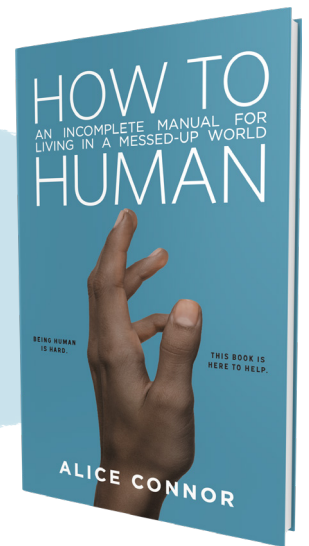


# HOW TO HUMAN STUDY GUIDE

BY ALICE CONNOR



I'm so glad you're reading this. Chuffed, even! I love a good study guide. I need someone to ask me difficult questions I wouldn't ask myself. I hope these will be helpful and difficult for you.

## SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE:

- Do it with a friend. Some folks might say “accountability partner,” which I love, but I also understand that particular phrase has some shame-related baggage with it in some Christian traditions, so name it whatever you want. “Gertrude” has a nice ring to it. The point is, as with physical exercise, you're more likely to do this work with a partner. The other point is, a trustworthy person can help draw out deeper experiences and hold loving space for you when you don't feel you can hold it for yourself. Also, you could get ice cream.
- Don't stop with your first answer. Brainstorm without judgment. Write it all down, even and especially the ridiculous and awkward and unflattering answers. Allow your heart and mind to tell you other possible answers, and then examine them—are they true?
- Allow for multiple answers that might be contradictory. You are not straightforward; you are complex and beautiful.
- Ask yourself how some of these answers serve you. Maybe they do, maybe they don't. Maybe they used to but don't anymore.
- What's most important about this work—whether or not you use this li'l study guide—is to be honest and searching and gentle with yourself.

Great, let's get to it!

## TRY IT, YOU'LL LIKE IT

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- From what do you need relief? Are you willing to look for or receive a cure, or do you only want relief? Why? What are you afraid of in a cure? What would you lose?
- What was something your parents made you eat when you were a child that you've grown to love? What do you love about it? How does this experience inform how you think about other things you haven't liked in the past? Are you willing to try again, to experiment with another way of looking at it?
- What do you make of the idea of spiritual experimentation? Is it scary? Is it exciting? Is it just meh? What about the action-reflection-action model—can you point to places you already do something like this on purpose? What are some things in your life that could use a little more experimentation or reflection? Don't be hard on yourself—just hold your relationships, cultural phenomena, personal habits, etc. up to the light and notice where you're on autopilot or where you're aware you'd like to live differently. Hold this list gently. It's not a list of failure, nor is it a to-do list—it's a list of possibility.
- How does the metaphor of the protected inner wound speak to you? Are you able to articulate what your wound is like or is from? Or, more generally, are you aware of the metaphorical gauze you've wrapped yourself in? What behaviors do you use to protect yourself? What stories do you tell yourself to make things less painful? What would it take to peel back just the first layer?
- What are you afraid of? (Besides, like, fire or clowns.) What holds you back from working on your inner life?

## TAKE PEOPLE SERIOUSLY

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- If you could see the people around you right this minute exactly as God sees them, could you bear to look? Why? What do you think you'd see?
- What do the young people want these days? Not sure? Go ask one. I'll wait.
- How does it make you feel to consider that the institutions you love will change significantly, perhaps to the point that you won't recognize them?
- Have you spent much time considering Black Lives Matter? Why? How does “Black Lives Matter, *too*” sit with you? What do you make of my calling black folks' pain “inconvenient”? Recall a time when someone told you about pain they'd experienced—perhaps race-related, perhaps at the death of a loved one, or something else—and your well-meaning response was to tell them it wasn't that bad. Or recall a time when you told someone about your own pain and their response felt dismissive.
- What do you make of Oshea and Mary's story? What thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations does it bring up?
- What for you is the overlap between safe and comfortable?
- Try the experiment on the last page of the chapter. What was it like to really listen for understanding and not to insert yourself?
- Try the extended experiment about asking questions of stories you see on the news. What do you notice within yourself as you ask?

