

# **The Sacred Journey; a Memoir of Early Days Study Guide**

**The Sacred Journey; a Memoir of Early Days by  
Frederick Buechner**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <a href="#">The Sacred Journey; a Memoir of Early Days Study Guide.....</a> | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>   | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>   | <a href="#">3</a>  |
| <a href="#">Introduction.....</a>   | <a href="#">4</a>  |
| <a href="#">Once Below a Time, Section 1, pp. 9-18.....</a>                 | <a href="#">5</a>  |
| <a href="#">Once Below A Time, Section 2, pp.18-29.....</a>                 | <a href="#">6</a>  |
| <a href="#">Once Below A Time, Section 3, pp. 29-36.....</a>                | <a href="#">7</a>  |
| <a href="#">Once Upon A Time, Section 1, pp. 37-53.....</a>                 | <a href="#">8</a>  |
| <a href="#">Once Upon A Time, Section 2, pp. 53-65.....</a>                 | <a href="#">9</a>  |
| <a href="#">Once Upon A Time, Section 3, pp. 65-75.....</a>                 | <a href="#">10</a> |
| <a href="#">Beyond Time, Section 1, pp. 76-94.....</a>                      | <a href="#">11</a> |
| <a href="#">Beyond Time, Section 2, pp. 94-102.....</a>                     | <a href="#">12</a> |
| <a href="#">Beyond Time, Section 3, pp. 102-112.....</a>                    | <a href="#">13</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>   | <a href="#">14</a> |
| <a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>   | <a href="#">17</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes.....</a>   | <a href="#">19</a> |
| <a href="#">Style.....</a>  | <a href="#">21</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>   | <a href="#">23</a> |
| <a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>                                  | <a href="#">25</a> |



## Plot Summary

"The Sacred Journey; a Memoir of Early Days" examines the journey and transitions that lead to Frederick Buechner's conversion to Christianity. From early childhood, many little moments combine to give him the message that what he is always seeking Jesus, and he comes to terms with this in his early twenties.

During Freddy's childhood, his family moves around constantly, as his father searches for work during the Great Depression. When Freddy is ten years old, his father kills himself one morning. This is the moment when Freddy begins to be aware of the passage of time, and of the approach of death. Freddy is unable to grieve for his father for many years.

Freddy, his mother, and his little brother Jamie move to Bermuda for a little while to get away from the painful situation. Freddy loves Bermuda, thinking of it as the Land of Oz from his favorite series of books. The family is forced to leave Bermuda when World War II breaks out in Europe, and there are rumors that the island will be used by the Germans. They move back to the United States, moving in with Freddy's grandparents. Freddy goes off to boarding school, where he makes friends for the first time, being a bookish, nerdy boy who hates the outdoors. Freddy realizes that he wants to be a writer, and he does his best to write good poetry.

Freddy goes to Princeton University for a while, taking off some time to train in the army for war. When he learns that his father's brother has also committed suicide, Freddy is terrified that he has inherited a death wish, which causes a panic attack during basic training. He turns out to be unfit for combat, and he gratefully returns to school, but with a new appreciation of education. Happy to not be out fighting a war, Freddy applies himself to his studies, and begins his first novel, starring his favorite character from the Oz books. After graduation, he ends up teaching at his old high school, and is surprised when a publishing house decides to publish his first novel. Trying not to let fame go to his head, Freddy tries a handful of different careers, but nothing works out. He feels that he is always searching for something elusive, and finally he realizes that what he is looking for is Jesus Christ. Freddy enrolls in seminary, feeling that God has provided him with the same magical tools as the King of Oz had at his disposal. In Oz, they are three magical pearls, but in real life, Freddy has found faith, hope, and love.



# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

At the age of fifty, Frederick Buechner examines his memories and his mementos, looking for keys to the person he has been, and for clues to the person he is becoming. He thinks that God speaks through the everyday noise of life, and he decides to write down his memories of the first half of his life to see what God is saying to him through those memories. He encourages the reader to look for glimpses of the reader's own self in the stories, and also suggests that the reader can examine his or her own life and see what God is saying.

Frederick muses on an ordinary morning, years ago, when he pauses and listens to the sounds around him. Although they are only a collection of ordinary ambient noise, it occurs to Frederick that the sounds of this specific moment will never be repeated, and it suddenly seems very sacred to him. He imagines that God speaks through the music of our lives, and he wonders what he could hear if he listened hard to this music for an entire day. He tries this experiment, and turns it into another book, and also a lecture, called "The Alphabet of Grace." He suggests that all the events in our lives are letters in God's alphabet, which can be read only if one tries very hard to figure it out for oneself. Frederick wonders what the result would be if he listened to his entire life the same way that he listened to a single day.

