

Holdfast: At Home in the Natural World

A Reading Companion for
Book Clubs, Writing Groups and Readers

with discussion questions, writing activities and group activities for each essay

by

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“The Testimony of the Marsh”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Is loving life like loving a person? How are they alike? How are they different?
2. Have you, or has someone close to you, lost their love for life? Was that love ever regained? How?
3. What other landscapes and situations might evoke the judgment that the purpose of life is to continue, as the author claims?
4. When have you felt most full of life?

Writing Activity

In this essay, the author uses language that evokes motion, color and sound. For this writing activity, try something similar. First, think of a landscape that is particularly important or interesting to you. Then, free-write* for as long as you like, alternating between different human senses. You could even try using the senses and perspective of another being. Read your writing aloud. How does this kind of language bring the scene alive?

Group Activity

Write a brief love letter to life and exchange it with another person. When you receive a love letter from your activity partner, write a reply as if you were life responding to that person’s affection.

*Free-writing is the unconstrained recording on the page of whatever sentences come to your mind, without stopping to edit, Just begin to write and keep on going. If you run out of ideas, just keep writing “waiting, waiting” until more sentences come to you. No going back to “fix” things. No stopping to think. The idea is to capture the creative, free flow of your mind. There will be time later for editing; the goal here is to silence the editor in your mind in order to liberate the honest and unrestrained writer.

“Holdfast”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What has served as a holdfast in your life?
2. Have you managed to keep connected with the places where you grew up? How?
3. How do you know when you are home?
4. The world we live in has become increasingly mobile and decentralized. What effects of this situation have you felt? List some that are positive and some that are negative.

Writing Activity

Where are you from? The usual answer is to name a city or place on a map. But we are from many other origins - religions, smells, geographies, holiday traditions, family songs, loves, fears, hatreds, foods, and on and on and on. Write three sentences, each beginning, “I am from.” Let the sentences go on and on, if you like, and be sure to include the specific words, the surprising descriptors, the smells and emotions that will hang in the reader’s mind.

Group Activity

Look at the picture of the holdfast on the cover of this book. In small groups gather around a piece of paper, chalkboard or other surface and draw what your holdfasts might look like. Let your drawings overlap and intertwine so you have an entire “forest.” Now, discuss the “ecology” of that forest - how are the holdfasts connected? How do they sustain or undercut one another?

“Howling with Strangers”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. When have you felt connected to a stranger? What explains that feeling?
2. Do your connections and interactions with non-human nature affect your connections and interactions with humans? How?
3. Do your connections and interactions with non-human nature affect your connections and interactions with humans? How?
4. What sounds help you to feel rooted or connected? Why do you think this happens?

Writing Activity

Go to a place where you are surrounded by a number of people you do not know. Try to interact with some of them, if you feel comfortable doing so. What did you notice about these people and their relation to you? Did you feel connected to any of them? All of them? Write about these interactions either when you are in the situation or when you return to your home base.

Group Activity

With your group members, do a “sound meditation” as follows: Everyone closes their eyes. One member - the leader - hums a sound. The others hum tones that “respond” to that first sound. A response need not be a matching or harmonious tone. The leader changes his/her tone as desired; this is an invitation to the others in the group to respond to the change. This can go on for some time. Let the last “chord” ring into a long silence.

“A Field Guide to Western Birds”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. When have you been captivated by a sense of wonder about the natural world? Did that have an impact on the rest of your life?
2. Does the complexity and vastness of life on Earth comfort you, bewilder you, or both? Does learning more about life on Earth intensify or lessen those feelings?
3. Have you ever had the experience of seeing, in person, a plant, animal or other natural feature that you had only previously experienced through books or pictures? Recall and savor that moment.
4. How have the members of your family invited you into the great outdoors, or protected you from it?

Writing Activity

Write a few paragraphs about your family’s relationship to the natural world. How would you characterize this relationship? That is, is the natural world part of your family? Is it more like an estranged neighbor? Is it a mother or father figure? Is it like a family pet?

Group Activity

Take the group into a nearby natural area, preferably one with a lot of different types of vegetation and other forms of life. In turn, have everyone name one plant, animal or other natural feature they see (common names are fine, scientific names are fun!). Do this until the group cannot name any more. Then, as a group, make up names for as many more features as you can find. They may be as “scientific” or as fanciful as you like. Create a field guide to natural phenomena that have no name.

“The Thing About Dogs”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Describe a time when you felt lonely. How did you deal with it?
2. What has been your relationship with domesticated animals, particularly cats and dogs? What has been their role in your life?
3. What landscapes make you feel particularly at home? Do any make you feel alienated?
4. Do you enjoy being alone? What makes time alone valuable for you?

Writing Activity

Write about a time in which your primary companion was non-human. What or who was this companion? What did you learn during this experience?

