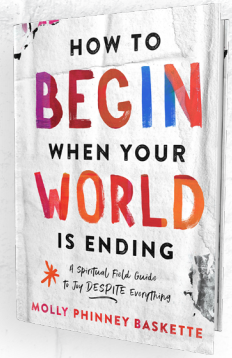


HOW TO BEGIN WHEN YOUR WORLD IS ENDING

A SPIRITUAL FIELD GUIDE TO JOY DESPITE EVERYTHING

BY MOLLY PHINNEY BASKETTE

CHURCH READING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE



PROLOGUE: THERE ARE VERY FEW EMERGENCIES

- How does Molly describe emergencies and what constitutes an emergency? How does it differ from your own definition? How do you know it's an emergency? Describe how you generally react in an emergency.
- With spiritual hindsight, emergencies can turn out to be emerge-and-sees: the rupture that opens a portal to a new perspective or reality. What's an "emerge-and-see" you've experienced recently? How did you emerge? What did you see that you couldn't previously?
- Molly looks at how the novelist Robertson Davies describes a parson who takes time, in the middle of the night, to compose himself before visiting the scene of a crime. What is your best advice for getting yourself together when you need to be the Someone others can rely on?
- Who has been that reliable Someone for you in your life?

CHAPTER 1: GOD DIDN'T SEND THE DISASTER (BUT SHE WILL USE IT)

- Molly's book comes from a faith perspective, but she willingly asks the important questions for readers to also ask—the big ones: Is God real? If so, is God an asshole? How do you answer those questions?
- Talk about a time when you blamed God for something terrible that happened. Reflecting on it now, what was helpful about that (emotional release?), or maybe not so helpful?
- What do you think is happening, from God's perspective, in times of natural disaster? What about human-driven disaster?
- Do you agree or disagree with Molly that pain can be a good stimulant for growth and change?
- Were you ever kicked out of church or any faith-based organization for asking too many questions?
- The new members at Molly's church tell their spiritual story (not their "church story") as an initiation and bonding ritual. What is your spiritual story? Some features might be: mountaintop, shipwreck, wilderness, valley of the shadow/valley of dry bones, illness/wound/miraculous healing/resurrection, significant teachers, births, deaths and other losses. (Try telling it in ten words or less! Count them on your fingers.) Here's Molly's own ten-word story: "I was alone. But not really—always, angels, everywhere."

CHAPTER 2: HOW TO MYSTICAL

- If you could have cast a spell at age five, fifteen, or twenty-one, what would it have been for?
- At what age were you your most magical?
- Have you ever had a dream that was directly from the divine? What was it trying to tell you?
- Has God ever spoken to you directly—in words, or some other way? What was it like?
- What do you imagine the afterlife is like? Is there nothing? Something? What might the something be like?
- Molly writes, “It turns out the mystical life is less about control than surrender, less about lying on our little beds trying to send our spirits out of our bodies, and more about learning how to be fully in our bodies. Less about trying to summon God than about leaving ourselves open to God’s arrival, however painful or frightening.” Can you will a mystical experience or prepare for it in any way?
- Molly’s back pain was resolved—how does she account for that? How do you, reading her story, account for it?

CHAPTER 3: THE SUPERPOWER OF VULNERABILITY

- Do you tend to be the “strong one” in your primary relationships? If so, how does that strength manifest?
- Tell about a relationship (friendship, work, parent/child, or partner) that has gotten unstuck—where you shifted a pattern and took different roles, or where the “strong one” finally learned to ask for help.
- Do you know your enneagram number? If so, how does it support you in accessing vulnerability or prevent you from doing so?
- Molly describes her hair as her armor and strength. What part of you represents your invulnerability?
- When Molly writes about facing her illness and her perception of herself as looking like a sick person, it unlocks something: “This was an important spiritual step for me. This reality had to lock in at the most highly authorized levels of my being. Sometimes denial is necessary, even lifesaving. But too much, for too long, keeps us from really getting to the nourishing marrow of what our lives can teach us, how the unwanted can transform us.” When has illness, a health scare, or an accident made you encounter your own vulnerability?
- At her summer camp, Molly gave this impromptu sermon: “One thing I’ve learned over the years is that at Silver Lake, God can give you a clear idea of yourself. Usually, the clear idea that God gives you is that you are beautiful and strong. But sometimes the idea that God gives you is that you are beautiful and weak. Sometimes God takes away our abilities so that we can give other people an opportunity to serve us.” How do you respond to that last sentence—and why?
- Many readers respond with strong emotions as they read about Mike, who is a pedophile, and Gloria, who murdered her daughter after a psychotic break. How did you respond? Do they ignite your empathy, disgust, confusion, or something else? Does their redemption arc ring true?
- Have you had an experience of community where people were not allowed to show up messy? What harm happened as a result?

