

Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Kristopher Norris

For the Time Being by Annie Dillard

Before you read . . .

In this intricate, complex, and beautiful book, Annie Dillard weaves together essay, history, personal narrative, and even poetry to approach some of life's most important and most perplexing questions. Why are we here? What is the purpose of humanity? Why do we suffer? And where is God in all of this?

Dillard begins with the striking and vivid image of birth defects, and then moves to serious and creative reflections on suffering, evil, and the paradoxes that fill our lives. Through the 200 pages of her novel, Dillard leaves us with no answers; rather she heightens our sense of the deep mystery of life. She makes us feel so small, yet so important in the same sentence. She appeals to God and yet intensely interrogates God at the same time. She reveals beautiful images of life and nature, yet also horrifying statistics and visions at the same time.

For the Time Being will be like no other book you have read. Dillard moves from conversation on clouds, the formation of sand, a paleontologist-theologian digging up clay soldiers in China, and a nurse in the newborn ward of a hospital, to critical questions of human suffering, disaster, and evil. Dillard's book is filled with theology, science, and mostly compassion. She touches on the questions we all at some time ponder, the questions that stretch our minds and touch our hearts.

In the end, this book is primarily about the relationship between God and humanity. One-time self-described as "spiritually promiscuous," and recently a Roman Catholic convert, Dillard brings a wide array of traditional and world religious thought to her work. The book is fraught with seeking, and certainly offers much for those of us who wonder about the vitality and suffering of life in this world. In her quirky, and often outright strange way, Dillard articulates questions in ways that cause us to pause and think. For most readers, this book will take several chapters in which

to catch Dillard's rhythm and direction. In the end, we are left with the paradox of life and death, of human insignificance in comparison to the universe – "an atom lost in the universe" – but also the great importance of humanity to a God who became human. Statistics, images, and stories lead us to our own questions and perhaps by the final page, to re-imagine our own relationship with God. While she may not provide us with quaint answers to life's complications, Dillard does offer a new way of thinking. Perhaps, this month as we study disaster response, Dillard will help you to rethink questions of mercy and grace, or at least lead you to wonder – "To what end were we billions of oddballs born?"

For group reflection and discussion . . .

Use the following questions to guide your Reading Group discussion after your group has read the novel. The questions will help you to engage the book, its themes, and the *Affect* missions emphasis of the month.

Reflecting on Themes:

- What was your reaction to the book as you were reading? What about your initial reaction upon completion? Which sections of prose, or which images, struck you the most? Dillard offers many more questions than answers in this book. Which question did you resonate with the most?
- Where do you agree with Dillard, and where do you disagree?
- After portraying images of birth defects, Emperor Qin's massacres, and natural disasters, Dillard wants to ask God simply, "What's with the bird-headed dwarfs?" What images have you experienced lately that have caused you to ponder similar questions?

- Dillard also offers many images of newborn babies, and reflects on the mystery of birth and life. What thoughts come to mind when you see a newborn baby?
- In several places in the book, Dillard offers statistics portraying the smallness of humanity. What experiences have made you feel small? How do you deal with this smallness? How does it affect your reflection upon God?
- On page 86, Dillard questions, “When did God always work for the good of those who love him?” How do you deal with situations in which faithful servants of God suffer – when bad things happen to good people? How do you wrestle with Scriptures like Isaiah 45:7, as Dillard does on page 117?
- She quotes Simone Weil who says that evidence of God’s mercy is sometimes the absence of it. What do you think he means by this? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Dillard discusses the paradox of the presence and absence of God. In one section, she suggests the presence of God in the world is either lost or gone astray. Do you believe this to be true? Why would someone say this? How would you respond to her question?
- Theologians have often debated the paradox of God’s immanence and transcendence. How have you experienced both of these aspects of God? How do you reconcile both parts of God’s character? What light do Scriptures shed on this question?
- How might CBF field personnel who are working in areas of natural disasters deal with questions of theodicy or the presence/absence of God? How do they respond to people who are experiencing great suffering?
- CBF field personnel David Harding calls the water crisis in Ethiopia a “silent tsunami.” Famine can have both human and natural causes. After reading through Dillard’s reflections and reading about disaster relief work, what can you do in the face of systemic or natural causes to many of the world’s problems?
- How would you respond to people wrestling with issues of God’s presence, or questions about evil and suffering? What do you think these questions have to do with CBF’s mission of “being the presence of Christ?”
- In her article in *Affect*, Tracy Allred describes a scene in Ethiopia where Christian and Muslim workers held hands to pray as they were drilling a well for clean water. This resonates with Dillard’s reflection on the unity of humanity. How can we come together across religions, national borders, and other “dividing walls” to help those in need during a crisis? Why is it easier to see a common humanity in times of crisis? What can we do to make this sense of unity carry over to other times and places?

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Reflecting on the Mission:

- The mission study this month is about disaster response. Dillard asks on page 107, “What were your sensations” when you heard about the 140,000 drowned in the most recent tsunami? How do you respond when you hear of tragedies? What questions do they bring to mind?

next month:

Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time by Greg Mortensen and David Oliver Relin is a true account of one man’s educational investment in poverty-stricken Pakistan and Afghanistan.