

Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair Study Guide

**Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair
by Anne Lamott**

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Summary

Anne Lamott tells the story of her own search for meaning in life in her nonfiction book *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*. Through her own stories and stories she has heard from others, Lamott helps her readers understand how bad times will change them as well as how people will resent and misunderstand their attempts to find meaning in their losses. She offers both a serious and humorous look at the way it is the stitches in life that help to hold humans together.

Lamott opens her book by describing what she hopes her story will achieve. Her intent is to help the reader find meaning in the grief, turmoil, and loss that invades everyone's life. Lamott goes on to relate some highlights from her life. She describes her diagnosis as an overly sensitive child, her attempts to live as the world wanted her to, and her decision to stop trying to be successful and start trying to find real meaning in her life.

Lamott moves on to discuss her own battle with individual loss as she tells the story of the death of her best friend Pammy. She describes her obsession with a shirt that Pammy had given her and tells how she finally came to terms with laying the shirt to rest. Lamott also takes on the subject of collective grief when she tells the story of the teens that accidentally destroyed many homes and hundreds of acres of wildlife with a camp fire. Even though the boys caused grief for their community and their parents felt they should leave town, the community bonded together and encouraged them to stay.

Ripped curtains are used as an analogy for Lamott's own process of recovering from alcohol addiction. A talented friend of Lamott's takes a pair of curtain panels damaged by Lamott's dog. She sews and patches the panels together until she makes what Lamott describes as a curtain that is both homely and beautiful. Similarly, she says it was friends with special talents who helped sew the pieces of her back together, making her a useful person. Her church has served as a darning egg to help Lamott keep her shape as she continues to patch and repair herself.

This study guide is based on the Kindle version of the book, copyrighted 2013.

Beginning

Summary

Lamott begins her book by telling the reader that there is a good deal of bad stuff going on in the world that can make one lose sight of the meaning in life. Meaning is easy when one's life is going good but when one is hit by devastation and death it can be hard to find. Lamott explains that any search for meaning in life must start where a person is, even if that is in deep depression. Even though Lamott admits she does not know where one should start when seeking meaning for life when there is tragedy, she offers some suggestions. She says people need to stick together, and that they perhaps need to start by finding meaning in small things.

While some people say that life's importance is found in family, Lamott argues this is not the case for those who do not have a large supportive family or who have abusive families. These people must look elsewhere — like in work, music and art — for meaning. Lamott also points out that as humans grow older, and as their children grow older and develop problems, life can become more difficult to decipher. Despite the difficulties in life, however, Lamott tells the reader that she believes there is worth in seeking out the meaning of life.

Lamott continues the chapter by listing a few of the methods to find the meaning of life based on the teaching of groups like Christians, AA and environmentalists. She indicates their methods stand up when life is going good but can fall apart on what she calls “bad days” (6). She describes her book as a “patchwork” of stories intended to show how others sought or found meaning in their lives (7). She then goes on to state that the book is not about Christianity but that she will use some of the terms and lessons of Christianity to help make her points. With that explanation clear, Lamott uses the crucifixion of Christ as an example. She explains that Christ really did suffer on the cross and it really does not make sense why He had to suffer. She adds that even though she knows people are given hope through the resurrection — they have hope of eternal life and that they will see their loved ones again — she still believes people should admit the horror of things that happen in the world and not just try to “put a pretty bow on scary things” by reminding those who are suffering of the hope of the resurrection (9).

Lamott believes some of the meaning in the bad things in life is found in how they change us as people. In order to do change us, however, the person must actually go through the horror of the situation. She uses the example of Mary the mother of Jesus who stood by the cross while Jesus died. She did not know her son would rise from the dead; she just grieved his pain and death. Based on the story from the Bible, Lamott reminds us that we know that Jesus rose from the dead, and that there is new life, just like the flowers that bloom year after year remind us that there is new life.



Lamott argues that the flower bulbs that bloom year after year should remind humans that no one is lost even though some people question that assumption. She uses the Newtown shooter as an example of a person that many believe is lost. Lamott argues that a God who is supposed to represent love would not have given up on the shooter because of what he did to others. She even goes so far as to point out that every human alive is connected to that shooter in some way because we are all human beings. Even though we are different in our errors and sins, we all still are at fault at some point in our lives.

Lamott writes that people live stitch by stitch even though they may look only at the whole picture. After loss, people do what they can to help even if those things are small things. Lamott says she taught Sunday school two days after the Newtown shooting. Because she knew her students generally wanted to make crafts rather than talk about what happened, she planned for them to make angels out of coffee filters. She makes a point of describing their routine of lighting an electric votive candle and praying before they began their art project.

The two students in Lamott's class were developmentally challenged teens. As they finished their angels, the boy spoke up and told the girl that when he had brain cancer he was in a coma but then he had woken up and had been "here again" (20). Lamott points out that waking up and living their lives again is what people are called upon to do after a tragedy.

Analysis

In this first chapter of Lamott's handbook she lines out what she hopes to teach her readers through her book. She tells her story from her own perspective and often adds anecdotes from her own life to help the reader better relate to her position. Throughout the course of her story Lamott sometimes belittles and makes jabs at herself. For instance she chides herself in several places for forgetting the stapler which would have made putting the coffee filter angels together easier. "It would have been fabulous if a certain special someone had remembered to bring the stapler from home" (19). The reader catches the sarcasm in Lamott's criticism of herself. At one point she also mentions her "charm and legendary patience," a description the reader also suspects might be Lamott's way of overstating personality qualities she does not believe she has or of which she believes she does not have much (17).

In this section of her book, Lamott states her intention to use stories as a way of connecting hurting people. "Like life, this book is a patchwork of moments, memories, connections and stories that I've found help steer me in the direction of answers that will hold, for now and even over time" (7). Lamott explains how these stories and memories have helped her to find meaning in her life and how she believes they can help the reader find meaning in his life. This passage tells the reader that Lamott too has suffered and has lost her grasp on life through her trials. She is not telling the reader to do anything that she has not had to do in her own life. She also tells the reader she is



sharing with them the same stories and experiences that helped her to make sense of her life in hopes that they can use her experiences to make sense of their own lives.

Lamott uses imagery of sewing throughout her book as an analogy to the way one can put one's life together. The title for her book "Stitches" is the first mention of this sewing imagery. In the quote referenced in the paragraph above Lamott calls the book a "patchwork" (7). Those familiar with quilts know that a patchwork is a quilt made out of a variety of different types, colors and sometimes sizes of fabric that are put together to make an attractive whole, though it may not appear so at first. At another point in this chapter Lamott points out that people live "stitch by stitch" (13). She elaborates by saying that sometimes this stitching is unraveling and sometimes it is crude but it helps to hold our lives together.