On-the-Spot Testimony Workshop:

- Go around the circle and name one thing making you feel vulnerable right now.
- Go around again and tell about something bad you did when you were fifteen.
- Final go-round: Tell about a person you have hurt.
- Find a facilitator in the group to bring into the space a time of response, as people tell the stories of those they have harmed, to help group members hear and receive group forgiveness and grace, which might come as a unison affirmation like this one: “May telling this truth set you free. You are whole, human, beautiful, and beloved.”

CHAPTER 4: THE BODY AND THE BLOOD

- Molly escaped to Les and Sam's flower farm to heal between chemo episodes, which she described as "the safest place I know." What is your safest place?
- When has your body betrayed you? At what ages has your body insisted on claiming the lion's share of your attention? What do you love most about your body and what it can do?
- Molly's friend Jessie, who died of ALS, wrote a poem that ended, "In the house of an ALS patient, the glass is half full, for otherwise it is too heavy to carry." Who are the people you have known who adapted to their chronic or degenerative illnesses in surprising ways?
- For some, the words or image of the "blood of Christ" figure into their faith. How do those words resonate, or lack resonance, in your faith? How do you understand the blood as an element of the sacrament of communion?
- Have you ever donated (or received) blood? What was that experience like?

CHAPTER 5: OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

- The familiar psalm fragment "Out of the mouths of babes and infants . . ." ends in a way that might be unfamiliar and lead to a much bigger meaning than "kids say the darnedest things." The whole quote is: "Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a stronghold because of your foes, to silence the enemy" (Psalm 8). What do you believe about children that makes this ring true? What else do you wonder or believe about this line?
- Molly became homesick, frustrated, and ultimately clinically depressed while working at the Casa San Jose. Have you ever found yourself demoralized after rushing in too idealistically to a new calling? How did it resolve?
- Tell about a challenging cross-cultural situation you have been in. What did you learn? How did you grow? Did it change how you understood what kind of help might actually be helpful?
- Molly describes George and Luke, two young children from her church who helped her navigate the terror of cancer just by being themselves. She writes, "By bathing ourselves in children's natural light and joy and wonder and curiosity and need, we discover their babblings are often a telegram from God able to drown out the noise of our worst enemies: fear, insecurity, depression, anxiety, pettiness, jealousy, and judgment." Describe a child who has delivered such a "telegram from God" to you.
- Molly describes telling her own children that she had cancer. Do you think it is better to tell children a painful truth that might affect their lives deeply, or do you prefer to shield them from the harshest realities of life? Are there more than two options for difficult conversations like this?

CHAPTER 6: THE HOLY SPIRIT PORTAL

- What is the difference between a wish and a prayer?
- “Prayer is a way of finding out what we really want, opening our hearts to whatever will come, our worst fears and best hopes, our projections and reality-checks, and getting gradually free of fear,” writes Molly. How does this align with your own understanding of prayer?
- What do you think is actually happening when you pray for someone else? Molly uses the metaphors of channel, vessel, human microphone. Do you have a different analogy for intercessory prayer?
- If God is real, omniscient, and not an asshole, as Molly claims, then why do we bother praying? Or as Molly’s resin tchotchke proclaims, does prayer really change things?
- What is your current “selfish prayer”? What is your current “noble prayer”?
- Journal or talk about a time when you were praying as a novice, like a rock climber—scared and unable to see the next handhold. How did you find the way up?
- What prevents you from praying more often, or praying differently than you do? What are your real desires for your prayer life? (Don’t be noble! Just honest) What would be a good next step toward a more robust prayer practice?
- If prayer is “absolutely unmixed attention,” what do you do that is like praying, in the sense that it helps you absolutely focus or flow? And what activities distract and fragment your attention?
- What bits of yourself have you lost along the way—and has their loss opened a Holy Spirit Portal in you?

