

Spinifex Blessing Julie Perrin

Stories of Faith and Life

Companion Guide

Introduction

Welcome to the Companion to *Spinifex Blessing*. This guide is for the use of small group leaders hosting conversations and individuals seeking reflection activities.

Spinifex Blessing is a set of stories that respond to grace in everyday life. The Companion will have done its work if you or your group are encouraged in knowing and articulating more of your own faith journey.

These stories were written for the faith column of *The Age*, a Melbourne newspaper. You will rarely find direct biblical references but you are encouraged to think of biblical passages or images that resonate for you with the stories.

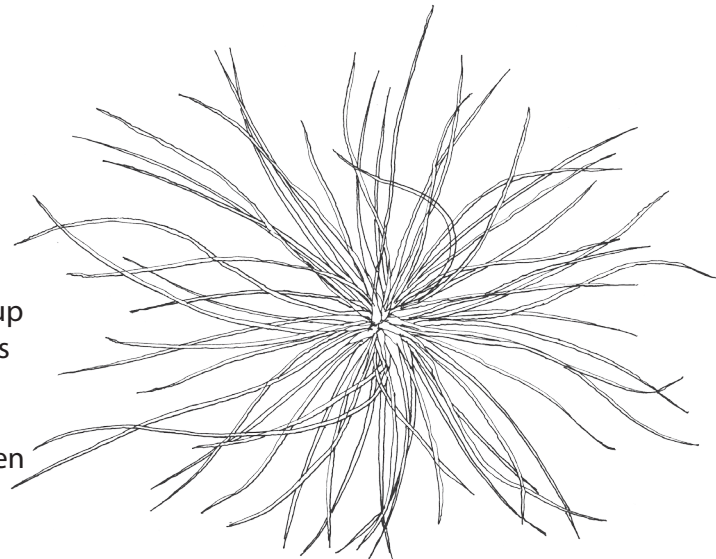
Different ways to use the stories

Study group: one session	Study group: 3-4 sessions	Personal reflection or individual retreat day(s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Select a theme (p3-4) or 2-4 stories• Read aloud one story• Pair discussions, or other ways to meet the stories (p2)• Plenary / group reflections (p2)• Repeat for another story• Encourage ways to respond afterwards (p2)• Close session	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Select a theme for the first session (p3-4)• Read aloud one story• Pair discussions• Plenary / group reflections (p2)• Repeat for another story• Choose a theme for next session• Encourage ways to respond afterwards (p2)• Close session	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Select a story or theme (p3-4)• Read a story aloud or silently, or explore other ways to meet the stories (p2)• Repeat for another story or theme, as your time allows• Explore ways to respond afterwards (p2)

This Companion does not assume everyone will respond to the same invitations. Different members of a small group may choose different practices, and individual retreatants can self-select a sequence or set. If your small group meets over a series of weeks you can offer people a chance to contemplate which practices most appeal to them. We recommend trying out a new activity as well as one that is familiar. Mutual Invitation (p2) is a discussion method that allows everyone to make a choice in contributing their thoughts rather than privileging the voices of more confident talkers.

Notes for Group Leaders

- Allow a small group time of 90 minutes or more
- Allow a minimum of 15–20 minutes for each practice
- Tailor the activities to the time you have available
- Pair discussions need 5–15 minutes and good listening
- Allow time for pairs to report key insights back to the group
- Encourage listening and noticing not right/wrong answers
- Consider the Mutual Invitation discussion method
- Reading aloud a single story takes 4 minutes
- Participants will need a simple notebook or journal and pen



Try these group approaches:

Reading aloud and paired discussion

Small groups are encouraged to read one or more stories aloud. Take your time; do not rush. A simple way to check if people feel clear about what they have heard is to ask people in pairs to complete in their own words the sentence

'This is a story about...'

Reflections can follow either in pairs or by Mutual Invitation* in the group.

- This story reminded me of...made me think of my own experience when...
- It resonated for me with the biblical story/passage...
- This image came to mind...
- In my own Christian faith, this story opens me to...

Pairs can be encouraged to report back to the group what they recall their partner has just told them. This encourages attentive listening and any misses/misunderstandings can still be clarified.

Mutual Invitation*

In this way of structuring group conversation, the leader shares first. After they have spoken they name and invite another to share. This does not need to be the person sitting next to them. After this person has spoken they then invite someone else to speak. A few moments of silence between speakers can be an opportunity to sit with what has been said.

When invited to share you can say, 'pass for now' and then ask someone else to speak. You will be invited again after some others have spoken. If you are clear that you still don't want to say anything simply say 'pass' and invite someone else to speak. This continues until everyone has been invited.

This method helps with listening in a way that does not try to respond immediately to someone else's sharing. There may be time to respond and ask clarification questions after everyone has had an opportunity to share.

*This method of Mutual Invitation is drawn from Eric Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, Chalice Press 1993.