Along with her sewing analogy Lamott uses a good deal of literary devices as she introduces her topic. She speaks of life running past us like "giddy greyhounds" (2), an example of alliteration where Lamott uses "g's" in paired words. Notice also the personification on Page 2 as "time skates" and life tends to "hotfoot it out of town." Later in the chapter on Page 13 Lamott uses metaphors as she likens life both to a Swiss watch and a cuckoo clock with rusty gears. Lamott also enjoys describing things using an image completely different from what the reader might expect. For instance she explains that the angels she had her Sunday school class make looked "garroted" (19). Garroted means it appeared they had been killed by strangulation. Lamott also shows a bit of irreverence in her language as she refers to Capri Sun, the drink sold in convenient foil pouches, as the "living water of most Sunday schools" (19). This allusion points to the Bible, where Jesus is at one point called the living water.

Vocabulary

inevitably, vortex, interminable, counterintuitively, immediacy, repressive, solace, existential, animating, incrementally, fixate, votive, subversive, platitudes, paradox, solidarity, garroted, adamantly



The Overly Sensitive Child

Summary

In the chapter entitled “The Overly Sensitive Child,” Lamott indicates that she never felt comfortable in the world as a child. She and her brothers were given no religious teaching but were instead introduced to books which Lamott writes were her source of solace. She explains that books, like other forms of art, bring this sense of “home” because they immerse the reader in something great. She says a search for meaning will often include whatever art form the person most enjoys. For Lamott it was books. She argues that beautiful music, art, or great books are all outlets that can lead a person to meaning in his life. Lamott next shares that no one had told her how the trials of life would affect a person like her who had a gentle spirit. She had been taught that her success in life would be measured by her accomplishments. Although as a child and young person Lamott spent a good deal of her life trying to live up to other people’s expectations, she began to realize she had missed out on the meaning of life and hopes to find that meaning, an undertaking she knows others will not understand or applaud.

Lamott expands on the idea that she knows people will not encourage her desire to find meaning in life by explaining why it is not good for society as a whole for some people to decide they want to seek out the meaning of life. She explains this type of search can make one’s family feel as if they are not important and may also cause you to reveal family secrets that some want to keep private.

A book in particular that intrigued Lamott as a young person was the novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein. She explains that it backed up what she, and many like her, had thought all along: that they really did not belong on Earth. The book describes the feeling that Lamott has had all along, that there are certain people who can reach to the souls of others. These people aren’t attracted to each other by their charm and success, but instead some truth hidden deep inside them. Even though the book awakened a desire in her to seek this truth, Lamott had felt at that time that she was not able to do so because she had tests to study for and homework to do.

Lamott goes forward in her book stating that she had been diagnosed as being an overly sensitive child, she felt, because she realized the world was a scary place and there were things to be feared in it. Overly sensitive children, like Lamott, also worried about hungry children and dogs that did not get adopted at the pound. She remembers being accused of being a stick in the mud and was told she needed to get a thicker skin, often in critical tones. She never remembers anyone ever telling her anything positive about being sensitive or that her compassion was a blessing.

In Lamott’s family, neither anger nor pleasure were voiced. Her parents’ bad marriage had gotten to the point where they no longer yelled at one another; they just spoke in clipped, cold sentences. To make matters worse Lamott was taught to ignore the alcoholism in her family as well as anything else bad that was happening in the world.



When the women's movement began, when Lamott was fifteen, she thought she might survive because that movement encouraged women to tell the truth. In order to tell the truth, Lamott had to learn new skills needed to recognize the truth. She also had to admit how angry she was. She felt as if she was being disloyal to her family. She compares what she turned into as being a self-conscious Bavarian pretzel.

Lamott tells the reader that she quit her last real job when she was 21 to begin her search for her real self instead of the self she had agreed to be. During this time she learned to accept herself, to waste time, and to waste paper. She also came to the realization that despite what the world thought, what she was doing was not lost time. She did resent that there was no shortcut to finding herself. She writes that the hardest lesson that she had to learn through her journey to find herself was that she needed a good deal of help. To assist her along the way she found a few good companions, learned that she had not been born a control freak and that it would not bother anyone or short-change them if she took a turn.

Lamott includes in this chapter a story about the small house she bought where three dogs had lived. One room of the house smelled like dog pee. She describes all of the things that she did to try to cover up the scent, and then the steps she took to try to get rid of it. It was not until her handyman pulled up the subflooring that they discovered the dog urine had soaked into even the joists of the house. In order to get rid of the smell they had to replace even the joists. Even though it was radical, Lamott did the demolition and renovation because she believed she and her son were worthy of living in a house that did not smell like dog pee. In a similar way, she had to demolish herself down to the joists in order to get rid of the secrets and pain so she could rebuild.

Analysis

In order to encourage a feeling of connection with her readers Lamott spends this chapter telling the story of her decision to search for meaning in her life. It is her belief that it is through the sharing of one's story one can help others to have the courage to make changes in themselves. "All that is holding us together [is] stories and compassion" (23). This quote highlights Lamott's belief that stories are integral in the healing process, as these stories can both teach the listener that other people have survived what they are going through and that there is hope for life on the other side of their tragedy.

Lamott warns her readers that searching for the meaning of life goes against the popular definition of popularity and that they will more than likely be ridiculed for their desire to find meaning in their lives. Even though some people believe their jobs or their families give their lives meaning, Lamott points out this is meaning as the world sees it. The world's view of success is to have a job, a family, and to support oneself. To try to find meaning beyond family and jobs may offend some people.

More than anything, Lamott seems to credit her friends with helping her to find a better version of herself. When Lamott talks about what saved her during her search for truth,



the first things she lists are “gentle, loyal and hilarious companions” that she found to help her through (33). It was these people who helped to convince her that she deserved better in her life.

Notice Lamott’s continued use of analogies to help her make her points. In one of these she describes herself as being made into a self-conscious Bavarian pretzel. Even though a teacher once told her that these pretzels had been made to look like children praying in an old fashioned way with their hands on their shoulders, all Lamott ever thought about when she considered that posture was a child in a straight jacket. She uses the image to show how bent and twisted she felt by the way she had been raised. The reference to the straight jacket makes one think that Lamott also considered her childhood a type of prison.