CHAPTER 7: MANY ARE STRONG AT THE BROKEN PLACES

- “God is not safe, but God is good,” echoes a well-known line by C. S. Lewis. What feelings and thoughts does that sentence ignite?
- At the last supper, Jesus “took, blessed, broke, and gave” the bread. A whole loaf of bread is beautiful, but in order for it to be enjoyed or shared, it must be broken. How do you understand the metaphor of the bread broken in the sacrament of communion?
- “Nothing is broken that doesn’t have a blessing behind it and a giving before it,” writes Molly. “What if it were true that everything that breaks in your life was bracketed by blessing and giving? What if believing it made it so, and we could stop being so afraid?” How do you answer these questions?
- Molly’s foster son Junior survived the unimaginable—extreme poverty, illness, and abandonment—and grew into an amazing strength, because of—or in spite of—those challenges. Describe someone you know who became “stronger at their broken places.” Now describe someone the breaking just broke. What do you think made the difference? What have you observed that helps some people navigate trauma into resiliency, while others fail to thrive? Are there spiritual, therapeutic, or trauma recovery sources you’d like to share with the group?

CHAPTER 8: THE SIN OF CERTAINTY

- Did you grow up with a fundamentalist faith marked by good-and-bad binary thinking, no faith at all, or a faith that understood that life is full of gray areas?
- What feelings came up for you reading about Drew, who interrupted Drag Gospel Festival worship with his jeremiad against homosexuality?
- If you had been present in the room that day, how might you have responded to Drew? Who did you identify with most in the scene?
- Molly writes, “Fundamentalism, with its self-reinforcing, self-righteous certainties, is a sin because it claims to know the mind of God, and who can know that?” Do you believe we can know the mind of God, partly or wholly? How do you figure out what is true and good for yourself?
- Molly describes the third way of Jesus as “neither returning evil for evil, nor caving in to it,” but finding a way to stand up to it. Can you think of an example from the recent news, or your own life, where someone embodied this third way of Jesus?
- What is doubt? How can it be a blessing?
- Is evil real? How about the Devil?
- How do you respond to the idea that even atheism and agnosticism have fundamentalist forms—a refusal to be taken in—even taken into poetry, mystery, blessing, heaven-on-earth?

CHAPTER 9: LIFE IS LOVE SCHOOL

- Have you ever known anyone like Carl—someone who experienced a radical personality transplant? What brought about that change?
- Who is the easiest person in your life to love? How do they remind you of God?
- Describe a time you made the decision to make your heart bigger, like Julie did in adopting Abie (or, you know, something slightly smaller-scale).
- Molly’s friend Laura Ruth said, “There are people I want to hate, but then they tell me their stories, and then I know them, and then I can’t help but love them.” Has this happened to you?
- “Frankly, being loved is almost as hard as loving because it requires a degree of trust and surrender that is absolutely terrifying to our carefully constructed egos,” Molly writes in this chapter. Does that resonate with you?
- What thoughts or feelings came up for you reading Molly’s conversation with God about her challenges expressing love to Rafe?
- If we’re all in Love School, what extra-credit assignment is God giving you currently? What relationship needs your will-to-love: a coworker, family member, or church sibling? What is the next step?