Frederick comments that although his children are grown up, he himself is not sure he has ever grown up. He also says that he likes to reminisce, not so much to see who he has been, but more to see who he is going to be, and see if he is on the right track. Statements like these indicate that he does not think that growth ends with adulthood, and that he thinks that people continue to develop and change throughout their lives.



# Once Below a Time, Section 1, pp. 9-18

## Once Below a Time, Section 1, pp. 9-18 Summary and Analysis

As Frederick begins to reminisce about his childhood, he decides to borrow a phrase from Dylan Thomas's poem "Fern Hill" to describe the mentality of early childhood. "Once below a time" indicates a period when the finite nature of time has not yet been discovered. Frederick calls this mental place Eden, after the Bible's Garden of Eden, an innocent paradise free from death, knowledge, and fear. Frederick notes that this is a more accurate way to see the world, saying that as children we understand that every moment has the capacity to last forever. He especially points out that even after the universe burns out, any given moment of life has already happened, and can never be undone. Frederick feels that, rather than thinking about past or future, young children are able to live in the moment, as though the "now" is all the time any of us ever has.

Frederick remembers the people and ideas which are especially significant to him as a child, and thinks about the effect that those forgotten interactions have had on who he is as a person. He recalls his nurse, Mrs. Taylor, teaching him the names for plants and animals, and fascinating him by popping out her false teeth. Freddy's favorite place to visit in childhood is the Land of Oz, from L. Frank Baum's classic series. Freddy's favorite character is a funny, emotional little king named King Rinkitink, whose silly tears and fat body nonetheless convey a powerful strength, all the stronger for coming from such an innocuous package. As Frederick reads various books over the years, his favorite characters are always those reminiscent of Rinkitink, including St. Paul in the Bible. This indicates a humility in Frederick, recognizing that the most astounding acts of grace sometimes come from where one least expects them.



## Once Below A Time, Section 2, pp.18-29

### Once Below A Time, Section 2, pp.18-29 Summary and Analysis

When Frederick is a child, his family moves around constantly because of the high unemployment during the Great Depression. The only permanent place that he thinks of as home is his grandmother's house, where the family always ends up visiting. Grandma Buechner has inherited wealth from her family's breweries, but has lived long enough to have much of what she values taken from her. She is a woman of passion, who does not hold back her emotions for the sake of politeness or gentleness. The only time Freddy observes her holding back and being gentle to someone is right after his father dies. Although Freddy's mother has fought for years with her mother-in-law, competing for the same man's love, the two women are finally united in grieving for the dead man. Freddy sees his grandmother as a rock sticking out of the ocean, strong and immovable, but with scars from years of weathering storms. Although Frederick seems to admire the honest, frank way that his grandmother approaches life, he expresses pity for her in her final moments, because she never really does believe in God and religion. Frederick feels that, without religious faith, his grandmother is doomed to the terror of facing death alone and helpless.

Frederick talks about how people who die stay with the living in the form of memories, but not just the memories of past experiences with the dead person. He feels that, just as the living person still changes, so their relationship with the dead person changes and develops, too. Even relationships long past leave their mark on a person's soul, and Frederick thinks that the living can continue to learn lessons about their own life and about the lives of others by continuing to pay attention to what the memories of the dead might be trying to tell the living. He also indicates that even the dead grow and change because of the way we can learn to understand more about life from them.



# Once Below A Time, Section 3, pp. 29-36

## Once Below A Time, Section 3, pp. 29-36 Summary and Analysis

Frederick remembers the early signs that his safe, timeless world of childhood is cracking, and will not always be such a haven. His first sign is when he realizes that the people he loves have two sides to them. There is the side that they show to him, an expression of their love for him, but there is also another, more selfish side, which is still capable of seriously hurting the people that they love. Freddy's father sometimes laughs in a terrifying way, as though something is broken in him. At times when adults deceive him, or when his father's drinking frightens him, Freddy feels that maybe the world is not put together quite perfectly. This is especially jarring to him, since he has no permanent home, but rather feels as though he is at home when he is surrounded by people who love him. Unfortunately, this means that as soon as his parents leave the house, it ceases to be home, and Freddy feels that the world will collapse if his parents leave him. Freddy worships his father, thinking that the man possesses godlike powers and all knowledge. He foreshadows the painful effect his father's death will have on him by saying that, as a child, he is right to feel that death can come and destroy everything in a moment. This indicates that his father's death is a very terrifying event for Freddy, although he seems to only have a few memories of his father, who is usually away at work.