Lamott also has a sarcastic, almost satirical, way of writing as she makes her points. For instance, as she talks about the way some families have secrets that they do not want getting out she includes the phrase that some parents “probably should have raised Yorkies instead of human children” (24). In another example, when Lamott writes about the way the people of the world react to overly sensitive children, she states these children are often told they need thicker skin. Lamott snarkily adds, “That would have been excellent, but you couldn’t go buy thicker skin at the five-and-dime” (27). She also remembers being called a stick-in-the mud because her sensitivities to life kept her from doing things like going to sad movies. “What a stick-in-the-mud. This was the technical term, delivered in a sharp, scolding voice, which further calmed and reassured the child” (27-28). The intent of Lamott’s sarcasm is to show that neither the comment, nor the tone of voice in which it is often delivered helps the sensitive child become any less sensitive. Notice also her intentional understatement of the dogs’ “tiny hygiene issues” which results in her handyman having to even replace the joists of her new house because dog urine had soaked into them (35).

Vocabulary

alienation, solace, alchemical, fixation, unabashed, erudite, prestige, copious, eradicate

Stitches

Summary

In the chapter “Stitches,” Lamott changes her focus from tragedy in general to the loss of a loved one in particular. She describes these times of grief, which the world insists we get over as quickly as possible, can sometimes seem like life hands us ugly squares that do not match or even coordinate out of which to make a quilt. She tells her readers it is healthy to be a mess for a while after a tragedy but that eventually one will have to get up and begin living again. She suggests the best way to start living is to symbolically sew around all the ugly squares life has handed out with the same color embroidery thread. This thread, she says might be keeping close to a few trusted friends and developing daily routines and rituals. This thread, she explains, can help to unify even the most mismatched fabrics and help a suffering person feel some relief.

Next Lamott poses a question asking what one should do if he never gets over the biggest losses of his life. The benefits of never being able to get over a great loss, Lamott says, is that that person can stay alive inside you forever; but the bad news is that you will continue to feel grief from losing that person forever.

Lamott tells the story of Pammy, a woman who had been a friend of hers since high school. Pammy was 37 when she died of breast cancer. After Pammy’s death, Lamott’s memories of her friend became focused on a white linen blouse the two had shared while Pammy was still alive. Pammy had given Lamott the blouse just two weeks before she died. Lamott even wore that blouse to Pammy’s funeral. After time passed and the sharp pain of Pammy’s death faded from Lamott’s life, she noticed how thin the blouse was getting. It finally began developing small tears that Lamott had to stitch it up to wear it. Even though Lamott believed Pammy was living in her eternal life, the shirt was the only way she felt she had to keep in touch with Pammy on Earth.

Lamott writes that years after Pammy’s death she knew she was probably neurotic for continuing to hold onto Pammy’s shirt the way she was. She also did not want to give up this physical memory of Pammy because Pammy was one of the few people who had helped Lamott to salvage herself from her childhood. She associated Pammy with hope. When Pammy died, some of Lamott’s hope for the future died as well. Lamott explains to the reader that she first tried to bury the shirt when she went on a trip to Mexico with her friend Tom. She had intended to bury the shirt on the beach but wound up taking it back home with her, unable to do as she had intended. To Lamott that shirt was a physical reminder that Pammy’s friendship had been real and true.

It was during a second trip with Tom that Lamott was finally able to bury the shirt. They visited Southeast Asia a few years after they had been to Mexico. One night in the hotel Lamott went a little crazy when she got four messages from her son saying he was in the hospital sick with a fever and severely sore throat. Lamott assumed he had meningitis and was badly worried when she could not get in touch with him. She lay on



her bed and cried just as if someone had told her that her son was dead. When she pulled Pammy's shirt out of her suitcase and began to stroke it, she began to feel calmer. She felt Pammy's physical presence in her hotel room as she held onto the shirt. After she watched TV for a while Lamott was calm enough she could sleep. She describes that sleep as salvation.

In the morning, Lamott discovered that her son only had a bad case of strep throat. She and Tom celebrated their own private church service at the hotel because Lamott couldn't find any Christian churches. They decided to go for a boat ride. As they waited for the boatman to return for them, Lamott took off Pammy's shirt and began tearing it into pieces. She dropped those pieces into the Nam Khan.

Analysis

Lamott discusses in this section that the way the world insists that a person deal with grief, especially the loss of a loved one or a devastating tragedy, is not necessarily the healthy way to deal with pain. She points out that the world labels excessive grief as being "self-indulgent" (37). "It can be healthy to hate what life has given you, and to insist on being a big mess for a while" (38). Even though Lamott tells her reader that grief is healthy and that she believes she will never completely get over, or even pretend she has gotten over, the death of her best friend, Pammy, she does tell her readers that they must at some point get on with their lives.

One aspect of never completely getting over a death or a loss is that if a person continues to grieve, it means that person stays alive inside of them. Lamott compares how life might work after a person forgets about a person who died to how a GPS might work if it had no record of certain important locations. "The insidious palace lie that we will get over crushing losses means that our emotional GPS can never find true north, as it is based on maps that no longer mention the most important places we have been to" (40).

Lamott compares the trials of life and the difficulties that people have in adjusting to them as a person trying to put together a pretty quilt out of a hodgepodge of ugly mismatched pieces of fabric. In her analogy this hodgepodge of strangely mismatched quilt square represents the tragedies that life gives us. As Lamott says "We may feel as if we've been handed ugly patches for our quilt that clash with one another" (38). The quilt represents a person's life. Following this same analogy, Lamott suggests that people should learn to "sew around the quilt squares with the same color embroidery thread" (38). In this analogy, the thread of the same color can help to unify even the strangest and most mismatched colors. This thread represents things like good friends, and daily rituals, and routines.

Another analogy that Lamott makes in this section connects the blouse that Pammy gave Lamott with her willingness to let go of Pammy's memory. She struggles for years against the world and her own belief that she is neurotic for not being able to give up the physical object that represents her friend. It is more than ten years after Pammy's death



that the pain of her loss of Pammy finally lessens to the point she is able to “bury” the shirt.

Notice the continued use of literary devices in this section of the book. There is personification in her statement that “some time might tiptoe past” (39). Lamott describes the blouse that Pammy gave her in a simile as looking “like a holy garment” (42). The memories that people have of deceased loved ones are described as being “washed away like Etch A Sketch drawings” (45). Notice Lamott uses her sarcasm on Page 45 when she records that she would react by telling those who told her Pammy did not really come to visit her “Thank you for sharing” (45). The seemingly polite answer is probably intended to be taken as sarcasm with Lamott really wanting to tell people she really does not care what they think of her belief that Pammy comes to visit her.