CHAPTER 10: GOD DOESN'T HAVE A PLAN

- Molly writes, “We’re tempted to look for simple answers when complicated things happen, and bad theologies provide them.” When has someone tried to comfort you and instead annoyed or distressed you with advice, platitudes, or even blaming the victim? Make a list of catchphrases that people should never use with someone in grief or distress, starting with “God has a plan.” Have you ever used any of those phrases? Or even blamed yourself for something terrible happening, so you could make more sense of it?
- “Powers and principalities, behind-the-scenes spiritual forces, are real. So are we. No matter what is going on, we have some agency and choices, some control over how we think about and respond to what is happening to us,” Molly writes. Do you believe in supernatural forces? Do you believe in free will? Where is the line between them?
- Molly describes structural or social sin as far more pervasive and destructive (e.g., polluting corporations) than individual sin (that Coke bottle you failed to recycle). Is this an understanding you were raised with? How do you respond to that understanding now?
- Have you understood God more as a Planner or as a Dreamer? Or somewhere in between?
- Molly writes, “Whatever we are facing, we can get quiet, settle into stillness, and let ourselves be pulled toward the good and toward God. . . . Think about the last time you were mixed up and feeling torn by opposing impulses, desires, or feelings. Did you take time to meditate, pray, or go for a long walk by yourself, and let the Lure tell you what to do next?” How would you answer that question?
- “God did it *tzimtzum*,” shrinking Themself up to make room for human agency, even the room to screw up. If you were God, would you make the same choice?
- What ending would you write for Antonio, the young man in juvenile prison who had a Huck Finn–type escape and subsequent journey?

Activity: Draw God as a Dreamer, with a thought-bubble over Their head. Fill it with dreams for you.

CHAPTER 11: RANDOM TUESDAY DEATH WISH

- What was your initial reaction to Molly’s admission that she didn’t always want to live? Have you ever had your own flirtation with death?
- Have you known anyone who had an NDE (near-death experience)? Did it change the way you think about life after death?
- Molly’s theological position on suicide evolved as she pastored people with suicidal depression—from thinking there would be more “work” on the Other Side, to believing that God welcomed the hurting home after suicide. How have your attitudes, theological or otherwise, shifted on suicide as you’ve grown, and perhaps have known people who completed suicide? Is there someone in your life (or you yourself?) whose opinion about suicide and/or death you wish you could change?
- How do you hope to grow old (or be old, if you already are!)? What can you do to practice resurrection, even as life takes things away from you—like Edith, who put her face in the sun every day, or Lewis, who writes poetry?

Activity: Plan your own funeral (it’s good, sensible egomania). Who should speak (and who should keep silent!)? What kind of music should there be, what kind of feast, what rituals? You can use [this Google doc](#) to guide your planning (it also contains a workshop at the end that you can use with a church or a book group). [This Google doc](#) has a list of suggestions and rituals for more secular services. And definitely do an Advance Care Directive to help your loved ones know how to manage your end-of-life medical care.

CHAPTER 12: LOSERS FOR JESUS

- Molly writes, “The loss of who we believe ourselves to be, which happens not once but over and over again, is extremely painful.” Can you remember a pivot point in your life when you lost who you thought you were? Looking back, was that a fair assessment?
- “Letting go—of our personal privileges, profit, and power,” Molly writes, “is a different kind of fight, and a deep spiritual benefit.” How have you been what she calls “a loser for Jesus,” making a choice to let go of privilege, profit, or power for the world’s (and your own) good?
- To symbolize her personal resurrection after surviving partner violence, Amber got a tattoo of a bird flying out of a cage. What tattoo would you get to mark something you’ve survived?
- Henri Nouwen wrote, “The main question is not ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.” What wounds have you put into the service of others?
- In this chapter some trauma research is presented from the Oprah/Dr. Perry collaboration “What Happened to You?” that describes four distinct ways that humans have metabolized trauma since prehistoric times. They are: (1) connection to tribe, (2) co-regulation through rhythm such as in dance or drumming, (3) storytelling and meaning-making, and (4) occasional/judicious use of psychedelic substances for healing in guided communal religious rituals. Where do you see these tools at work in your life? Which ones is your life, or society in general, missing out on?
- Apocalypse means “uncovering.” What have the apocalypses of the last few years revealed to you, or in society?
- In the book, Molly’s colleague Kit asked us to “lose like Jesus”: to suffer in a way that makes us more supple. Where do you see the possibilities? Can you name a time suffering and suppleness have happened to you?

CHAPTER 13: ON NOT MAKING EVERY MOMENT COUNT

- When have you found yourself in a situation where the scaffolding holding you up, the organizing principle for your days, was suddenly gone (e.g., when cancer treatment ended, or graduation, empty nesting, retirement)? How did you feel? What did you do next?
- What is your idea of a Best Meaningless Day, a day not worthy of Instagram but full of what Molly calls “McPleasures”?
- Howard Thurman said, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” What is making you come alive right now?

