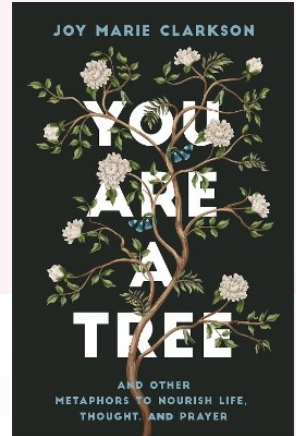




# LEADER'S GUIDE

## YOU ARE A TREE BY JOY MARIE CLARKSON



"This is a book about paying attention - to our experiences, and to the words we use to describe them."

**JOY MARIE CLARKSON**

### THEMES

Stories

Journeys

Metaphor and Language

Faith

Hope

Imagination

Beginnings

### ABOUT THE BOOK

*You Are A Tree*, by Joy Marie Clarkson is a "book about paying attention to our experiences, and to the words we use to describe them." Metaphors matter and give our profound experiences and evasive concepts satisfying clarity. In this book, Joy meditates on seven metaphors offered to us in the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures that help direct our actions and orientation in the world.

Metaphors help us gain language to speak about profound experiences and concepts that evade us. By reflecting on the properties of trees and journeys (or other metaphors for life), and carrying them over to the human condition, we might discover new ways of understanding ourselves.

Yet not all the metaphors in our world are good ones, and some even have the potential to do great harm.

Joy's book, therefore, meditates on seven compelling metaphors from Christian and Hebrew Scriptures: people are trees, wisdom is light, safety is a tower, love is a sick-ness, change is birth, sadness is heavy, and life is a journey.

"This book invites you to pay attention to your experiences, and to the words you use to describe them. That attention reveals a richly layered and meaningful world, a refreshing perspective that nurtures wonder, gratitude, and hope."



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS



1

Q. What are metaphors and why do they matter? (p17-18)

### TALKING POINTS

“Metaphors matter because they allow us to give a voice to those profound experiences and concepts that evade us” (p17).

What is a metaphor?

- The operating word in a metaphor is, *is* or sometimes *are*.
- Etymologically, metaphor means to “carry over.”
- Aristotle’s Poetics describes a metaphor as, “the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy.”
- Simply put; “a metaphor is when we use words to carry the properties that naturally (or rather, properly), belong to one thing over to another thing” (p19).

Whereas “a simile is simple, it marks out the similarities between things: this is like that” (p18).

2

Q. “As a systematic metaphor for human flourishing, *humans are computers* is both incomplete and unforgiving” (p23). Why is this metaphor problematic?

### TALKING POINTS

“When we describe ourselves as computers, we tend to start treating ourselves as if we are, expecting of ourselves those things we can expect of a computer” (p23).

This metaphor is problematic because:

- We can begin to subtly absorb the idea that we are valuable based on what we produce.
- If we do not function efficiently, we’re disposable.

“Computers are replaceable; human beings are not” (p24).

- We are not as simple as machines, and we do not function the same every day.
- We are so much more resilient than computers.
- The ways we fail to be like a computer (loyalty, resilience, intuition, and creativity) are our greatest strengths.

“The metaphor ultimately fails to grasp the needs and strengths of human beings because a machine, even an advanced one... is for the most part much less sophisticated in design than the constantly morphing organism that is a human” (p24).

3

Q. Do you have a favourite tree, or if you were a tree, what season would you be in? Which section from *People are (not) Trees* resonated with you the most?

### TALKING POINTS

“A person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither –  
whatever they do prospers.”