Group Activity

Divide into groups of two and spread around your space so the groups cannot hear one another easily. Designate one person to be the silent listener and the other to be the speaker. Speaker, talk for three or four minutes about an experience of being alone. Listener: listen and respond without words. Then reverse roles. After doing this, both members write briefly about this experience. Would it have been different if the listener had been non-human? How?

“Field Notes for an Aesthetic of Storms”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Do you enjoy storms? Why or why not?
2. Have you had to deal with another person’s loss? Did you deal with it differently than you deal with your own losses? How?
3. How have beauty and suffering interacted in your experience or the experience of someone close to you?
4. What kinds of storms have you experienced in your life? Did different storms elicit different emotions?

Writing Activity

Fold a paper into thirds, lengthwise. In the far left column, make a list of ten things that really scare you. Then, in the middle column, next to each of the ten items, write a word or two describing it. Then, in the right column, write a word or two that describes your physical or emotional reaction to it. Read this whole list aloud. Have you written a poem? Revise and share.

Group Activity

As a group, walk out to the edge of something (the edge of a freeway with traffic, the top of a building, the edge of a river, the diving board). Sit there and free-write a paragraph. Read the group’s paragraphs one after another. Now put them down on the floor or a table and rearrange their order to make the most sense. Have you created a collaborative essay about edges?

“The Western Singing Fish”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What does it mean to “live thickly”? How might you live your life more thickly? List some of the changes you could make.
2. Look around you. How many things separate you from the earth? How many things connect you to the earth?
3. Have you ever “caught a glimpse of a self entire”? (see page 70). Was that an illuminating experience or was it something else?
4. Do you value time? What do you do to get the most value for your time? How do you “kill time”?

Writing Activity

Did your mother/father/son/daughter hum/whistle/sing? When? What did it sound like to you? Tell a story about this.

Group Activity

In groups of any size, hum together. Hum loneliness. Hum urgency. Hum triumph. Hum silence.

“The Song of the Canyon Wren”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Have you ever felt “greedy” for a particular place?
2. What are *you* listening for in your life?
3. In what sort of landscape do you feel most at home? What do you think accounts for that?
4. Have you even felt such a strong connection to a place that you felt you had been there before?

Writing Activity

Pick an evocative sound you can hear from where you are sitting. It can be a song, or notes from a song, or a natural sound, or something else. Close your eyes and think very carefully about this sound. Then free-write about what the sound reminds you of, what places, smells and sights it invokes. Let your mind lead you there.

Group Activity

As a group, go to a place with many sounds: a forest or school yard or the edge of a road. Sit quietly and listen. Then each person free-write about one particular sound – what it sounds like, what it feels like in the ear, what it reminds you of. Then go around the group, each person reading their work, to create a sound-map of the place. Draw that map.

“The Prometheus Moth”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. If you were the author, what decision would you have made about whether to ask the doctor to end her father’s life?
2. Often, people say of a death, “It’s for the best,” or “it’s a mercy.” Can that ever be true? Why or why not?
3. How can mercy killing (or any other act) be “beyond ethical categories”?
4. How is the death of a moth different from – or similar to – the death of a parent?

Writing Activity

Write about an experience you have had with death, human or otherwise. Return to what you have written and consider your relationship with death. Are you afraid, defiant, ambivalent, accepting?

Group Activity

The author used the killing of a Prometheus moth as a possible metaphor for a merciful death. But there are many other metaphors. Each person suggest one and explain its strengths and weaknesses. Does this “basketful” of metaphors suggest the general qualities of mercy?

“Traveling the Logging Road, Coast Range”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. In this essay, the author does not make a single moral judgment (a statement about what ought or ought not to be) or condemn any practice. Yet her strong moral views about clear-cutting are evident. How did she do that?
2. Have you ever been impacted by a clear-cut, a strip mine, or some other major “resource depletion”? In what ways did it impact you?
3. Can you tell a specific story from your own experience about how your health and the broader ecosystem health are connected?
4. Do you agree with the author that the clear-cut is a landscape of “irretrievable loss”? Or do you see things differently? How so?

Writing Activity

Nature writers often choose the most beautiful scenes to describe, probably because such scenes move us in ways we value. But ruined landscapes move us too – although in different ways – and writing about them may be part of our work of witness. Find a landscape that has been recently disrupted (by chainsaws, bulldozers, etc.). Describe it as accurately as you can.

Group Activity

Go with your group on a “field trip” to a ruined landscape. Sitting on a stump or in the dirt, write what you would say to children if you were leading them on this trip. It will be a challenge to think of how to “frame” the experience for them. Compare your “small speeches” with those of the rest of your group.