CHAPTER 14: HOW TO COME BACK FROM THE DEAD

- In that first Easter sermon after chemo, Molly told a story about going out into a local park with her husband and children to “set free the hair” she had saved, and two little girls promptly finding it, oblivious of what the hair meant to this family who had been through so much. Which is better: naïveté, or “hard knowing”? Is there something in between? Could the finding of the hair and the joy also have been a way to gift the hard knowing?
- Life is like a game of spiritual Tetris, as Molly describes it. “The way behind you is closed. There’s no going back there. All you can do is look for the next opening God has provided.” What metaphor would you use when it seems there is truly no way forward?
- In this chapter Molly provides a list of ways to go on when it seems like there’s no way, including these: “Look for beauty. Start with the mirror. Be vulnerable and naked though it terrifies you. Let your bald flag fly, and see what happens. Let people feed you.” What would you add to this list?

CHAPTER 15: CHURCH ON FIRE

- “Life has a habit of cycling through unpredictable sine waves of equilibrium and disequilibrium,” Molly writes. “Bad things happen, then thorny problems resolve, and if you are lucky, you live long enough for life to get hard again.” Where are you at on the roller coaster of life currently? Creaking your way up? Rocketing into a trough? Easing toward the end of the ride?
- When have you had a beautiful or scary experience of aloneness, like Molly in the Berkeley backyard tiny house? Do you currently crave more aloneness, or less? What are the gifts of solitude?
- Molly and her church made it through a protracted conflict by learning more about family systems and how anxiety functions in groups, including the disposition to herd mentality and scapegoating either the most responsible or the most vulnerable person in the system. She writes, “I learned that you can blame the blamers back, or take responsibility for your own reactivity and functioning. As Richard Blackburn says, ‘Christ exposes the false nature of the scapegoating mechanism. We no longer have to follow the crowd.’” Does this bring to mind conflicts you have been in?
- Where do you see the scapegoating mechanism at work in your workplace, church, or family?
- Molly describes her lifelong battle with workaholism and overfunctioning. What “virtues” of yours do you suspect need burning away?
- Molly’s friend Rev. Lynice Pinkard describes the refining fire of community this way: “Community is a collision of egos, a furnace for welding steel-hard opinions, a crucible for melting the hard ores of self-interests into common Love goals. It offers the pain of not getting our own way, [(and) the promise of finding a third way altogether. . . . ‘Stubborn support and confrontation for [the purposes of] growth’ is our spirituality.” In what communities have you seen this “stubborn support and confrontation for [the purposes of] growth” yield good outcomes?
- At this point in Molly’s family story of love and conflict, which of the family members do you most identify with: Molly, Peter, Rafe, or Carmen?

CHAPTER 16: DANCE WHEN YOU'RE BROKEN OPEN

- Reading about Mali Watkins, his neurodiversity, his encounter with the police, and his grace in handling those who harmed him, what thoughts and feelings come up for you?
- Molly writes: “It is dangerous to say that God brings good out of our suffering. Some of us have spent years unbelieving in a God who demands suffering, particularly the suffering of already vulnerable people. But Mali reminded me that each of us gets to decide for ourselves if our own suffering has a holy purpose.” How do you feel about this statement?
- Molly sums up, “The central question of our lives might be: How much can we heal from the hard things that happen to us? And with it: How do we find meaning and purpose from our woundings? That is a question each one of us needs to answer for ourselves.” How do you answer it?
- “Exforming,” in the parlance of the global community InterPlay, is a way of giving deep emotions a bodily catharsis. Name as many varieties of exforming as you can think of (wailing, dancing, sighing, etc).
- Do you dance? When, how, with who?

Activity: End with a dance party! Use this Spotify playlist, <https://tinyurl.com/doomsday-dance-party>, or create one of your own.

For suggested food and beverages pairings for a proper party, see this one page [Doomsday Pollyanna Dance Party-slash-Book-Club guide](#).