Psalm 1:3

- We see ourselves in trees - the sweet flowers of spring, the flourishing of summer, pruning after harvest in autumn and bareness in winter – can all be felt in our human experience during different seasons. Each season comes with limitations and expectations that cannot be altered, but also an abundance of possibilities as well.
- Few pages in the Bible do not speak of trees, and many significant moments in the Bible take place in the presence of trees. Trees are an ancient witness to the drama between God and man (p40-41).
- Trees “keep secrets” as they silently witness our comings and goings.
- Trees are a picture of human flourishing: “trees are *planted by streams of living water* and they *bear much fruit*” (p43).
- “Rootedness is one of the ways we intuitively describe the kinds of stability that leads to flourishing and the kind of instability that leaves us dry, parched, and desperate” (p43).
- Much growth of trees is hidden; deep and slow growth can happen where we cannot see and a tree cannot flourish on its own (p46).
- “Each day, a tree needs something slightly different: sunlight, shade, water nutrients... so its branches won't break. A flourishing human life is the same” (p51).
- Jesus promises that if we abide in Him we will produce fruit, but also that we will not wither (p55).

## 4

Q. “Many of our ways of speaking of knowledge, wisdom and understanding have bound up in them the imagery of light and dark, shadow and beam, night and sunrise” (p63). Discuss Chapter 4, *Wisdom is (not) Light*.

### TALKING POINTS

“The coupling of light with wisdom and darkness with ignorance pervades scripture” (p67).

- “Study is a spiritual matter: in seeking knowledge, we experience the warmth of God's light, which lightens us” (p71).
- “Sin causes us to avoid the ‘source of light and fountain of wisdom,’ whereas ignorance merely represents someone who has never been *shown the light*” (p73).
- “Sometimes the light is hidden to us not because of our own ignorance or sin, or because God is hiding, but because it is a confusing, broken, and difficult world” (p75).

## 5

Q. In *Safety is (not) a Fortress*, Joy describes fears such as darkness and descending, in comparison to the safety of a high castle or successful climb. Which do you fear more, darkness or descending?

### TALKING POINTS

When we are afraid, what do we seek our refuge in? Is it work, friends, money, romance, social connections? Or is it God?

- All these things are temporary and can fail us, but God will never fail us.

When we're feeling afraid and vulnerable, how might we run to the fortified tower of the God who loves us? “Where can we go – physically, emotionally, relationally – to obtain distance, perspective, and time? (p100).

- We can pay attention to what stirs us when we descend. Are we afraid of the dark? Do we feel claustrophobic? Are we lonely? When we better know what triggers us, we can connect our experiences to insecurities, and take those fears to God, our safe refuge and fortified tower.

# 6

Q. "What does love look like to you?" (p104). What did you learn about love from the Chapter, *Love is (not) a Disease*?

## TALKING POINTS

"When we lose love, be it through abandonment, death, or betrayal, we feel sick until we know how to speak the loss of it out loud. When we love someone...*they become our world*, and so we use our world to describe them, because everything reminds us of the beloved" (p105).

- "Love is so integral to our lives that we seem to use almost everything to describe it" (p105).
- Love as a sick-ness; "Love is madness, but it is necessary madness" (p108), "Love can be a sickness, and a sickness that leads unto death, but not all death is bad; the death to self can see in its place new life and new vistas" (p110).
- Love as a home; "Love leads to home-making... Our love is a place we can continue to make comfortable, safe, and rejuvenating for its occupants" (p113).
- Love as a mirror; "Love has to do not only with seeing and knowing the beloved, but also being seen by them" (p116).

# 7

Q. In the Chapter *Creation is (not) Birth*, Joy says, "Life is made meaningful by the things we say yes to, even though we can't see to what end those things will lead" (p132). What have you said yes to in your life that has brought forth unexpected creativity, faithfulness, or love?

## TALKING POINTS

"Birth is one of the ways we speak about thought, creativity, and vocation; about undertaking work that might change us" (p125). Some examples Joy includes are saying yes to;

- Studying, careers and new job opportunities.
- Getting married and/or starting a family.
- "the greatest moment of calling, the voice that calls every human being: the call from death to life. This is the great vocation of all human existence, to be drawn into the loving life of God, to not perish, but to live" (136).

