***Gifts of the Dark Wood***

***Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics***

***(and Other Wanderers)***

**by**

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**Study Materials**

**Prepared for Members and Friends**

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Introduction: "A Place in This World"

Chapter 1: "Where We Find Ourselves"

In these pages Elnes introduces important ideas that he elaborates in the remainder of the book. Plan to read both the Introduction and Chapter 1 in their entirety. Afterward, this summary may be helpful as a review.

Summary of Chapter 1

You have a place in this world where you are most fully alive. You may have discovered it in childhood and revisited it during significant upheavals or transitions since then--this is "home." This book is about seeing life anew and recognizing that experiences of failure, emptiness, and uncertainty are as critical for finding our way through life as they are unavoidable. They offer clues to our "calling" or "path in life," and may come about deep in the heart of struggle. (pp. 1-2)

Recall the story of Peter who walked a few steps on the water toward Jesus, but fell and asked for Jesus' help. Jesus' response to Peter was "Upon this Rock I will build my church." Could it be that *right failure* is more important to Jesus than *right belief?*  (p. 4) Sometimes we assume that good things will continue--until they don't. You may be due for a journey into darkness before you discover a firm foundation. (p. 5)

Some ancient Christian mystics came to believe that the Dark Wood is *where you meet God.* It's here that you discover who you are and what your life is about.(p. 6) This book describes seven unusual gifts of the Dark Wood: emptiness, uncertainty, getting lost, being thunderstruck, temptation, disappearing, and becoming a misfit. Think about them--have you ever experienced any of them? Do you experience them now? Dark Wood experiences may enable you to find your path. All you really need to be *is struggling*.(pp. 7-8) Great saints of the past experienced doubts and imperfections. In their struggles they moved from uncertainty to *trust* and from failure to *faithfulness.* (p. 8)

Struggle and challenge allow you to find your path in life. You discover the way forward by special markers, called "sweet spots." These appear when you make adjustments that allow you feel most fully yourself--most fully free, yet wholeheartedly engaged and alive. The Dark Wood is where you not only meet God, but meet yourself--your true self that is most directly connected to, and in conversation with, the divine. (pp. 9-10)

Elnes proposes to help you be more fully yourself through mythological imagination found in ancient Judaism and Christianity stories passed to us. These stories are our stories and we learn that our lives are more bound up in God's story than we realize. As a result, our failures and struggles may become our most powerful allies in becoming more fully alive. In addition the Holy Spirit is a term to which people have different reactions. Therefore, Elnes chooses the words, *The Unexpected Love* as the name for Holy Spirit. (pp. 11-14)

We usually don't notice the Spirit acting in our lives until we start paying attention, and then we realize that the Spirit has made sweet-spot moments that we did not notice. These surprises are probably not because the Spirit comes and goes, as much as they are due to variations in our awareness. The Holy Spirit speaks in whispers and does not insist that we listen. The voice is likely to come as inner hunches, sweet-spot moments and subtle intuitions that gently click something into place that had been out of alignment. (pp. 15-21)

Discussion Guide for Chapter 2

"The Gift of Uncertainty"

1. On pages 24-25 Elnes describes what it's like being in the Dark Wood. A person experiences sweet-spot moments with all their excitement and terror, and then ultimately--uncertainty. Reflect on your life experiences. Have you visited the Dark Wood? What was it like?
2. Think about Ortberg's statement: "We all think....that certainty alone could never produce." (p. 28). Describe your thoughts.
3. Describe the value of choosing to pursue mostly projects that you do wholeheartedly. (pp. 29-30)
4. Read about Jesus' healing the paralyzed man who waited by the pool for thirty-eight years in John 5:1-15. In Elnes' version of this story (pp. 31-35) read suggested reasons for the actions of both Jesus and the man. Elnes says that when our soul is shackled by fears, it "inevitably revolts and seeks to break free. When it wins the revolt, we may find ourselves in places we wouldn't necessarily go ourselves, but we also find that we are terrifically OK with that. We experience a taste of freedom, even joy...." (p. 34) Describe any experience you've had in which you found freedom from your fears. Was giving up your "certainty" worth the freedom that followed? Explain.
5. How readily could you adopt for yourself Elnes' mantra? "Do not worry about anything until it presents itself to be worried about." (p. 39) Explain.

Discussion Guide for Chapter 3

"The Gift of Emptiness"

1. After you've read Rūmī's poem (p. 41) silently, read it aloud, but substitute "spiritual part of a human being" for the word "soul." How does the changed wording elaborate meanings for the remainder of the poem and clarify the first paragraph on page 42? Explain.
2. Read Forrest Church's statements about his knowledge of you (pp. 45-46). Does he really know you? How do you feel about this knowledge now that it's been brought to your attention?
3. Do you have fear, even a little bit, of your shortcomings? Before you answer, consider the message in "Chances are....it never does." (pp. 47-48)
4. In the section Black Hole Faith, Elnes describes multiple experiences involving himself, Jesus, and the Cross and says that each one ended badly. Comment on the significance of his statements about moving to awe-struck reverence:

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| * Once I admit that I'm no different from anyone else... (p. 50)
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| * If I am to experience what it is like to be fully alive before I die, I must--*must--*depend on a power greater than myself to make the journey with me. (p. 51)
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| * At our place of greatest despair over our lives and our abilities, we discover a Presence who loves us beyond our imagining, who *chooses relationship over perfection.*...we discover that the only thing we have truly lost...is our fear. (p. 51)
 |
| * Standing in this place (of awe-struck reverence) is the beginning....most beautiful spot in the world in which to stand. (p. 52)
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1. Connections between emptiness, God and humans are far-reaching. Reconsider Elnes' illustration involving spreading the salt about the size of our galaxy (p. 60). He asks us to imagine what God's consciousness must be like. Later he challenges us to "get empty! Let God find you." (p. 61) What does it take for you to get empty?