“Cast Your Frog on the Water”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What do you remember most about your parents or children when they are far away? Elements of their personality? Memories of specific events involving them? Things they've said? What else?
2. How have you kept loved ones close to you even when they are some distance away?
3. How have you learned to let go of fears or anxieties surrounding separation from loved ones?
4. What do you love about the darkness of night? What makes you avoid it?

Writing Activity

Think of someone you are close to, but who is far away. Imagine him or her in a particular place and situation. For example, is she in a diner, eating lunch alone? Is she in bed, trying to get to sleep? Now write what you imagine, in the form of a scene from a book of fiction. “Mary scrapes the mayonnaise off her burger . . .”

Group Activity

Go outside together at night. Choose a place where you can sit comfortable for some time, and sit in silence. Pay attention: what do you learn from our eyes? Your ears? Your nose? Your skin? When, after twenty minutes or so, return to a lighter place and work together on a big piece of paper to draw a “sensory map” that locates, from an aerial view, the members of your group and the noises, smells, etc. that you noticed. This is an exercise in the writers’ arts of paying attention, remembering, and (of course) rejoicing.

“Memory (The Boathouse)”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Do you agree with the philosophers that your sense of self would change significantly if you began to lose, or lost, your memories?
2. Has someone close to you lost their memory partially or entirely? What else has that person thereby lost? What remains for them?
3. The author asks, “If memories define who we are, does this say something about love?” What do you think?

Writing Activity

“An artist once told me that if you want to paint a person, you must paint the shadows on his face.” Is this true as well for a writer? Try it out. Sit quietly, closely observing someone nearby. Then write a description of that person, writing only about the shadows. Or, do the same with a bird. Or a wind storm. Or a bus on a city street.

Group Activity

The second half of this essay is loaded with questions. Go through the text and assign a question to each person. Then:

- a. Read the questions in order, as if they were the lines in a single poem. What is the name of that poem?
- b. In order, each person lead a discussion of possible answers to their question. Why are some so easy to answer and some so difficult?

“Baking Bread With My Daughter”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Is it more difficult to see a young person in pain than an older person? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever learned something significant from your own pain or the pain of another? What was it?
3. Is it more difficult to see another person in pain than to feel pain ourselves? Why or why not?
4. Do you think all pain is bad? In other words, if you could revise your life to remove all instances of pain – would you? What do you think the effect on your life would be?

Writing Activity

Write a recipe for the relief of pain or sorrow (you choose). (e.g., one part old movies on the couch, two parts chamomile tea, etc.) Share this with others if you like.

Group Activity

When we look beyond the pain of a single child, we recognize that the world is full of children who are suffering – from war, hunger, disease, thirst, enslavement. The world is also full of people in organizations who are working hard, and often effectively, to relieve that suffering. Do some on-line research to learn about such organizations. Select one of these organizations and do what you can to support their work.

“Pale Morning Dun (*ephemerella infrequens*)”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What are the three or four belongings that most clearly define you?
2. What does this mean: “too pretty to keep”?
3. Cigarettes, guns, whiskey, pesticides, fungicides – do you think it’s fair for a writer to pick out details like these to represent a man’s life?
4. Learn a little about the pale morning dun (*ephemerella infrequens*). In what ways might it be an apt metaphor for a person’s life? In what ways not?

Writing Activity

Choosing one room in your home, look around and choose four or five objects. Now, as if you were a stranger looking only at those objects, write a description of the person you might imagine is the owner of the objects. How does he/she speak? What obsesses him or her? What personality quirks does she or he have? Etc.

Group Activity

In your meeting, everyone should bring one thing – anything. Put all the objects on a table. Now write a scene that includes reference to all of those things. In a scene, you’ll need character(s), setting, and some action.

“On Being Afraid of Bears”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What are you most afraid of? What’s the good of fear?
2. Does it make you more or less fearful of something to be with someone who does not share that fear? Why?
3. Why does the unknown inspire fear so often? How can we unlearn this fear?
4. A tent is an oddly paradoxical thing, providing protection from some things but no protection at all from others, increasing fear in some respects but decreasing it in others. What is your experience of tents?

Writing Activity

Write about an encounter with something you are afraid of. Write it in the first person, present tense, using all the tools of fiction: dialogue, character, setting, etc.

Group Activity

Take a field trip to the zoo. Split up, with each person going to the animal exhibit (spider? snake? tiger?) that she or he fears the most. Write an entirely dispassionate description of the animal in one paragraph. Now write a one-paragraph description of that animal that is full of passion. Joining back with the rest of the group, combine all the dispassionate descriptions to create a “field guide” to the zoo. Then combine all the impassioned paragraphs to create a guide to quite a different place.

“Notes From the Pig-Barn Path”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What has to be true of a place for you to consider it to be “wild”?
2. What do you think the author means by “the domestication of the spirit” (p. 140)?
3. Is there order in the wild? Chaos in cultivation?
4. Choose your favorite metaphor in this essay. What makes it work for you?