# 8

Q. Have you encountered the burdens of depression, grief, sadness, disappointment or shame? What does the weight of your own life feel like right now? How did the Chapter, *Sadness is (not) Heavy* resonate with or encourage you?

## TALKING POINTS

"Give your burdens to the Lord, and he will take care of you. He will not permit the godly to slip and fall" - Psalm 55:22;

- It's normal when experiencing these types of burdens, to find yourself less able to cope with your life; a sense of feeling like your hands are too full, things are too hard or too much and being bone tired without energy are all common to feel but are also invisible to others.
- When we're burdened, we speak of being heavyhearted, and depression carries with it the implication of being forced down or depressed.
- Whereas when we help to carry one another's burdens, we may feel our burdens lift and begin to feel more lighthearted or high-spirited.

- Sadness is not like the burden of a backpack that we can put down or take up; it is a part of us, they are our own, as much a part of us as our blood, nails and skin.
- Pain and sadness need to be felt, when we put them down at the feet of others it does not address the issue and often, others suffer.
- “To not feel things is to not care” (p152); is a meaningful life possible without burdens?
- Jesus offers us a “light burden” (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus doesn't promise to take away our heavy burdens, as burdens are the weight of living, but he does offer that they will be more bearable with him.
- There is a difference between a burden and a load. Loads are ours alone to carry, a burden was meant to be shared (p154).
- Sometimes we may feel uncomfortable sharing our burdens with others, but in not letting others carry our burdens we are preventing them from the deep joy and calling of fulfilling the law of Christ (p154).
- Humour – and taking ourselves less seriously - has a role to play in lightening our burdens.
- Looking after our physical needs is crucial; sometimes we need food, rest, and a nap.
- “Life is not fair, and it is not equal; some of us bear more burdens than others, cast on us by traumatic experiences, loss, mental health issues, or the irresponsibility of others. We also carry the burdens of things we did choose, and regret: sin, bad decisions, faltering love” (p161).

9

Q. How has the metaphor, *Life is a Journey*, helped you consider your life and experiences? Is there anything you would have done differently?

### TALKING POINTS

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). “The Christian life is the path to Golgotha, *bearing up* under the weight of the cross (p178).

- Journeys are more than simply where we are going, and the metaphors we use around life being a journey also encompass how the righteous travel, who we associate with, where we are going and what we're carrying; it encompasses all other metaphors (p178).
- Life as a Pilgrimage; “A pilgrim is one who is searching, who is not at home” (p179).
- “We are homesick”; As Christians, our travelling is not only dangerous, difficult and uncomfortable, but we are exiled from, and long for, the home we're travelling to.
- Life is not a race, it's endurance training for the “final, gruelling but triumphant run toward the end. And this ending... just the beginning of a great journey: life! (p184).
- Just like Sam, from the Lord of the Rings, we all have the difficult task of inhabiting a world that's broken and where we no longer feel at home. The task of home-making is bittersweet, we experience joy, beauty and love, but we're homemaking in a world that can never truly feel like home (p189).
- “The Christian life itself is a metaphor, the carrying over of our true home to this world, where roots draw their nourishment from the springs of eternal life, unfolding in the light of True Wisdom, safe in the arms of the Most High, at home in love, changed from glory to glory, burdened only with the weight of love” (p189).

# 10

Q. At the end of each chapter in the section called *Thinking and Praying*, Joy suggests works of art; paintings, films, images/text, songs, poems and podcasts, that can help us think about metaphors in new ways. Did you follow any of these prompts? If so, share what you learnt or experienced.

## TALKING POINTS

Many of us are drawn to different forms of art because of our interests, giftings or circumstances. A musician may be drawn to music, but a writer prefers to read a quote. A busy mum might have enjoyed a song, but didn't have time to watch an entire movie! There is no correct answer about what kind of God-honouring art we each enjoy.

It's okay if the group members didn't follow any of these prompts. You may like to have a painting, poem or song that you enjoyed accessible so you can share and discuss this one with the group.



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