## DO SHIT ON PURPOSE

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- Have you seen *Creed*? It's really good.
- What are you already doing intentionally? Yes, all of it.
- What kinds of things can you look back on in your life as “just happening” with no one (definitely not you) choosing them?
- What are the irrational patterns you fall into that you're aware of? Alternatively, what keeps you from paying attention?
- “We don't know it at the time, but we all grow up with a script that defines how we live our lives. Every family has one. It tells you what a clean house looks like and whether you write thank-you notes. . . .The script we learn to enact in our families isn't necessarily morally good or bad; it just describes for us how to be a person. It tells us where our attention is supposed to be.” How does this speak to you? How do you see your family script showing up in your life? How do you see it crashing into other people's scripts?
- Who will you be? Big question, I know, but taking a 10,000-foot view, what kind of person are you hoping to be? What are you doing to make that happen?
- “Doing something on purpose is no guarantee it'll work.” How does this make you feel? What's the reward for doing shit on purpose?

## SUCKING AT SOMETHING IS THE FIRST STEP TO BEING SORTA GOOD AT SOMETHING

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- “The good news is: of course you don't know what you're doing.” Does this sound like good news to you? Why or why not?
- Share with your partner a story about a time when failure was helpful. What changed because of it?
- What feels like unadulterated failure right now? What are the thoughts you have about it? Describe your feelings (maybe using the “Wheel of Emotions”). How does it feel in your body, this failure? Are you able to take even a tiny step back and ask yourself questions like “What am I learning in the midst of this misery?” or “What are the possibilities for how I respond to this failure?”
- How does the idea of failure as a process or spectrum sit with you? What would it take for you to experience not knowing something or even being bad at something as liberating rather than constricting?
- Try the experiment at the end of the chapter: “Ask someone you trust to explore an example of failure in your life with you and to ask questions about it. What's a different way to look at it? Even if it feels too shiny-happy, how can you reframe it to be about possibilities? What can you learn?”

## TAKE OFF THE COSTUME

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- What did you use to do when you were younger that you now only do secretly and alone? What makes you want to hide it away? Is that story you're telling yourself about it actually true? Does it matter if it's true? (I once heard someone say, "If you can't sing well, at least sing loud," which makes me so happy. Who cares if your voice isn't conventionally beautiful—do you like singing? Then sing!)
- What is your costume? Like, literally, how would you describe what you normally wear that communicates to others that it's you? In my house, we call it our cosplay. I can cosplay as my husband by wearing a superhero t-shirt and a comfy cardigan and holding a cup of tea. What's the cosplay of you? What does this costume communicate to other people about you?
- But what's your spiritual costume? Metaphorically, how are you presenting yourself to the world that is both you and a way of pretending to be yourself in a carefully curated way? And what are you hoping to communicate to other people with this costume? Mine is constant competency combined with a kind of learn-from-my-mistakes charm. I hope.
- Each of us looks at global issues differently and chooses different issues to be concerned about. What issues around the world keep you up at night? What issues are you just now waking up to, even if you don't have a complete handle on them? What has kept you from seeing them clearly?
- What is the pain that your costume helps you soothe or ignore? How does it feel (thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations) to consider your own vulnerability?
- Try imagining someone else in your life and their vulnerability. Try imagining someone on the news or someone you don't get along with well working on their vulnerability. What do you notice inside yourself as you imagine?

## IF IT'S NOT OKAY, IT'S NOT THE END

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- Do you believe everything will be okay in the end? Why or why not? Is that hope helpful for you? What if I rephrased it in the words of the musical *Hadestown*: "Someone's got to tell the tale / Whether or not it turns out well / Maybe it will turn out this time." Is that "maybe" hopeful to you?
- What is dead or dying in your life (programs or relationships or expectations, as well as literal people) that you hope will eventually bring new life?
- How do you explain to your kids or to yourself that people don't last forever, that the world around us will eventually die, that we will experience hurts and betrayals all our lives that feel like death?
- Let's ask the hard question: What *will* happen if, when you leave, no one cares about the things you care about and keeps them going? Truly, what will happen? What does it mean about the work and care you put in if the thing doesn't continue?
- Consider the agricultural metaphor for campus ministry: Do you find that metaphor useful in your own life? What season are you in right now?
- Tell your partner a story about a time when you experienced a good ending, a death that was needed and well done, an ending that was a gift.