# Once Upon A Time, Section 1, pp. 37-53

## Once Upon A Time, Section 1, pp. 37-53 Summary and Analysis

Frederick recalls the exact moment in his life when time really begins to exist for him, with a distinct sense that things do not last forever. Early one morning, Freddy and his brother Jamie are playing in their room and take no notice when their father looks in on them. A little while later, the household discovers that Freddy's father has committed suicide in the garage, having left a short farewell note on the last page of the book "Gone With The Wind." Ten-year-old Freddy quickly learns to suppress his grief, although as an adult he recognizes that the loss is still painful. The family goes to Bermuda for a change of scene, although Freddy's grandmother insists that they are running away, and that they need to face reality. Freddy loves beautiful Bermuda, and feels a sense of home there that he has never known. It is also there that he discovers the thrill of desiring a girl, although he does not even understand what it is that he desires. Unfortunately, when World War II breaks out, there are rumors that the Germans are going to use Bermuda as a strategic point, so all Americans have to leave the island. It seems to Freddy that Bermuda is the Land of Oz, and that the war has forced all of them out of their haven to face reality again.

Freddy never gets a chance to say goodbye to the girl that he has a crush on, just as he never says goodbye to his father. There is a sad significance in the hasty suicide note, since "Gone With the Wind" ends with a scene in which a husband leaves his wife, feeling that there is nothing left that he should stick around for. The hero just does not care what becomes of his wife, just as Frederick's father has bowed out, not wishing to say goodbye to his own wife or the two little boys playing on their bed. This is why Freddy is able to suppress his grief for so long, because he feels little need to bid his father goodbye, either. His father's death is treated as almost the same event as the beginning of the war.





## Once Upon A Time, Section 2, pp. 53-65

### Once Upon A Time, Section 2, pp. 53-65 Summary and Analysis

After Bermuda, Freddy's family moves in with his other grandparents, Naya and Grandpa Kuhn, in North Carolina. Freddie loves Naya, who seeks out the eccentric in those around her and loves to share her hilarious observations with him. Naya fills Freddy with stories of family and friends, but they are always anecdotes showing the surface of things, rather than the depths. Frederick notes that he and Naya both have a tendency to focus on the exciting surface because the depths are too scary, and he wonders if this is why it takes him thirty years to begin truly grieving over his father's death.

Having taken steps toward adulthood, Freddy's idea of reality changes, and he starts to see that there is pain in everyone's lives. Although he is able to acknowledge that coincidence causes many of the significant moments in life, he still feels that there are hidden gifts to be found, which indicates that there must be a giver. He sees this as a sort of crazy, holy grace: crazy because it turns up unexpectedly, growing up out of the pain of life, and holy because moments of grace seem to come from some place even more sacred than the Land of Oz. As Freddie begins to understand love more, he realizes that it is not just something given by others that he can bask in, but that it is a reaching out to others, to give them something of oneself. He says that each of us is searching for something, and we do not even know what it is, but we are still looking. To Frederick, faith is a gift: the ability to continue believing that that elusive something is out there, and can be found.

## Once Upon A Time, Section 3, pp. 65-75

### Once Upon A Time, Section 3, pp. 65-75 Summary and Analysis

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States is seized with a passionate patriotism that comes from believing that the enemy truly is Evil Incarnate. Soon Frederick's mother decides that it is time for him to go to boarding school, so he goes off to school in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. He fears that his home will no longer be there when he returns, and he notes that this fear is correct, since his mother soon remarries, and moves again. At first, Freddy hates his school, being a total nerd, but he soon makes friends for the first time in his life, and he is pleasantly surprised to find that there are kindred spirits in the world. Eventually, he gets close enough to his friends that he is able to admit that his father died from suicide, and not from heart trouble, as Freddy has previously claimed.

Mr. Martin, Freddy's English teacher, gives him the unheard-of grade of one hundred on one of his papers, and from then on, Freddy realizes that he wants to be a writer. Mr. Martin shows Freddy the magic of not just saying things with words, but using words in such a way as to change the reader's soul. Tired of only focusing on the surface of things, Freddy tries to find more depth by writing poetry. Although he thinks of his poems as beautiful masterpieces, hoping he can fool the reader into thinking that he is more eloquent than he really is, all of his early poems are just terrible. The thing that seems the most curious about these early poems is how much they talk about Jesus. Although Freddy has been confirmed in the church, he does not really care much about religion, and his spiritual regard for Jesus does not extend past his adoration of Leonardo's portrait of Jesus in "The Last Supper." Frederick hints that these early influences of Jesus in his life are just the seeds of something very important and significant.



# Beyond Time, Section 1, pp. 76-94

## Beyond Time, Section 1, pp. 76-94 Summary and Analysis

Frederick goes to Princeton University. The War has cast a frantic, manic feeling over college campuses, and everyone parties intensely, not knowing what tomorrow might bring. In the laughter of the young people is a kind of desperation, fearing that they might be dead soon. Freddy tries taking German, thinking he might get a job as a spy, but he is terrible at speaking it, despite his efforts to cheat. When he realizes how much debt he is in, Freddy gets a job waiting tables, but he hates his job, feeling that it is demeaning, and he is not able to make enough money to pay off his debt. He decides to go visit his successful uncle in New York and ask him for money. The uncle laughs when he finds out why his nephew is so nervous, and happily gives Freddy the money, then sends him on his way. A few weeks later, Freddy is devastated when he hears that the uncle has shot himself, leaving behind a son Freddy's age. Frederick becomes worried that there is some sort of family tendency to give up on life, and worries that he himself will one day commit suicide.