Vocabulary

fathom, cataclysm, vomitous, respite, permeable, insidious, surplice, metastatic, emaciated, ectoplasmic, encapsulated, perennially, antiquity, ethereal, improvised



Mount Vision

Summary

In the chapter "Mount Vision," Lamott writes that even though people can be hard to get along with and can cause pain to one another they can also work together to help one another survive losses. To illustrate her point, Lamott tells the story of a fire in 1995 that was accidentally set by four teenage boys who went camping illegally on Mount Vision. The boys had buried their fire under dirt before they left but it still broke back out and burned 12,000 acres of wilderness and destroyed 50 homes. A nearby town was saved but the loss of wildlife and wilderness was devastating.

The four teenage boys who started the fire turned themselves in for the crime. Their parents were with them when they confessed. A firefighter wrote a letter to the town paper explaining how carefully the boys had covered the fire but embers left burning under the ground had broken through. The boys did not know there was a danger of that happening. After the letter was published people began talking about the things they had done wrong when they were teens.

A picnic was held to honor the firefighters. The mayor made a speech in which he told those gathered that in ancient times those who damaged a town were sent away from it as punishment. He had heard the families of the boys who started the fire were thinking about moving away but he encouraged them not to do so. The crowd applauded when the mayor said the boys and their families were needed and wanted there. Lamott points out that even though God does not need the help of humans in doing His job, God still allows us to help.

Next, Lamott tells the story of a woman whom she believed had the ideal life. A mutual friend told Lamott about this woman, who was named Helen. Helen's husband had a disease that was causing his mind to deteriorate. Lamott compares their forty years of marriage to a blanket that is unraveling and ripping. It is at this point in life that one must relegate to trying to patch their lives together. Helen eventually had to put her husband in a nursing home. Friends worked to support her during her bad years. Meanwhile Helen was her husband's salvation, even on the days he did not recognize her. She went to see him daily. When he died, Helen was heartbroken. Lamott writes that even though Helen misses her husband she has learned to love and live her life again. When Helen learned that a friend's grown son was close to death she was able to share with that friend that she would endure the pain and that she could depend on others to help hold her together.

Lamott shares the story of Helen's friend and her son David. David had lived on the street for nearly thirty years because he was mentally ill and an alcoholic. He was welcomed home by his mother for meals when he had not been drinking. One day David had a major seizure and was hospitalized in intensive care. Lamott admits she had hoped he would die but he survived. When David improved to the point he was



moved to general care, his mother was grieved wondering how to best take care of him. As members of the community began asking her about David and showing concern she learned how to take support from others. As time went by David's mother saw his worth. She learned how loved he was by the community and what an impact he had made on others. When David's mother was faced with putting him in an Alzheimer's unit she dreaded how people would react to the news. Instead of being judgmental the people told her they cared about her and David.

Lamott sums up the lessons to be learned from the stories of these two women in her conclusion. She describes how the women learned to sew back together their lives from the rough pieces they'd been given. Lamott explains that this is why she has always loved patchwork quilts more than elegant, planned ones. Patchwork quilts, she explains, show us how homeliness and roughness can come together in a beautiful way. She also likes the way the quilts seem improvised, as if the maker had no idea what the end product would look like but worked with what life threw his way.

Analysis

In this chapter Lamott highlights the way others can help people who are trying to cope with loss or death. To make her point Lamott shares three stories. In one, a community not only pulls together to help its members when they lose possessions and wilderness areas because of an accidental fire. In this story Lamott also describes the way the community embraced the boys who unintentionally started the fire. Not only did they not punish them for their mistake, they also encouraged them and their families to stay in the community.

In her second story, Lamott shares the way a community's support can help a person dealing with the loss of a loved one to Alzheimer's. She details the way Helen's friends loved her and supported her through her husband's illness. After he died they let her know that the pain would not last forever. Because of her experience, Helen was able to help and encourage another friend when that friend's son became seriously ill. Along with the power that other people have to help people who are suffering, Lamott also voices her surprise that an all-powerful God allows humans to help Him do His work. "If there is a God, and most days I do think there is, He or She does not need us to bring hope and new life back into our lives, but keeps letting us help" (60-61).

Lamott focuses on quilts as she develops her sewing analogy in this section of the novel. "Forty years of love, fun and hard times, and yet the best their community and doctors could do was patch together something rough. Two pieces of cloth, forty years before, had become one, fused, and now, like a strip of old cloth, it was attenuated and unraveling" (62-63). Lamott describes Helen's relationship with her husband as a quilt they sewed together when they were married. The quilt obviously represents their marriage and relationship over the years. With his Alzheimer's, Helen's husband came to the point that he no longer knew her or remembered the life they had lived together. It is at this point the quilt begins tearing and pulling apart. Lamott describes that much of



life is just about patching. One must take what life has given to them, find places that will hold patches, and begin working.

Notice the images of comfort and protection that Lamott evokes when she speaks of quilts. She describes Helen and her husband's marriage as once being a quilt big enough to cover the entire family. As the disease progressed in Helen's husband's brain, however, "The fabric of the relationship became smaller and smaller, and the marriage was no longer a blanket for the whole family" (63-64). Notice also how Lamott uses the sewing analogy to describe the way Helen and her husband interacted even after he had to be put in a nursing home. "When both cloths were together, the threads knew each other" (63). She has returned to the earlier image of the quilt made out of two cloths when Helen and her husband were married. Even though they have been separated by circumstances "the threads," the basic, most fundamental parts of each member of the couple, still recognized one another.

Vocabulary

disparate, transgressions, digressed, amiable, attenuated, convalescent, sovereign, apprentice, novice, poignant, trajectory, consign, dementia, improvised



Remnants

Summary

In the chapter “Remnants,” Lamott begins by describing how her friends had helped her through her decision to stop drinking by telling her the truth about what to expect. They taught her that no matter how hard her life got she did not need to go back to drinking. These friends also shared with Lamott that her best shot at being happy was to dedicate her life to helping people. Lamott writes that they also taught her to pay attention to life around her but not so much as to what was going on in her mind.

Lamott goes on to describe some of her friends and her belief that some of them have been assigned to her because of their special talents. Bonnie, for instance, answers Lamott’s tough spiritual and parenting questions. Another friend, Neshma, sews.

As Lamott continues to tell her story she writes about four curtain panels she had bought for the windows in the front of her house. The top halves of the curtains had heavily appliquéd ovals while the bottom halves were just plain cotton. Her dog, Bodhi, ruined the bottom of one curtain with his claws within one month. Lamott tried to buy a replacement but none were available. Nearly a year later Bodhi ruined another panel. When Neshma learned about what happened to the curtains she took home the still intact top parts to see if they could be worked into one curtain. Lamott compares Neshma’s desire to make something beautiful out of the fragments of the curtains to the desires of the teachers Lamott had who sensed there was something powerful in Lamott and wanted to help piece her back together.

