jeffrey Munroe

Discussion Guide

This guide is designed for small groups, book clubs, and other gatherings. There are ten sets of questions that match each chapter. If your group only has one session to discuss the book, please go to the questions that accompany Chapter 10, which also serve as single-session discussion questions. If your group has two, three, or four sessions, divide the chapters equally and choose the questions you feel will help elicit conversation with your group.

### **Chapter 1: ‘Let Me Tell You a Story’**

- Jeff quotes Richard Rohr, who states, “If we do not transform our pain, we will most surely transmit it.” Recall a time where you may have witnessed this truth in your own or another’s experience of deep pain.
- In the context of deep personal pain, the question “Why, God?” is universal. Recall a time where you or someone you love asked that same honest question.
- We read that in response to his pain, “Job tells a memorable story,” which suggests that sharing our stories is a way to transform rather than transmit our pain. Just as we can be stewards of our wealth or environment, we can be faithful stewards of our pain. Consider some ways that might be possible.

### **Chapter 2: I’ll Go First**

- After telling Gretchen and his shared story of deep pain, Jeff writes, “In some ways it defines us. In other ways, we refuse to let it define us.” In our own stories of pain, what elements define the healthy or unhealthy practice of those two responses?

- After sharing the familiar story of the talents, Jeff asks two good questions for readers to consider: “What does it mean to follow the example of the first two servants in Jesus’ story and somehow do something with our pain, instead of burying it? What does it look like to live out of our pain, enabling us to relate to others on the deepest levels?” Another one to consider is, “What are the consequences when, like the third servant, we try to play it safe by burying our pain?”
- Jeff suggests that we all know many people with stories of deep pain and suffering. Make a list of those people in your life who have endured deep trauma. Then consider how many of them have been shared or not shared with you. What have you gained or, perhaps, missed out on as a result?

### Chapter 3: Murder Mysteries

- As uncommon as Roger Nelson’s tragic story is, at which point did you connect most deeply with him or his experience?
- Dan Rooks’ first response to Roger’s story is, “You have only half of the story.” Some might first see that as insensitive, but he goes on to insightfully show the deep parallels between Roger’s story that day and Clarence’s as well and how truly tragic both stories are. Eventually, even Roger is able to see the whole story and be transformed by it. How might seeing stories *whole* help communities, too, steward their shared pain in a healthier way?
- Roger said grief was jagged; Dan said not all grief is jagged but traumatic grief tends to be jagged. What do you think

they mean by “jagged grief” and what do you make of the distinction Dan makes?

- Dan Rooks’ responses make clear that our stewardship of pain can bring healing, and he offers many insights about how Roger and those around brought him such healing along the way. Identify those key insights where, like the seeds of a “lodgepole pine,” this heartbreaking story produced new growth for him and for those around him.

### Chapter 4: Quiniece’s Legacy

- While an accidental death in a hospital is relatively rare, at which point did you connect most deeply with Quentin Henry’s story?
- Marilyn McEntyre writes, “Healing comes as we widen the lens and take in the reality that loss is something many others have experienced. My pain is my pain, but it is also something that links me to others in a deep and irreducible way.” Then why is it true so often that our grief leads us to isolate ourselves from others? How might a community act according to this wider lens without diminishing the immediacy and personal nature of loss?
- Marilyn uses the word “palimpsest” to describe grief. Palimpsest is defined as “writing material (such as parchment or a tablet) used one of more times after earlier writing has been erased” or “having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface.” How is grief like a palimpsest?
- “There’s a place for outrage,” McEntyre writes, “Injustice needs to be named, though perhaps not always by the most injured party. Part of holding grief in community is that others might pick up that piece of the burden and speak out

on behalf of the family.” Consider all the ways a community might help the grieving beyond the more traditional ways of showing care.

## **Chapter 5: A Mysterious Grace Shines Through**

- ✦ In hearing of Mitch and Sandi’s story, Mary Anderson says she is reminded of her own story. Cancer has affected the lives of countless readers of this book. Where does your story connect most deeply with the story of these two families?
- ✦ Mary’s enemy analogy is a deeply insightful one, and with it she suggests that a time of isolation or aloneness is necessary for the survivor of a lost loved one. Do you agree? Is that something a community of caregivers tend to recognize? Just how important is it to the healing process?
- ✦ After a spouse’s death, the question of when to allow a new relationship to form is a common, difficult one many surviving spouses face, and we all know how unforgiving some communities can be. Mary claims “It’s not a matter of time, it’s a matter of how you are responding.” What are some signs that one is responding well? How does one’s faith in God figure into that? And, what do you think of her advice about also helping the children who are dealing with a lost parent?
- ✦ This chapter concludes with the words of its title: “A mysterious grace shines through.” Can you recall a time of loss that was accompanied by grace?