Try these practices for individuals and groups:

Part 1 – Ways to meet the stories

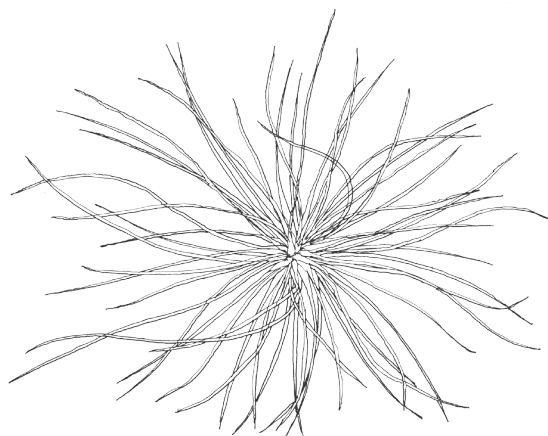
- Read a story either silently to yourself or aloud in a group
- Handwrite words that you want to recall
- The stories quote poetry and prayers; when they are read aloud, try to notice what you hear. Allow time to re-read the story silently yourself and write out by hand any words that stand out to you. Stand the handwriting in a place where you will meet it during your day
- Find biblical passages that resonate with the themes in the stories
- Does an image or phrase, story or parable come to mind? Make a note in your journal about any parallel stories or images you think of

Part 2 – Ways to respond afterwards

- Learn short prayers and poetry by heart – this follows readily from writing words out by hand. Walk through the words phrase by phrase; sometimes a gesture will help you remember a section
- Create your own prayers with words, gestures or collage materials. Keep things simple, don't try to create a perfect 'product'; learn what you can from experimenting
- Enjoy what you have made, display it in your home

Postscript – Using these stories in worship

If you choose to read aloud any of these stories in a worship context, remember to give the listeners a sense of the audience they were originally written for – that is, readers of a major Australian public newspaper – *The Age*. Acknowledge the writer and people won't get confused about who 'I' refers to. None of the stories are longer than 450 words. They take less than 5 minutes to read aloud.



Stories grouped by theme

All stories are shown by name, followed by volume and page number

Theme: Quietening

Title Soundscape 1–4

Quotes

I come to love the fullness and dwindling of sound, the signal of arrival and the receding away... The bliss of rest can be a kind of prayer.

Questions

- The story describes immersion in sound; can you recall any similar experience where one sense comes to the fore?
- What does it mean to trust when you cannot actively participate?

Theme: Quietening

Title Earth Hour 1–7

Quote

Words you know by heart stay available to you, unfolding their mystery...

Questions

- What hymns or poems do you know by heart?
- What songs/ prayers/hymns would you want to share with others?

Theme: Quietening

Title Port Fairy 1–10

Quote

...beauty alongside frailty; there's a grace between people of all ages and stages of life...

Questions

- Where have you witnessed this kind of intergenerational grace?
- What could be meant by the final phrase 'an ancient song echoing a new song beginning'?

Theme: Beauty in the Ordinary

Title Victoria Market 1–26

Quote

'If one morning you awaken with a small stone of resentment...'

Questions

- How do you think the tangible details move the writer towards transformation in this story?
- Have you had an experience where you have been called out of a resentful or difficult place?

Theme: Beauty in the Ordinary

Title Carmina Gadelica 1–22

Quote

Generations before us have known there is comfort and joy to be found in tedious tasks by adding a rhyme or a song.

Questions

- What have you read or heard that is similar to these blessings?
- Do you make up your own rhymes and songs for daily tasks?
- In what ways do the sayings in this story relate to the themes of the Ordinary time story? (2–4)

Theme: Social Justice

Title SievX 1–13

Quote

Offering hospitality to the stranger is taught in all the major faith traditions. Sometimes we need the voices of children to remind us.

Questions

- What resonates for you with the Middle Eastern proverb quoted in the story?
- How could you more readily respond with a child-like wisdom?

Theme: Social Justice

Title Bank Teller 2–19

Quotes

Human cruelty and human kindness, they sit so closely together... The bank teller carved out a space...

Questions

- What acts of respect have you witnessed in unexpected places?
- What is it like to receive the kindness of strangers or near-strangers?

Theme: Hardship and Grace

Title Taxi Driver 1-19

Quote

It is in the shelter of one another that we live.

Questions

- What small details alerted the writer to the compassion of the taxi driver? How do his actions speak to her during and after the event?

See also Non-anxious Presence 3-19, Kindness 3-4

Theme: Hardship and Grace

Title Greeting and Parting 3-22

Quote

In the landscape of farewell we must learn to be 'generous citizens of loss.'

Questions

- Does this ring true for you? How do you imagine this generosity?

Theme: Hardship and Grace

Title On Doubt 2-16

Quotes

God is found in unknowing brokenness and doubt... It is too easy to wound people with sureness, mistake certainty for faith.

Questions

- Do you find this stance of openness towards doubt helpful?
- Have you ever experienced being wounded by someone else's sureness?
- How might it be possible to mistake certainty for faith?

Theme: Easter – Palm Sunday

Title Shaggy Horse 2-13

Quotes

'Oh look, that one's waiting for Jesus!' ... For horses, as for humans, even when you get picked for the top race, you need your shaggy friends to keep you company.

Questions

- What might this story (and Shy Animal 3-10) say about the companionship of creatures?
- What might this one suggest about fame and glory?

Theme: Easter – Maundy Thursday

Title Before Good Friday 1-16

Quotes

As if barracking for Jesus put you on the winning team where nothing could touch you... I remember people who carry wounds that don't heal.

Questions

- Do you relate to the song in this story and the sense that some things remain wounded?
- How could such an acknowledgement bring a kind of healing in itself?
- In what ways does this story bring us closer to Easter?

The stories Blessing song 2-10 and Non-anxious Presence 3-19 travel from darkness to light. In what ways are they like and unlike the Easter story of Jesus' death and resurrection?

Theme: Christmas

Title Christmas Carols 2-24

Quote

I look around at unglamorous people perched on crappy old couches. I am in the company of angels and shepherds.

Question

- Why do you think the writer claims 'This is Christmas, God with us'?

Theme: Christmas

Title Round the Back 3-25

Quotes

It gave round the back a whole new resonance... 'the world is the solid speech of God.'

Questions

- How did the garden round-the-back illuminate Christmas for you?
- How have you experienced the world as 'the solid speech of God'?