When Neshma brought back what she had created out of Lamott’s curtain panels she told Lamott the story of their creation. Lamott describes the creation as being homely but extraordinary at the same time. Neshma had to pin, measure and patch and still the curtain had odd lumps where the appliquéd parts met and at other points where too many seams lined up. Lamott compares the curtain to the way that her own life was patched back together by her friends who helped her give up alcoholism. She describes how Neshma had lined up, pinned and sewn, sometimes to have to pull out her work and start over again. Lamott shares that the great secret of life is that we mostly do things “over and over” (81). She believes it is this ritual and repetition of life that has saved her. The repetitive stitches hold people, like cloth, together. Lamott summarizes that without these stitches some fabrics, like her curtains, would just be rags.

Analysis

Lamott uses the analogy of sewing to compare a damaged human life to damaged curtains. She describes how the curtains, just like one’s life, can be sewn back together to create something unusual but beautiful in its strangeness. She uses the story of Neshma to show how God lines us up with friends who have the talents we need to help



us. Just as Neshma was able to help Lamott with her curtains, so were the people whom God put into Lamott's life when she decided she wanted to get sober able to help her meet that goal.

Lamott compares her own damaged life to the curtains damaged by her dog. Just like her curtains were shredded by Bodhi, her life was shredded by the alcoholism in her family and the rough way in which she was raised despite her sensitive nature. In the case of the curtains and the case of Lamott's life, both of these things could have been considered worthless and thrown away. Lamott is grateful there were people who sensed there was something worthwhile inside her that was worth saving.

A variety of literary techniques are used to make this chapter of Lamott's book both interesting and humorous. Lamott describes the people who helped her become sober as having "not been housebroken for long or practicing good dental hygiene" (73). In other words, they were just as big a mess as Lamott felt she was. In this chapter when Lamott tells the story of her curtains she makes a point for her reader to notice she writes about the curtains in the past tense. This is her way of foreshadowing the curtains are no longer as they once were.

Lamott uses similes to add description and humor as well. She tells the reader her curtains were beautiful but also "as utilitarian as underpants" (77). When the dog finished with the curtains, they looked "like a grass skirt" (77). She describes her dog as looking "like one of the hippos in tutus in Fantasia" when he was stuck in the hole he'd made in the curtain (78). In a metaphor, Lamott tells the reader that without her rituals she "would be a balloon with a slow leak" (82).

Finally, Lamott uses hyperbole, or exaggeration, to describe the circumstances that caused her dog to ruin her curtains. She describes the dog as trying to save the family from "the invading postman and the dreaded Oregon juncos" (77). When the dog ruined a second curtain Lamott explains that the damage was done because "an assassin, or possibly a junco, breached the front gate" (78).

Vocabulary

erratic, repellant, exquisite, indefatigable, utilitarian, pristine, mulling, primordial

Forward

Summary

In her final chapter “Forward,” Lamott points out to the reader that meaning is found sometimes in the search, and that just being alive is phenomenal. She has learned that order and discipline are important for meaning. Discipline is specifically important because it leads to freedom, which she argues has meaning in itself. Even though the world pushes us to be successful Lamott tells her reader that even success disappears soon after we die. She says the question lies in love. Though some may wonder how there might be enough love to get us through the next disaster, there always is enough.

Lamott continues her description of ways to find meaning in life by telling the reader that there is “meaning in attention, focus and concentration” (87). She describes how she has learned to concentrate on and enjoy the beauty of nature. Lamott next lines out her plans for her Sunday school class in which her students will make paper towel tube chrysalises. She can anticipate how her students will react to the art project as well as the scripture and snacks she provides. She hopes to get them excited about the change from caterpillars to butterflies.

Next, Lamott shares that her friend Barbara died of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease). Barbara had worked as a lawyer but after surviving breast cancer, she had changed her focus to teaching about that type of cancer. She even fought against the companies that profited off women who got breast cancer. While many say that death gives life meaning, Lamott argues it does not. She believes it is love that gives life meaning. Lamott argues that it is when a person agrees to be connected to something larger than themselves that he will begin to find meaning in his life.

Lamott next tells the reader that there is much meaning in stories. She believes that people who introduce children to reading and stories will get the best seats in heaven. One of the challenges of teaching, like finding the meaning in life, is knowing where to begin. At this point she says one must find a need and start sewing.

In her conclusion Lamott describes the act of darning socks. Darning was used to repair holes in socks by making parallel stitches to close the hole. Darning eggs were important in this undertaking because it gave the sewer a shape to work against while sewing. She explains her church is her darning egg. She feels a unity with the people in her church, especially in the choir. Even though the singers sometimes miss notes, the singing continues.

Analysis

There are a variety of ways to find meaning in life even though some of these roads to meaning may seem strange routes. First Lamott says that the act of searching for



meaning in itself can give one's life meaning. This seems paradoxical but Lamott insists there is meaning in the search. She also argues that discipline and order can help one find meaning in life. It is almost as if just by doing things in the same order it gives the mind the ability to feel calm and not disorganized. Lamott also shares with her reader that there is meaning in focus or in paying attention. One can also find meaning in life by helping others.

Darning is the example that Lamott uses in her sewing imagery in this section. She explains that just in the way that people use darning eggs as a form to repair worn socks, so do people need a "darning egg" to help them shape the repair of their lives. Lamott says that her church is the darning egg that helps to shape her life. Even though the people in her congregation are not perfect, there is a sense of unity that helps to heal her.

Even in her final chapter, Lamott continues to use exaggeration to illustrate her points. When she writes about how she has learned to pay attention, she indicates she learned to "pay attention to most plain old butterflies, not just the ones in tiaras or argyle socks" (87). Of course there really are no butterflies that have tiaras or argyle socks, but Lamott uses this description to indicate that she not just paying attention to the really unusual butterflies. She also uses a simile when she describes both birds and butterflies as being "like one perfect teaspoon of creation" (87).

Vocabulary

phenomenal, carcinogens, eulogized, fixated, exposition, embellish

Important People

Anne Lamott

Anne Lamott is the author and first-person narrator of the memoir and spiritual guide, *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*. She is an American novelist, memoirist, progressive political activist, public speaker, and teacher of writing.

