

Braving
the
THIN
PLACES

*Celtic Wisdom to
Create a Space for Grace*



JULIANNE STANZ

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Braving the Thin Places



A Note for Book Club Facilitators

Dear Book Club Leader,

Leaders encourage readers!

I am so thankful that you are leading a book study to help participants brave the thin places in their lives. A book study can be a simple way to build friendships and to talk about what is happening in our lives. I hope that this journey for you and for each person in your book club is enriching, nourishing, and renewing. More deeply, I hope that it encourages you to brave your own thin places where God has worked and continues to work in your life.

So what is a thin place?

A “thin place” is where God’s grace is waiting to happen.

Your thin place might be an important threshold, a soul friendship, a fresh chapter in your own life story, a painful secret or fear, or a time of hardship. Whatever the circumstance, a thin place is where God and humanity meet in a mysterious way. These moments open us to places of rawness and beauty. When we enter into a thin place, something seems to break open inside us, and words are inadequate to describe what we are experiencing. In these moments, we feel a sense of breakthrough as we break free of the ordinary and experience the extraordinary amid our daily lives.

A book club is a supportive way to help people gather together and enter into thin space. Your role as a small-group leader will help draw people more deeply into the book and help them grow in their faith. This small-group process incorporates prayer, relationship building, and faith sharing and can be adapted for a variety of settings and audiences. May this space be a time of abundant growth, compassionate understanding, and creative thinking,

Beannachtai (Blessings),

JULIANNE STANZ

Author of *Braving the Thin Places:*

Celtic Wisdom to Create a Space for Grace

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Tips for Facilitating a Book Club

A book club can help you deepen existing friendships and make new friends in a relaxed environment. It can also help you grow in your understanding of the themes of a particular book and consider nuanced perspectives and new ways of thinking. While reading individually can be a deeply meaningful experience, reading a book with a group can be a powerful tool to challenge us to grow beyond what we can do on our own. As you consider whom to invite for your book club, you might want to consider a few basic tips to make it a success.

Create a Space for Grace. At the heart of this book is the message of creating a space for grace where we can grow in friendship and in faith, with God and with others. As such, people are going to be at different places on their journey of faith. People of diverse faith traditions and backgrounds and those struggling with faith or seeking faith can all be a part of this important conversation.

Personal Invitation Is Important. Consider whom you want to invite to your book club knowing that in places this book may open up deep discussions among the group. When you invite others to join your book club, share with them the reason why you think that this book would be a good fit for them.

Reading the Book. There will be avid readers in your group, and those who might not have read the book ahead of time. Encourage people to come whether they can do the reading or not. Non-readers may read later at their own pace but will still have valuable insights to share.

Handling Difficult Topics or Differences of Opinion. Everyone's opinion is valid. Differing opinions can stretch us. Avoid conversations that get heated though, which can make others feel uncomfortable. "Let's hear from someone else" can be a good phrase to keep conversations moving.

Socialization Time. Socialization is important. Allow for socializing at the beginning of your time together and then move into a discussion of the book.

Have Fun! Book clubs are a way to inspire, encourage, and support but also to socialize and have fun. Hospitality (which is one of the themes treated in the book) is important so provide a comfortable and inviting atmosphere along with abundant food and drinks.

The Role of a Facilitator:

- » Gather a group together to journey through the book.
- » Solicit different ideas on the format, location, and timeframe for discussion.
- » Establish a format that works for those you wish to invite.
- » Set up a comfortable and inviting place to meet.
- » Greet members as they arrive and ensure that everyone feels welcomed and included.
- » Encourage all members to participate actively in the group.
- » Be the contact for members to call for information or in an emergency.
- » Contact members if there is a change in plans (weather, emergency, etc.).
- » Remind people that confidentiality is an important consideration for the book club.

