

EDITH WHARTON, ILLUMINATED BY THE MESSAGE

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Read the Introduction. Share anything that strikes you or raises questions and discuss them with others.
2. What do you think of the idea of taking excerpts from famous literary authors and combining them with passages from the Bible?
3. How do you react—positively or negatively—to the contemporary translation of the Scriptures from *The Message* that is paired with each literary passage. Give specific examples.
4. Do you feel that prayer can be triggered in this way? Why or why not? What is your definition of prayer?
5. Who are other authors who have inspired you? Explain why and how.
6. Is art in general a portal to prayer for you? Explain your answer or give examples.
7. What else encourages or inspires you to pray? Name these inspirations.
8. Do you ever get “stuck” trying to pray? What happens when you do? If you are never “stuck,” why do you think that is so?
9. What is the difference for you (if any) between “religious” or “spiritual” writing and “secular” or “literary” writing? Explain your answer.
10. Can you learn how to pray from those who do not share your exact beliefs? Why or why not? Give examples if you can.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

1. On page 18, Wharton’s character feels “an inarticulate sense of well-being.” Is this grace? Have you ever felt this? Tell the story.
2. On page 16, Amherst realizes that his friend’s beauty is rooted in her compassion. Tell of a time when you saw or experienced an act of compassion. How was it beautiful?
3. On page 92, Ann Eliza’s illusions of love “shrivel into ashes,” and, on the opposite page, Jesus says, “Don’t run from suffering; embrace it.” Tell of a specific incident when suffering enriched your life.
4. On page 60, Wharton’s character ponders her lost youth, and, on the opposite page, Ecclesiastes describes how the body ages and then “The spirit returns to God, who first breathed it.” Do you feel like a spirit “breathed” by God? How specifically?
5. On page 114, Wharton writes that, in the welter of life, “here and there a saint or a genius suddenly sends a little ray through the fog.” Describe in detail a moment in your life when something someone said, did or wrote gave you a deeper understanding of God’s plan.
6. On page 112, Wharton’s character grits her teeth and goes in a store for a job, and, on the opposite page, James calls tests and challenges a gift. Recall an incident when your faith was challenged. What did you do? Was that challenge a gift? Be specific.
7. On page 50, Wharton writes about dying and becoming once again “a part of flowers/And tears and tides...,” and, on the opposite page, the psalmist writes that, while men and women don’t live very long, God’s love “is ever and always.” Specifically, how does God’s love impact your life?
8. On page 74, Wharton’s characters look out the window at a beautiful night sky, and, on the opposite page, the psalmist looks at the night sky with its “handmade sky-jewelry.” Describe a moment in your life when you experience God in the beauty of nature.
9. On page 80, Kate Chapman realizes that no one notices her at a party, and, on the opposite page, St. James warns against grandiosity, “You’re nothing but a wisp of fog.” Describe a time when you were lonely. How did your faith help? Be specific.
10. On page 30, Wharton describes a child reaching for cherry flowers she’s unable to reach, and, on the opposite page, Sirach tells the believer not to waste time on things beyond reach. What are ways, say, in the last day or so, that you’ve worried about something you couldn’t control?