

The background is a dark, textured charcoal grey. Overlaid on this are several delicate, yellow-gold branches with small, pointed leaves. The branches are scattered across the page, with some framing the text and others extending towards the corners. The text is in a white, serif font with a slightly distressed or hand-drawn appearance. The words are arranged in four lines: 'WHERE', 'GOODNESS', 'STILL', and 'GROWS'. The 'O's in 'GOODNESS' and 'GROWS' are replaced by solid white circles. Below the main title is the subtitle 'DISCUSSION GUIDE' in a similar font. At the bottom is the author's name 'AMY PETERSON', with the 'O' in 'PETERSON' replaced by a solid white circle.

WHERE
GOODNESS
STILL
GROWS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMY PETERSON

WHERE GOODNESS STILL GROWS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

A NOTE FROM AMY

I created this discussion guide for you because I believe authentic conversations that take place within continuing community are powerful. I want to help you have those conversations.

As I write in *Where Goodness Still Grows*, this isn't a "book of final, definitive answers about virtue" — it's a book intended to spark discussion about what virtue looks like in our own contexts. Conversations about the ways we've used the language of virtue to control people. Conversations about the ways we've been hurt by hypocritical leaders. Conversations about the ways we have been hypocritical ourselves. Conversations about what it might actually mean to embody the goodness God intended for us to embody.

We were mostly strangers to each other when our book club formed in September. Having just moved to North Carolina, I didn't know many people, but I didn't think I could create an effective study guide on my own. I put out a call on social media and the neighborhood listserv inviting people to join a ten-week book club. Amazingly, more than a dozen brave strangers showed up at my house that first Sunday evening. We were baby boomers, gen-xers, millennials, and generation Z. We were single, married, childfree, busy parents, and empty-nesters. We were gay and straight. We were mostly white and middle-class. We were devout and disillusioned, and for all of us, the questions of what to believe and how to embody goodness in a fractured world were live questions, with answers shape-shifting before us.

By the end of our ten-week study, we knew something of each other's pasts and heartaches, and something of each other's current struggles. We had found things we disagreed on (hell, salvation, which cheese is the best at Trader Joe's) and loves we had in common (Narnia, Sufjan, D.L. Mayfield). We brought food to one couple when a new baby was born and sometimes we got together for dinner even when book club wasn't happening. We ended with more hope than we had when we began, and with a fresh appreciation for another virtue: the virtue of changing your mind, of flexible conviction, open to the Holy Spirit's movement.

Please gather some people together to read this book with you. Family, friends, a church group, people in your dorm — or just whoever shows up when you do an open invitation on Instagram. And drop me a line, if you do — maybe I can join you one week, too.

 with love, AMY 

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INTRODUCTION

1. Describe the religious tradition you grew up in. Do you call yourself an evangelical? Why or why not?
2. “I find myself wondering,” Amy writes in the introduction, “if the ground I grew up in was radioactive all along and whether anything good can grow there.” The author wrestles, throughout the book, with the question of whether the hypocrisy she now sees in the American church means she has to reject everything she learned growing up in evangelical circles. In what ways have you moved beyond or stayed within the culture you were given, and why?
3. It often feels like it’s become impossible to have a civil conversation with someone who doesn’t share your political views. Share about a conversation you’ve had, whether failed or successful, with someone with whom you disagreed.
4. Can you think of a time with interacting with someone from a different background caused your view on a topic to change?
5. The author defines the word apocalypse as “an uncovering, the disclosure of something that has been hidden, a revelation,” (xxii) and acknowledges that the evangelical support for Donald Trump has felt like the end of the world she once knew. In what ways have the events of the past few years been apocalyptic in our culture?

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LAMENT

1. Lament isn't really a virtue; it's a practice that can lead to virtue. Why do you think Amy begins the book with lament?
2. Did you grow up with lament as a regular practice or as something to avoid?
3. What virtues might the practice of lament nurture in people?
4. Part of the difficulty of lament is that we lament different things. How can we lament together in the church when we have such varying perspectives on what is worthy of lament?
5. How is lament different from grief?
6. What is the relationship between lament and reconciliation?
7. What role does art play in lament?
8. Have you ever seen lament practiced well?

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KINDNESS

1. How would you have defined kindness before reading this chapter?
2. Sometimes calls for “civility” or kindness are actually attempts to silence people, or to gloss over real problems. Have you ever experienced this?
3. You can buy a t-shirt on Amazon with the words “Make Kindness Cool Again.” A recent anti-bullying campaign in public schools was called the “Kindness Campaign,” and on social media people share about “random acts of kindness,” What are the benefits or drawbacks of commercializing or popularizing kindness in these ways?
4. Amy suggests that understanding our kinship with all people invites us to think differently about wealth and inheritance. What do you think?
5. What are some ways you can make personal reparations?
6. What role does imagination play in cultivating kindness?
7. How did you respond to Amy’s suggestion that you might be “kin” with the non-human world?
8. What steps might you take to transform your relationship with the natural world?