Book-Club Format

This book study can be adapted to fit a variety of audiences and needs. It can be held at a parish, school, a private home, or at a business. A reserved room in your local Irish pub would also make a great location! The ideal size varies depending on where you are holding your book study and the participants involved. Providing a welcoming and “cozy” environment adds to the friendly nature of a book club. Book clubs may meet weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Some book clubs meet for an hour, some for longer. Here are three possible formats:

1-hour format:

15 minutes: Social time

40 minutes: Book discussion

5 minutes: Wrap up and mention prep for next meeting

90-minute format:

20 minutes: Social time

40 minutes: Book discussion

5 minutes: Break

20 minutes: Further discussion

5 minutes: Wrap up and mention prep for next meeting

2-hour format:

25 minutes: Social time

45 minutes: Book discussion

5 minutes: Break

40 minutes: Further discussion

5 minutes: Wrap up and mention prep for next meeting

Facilitator's Note

Braving the Thin Places consists of an introduction, eleven chapters, an epilogue, and a conclusion.

It is written in four parts as follows:

Part One: Entering In

Chapter 1: Who Are You?

Chapter 2: Facing Our Fears

Chapter 3: The Darkness

Part Two: Crossing the Threshold

Chapter 4: Mirror, Mirror

Chapter 5: The Thin Times

Chapter 6: A Pause for Prayer

Part Three: Breaking Free

Chapter 7: Your Soul Friend

Chapter 8: Finding and Telling Your Soul Story

Chapter 9: From Dying to Rising

Part Four: Coming Full Circle

Chapter 10: Creating a Space for Grace, Part I

Chapter 11: Creating a Space for Grace, Part II

Epilogue: A Homecoming for Your Soul

Introduction: At the Threshold of a Thin Place

While it might be tempting to skip the introduction and dive right into the book, the introduction contains important and helpful context to set the stage for the coming chapters. It outlines what it means to be a spiritual person and how our spirituality defines how we live our faith. It also introduces the reader to an authentic concept of Celtic spirituality.

**"Each of us stands at the threshold of a thin place,
and we are its gatekeeper."**

Introduction, ix

1. Consider the opening line, "Each of us stands at the threshold of a thin place, and we are its gatekeeper."
2. What does this mean to you?
3. The introduction opens with some examples of thin places: "Have you ever held a loved one's hand as they slipped from this life and into the next? Birthed a child and felt the thin edges of God's presence inside your being? Beheld such beauty that it took your breath away? Or been moved to tears by an image or a piece of music?" What are some of your own thin places?
4. Where have you found God in your own life?
5. Why does the author consider 2020 to be a thin place? Do you agree?
6. What have been some of the biggest changes you have noticed in yourself as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
7. The author describes certain aspects of spirituality, specifically Celtic spirituality, in the introduction. How would you describe the elements of your own spirituality?
8. Based on the introduction of the book, what are you most excited about?
9. Do you have any fears as you begin this book club?

Chapter 1 Questions: Who Are You?

The first chapter sets the foundation for the premise of the book—braving the thin places in our lives where we feel most alive and connected to God and to one another. This chapter also encourages us to reflect on the core or center of our spiritual lives—our soul and how to nourish our core.

“In the breaking open of our fears, hopes, and joys, the real work of healing, finding acceptance, forgiving, and ultimately loving happens. This is the thin place where we meet God and our true selves.”

page 12

1. How would you answer the question, Who are you?
What are some of the attributes and characteristics that you would sketch out?
2. The author writes, “Your spirit is your soul spark.”
How would you describe what your soul is?
3. The author uses the analogy of the “Tilt-a-whirl” to describe how life can feel at times.
When have you experienced this? What has helped you to get off the Tilt-a-whirl?
4. Name three or four practices or ideas that you feel have pulled you away from who you were created to be.
5. Name three or four practices that have strengthened your core or your soul.
6. The author notes, “We are all broken in some way. But those of us who embrace their brokenness will be transformed.” Have you ever experienced this?
7. The author ends the chapter with these words:

*“On this pilgrim road, believe that...
Who you are is enough.
You carry the spark of divine love within you.
You are loved just as you are. You are a gift. You matter. You are precious.
You are a beloved child of God.”*

Which of these sentences resonates with you the most?
Which do you struggle with?