Writing Activity

Make a list of all the things you want to do or be, but don't or aren't (your untamed self). Make a corresponding list of all the “fences” that hold you back. Write a short story about breaking through one of those fences.

Group Activity

Pick a place that everyone in your group can get to. Pick a period of time (it can be a day, a part of a day, a week – whatever). Either alone or together, have each person go to that place regularly over the chosen period and take extensive notes. Any format will do. Then have everyone come together and share their observations. Discuss the differences in what people observed, being particularly attentive to what those differences say about personal value systems.

“The Man With a Stump Where His Head Should Be”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. How many “costumes” do you wear on a regular basis in your life?
2. Have you ever feared that you would wear the wrong “costume” in a given situation – thus exposing yourself?
3. What part of you is costume/role and which part of you is otherwise? Which is the “real” you, or is it all you?
4. The author is describing what has come to be known as the “imposter’s syndrome.” Look this up. Have you reason to think there are gender differences in this sort of experience?

Writing Activity

Write a story about something completely outrageous that you have done – something that was fun at the time, maybe something you have not told anyone about. If you need to, write it in the third person, as if it were fiction (and maybe it is).

Group Activity

Write a list of ten sentences that describe the real you, each on a separate piece of paper. Take the ten pieces of paper and combine them with everyone else’s in the center of a table. Let everyone choose five sentences that describe some aspect of their “real self.” What remains on the table? What parts of your Self have others chosen? What parts have not been chosen?

“The Only Place Like This”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What is valuable about a town like the one discussed in this essay? Have you been to one? What was it like?
2. What seven nouns would you use to describe your town (pp. 150-151)?
3. The author describes beauty, solitude, and peace as commodities like frozen fish (p. 154). Is she right, or are there some things that can never be bought or sold?
4. How would you answer the school teacher’s question (p. 154)? What kind of life do you want? What do you want for your children?

Writing Activity

Write a description of the front door of the place where you grew up.

Group Activity

Work together to develop a list of the most important features of an ideal community. These can be physical features (geography, stores and structures) or things that are less tangible. How many of the things in this list are present and absent in the community (or communities) you find yourself in?

“Canoeing on the Line of a Song”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. How does familiarity change our experience of a place or a person?
2. How do you find your way home? How do you know when you are there?
3. The author seems to regret the opportunities her mother never had. Do you have the same feelings about your mother?
4. Did your mother sing to you? What sort of songs? What did it mean to you? If she didn't, what do you think accounts for her silence?

Writing Activity

List five or so things (songs? smells? places?) that remind you of your mother (or father, or other). Choose one and write the story that the thing evokes.

Group Activity

“The canoe route is the background music of my childhood,” the author writes. Let this meeting of your group be a celebration of the background music of your childhoods. Bring a song to share, to sing, to play on an MP3 player, or on a piano – and let this music fill the air. When you're done listening, create a silent space in which each person can free-write about what this music brings to mind.

“Incoming Tide”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. What are some of your most important holiday traditions? How have they changed over the years?
2. How would you describe the sound and smell of “God walking”?
3. Have you had an experience like the man on the airplane or Moore in the forest? How would you describe it? Did it change you? How?
4. Does nature lift you, the way the incoming tide lifted the author? If so, describe one such experience. Can you explain its power?

Writing Activity

Write about a time when you have felt as though you saw/touched/heard/smelled or otherwise experienced something sacred, whether you believe you were experiencing something supernatural or not.

Group Activity

First, everyone write ten words to describe an experience of the sublime, like that in the Writing Activity. Make sure these words are as descriptive of your experience as possible; they might describe a thing or a sound, a touch or an idea. Then, in round-robin fashion, each person share one word on their list. Continue around the group until all of everyone’s words have been shared. Have you just created a poem about the divine and sublime experiences of our lives? A song? A story?

“Dead Reckoning”

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. When was the last time you took a risk? What did the experience teach you?
2. What kinds of experiences bring you closer to the people who are important to you?
3. What does family mean to you? What are the challenges and rewards of close family relationships?
4. How have you navigated through your life so far? How is it different from how you expected to do so?

Writing Activity

Re-read pp. 174-175. Then write a three-paragraph essay by following these prompts in succession:

Paragraph 1. Evening. Bedtime. It’s a time for . . .

Paragraph 2. When _____ was young . . .

Paragraph 3. I thought then that I knew what could happen next . . .

Group Activity

Consider three important events in your life – what might be thought of as three of your life “ports.” Think hard about how you came to each of these ports and how you navigated to the next one. Then, on a large piece of paper draw a map of the route from event to event. Is the path from one port to the next convoluted or straight and easy to understand? What has helped you along your way and what has hindered you? Share the maps with the others.