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HOSPITALITY

1. What connections do you see between kindness and hospitality?
2. How was hospitality practiced in your family when you were growing up?
3. In practice, the work of hospitality often falls more to women than to men. Have you seen churches or other groups put the obligation of hospitality primarily on women? When and where have you seen men called to be hospitable?
4. Some of the biggest obstacles to hospitality are busyness, a need to focus on your own family, and fear. Which of these resonate with you? How have you overcome these obstacles?
5. Amy contrasts the Biblical command to care for strangers with the low percentage of white evangelicals who believe we are obligated to help refugees. What does this disconnect say about the church's teachings about hospitality?
6. Amy writes that hospitality is a "radical stance of faithfulness against fear." Have you witnessed that kind of hospitality at work?
7. How have you seen a community shift as one person within it practiced hospitality?

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PURITY

1. What was your experience growing up with the word purity or with purity culture?
2. How was this chapter similar to or different from other critiques of purity culture that you've heard?
3. Is purity a virtue you want to reclaim?
4. How has the language of purity been used to disempower women? Men?
5. What do you think a Christian sexual ethic is?
6. How do you talk to children about sex?
7. According to Amy, purity in the Bible actually has nothing to do with sex. Rather, it's about things being in their right places. For us, the right place is wherever Jesus is. But what does this kind of purity look like, practically?

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MODESTY

1. How was the virtue of modesty talked about in your childhood or adolescence? Was it a virtue needed by all people, or only some?
2. Did hearing about the virtue of modesty in your teenage years change the way you thought about the opposite sex?
3. How might LGBTQ+ folks have felt during those youth group “modesty talks”?
4. How are power dynamics at play in modesty talk?
5. Have you experienced pressure to be modest about things other than your body — about your talents or gifts, for example?
6. What is the difference between modesty and humility?
7. “Modesty in the Bible is more about not flaunting wealth than not flaunting skin.” (98) Discuss what implications this might have for the typical American church today if we lived this way.
8. How does “immodest wealth” separate people from each other?

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AUTHENTICITY

1. Has authenticity ever been a big buzzword in your church experience? If so, how was it defined?
2. When you describe a person as authentic, what do you mean by that?
3. What is the relationship between authenticity and spontaneity?
4. Do you have to be vulnerable to be authentic?
5. Have you ever seen people compete to be the most “authentic,” resulting in unhealthy oversharing?
6. What’s the difference between authenticity on Instagram and authenticity in real life?
7. Some readers find this chapter to be the most controversial. What’s controversial about it for you?
8. Is “you do you” a helpful way to think about authenticity? Why or why not?
9. How does the church invite people into authenticity?
10. Amy argues that while the repetitive practice of prayer may not always feel deeply authentic, it may be the best way to cultivate our true selves. How is this possible?

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LOVE

1. How has apologetics (the practice of “defending the faith”) been a part of your life?
2. Was evangelism presented to you as a defensive activity? If not, how was it presented?
3. Were you warned as a teenager that you would be persecuted for your beliefs? Have you experienced that? Why do you think Christians have this persecution complex?
4. How do you distinguish between evangelism motivated by love, and evangelism driven by fear?
5. What are the various ways you can understand what it means to witness?
6. What does curiosity have to do with loving your neighbor? How might this relate to our approach to interfaith dialogue?
7. What does childbirth have to do with any of this?

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DISCERNMENT

1. What's your history with the term "absolute truth"?
2. Amy talks about discernment as knowing what is true rather than about knowing what is right. What is the relationship between what is true and what is right?
3. Some strands of evangelicalism focus on Scripture, reason and propositional truths; others tend to emphasize the Holy Spirit, emotion and passionate response. What has your church tradition taught you about finding the truth?
4. On page 155, Amy talks about the Jewish Midrash, in which participants are expected to disagree as they wrestle with scripture. In what ways is this different from how the Christian church typically approaches interpreting scripture?
5. Amy argues that "bodily knowledge" is not inferior to knowledge that comes through mental reasoning. What are some examples of things you know in your body?
6. "Fear of the unfamiliar and a desperate need to have certainty and to be right have limited our ability to taste and see that God is good." (156) Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
7. Many of us grew up hearing that we shouldn't trust our desires — that if we desire something, it must be bad for us. How ought you to respond to your desires? What are the potential dangers of following desire?
8. Amy has noticed that there is a "limited appetite among Christians when it comes to developing our taste for truth; we read the same 15 authors, listen to the same four preachers, and sing the same three praise songs. Anything beyond the familiar we label gross." Is this true to your experience? How have you experimented with moving beyond the familiar?
9. Which ways of knowing are harder for you to trust?

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HOPE

1. The life cycle of the chicken and the planting of a garden in spring are both used as metaphors for hope. Are there other metaphors that illustrate what hope looks like in our world? Do you find this book ultimately hopeful?
2. This chapter was a little different from the others. How would you describe the difference? Do you think the difference in narrative style signals something about the definition of hope?
3. “Only two things will last: the Word of God and the souls of men.” Amy no longer believes this is true. What about you?
4. Does our current moment of ecological devastation make it more difficult for you to hope? How do you practice hope?
5. In her TED talk, Greta Thunburg argues that action can lead to hope (rather than hope leading to action). Have you ever experienced that?
6. What makes hopelessness or cynicism so attractive? Why do people sometimes show disdain for those who try to act in hope (“Your metal straw isn’t going to change anything, you know.”).
7. What is the relationship between hope and vulnerability?
8. How does community nourish your hope? Or deplete it?
9. What do you think the title, *Where Goodness Still Grows*, means?