Chapter 2: Facing Our Fears

We all carry the wounds of guilt and shame within us; this chapter outlines some of the ways that we choose to deal with these broken places in our lives. The author uses the metaphor of the “junk drawer” to address the experiences that we don’t want to examine or wrestle with. Themes of brokenness, loss, memory, and hope are at the heart of this chapter.

*“Irish seanfhocal (old word):
An rud a ghoilleas ar an gcroí caithfidh an t-súil é a shileas.
Translation: What pains the heart must be washed away with tears.”*

page 17

1. What one memory, experience, feeling, or person would you remove from your secret, cluttered place?
2. How might you go about cleaning out your junk drawer? Who can help?
3. The author uses the image of the “potato masher” to describe a pattern, habit, behavior, or feeling that we stubbornly cling to. What is your potato masher?
4. What do you think about the concept of the golden scars?
5. What are your golden soul scars? What do they look like? How have they been repaired?
6. The author writes the following regarding the concepts of shame and guilt: “Shame and guilt, while connected, are not the same. Guilt is often an emotion that arises as a result of a behavior or activity. Shame is connected to your deepest identity and focused not just on the behavior or event but on yourself. Guilt says, ‘What happened was bad,’ whereas shame says, ‘You are bad.’” Is there a place in your life where you are holding onto shame or guilt?
7. What has shame told you about who you are?
8. What is the “lie” at the heart of your junk?

Chapter 3: The Darkness

We often are so bowled over by the pace of life that we forget to slow down and look inward to examine our relationship with God. Opening with Plato's Myth of the Cave, this chapter challenges us to look deeper at the themes of darkness and light and instead look instead to nuance and twilight. It also outlines the phenomenon of "death by despair" and encourages us to reflect on our relationship with God at a time when faith and religion are often eschewed as being old-fashioned or irrelevant rather than relevant and essential to our being.

"With the fast pace of life these days, the inner voice in the shadow of our hearts is drowned out. We trade authenticity and wholeness for pragmatic and efficient. We feel the "thinness" and growth edges before us, but the frenetic pace of our lives leaves little time for introspection and self-reflection, which are necessary for us to live a full life. Can you remember the last time you sat and reflected upon your life rather than rushing through the day?"

page 43

1. What is the great fear that has chained you to a wall?
2. Who are your shadow companions in the cave?
3. Reflect on this quote: "We are afraid of the light within ourselves but also of the darkness. We are equally afraid to shine and to stay in the shadows. We may be afraid to die but equally afraid to live." What does the author mean by this?
4. Which fear is greater—the fear of being chained in the dark or the pain from the light of truth?
5. The author notes that "Spirit can be nourished only by spirit. When we try to fuel our immaterial spirits with material things, we are left feeling unsatisfied, hungry, and dull." How does this show up in your own life?
6. What is the truth that waits for you outside the cave?
7. What would it take for you to loosen the bonds of your own entombment?

Chapter 4: Mirror, Mirror

The themes of this chapter are self-esteem, self-worth, and selflessness. The author challenges us to examine our own spiritual blindness or “echo-chambers” through the lens of the Gospel. Jesus’ radical self-giving love, which is offered to each person, is uplifted as the way in which we should approach ourselves, others, and the wider world.

“The mirror that we hold up to ourselves, especially the one that we often project on social media, is not the true reflection of who we are created to be. It is our spiritual echo chamber. In the Pinterest perfection of our self-selected imagery, many of us are crying out to be loved as we really are—not for what we do, what we look like, how much we weigh, or who we are dating, but for who we really are.”

page 58

1. Choose three words that reflect who you are. What do you want to reflect to the world?
2. Have you ever had a “shatter the mirror” experience? What happened?
How did others react?
3. Reflect on the story of Narcissus and Echo. Have you experienced this in your own life?
How have you seen this in others?
4. Have you ever been subjected to public shaming? What was the most harrowing aspect of that experience? Did new life come from this experience?
5. What does your spiritual echo chamber look like?
6. The author notes that “Self-esteem is related to our sense of self-worth and value as a human being. If you have a sense of your own innate dignity and value, you begin to understand that your self-worth does not come from other creatures but from the One who created you. The question that is longing for a voice as we look in the mirror is often this one: ‘If God knew who I really was, would he still love me anyway?’”
How would you answer this question?
7. Reflect on the Scripture quote: I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. —Psalm 139:14.
8. What strikes you about this quote?