## IT'S OKAY TO FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

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- Did you know there are many fascinating words to describe your emotions? What are some of your favorites? How helpful is it to be able to articulate the specifics of your emotions?
- What have you learned about your emotions from the church? From the work world? From your family of origin? From your family of choice?
- If our emotions can be toyed with so easily, of what use are they?
- “We have a right to feel whatever feelings bubble up—they’re just there; they’re not morally good or bad.” What feelings do you have that you think are bad? How do you respond when you’re having “bad” feelings? Try an experiment where you hold those feelings more gently, more loosely. Try to look at them as pointing toward something else, as though they are helpers. What do you notice when you do this?
- Relatedly, try the “What am I feeling, what do I want?” experiment or the suggestions following it. When you’re intentionally seeing and naming your feelings, what’s different?
- When have you experienced that Radiohead feeling I describe as “I breathe more deeply, and space opens up inside me, like my body contains infinity”? Try recalling that feeling in mundane moments of your life, connecting even a single, needed, deep breath with that feeling. Begin to associate that spacious feeling with mundane things as well as huge, obvious things.

## SAY THE THING

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- What is the thing you need to say? Think immediate: In the next hour, what is something you need to say to someone else or yourself? Don’t worry about saying it perfectly—just say it out loud or write it down in all its imperfect glory. Maybe then hone it, but don’t hone all the meaning out of it.
- Or think more expansively: Looking at your life as a whole or at something taking up a lot of bandwidth in your mind and heart, what do you need to say about it or to someone else about it?
- In Al-Anon, one of our many mottos is “WAIT: **W**hy **A**m **I** **T**alking?” In opposition to “Say the Thing” is silence and listening. Interestingly, WAIT can be helpful for future “Say the Thing” moments: listen, observe, notice what’s going on inside yourself so you know what the thing is that you need to say. Think of a time when you did WAIT and listen: What did you hear? How was it helpful?
- What euphemisms do you use regularly? How do they serve you? How do they protect you? Can you think of a time recently when you crafted your words to manipulate someone into what you wanted? Do you see a pattern of behavior, even if it’s not meant maliciously? What are you afraid of in speaking plainly?
- If you *did* paste signs to the knees of your trousers explaining your feelings, what would they say?

## ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED

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- Have you lost your voice? Not literally—like the voice of your soul. Have you hidden what you need and who you are deeply enough that you don't share it with others?
- What do you need right now? Immediately or physically? Generally or spiritually?
- Have you ever asked someone directly for what you needed? What was that like? What did it feel like in your body? When you got an answer (either way), what was that like? Have you ever asked someone directly for something more nebulous than a refund or to get past them in a line, like for an apology or for emotional space? Or have you asked for something embarrassing or difficult, like for someone to clean your house after you've been violently ill? What was that like? If you haven't, what would encourage you to try?
- How do you know whether something is a want or a need?
- How do you respond to “no”?
- If you are white, what is your gut reaction to people of color asking for safety and equality? That is, when you see protests on the news or angry confrontations with police or civilians, when you see challenging things on your social media, or when, perhaps, you feel you're being called insensitive or a racist, how do you react? What would be a more compassionate and intentional response?
- If you are not white, what is your gut reaction to people of color asking for safety and equality? What has been your experience of asking for or demanding what you need? Have you had an experience of someone really listening and responding well? What was that like? How do you care for yourself (thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations) in a world that often doesn't listen to you?
- What are your wants that might be getting in the way of someone else's needs?
- “You're allowed to take up space.” What space would you like to take up or relax into that you've been holding yourself rigidly away from?

## YOU'RE INVOLVED, NOT IN CONTROL

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- What are you doubting? What are you uncertain about? How does that feel? What kinds of mental gymnastics do you do to avoid feeling it or to make it okay?
- To what extent are you able to talk to people you disagree with? If your answer is something along the lines of “I just share more information with them so they'll agree because they just don't have all the facts,” you're not actually talking to or with them; you're talking *at* them. Even if they're objectively wrong and you're objectively right! If that's the case, don't shy away from it here—be honest about it. I certainly want to convince everyone I meet of my particular opinions, and even though we practice curious listening at the Edge House, I fail a lot.
- What do you want to fix? Yes, all of it. What's broken about those things? What's not broken about them?
- How does the line “We are not in control of anything. Control is an illusion” sit with you? How does the idea that powerlessness can be freeing sit with you?
- “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” What does this line bring up for you? (Again, thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations.)
- Try an experiment: Consider a relationship or a work that you're involved in as an invitation rather than an obligation to complete. What shifts in you when you shift your perspective away from *should* or *must* to *can*?