In *Stitches*, as in the majority of Lamott's nonfiction works, she relates personal anecdotes and stories as a way of illustrating her perspectives on hope, healing, and the search for the meaning of life. Lamott was born in San Francisco to Kenneth Lamott, also a writer, and Nikki Lamott, in 1954. She describes her childhood as a struggle and her family as dysfunctional and alcoholic.

Common themes in Lamott's works, both fiction and nonfiction, include alcoholism, motherhood, spirituality, Christianity, faith, the importance of community, and storytelling as a means of healing and progress. These themes are likewise explored in depth in *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*.

Pammy

Pammy is Lamott's friend who died of breast cancer at the age of 37. Before she died Pammy gave Lamott a white linen blouse. The blouse is a physical symbol of Pammy to Lamott for years after she lost her friend. It was more than ten years after Pammy's death that Lamott could bring herself to finally destroy the blouse. She tore it up and dropped it into the Nam Khan in Southeast Asia.

Pammy and Lamott had been best friends since high school. Lamott tells the reader that Pammy helped her raise her son and also that she helped Lamott out of her crazy life when Lamott decided to get out of that lifestyle. Lamott admits to her reader that she believes she will never recover fully from the loss of Pammy.

Helen

Helen is a woman that Lamott knew through a mutual friend. From what Lamott knew of Helen she thought that Helen had an ideal life. Later she learned Helen's husband had a disease that was causing his mind to deteriorate. Lamott compares the relationship between Helen and her husband to a blanket that had once covered their entire family. As the mind of Helen's husband deteriorated more and more Lamott describes that blanket as growing smaller and smaller. The worse he got, the more fabric of their relationship symbolically unraveled.



David

David is the grown son of one of Lamott's friends. Because he is mentally ill and an alcoholic he preferred to live in the streets. However, David had a seizure that caused brain damage and made him no longer able to live on his own. After he was hospitalized, his mother was surprised how many people cared about David and were touched by his life even though he was not perfect.

Tom Weston

Tom Weston is a friend who took Lamott to Mexico and later to Southeast Asia. Tom is a Jesuit and had been sober for thirty-four years, twelve years longer than Lamott had been at that time. Tom was with Lamott when she torn up and symbolically buried Pammy's blouse in the Nam Khan.

Neshama

Neshama is Lamott's friend who is blessed with the talent for sewing. When Lamott's dog tears up a pair of curtains she had bought to hang in her house, she gave them to Neshama to try to make something out of what was left of the curtains.

Bonnie

Bonnie is the friend that Lamott calls her spiritual mentor. She credits Bonnie with loving her and helping to heal her mind.

Bodhi

Bodhi is Lamott's pet dog who tore up her curtains trying to protect the family from intruders, like the postman and birds.

Barbara

Barbara is Lamott's friend who died from ALS. Lamott believes Barbara showed evidence of more meaning in the last two years of her life than many people have in their entire lives.



Objects/Places

World of Books

During her childhood, Lamott and her brothers were introduced to the world of books. Lamott tells her readers that the world that books provided to her was more like home to her than any place else she had been.

Home

Home is the place that Lamott believes that she should feel as if she belongs. She indicates that when she was a child she did not think that the world was her home. She did, however, find a home in books.

Bavarian Pretzels

Lamott believes these pretzels represent torture. Even though a Sunday school teacher told Lamott that pretzels represented a child praying, Lamott always saw them as a child wearing a straitjacket.

Thread of the Same Color

Lamott explains that thread of the same color, just like friends, can help pull together the different aspects of our lives, even if the “patches” the thread is holding together do not seem to match. This thread can also represent daily rituals that help a person pull his life together in a way that it is harmonious.

A White Linen Top

This white linen top, given to Lamott by her friend Pammy, represents Pammy’s physical presence to Lamott. Lamott hangs onto the blouse for nearly ten years after Pammy’s death before she finally “buries” Pammy’s blouse by tearing it up and dropping it into the Nam Khan.

Laos

Laos is one of the places to which Lamott’s friend Tom took her to visit. Lamott had a sort of breakdown during this trip when her son called to tell her that he was sick.



Nam Khan

Lamott dropped the pieces of Pammy's blouse into this river in Laos, symbolically "burying" this memory of her friend.

Mount Vision

Mount Vision is the place where four teen boys illegally camped and then accidentally set fire to the woods, destroying nearly 50 homes and thousands of acres of wilderness.

Darning Egg

A darning egg is symbolic of a structure that Lamott suggests a person have to form their life against, just like a darning egg is used in repairing socks.

Themes

Imagery involving Sewing/Cloth

Lamott uses the motif of sewing throughout her book to describe how one can recover from loss and grief. One of the first examples she includes describes how a sewer can use the same color thread to unify the mismatched patches that life hands them. In another example, Lamott compares the relationship between a husband and wife as a tearing quilt. In a final significant example, Lamott uses an analogy between a pair of ruined curtains and her own life to describe how a talented, loving friend can help bring healing.

In one example in which Lamott uses her sewing analogy she compares recovering from grief to trying to sew together squares of jarring colors and patterns to make a quilt. The strangely colored squares and patterns represent the tragic, painful situations that life hands out. The idea of sewing these patches together to form a quilt represents the act of trying to make sense of tragedy. Lamott explains to her reader that thread of the same color can be used to sew around the edges of each square and then sew the squares together in a way that they seem united. Good friends, as well as daily routines and rituals, are examples of the things this thread of the same color can represent.

When Lamott speaks of Helen and her husband she compares their forty-year marriage to a quilt that had gotten big enough that it provided comfort and security for their entire family. When Helen's husband began to suffer deterioration of his brain the fabric of that quilt slowly began to rip and unravel, leaving the family feeling uncomfortable and unprotected. It is in these instances when life is tearing apart what a family has made for itself, the family members must work with what is left of the relationship to patch things back together.

Another example that Lamott uses in her novel is a personal example. She uses an analogy to compare a set of curtains that were shredded by her dog to her own life that was shredded by her traumatic childhood. Lamott argues that just in the same way a talented, dedicated friend helped her to create a new whole out of the two damaged curtain panels, it was through the help of friends that Lamott created a new life for herself out of the tatters of her childhood and her own addiction to alcohol. Even though the curtains, and her life, were lumpy and unattractive in places, she believes each of these things has a special strange beauty because of the work put into them to make them useful again.

The Importance of Friends

Supportive and loving friends are crucial to one's healing process Lamott tells the reader. In one example Lamott compares her friends to thread that can hold together and unify even the most mismatched quilt squares. In another example, Lamott relates



that it was only through the help of her friends that she was able to overcome her addiction to alcohol. Through her other stories of friends who have survived great losses, Lamott credits their friends with being the ones that helped them through.

