



Readers' Discussion Guide/ Book Club

Heartwood: The Art of Living with the End in Mind

By Barbara Becker

Who are the loved ones you have lost who now form your “heartwood,” your pillar of strength?

Who or what are your “growth rings” today?

What was the first loss you experienced in your life, and how has your understanding of what happened changed over time?

When Barbara decides to spend a year living as if it were her last, she asks herself every day to fill in the blank, “I don’t want to die without...” What are some of the things that you would fill in for yourself?

In the midst of her miscarriages, Barbara turns to meditation to come to terms with anxiety and other difficult emotions. Do you have beliefs and practices that help soothe you and make you feel more resilient?

In the chapter on Consolee, who survived the genocide in Rwanda, Barbara writes about symbols of hope and the rainbow Consolee spotted in Central Park, as well as the daffodils that were planted throughout New York City after 9/11. What is a “miracle” to you? What represents hope or reminders of possibility in your life?

Barbara and her husband include their children in gathering around her mother’s bedside during the final days of her life. What are your thoughts about having children present at a death? Have you had discussions with the young people in your life after loss?

Trees play a significant role throughout the book, from the metaphor of heartwood to specific trees throughout. What symbols are significant in your own life when you think of life and death?

In “Two Turtles,” Barbara writes: “We lose things all the time that aren’t people. Jobs, precious objects, beloved pets. Death in the natural world weighs heavily too. A water source dried up. A forest lost to fire. An entire species gone extinct.” In what ways do you experience loss that isn’t necessarily the death of another human being?

Barbara writes that “in our culture, we are told that death is the last and greatest taboo--as welcome as a skunk at a garden party. Yet most often when I spoke of my experiences with loss, people opened up about their own.” What keeps us from opening up about our losses in our culture? How might we go about changing this?