Chapter 5: The Thin Times

The concepts of “thin places” and thin times are explored in this chapter, encouraging us to delve into experiences that have become sacred and holy ground for us. Embracing thin moments through suffering, healing, and transformation are all broken open so that we can discover, recover, and uncover hidden spaces of beauty waiting for us.

**“Pain is a threshold of growth. If we miss the pain, then we also miss the growth in the slow work of transformation that is happening, often unnoticed.
What the eye doesn’t see, as the popular saying goes,
the heart won’t grieve over.”**

page 69

1. Try to identify a “thin place” in your life where you feel God is most present to you. Describe the feeling of being in this place.
2. What are some thin moments in your life? How do you feel God’s presence reaching into these moments?
3. As you think about thin moments, which ones have shaped how you see yourself?
4. The author states, “When we go through any kind of intense pain, a transformation is waiting to take place. We wear that pain and that transformation on our hearts and our faces.” As you look at your face, what experiences are etched there?
5. What do you see when you look into your eyes?
6. Have you ever experienced a “winter in your heart”? What did this time feel like?
7. What was a challenging or deepened insight from this chapter that made you see yourself differently?

Chapter 6: A Pause for Prayer

In this chapter, the author helps us reflect more deeply on praying and finding our own prayer rhythm in life. Various prayer forms are explored, including the Lorica of St. Patrick and the wisdom it holds for us today. The value of silence is emphasized in a world filled with noise and visual distraction.

“Prayer helps us create rituals that ground and strengthen us in relationship to God. Rituals help us move between threshold moments, and their patterns help us navigate through thin moments.”

page 86

1. Recall a time in your life that was difficult or upsetting. Did you pray during this time? If so, what did your prayer look like?
2. Do you struggle with how to pray?
3. When you pray, whom do you speak to? God? Jesus? Holy Spirit?
4. “Many people practice prayer,” the author writes, “as an exercise in talking to God, but prayer is much more about awareness and listening, as indeed all of life is”. How does this statement challenge you?
5. What are some elements from this chapter that might nurture or even transform your prayer life?
6. “The true rhythm of prayer is found, not in the doing, but in the being, and it is in the being that God is very near,” the author explains. When do you feel closest to God?
7. Name two to three people whom you feel have a strong prayer life. What can you learn from them?

Chapter 7: Your Soul Friend

In this chapter, the ancient Celtic understanding of the “anam cara” or the soul friend, is recovered and situated in the context of a relationship centered on faith and growth. Stories of those who have found their soul friend and questions from those who are still searching are sprinkled throughout the chapter.

“A soul friendship is the place in which the light inside you meets the light inside the other person.”

page 101

1. Soul friends “are relationships cultivated by deep respect and empathy, sacred recognition, and connectedness in God.” What differences do you see between a friend and a soul friend?
2. Do you have a soul friend? If so, what qualities drew you to each other?
3. If you do not have a soul friend, do you believe that it’s possible that you have yet to meet this person? How might you recognize your soul friend?
4. What are the most important aspects of soul friendship?
5. What are the most misunderstood aspects?
6. The author explains that “Soul friends teach us how to love and how to live, but they also teach us how to pass from this life into the next, where our souls are immortal.” How does this make you feel?
7. Have you ever had an experience of the soul that was fleeting, yet that moment or encounter has lingered for you throughout the years? Describe that experience.

Chapter 8: Finding and Telling Your Soul Story

This chapter helps readers identify and tell their soul stories. According to the author, “Story is the ground of thin space.” Stories draw us in by igniting our imaginations in the past, present, and future. They cause us to search our memories for similar experiences and help us store those memories so that we can relate to others. The power of words to wound and to heal is explored, as is the gift of space in our stories.