In one example from the book Lamott compares good friends to a unifying color of thread that can be used to sew together the mismatched patches that life sometimes hands out. These friends can help a person make sense of what has happened to them and help to calm some of the disquiet.

In Lamott's struggle to overcome her own damaging childhood and alcohol addiction, Lamott credits her friends with helping her succeed. Lamott describes true friends as ones who "help you see who you truly are" (34). Even after they see the true you Lamott writes that they love you anyway, a reality that Lamott believes is a miracle. On the other hand, Lamott describes some of the people who helped her the most as being troubled in their own ways. She describes them as having "not been housebroken for long or practicing good dental hygiene" (73). This reference indicates that although these people might not have had it all together either, they were still able to help Lamott through her tough times.

In the stories that Lamott tells of other people's losses and traumas, each example involves friends who stepped forward to help shelter the person through his grief. When Helen's husband was at the worst points in his dementia, for instance, "people showed up, neighbors, relatives, college friends from fifty years before, who came from all over the country" (64). This inpouring of support helped Helen survive the worst of her grief and not be knocked over by it. In the same way, when Helen's friend suffered a tragedy with her son, Helen was able to support that friend and convince her that her friends could help her and keep her from becoming overwhelmed by her feelings.

Surviving the Pain of Death

In *Stitches*, Lamott argues that the worldview that one should grieve only a prescribed amount of time is not healthy. Insisting that a person overcome or hide his grief after a certain point of time can make him feel abnormal if he is not able to stop grieving that quickly. Additionally, Lamott tells the reader it is only by grieving for the deceased person a little for the rest of one's life that he is able to keep that person's memory in his heart.

In discussing how to survive the pain of death Lamott argues that even though those who have a tender heart feel the pain of death more sharply than those who do not, they are also able to reap the benefits of being able to hold on to that person's memory more sharply. Lamott tells her reader she believes it is when a person stops grieving for someone who has died that that person ceases to exist. Lamott never wants to forget her friend Pammy because Pammy gave her hope. She believes this hope would die if she were to forget Pammy.



Lamott also shows the reader through her story about Pammy how the world's idea that there should be a prescribed period of time for mourning can make a person feel abnormal. Lamott shares that she hung onto a blouse that Pammy had given her for almost a full decade before the pain of losing her friend dulled to the point that Lamott felt comfortable about "burying" the shirt. At times during this period, Lamott believed she was neurotic or that something was wrong with her because she could not bear to part with this physical item that had belonged to her friend.

The Power of Stories

In her handbook, Lamott seeks to teach the reader how sharing stories of hurt and healing can help others to heal. A good deal of Lamott's book is composed of stories about people or communities that have survived devastating tragedies. She shares these stories because she believes it is through stories that one learns how others have healed and also realizes that healing is possible.

Lamott quotes Barry Lopez as he says: "All that is holding us together [is] stories and compassion" (23). She believes Lopez's assertion as she shares stories intended to help people learn how to find meaning in tragedy and survive the healing process. She also believes it is in these stories that people can find advice that can carry them through even the roughest times in their lives.

Stories of grief and loss can help others realize that others have survived the same things through which they are going. For instance, after Helen survived the dementia and death of her husband with the support of her friends, she went on to help one of her friends get through her son's sickness. The fact that Helen had faced similar circumstances and was able to share her story with the woman helped her to understand that she too could face and survive her son's sickness.

Stories can also help remind people that they once made mistakes as well. For instance, when the four teenage boys accidentally set fire to wilderness areas and burned nearly 50 homes, the people in the area that had been so badly damaged remembered mistakes they had made as teenagers. A firefighter additionally shared the story of the boys' attempt to properly extinguish their campfire by covering it with dirt. This story helped the people understand that the boys really did not intend to do any harm.

The Search for Meaning

Lamott teaches that there are a variety of things that people can do to help find meaning in their lives, even after their lives have been torn apart by tragedy. Lamott warns her readers that the world will not applaud them in their search for meaning but that their journey will be a worthwhile one. She says that the world instead considers the meaning of life to be in one's family and job.



Lamott focuses her book on discovering the meaning of life particularly after one has suffered a tragedy. She argues that it is during these times that the trite meanings of life given by some Christian groups and other fall apart. She reasons that people should be allowed to grasp the reality of what has happened to themselves, their community or the world without having it belittled.

After one has faced the reality of what has happened, Lamott says there are a variety of different things he can do to help himself get back in touch with the reality of life. These include letting sincere friends help along the road to recovery. In all of the stories that Lamott includes about grief and loss, it is through the help of friends that the person who suffered the loss is able to get back on his feet and continue living.

Daily routines and rituals are another aspect of life that Lamott believes can help give one's life meaning. She believes the discipline needed to instill a routine in one's day can give a person the peace of mind and freedom to begin enjoying their routine and their life. Lamott also tells the reader that meaning can be found in beauty. It can also be found in paying attention to the details of life and ignoring what is going on in one's mind. Helping others is another step one can take to help find the meaning of life.

Styles

Structure

This short handbook is divided into six chapters. The longest chapter is twenty pages while the shortest is nine pages. No timeline is established in the book, though the narrative is related in the present tense. Each chapter focuses on a certain topic. For instance, in the first chapter “Beginning,” Lamott describes what she hopes to teach those who read her book. In the second chapter, “The Overly Sensitive Child,” Lamott describes the effect that her sensitive nature and alcoholic parents had on her as a child. In the course of her book, Lamott shares a variety of stories of people who have suffered with losses yet have discovered ways to deal with their losses.

Perspective

This memoir and guidebook is related in the first person perspective from the point of view of the author, Anne Lamott. This perspective is appropriate and works well because through the course of her book, Lamott tells her story as she struggled through her own life and hardships. The reader feels a companionship with Lamott as they learn from her real-life examples.

Lamott’s perspective is very subjective as she tells her own story and tells it with great emotion. The subjective perspective is one that is open to interpretation because it is based on emotions and personal feelings rather than facts. Grief and the meaning of life, the subjects with which Lamott deals, are subjects that do not fit the traditional boundaries of facts so it is understood that the subjective perspective is the only one that would work for this sort of work.

Tone

Lamott’s tone is serious but can also be sarcastic, self-deprecating, and satirical in places. It is as if she recognizes how hard life can be but also has learned sometimes the best one can do is make fun of it and of oneself.



Quotes

One rarely knows where to begin the search for meaning, though by necessity, we can only start where we are.”