## IF WE EAT TOGETHER, WE WILL NOT BETRAY ONE ANOTHER

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- How often do you act as if you are alone, as if you are the only person you can rely upon? How accurate is that, really? Sit with this question—don't immediately jump to "I really am, though." Let it marinate at the back of your mind. Notice who is present with you, even for a moment. Notice who *could* be with you, even for a moment, if you asked.
- Have you ever had Eritrean food? I can't wait for you to try it!
- What betrayal have you experienced? Why was it so painful? How have you carried the weight of it since then?
- How does the phrase "beloved community" sit with you? Beloved by whom? For what purpose? Which community? Is anyone excluded from this idea? Why? How can "beloved community" extend beyond smaller groups into the public sphere or corporate life, not just in a hashtag or team-building-exercise fashion?
- How do you share food with neighbors or strangers? What does it mean to you? How does it change you? Who do you *need* to eat with so you will learn not to betray one another?

## CONSIDER THE LILIES, DAMMIT

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- What journey have you been on—intentionally or unintentionally—where the place you came from took on more meaning than the destination—or at least more than you expected it to? What did you learn?
- What tiny things in the world around you—natural or not—do you notice that bring you joy?
- What coping mechanisms have you developed to deal with stress and anxiety? Name as many as you can, whether they're healthy for you or not. Notice how some of them have positive and negative aspects simultaneously. What are the blinders you put on yourself that keep you safe but also keep you from seeing the world around you?
- How do you make time for doing nothing or for spending unstructured time in nature? When was the last time you had nothing to do? How did you respond to that nothingness?
- If you're familiar with the "consider the lilies" wisdom from Jesus, how have you understood those words in the past? How does Fujimura's interpretation sit with you? What happens inside you when you do just go sit in the natural world?
- What are some things you worry about that need to be worried about and acted upon? What are some things you worry about that you have no control over, and the worry only sits in your gut and makes you even more worried? Share these things with your partner and pray Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer."
- What are the walls of your box made of? What is outside them?
- Is hope ridiculous? Why?

## AMBIGUITY IS NEITHER GOOD NOR BAD

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- What is your definition of a sandwich?
- Why is “Who is in and who is out?” the wrong question? Or, more specifically, how does looking at the world as though there are only two choices serve you or your community? If you think it’s the right question, why?
- “I know, I know, you hate me right now for saying your pain is good. That’s okay. That also is neither good nor bad, it simply is. Infuriating, isn’t it?” Is this perspective infuriating to you? Why? Connect this chapter to the “Feel Your Feelings” chapter: how do pain and pleasure point towards something deeper within or outside of you?
- What is the liminal space you’re in right this moment? What is a liminal space where you have found yourself in the past? What was it like in your body and heart and head? What was it like when you were finally out of that liminal space? How does remembering this help you now?
- With your partner, consider a problem or question you’re experiencing. What are the possible right answers to it? Brainstorm without judgment. Be silly, be serious, be creative. Brainstorm looking for a number of possibilities, looking for a spectrum of “good” and “bad” ideas. Only then, choose one to do and see how it turns out.
- What is it like to admit that you don’t understand something? What do you not know that is mysterious and amazing?

## EVERYTHING’S AWKWARD, LEAN INTO IT

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- Do you struggle with imposter syndrome? Why is it so hard for you to believe that you might be cool and fine?
- What do you do to try to make things less awkward? What gestures or verbal tics do you have to diffuse tension? What relational strategies do you deploy?
- What is something new you’ve tried recently? How did it go? How awkward did you feel doing it? If you haven’t tried something new recently, try something this week.
- What are you resisting when you feel awkward? What are you afraid of? Is it being wrong? Vulnerable? Seeming to be improper? What story do you tell yourself about what would happen if someone saw you in this light? What would actually happen?
- How can you, in your particular life, practice being okay with awkwardness?

## SO WHAT?

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- Given all of this, so what? What difference does any of this make?
- With what do you need to practice making it easier, whatever *it* is?
- How does that Kahn quote sit with you: “God breaks the heart again and again and again until it stays open”? What is an experience of heartbreak you’ve had that helped crack your heart open a little bit?
- “We don’t *have* to try something new, we *get* to.” What’s exciting to you about what you’ve read and thought about? What are you eager to try? How does any of this make you come alive?