## Chapter 6: The Long Goodbye

- No doubt, many readers can also relate to Jeff's journey with his mother through Alzheimer's. Where did Jeff's story connect most deeply with your own?
- Jeff was surprised by the first words of his own prayer at his mother's bedside: "Forgive us our sins." He reflects that it might have come from "never being all we could be to each other, for never loving each other fully or completely." How common a feeling is that to those who are losing a loved one? What are the relational obstacles that can make it so?
- How is Holy Saturday a helpful analogy for the long goodbye of dementia? Describe a time when you've experienced "Holy Saturday."
- Imagine if we all used Suzanne McDonald's definition of "caretakers": "They are the guardians of someone's personhood." So often our visits to hospitals and nursing homes are filled with awkward, shallow conversation. How might her definition change the way we talk with and among the aged and dying? What might characterize conversations that seek to ennoble those suffering—those who feel least like the person they once were?

## Chapter 7: How Do We Hold Our Pain?

- This chapter, as Jeff notes, is a bit of a detour to pursue the question of why people process pain differently. Has this been true of your experience as well—that people enduring a similar suffering or trauma process it very differently?

- ✦ It's very common today to hear someone labeled a "narcissist." Chuck DeGroat, however, suggests we be "very cautious about pathologizing people." Why is that so important, first of all? What is it about this pathology, especially, that makes it so difficult to recognize and acknowledge its cause? Is this where Christ's admonition to "love your enemy" becomes especially difficult?
- ✦ Nadine Burke Harris's use of adverse childhood experiences, "ACE," could help us understand so much of what often goes undetected in medical prognoses and in the way we view the people we know and love in our own circles. Are most Christian communities open and honest enough to acknowledge the effects of a high ACE score within its members? What would be the positive or adverse effects if such knowledge were as obvious, say, as what each of us did for a living?
- ✦ Chuck says "not all sadness is depression." Describe the differences.

## Chapter 8: Suicide and Soulwork

- ✦ Rosemerry Trommer tells us that, "From the first moments after Finn's suicide, I prayed, 'Let me stay open. Let me meet this,'" and she did so, in part at least, through her years-long daily discipline of writing a poem. Later, Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell refers to this as "soul work," quickly adding, "The practice doesn't have to be poetry." What other forms has soul work taken in your life to help sustain you through suffering and tragedy?
- ✦ In challenging Christians to avoid platitudes when dealing with tragedy, Sophie says, "It's helpful for Christians to recognize God works beyond our categories. There are

more mysteries in life than we can explain with our fairly simple, easily ordered theologies.” Sophie later says, in reference to Rosemerry’s deep love for her son’s friends and parents, “I wonder how it is that someone who does not define herself as a Christian can be so much more gracious and mature and forgiving than some Christians are. This is another mystery we all have to live with.” What spiritual baggage can sometimes prevent Christians from responding with such love during times of tragedy?

- ✦ Rosemerry describes living in the present as essential for helping her through the tragic loss of her son, and says both the past and future present problems. How do you understand that? In what ways does it mirror your own experience?
- ✦ Few Christian communities know how to discuss openly and lovingly the suicide of one of its members. What wisdom can we gain for how to respond in such moments from this chapter? Look especially to the powerful closing paragraphs where Jeff recalls what he said at the funeral of a young man he did not know who had taken his own life.

## Chapter 9: Living With Lament

- ✦ Which aspects of Nick Wolterstorff’s grief journey resonated most with you?
- ✦ Jeff writes, “Divine impassibility is the idea that God does not experience emotions and is immune from pain or pleasure.” He contrasts that to divine pathos, which attributes feelings to God. Later he adds, “I believe divine impassibility is a doctrine that could only have risen in the West.” How might that be true? How may divine impassibility have distorted some Christians’ responses to tragedy and trauma?



- ✦ In a sense Jeff's book comes full circle with this chapter. How does "a kintsugi life" embody the idea of the stewardship of pain? How might our refusal to simply discard the broken objects we acquire serve to remind us how to heal ourselves and help others to heal from tragedy and trauma? How might a mourning family or community benefit from being led through kintsugi?

## Chapter 10: The Thing with Feathers

These questions can be used for single discussion of the whole book.

- ✦ Jeff comments that each interview he did for this book has taught him so much about life. Which story resonated most with you, and what is the piece of wisdom you gained from it about dealing with tragedy, trauma, and suffering?
- ✦ Jeff writes, "There are no easy paths or quick fixes. Over and over, the people in these pages speak of life-giving practices they've engaged in." Which practices in particular do you see as personally valuable? Which would you like to see put into practice in a community you are part of?
- ✦ Jeff writes, "The damage done by the suggestion that we must flee feelings of sadness, grief, and pain is incalculable. The church can do better than that." What are some ways churches could be better at honoring grief and showing the greater culture how to do that well—and be known, in Dan Rooks' words, as "communities that encourage their members to love fully and suffer well"?