-- Narrator (Beginning)

Importance: In the opening of Lamott's book she makes the statement that while many wonder where they should start to search for meaning in their lives, the obvious place from which they must start is the place where they are.

Where is meaning in the meteoric passage of time, the speed in which our lives are spent? Where is meaning in the pits? In the suffering? I think these questions are worth asking.”

-- Narrator (Beginning)

Importance: As Lamott develops the intent of her book she zeros in from her vague description of how to find meaning in one's life to finding meaning in loss and suffering.

Whether I'm wrong or not, though, most of us have figured out that we have to do what's in front of us and keep doing it.”

-- Narrator (Beginning)

Importance: Lamott describes the way in which people tend to do what they see needs to be done or what is given to them to do when bad things do happen. Lamott believes this act of doing one's work is one way of coping with tragedy.

But there can be meaning without having things making sense.”

-- Narrator (Beginning)

Importance: This statement seems paradoxical but she explains to her readers that even though we may not understand what is happening to us or why it is happening, we can still search for meaning. She makes this statement as she tries to help mentally challenged children in her Sunday School class understand what they can do the help people who are hurt or suffering.

We found in books the divine plop, the joy of settling down deeply into something, worlds and realities greater than our own troubled minds. All of life, for me, begins with books and art.”

-- Narrator (The Overly Sensitive Child)

Importance: Lamott shares with her reader that because her parents did not encourage religion or belief in God that she and her brothers experienced through reading the same outlet in which they could find comfort and relief that others got through religion.

Most of us have done fairly well in our lives. We learned how to run on that one wheel, but now we want a refund.”



-- Narrator (The Overly Sensitive Child)

Importance: Lamott refers here to “that one wheel” being the wheel of success where parents and life in general teach a person what he must do in order to achieve success. Once people become successful at the cost of losing their own sense of self they realize that success by the world’s standards is not all that it is cracked up to be.

If you were raised in the 1950s or 1960s, and grasped how scary the world could be, in Birmingham, Vietnam and the house on the corner where the daddy drank, you were diagnosed as being the overly sensitive child.”

-- Narrator (The Overly Sensitive Child)

Importance: Lamott tells her reader that she was labeled in her childhood as being overly sensitive. She indicates this label was given to any child who recognized the danger that existed in the world as a whole or at home.

It was the belief I’d been given by people over the years that I was worthy of a house that was beautiful, and that didn’t smell; that my son and I deserved a fresh start, a fresh house that was not a cover-up, built on top of secrets and dog pee.”

-- Narrator (The Overly Sensitive Child)

Importance: Lamott uses the analogy of the drastic measures she took to make sure her house did not smell like dog pee to help her readers understand what must sometimes be done to one’s life to remove the unwanted “smell” from it. Sometimes it takes a complete demolition and overhaul to get to the root of one’s problems. Just as Lamott had people who helped her understand she deserved to live in a house that did not smell, Lamott hopes to teach her readers that they deserve a life that is not full of secrets and other “stink.”

Or you can start to sew around the quilt squares with the same color embroidery thread. This unifies your incompatible patterns, textures and colors.”

-- Narrator (The Overly Sensitive Child)

Importance: In this quote Lamott describes the different, sometimes tragic, experiences that life throws our way to conflicting, jarring patterns and colors of quilt squares. She argues the conflicting colors and patterns of the quilt squares can often be pulled together by sewing them together using thread of the same color. In the same way our trusted friends or daily rituals can help to pull our disconnected lives together and help them form a sense of cohesion.

I refuse to pretend that I ever got over her death.”

-- Narrator (The Overly Sensitive Child)

Importance: Although the world expects people to go through a short period of mourning and then return to life as usual after a death, Lamott takes a stand against the belief that one should have to bury one’s pain by telling her reader not only has she not



recovered fully from Pammy's death, she refuses to even pretend that she has recovered from her death.

When you can step back at moments like these and see what is happening, when you watch people you love under fire or evaporating, you realize that the secret of life is patch patch patch. Thread your needle, make a knot, find one place on the other piece of torn cloth where you can make one stitch that will hold. And do it again. And again. And again."

-- Narrator (Mount Vision)

Importance: In telling the story of Helen and her husband's mental degeneration Lamott continues her analogy of sewing. She explains that when life gets bad, just like when a piece of fabric gets a tear, one must continuously work to patch his life just like one must patch a piece of fabric to make it remain useful.

Sewing is a finger-and-heart equivalent of putting one foot in front of the other."

-- Narrator (Remnants)

Importance: Lamott continues her analogy as she includes a metaphor in which sewing is an act of going on with life just like forcing oneself to go on by putting one foot in front of the other is a way of going on with life.

Without stitches, you just have rags."

-- Narrator (Remnants)

Importance: Lamott explains without stitches, the things in life that hold one together like family, friends and daily routines, our lives, like a piece of damaged fabric, would just be rags.

It's much better to wake up now in deep regret, desperate not to waste more of your life obsessing and striving for meaningless crap. Because you will have finally awakened."

-- Narrator (Forward)

Importance: Even though waking up from ignoring one's life will bring regret at any age Lamott argues it is better to wake up, deal with the regret and learn to live one's life fully than it is to wait until one has come to the end of his life to do so.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss how Lamott uses the analogy of sewing throughout the book.

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How does Lamott use different literary techniques throughout her writing to keep her book from being bland? How would you describe her style of writing?

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Why is it important that Lamott share the story of her own childhood and how she was helped to recover from the scars of that childhood?

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Why do you think that Lamott chooses to “bury” Pammy’s shirt as she does? How does she know the time is right to part with that reminder of her friend?

Why do you think that Lamott chooses to “bury” Pammy’s shirt as she does? How does she know the time is right to part with that reminder of her friend?

What role do friends play in helping a person recover from a tragedy?

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How does one find meaning in life? How is this different from becoming successful by the world's terms?

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Why is it important to share stories of how others have helped us through tragedies? How does Lamott use stories to help her develop her points in her handbook?

Why is it important to share stories of how others have helped us through tragedies? How does Lamott use stories to help her develop her points in her handbook?

Discuss the stories that Lamott includes in her book. What purpose specifically do these stories serve?

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Consider how you might go about finding meaning in your life. Which of Lamott's suggestions might you use? Why?

Consider how you might go about finding meaning in your life. Which of Lamott's suggestions might you use? Why?

Why do you think it surprises Lamott that God uses humans to help in His work? Why do you think He uses humans when He could do what He needs by Himself?

Why do you think it surprises Lamott that God uses humans to help in His work? Why do you think He uses humans when He could do what He needs by Himself?