“Like the ancient *seanachai*, or the bearer of “old lore” in the Celtic tradition, we are a bearer of old lore in our own story.”

page 110

1. Choose two to three thin places in your life that have defined you. These may be experiences in which you felt that your life was moving too fast or you were being pulled away from the core of who you are. Of these two or three experiences, which one was the most impactful for you? Start with this experience.
2. Did you have a breakdown moment or a series of breakdown moments? What happened? Where was God in this part of your story?
3. Where was your thin place at this time?
4. What one word or emotion describes this time of your life?
5. Identify what freedom looks like for you on the other side of this story. How are you different? How are you the same?
6. Where did you see new life in breaking free?
7. Where did you find renewed confidence in yourself?
8. Where did peace and acceptance come from during this time? What did it feel like?
9. Who or what helped you become more open to God’s presence?
10. If you were to sit with your eighteen-year-old self, what advice would you give to this person, knowing what you know now?
11. What do you believe to be the central message of your soul story?

Chapter 9: From Dying to Rising

The motif of dying to rising in new life is the central theme of this chapter told through the lens of the death of the author's mother. Themes of belonging, longing, and home are explored in addition to some Celtic beliefs and customs around life and death.

"A longing for home is more than just longing for our place of birth or where we grew up. It is a longing for a place where we belong. Home is the touchpoint of our memory."

pages 126-127

1. Is there a relationship or experience to which you want to die and rise again?
2. What does breaking free look like for you?
3. What do you think of when you hear the word "home"?
4. Where do you feel most at home? How does this sense of home help you understand who you really are?
5. The author says, "The heart tug for this place called home never goes away, and it's important to acknowledge this. Home is less a physical place and more a space in your heart and your memory." How do you feel about this?
6. How is the place where you belong (and long to be) a thin place for you?
7. What emotions were stirring as you read this chapter? What was your biggest takeaway?

Chapter 10: Creating a Space for Grace, Part I

In Part I of this two-part chapter, five essential core practices of grace are explored through the lens of the acronym G.R.A.C.E. In this chapter, growing in gratitude, releasing regrets to rest and rest, and authentic availability and acceptance are explored.

G—Grow in gratitude

R—Release regrets to rest and reset

A—Authentic availability and acceptance

C—Cultivate radical hospitality

E—Embrace simplicity

**“Rest is not simply about the absence of noise or distractions.
It is a soul state in which our body is in pause and our mind is at peace.”**

page 145

1. What are you most grateful for at this moment?
2. What is one concrete thing you can do to be rooted in gratitude?
3. In your own life, what connection do you see between kneading and needing?
4. How do you release regrets?
5. How flexible are you in your personal life? Your relationships? With others? At work?
6. In your style of relating to others, are you more like a tree with fixed roots or a reed that can bend? What about in your relationship to yourself?
7. Take the time to count five of your blessings right now.
8. The author lists several suggestions in this chapter, including:
 - » Be thankful for the present moment and the person in front of you.
 - » Start listening more to understand rather than to respond.
 - » Leave time to be free from noise and distractions each day so that God can speak to you in the silence of your heart.
 - » Practice the art of flexible intentionality: be intentional about the values by which you live, but learn to adapt and accommodate others.
9. Of the practices listed, which ones are part of your life? Which ones would you like to add?
10. What other practices would you add?

Chapter 11: Creating a Space for Grace, Part II and Epilogue: A Homecoming for Your Soul

In Part II, the last two essential core practices of grace are explored. This chapter reminds us of the importance of creating community and cultivating stillness. It also asks us to consider adopting a simpler life. The epilogue brings us full circle to the beginning of the book and to the opening premise of the first chapter, "Who Are You?"

*"God is here with you right now, in the space between the words
on this page and the stirrings of your soul. God is here."*

page 164

1. How can you practice the art of radical hospitality?
2. What are some areas of your life where you might adopt a "meitheal" mindset?
3. Which areas of your life are more cluttered than you would like?
4. How might you cultivate time for stillness each day?
5. Have you ever gone on a retreat? Would you consider going on one?
6. After reading the book, how would you answer the question "Who are you?"
Has anything changed from how you first answered this question?
Why do you think this change has happened?
7. What is the one thing that you are going to do differently as a result of this book?
8. Who are you going to share this wisdom with?