Discussion Guide for Chapter 4

"The Gift of Being Thunderstruck"

1. Recall that "The Dark Wood is that inner terrain you negotiate more through intuition, imagination, and indirect ways of knowing than through direct perception." (p. 66) Have you experienced a sudden flash of insight or awareness that surprised you? Describe.
2. Several scripture verses begin with these words, "And God said...." Say aloud one or two of these. If God did *not* speak audibly, as Elnes points out, what meaning are we to give to these scriptures?
3. Elnes elaborates on "sweet-spot moments" in a description on pages 70-71: "...moving in the direction to which the lightning and thunder calls us....These are what we have been calling sweet-spot moments." Think of a time when you moved in the direction that lightning and thunder called. Describe the resulting sweet-spot experience.
4. Describe how you can know whether a spiritual experience is authentic.
5. From Confucius: "Choose a job you love and you will never have to work another day in your life." (p. 79) Has that been your experience to date? What meaning does this statement have if you're retired from paid work?

Discussion Guide for Chapter 5

"The Gift of Getting Lost"

1. "People who find and live....one of the most important gifts we can receive." (pp. 83-84) Describe your reaction to the notion that "getting lost" or "straying from the path" is to be expected more than once in the Dark Wood.
2. Elnes describes several benefits that he finds in getting lost regularly, and even talks about getting it wrong and having to start the process again. (p. 85) Have you had similar experiences? If yes, describe them. Also, talk about any experiences that you have encountered that are not mentioned here.
3. According to Elnes, God typically uses natural law in interventions. These intuitions come about in human consciousness through the production of sweet spot moments a person can either accept or reject. (p. 89) Why is this option important?
4. The suggestion is offered that God's lightning and thunder are more likely to be perceived when a person is quiet than when s/he is not. (p. 98) Describe a couple of ways you can make yourself quiet for this purpose.
5. Explain why it is/is not difficult for you to experience God's messages to you that come through imperfect people. (pp. 100-101)

Discussion Guide for Chapters 6 and 7

"The Gift of Temptation"

"The Gift of Disappearing"

1. In Chapter 6 Elnes proposes that the gift of temptation shows itself as doing the *wrong* good. He further contends that a person's logic, reason and strategy typically don't help that person realize the situation. (pp. 103-106) What are your thoughts about these statements? Describe your experiences, if any, with the gift of temptation to do the wrong good.
2. Elnes says further that "the path that fits you best is *revealed* to you" and that deep listening to the Spirit promotes this revelation. (p. 106) A little later Elnes asks the provocative question: "...have you given yourself over to the Spirit in such a way that you are willing to allow it to lead you on your path and bring you to fullness of life?" (p. 118) Describe a couple of reasons for a 'no' answer. For a 'yes' answer.
3. Chapter 7 opens with a brief discussion of pride and shame, but quickly moves to describe humility on page 126. Think about these themes, then describe your responses to these statements:

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| * Humility is living by God's vision of you, not your own. God sees a lot more of you than you do.
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| * God also sees the kind of person you are capable of growing into when you live wholeheartedly. It is this wholehearted image of yourself that feels most like home when you glimpse it even for the briefest moment.
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1. Try painting your own word picture for "turning sideways into the light and disappearing." Then talk about any actual experience(s) you've had with doing so. How did you feel afterward?
2. As is true of all human activities, we make mistakes. "But mistakes made while trying to be *ourselves,* not someone else, bring us closer to our place in the world, not farther from it." (p. 145) In what ways has making mistakes brought you closer to your place in the world?

Discussion Guide for Chapters 8 and 9

"The Gift of Misfits"

"Where We Go From Here"

1. Elnes offers different versions of Matthew 4:17 at the beginning of Chapter 8. The version that sounds like a friendly invitation (see p. 147) seems to be substantiated by its proximity to the beatitudes that Jesus may have given to contradict criticisms of the invitation. Discuss your responses to these ideas. (pp. 147-151)
2. Next is a discussion about entering/staying in the Dark Wood alone or in the company of others, described as misfits. (pp. 156-163) In your view what's advantageous about choosing the company of others over going it alone? Any disadvantages?
3. In the final part of Chapter 8 Elnes talks about characteristics of common ground among heterodox communities of faith. Share your own examples or insights into these characteristics.
4. Carefully consider this paragraph in Chapter 9, "Embracing our propensity for failure....need to be *is struggling.*" (pp. 170-171) Describe your responses.
5. Take into account the additional information in Chapter 9 about Peter's contribution to expansion of the church to Gentiles. Can Peter be considered a misfit exemplar? Discuss. Is he one with whom you'd like to keep company? Why/why not?