Freddy enlists in the army and goes to basic training in Alabama. Being a bookworm, he has spent most of his childhood avoiding the outdoors and liking rain because it is so nice not to have to go out in it. In the army, he is forced to live out of doors and experience the nastiest weather, with very little to comfort him. One day, as he is eating a cold, muddy turnip, he realizes how much he loves and appreciates this moment and the experience of the turnip, the mud, the rain, and everything. He decides that he loves the world and all its gritty little details too much to end it all, and stops worrying about suicide.

The final test of basic training is a simulated assault on a German village. During the assault, a commander orders Freddy to climb up on a roof, and for some reason, Freddy finds that he is unable to obey. Instead, he starts gasping and panting, and blurts out to them that his father killed himself. Although he is ashamed of what he has said, it seems to be the right thing, and he is discharged from the army as being unfit for combat. Even though the panic attack is not intentional, Freddy feels that he saved his own life by his reaction, because many of the young men who went off to fight in World War II did not come back.

When Frederick goes back to college after the army, he has a new perspective, and he works much harder at his studies, feeling that they are a gift, after the chance to march in the rain and storm villages. He begins writing a novel, with the main character inspired by King Rinkitink from the Oz books. Freddy falls in love with beautiful words and is fascinated by the passionate prose of various famous preachers. In reading their words about God, Freddy can not help but begin to believe in something great, something his own soul has been seeking. He foreshadows that Christianity will one day transform the way he sees the world.

## Beyond Time, Section 2, pp. 94-102

### Beyond Time, Section 2, pp. 94-102 Summary and Analysis

Frederick uses the phrase "beyond time" to refer to events in life that seem to indicate the influence of an author orchestrating a plot. These events are concealed as ordinary moments, but to Freddy they seem to whisper important truths. He notes that often these beyond-time moments do not even seem very important or significant, but if one is listening, one can learn the plot of one's own life through such messages. As he thinks about the events following his time in college, it is not the turning points that seem so important to him, but tiny encounters which move his soul. He hints that these moments come from God or a higher power, and that they provide glimpses of immortality, as well as some understanding of why we are here on earth, living these lives.

Having graduated from Princeton, Freddy finishes writing his first novel. He chooses the title "A Long Day's Dying," which is a line taken from John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. The line, spoken by Adam to Eve when they have just been forced out of the Garden of Eden, indicates that death is not a sudden pain, but a drawn-out, constant ache of knowing that death is on the way. This could be considered a reference to earlier portions of "The Sacred Journey," since Part 1, *Once Below a Time* seems to take place in Eden, indicating that time is created by an awareness of the inevitable march toward death. This makes sense, since Freddy leaves Eden the day his father commits suicide. Frederick is surprised when a publishing house wants to publish his novel, and is even more surprised when it is a success. For the first time, Frederick is famous enough to be recognized on the street, and strangers can pronounce his name. Although it feels good to be considered special, he tries not to let fame go to his head, because he recognizes that such fame is empty, and will not bring him happiness.

Right after signing the contract to have his novel published, Freddy happens to run into an old school friend in the hallway. The other fellow is working as a messenger boy. Freddy does not want him to feel bad, so he does not mention the book. He considers this to be a beyond-time moment, for he has realized that he can only be happy if everyone has something to be happy about. Another such moment comes after the book has already come out. A minister at Freddy's Lawrenceville school, where Freddy himself now teaches, takes him out to lunch, and Freddy wonders why. At some point in the conversation, the minister asks Freddy if he has ever considered using his gift with words for the glory of God and the Church. Freddy says that he never has, and the conversation moves on, but it is clear from its mention in this passage that the suggestion would receive very careful consideration.



## Beyond Time, Section 3, pp. 102-112

### Beyond Time, Section 3, pp. 102-112 Summary and Analysis

Seeking meaning and understanding, Frederick decides to spend a weekend at a monastery, wanting to ask questions of a certain monk who is famed for his wisdom. When Freddy arrives, he learns that the monk is unavailable, and the other monks have taken a vow of silence. The one monk, who is in charge of talking with visitors, has recently had a stroke and can barely speak. At the end of the weekend, Freddy has learned no profound truths, but as he is leaving, the elderly monk offers to bless him. As part of the blessing, the monk tells him that he has a long way to go. Freddy interprets this as a reference to his journey through life, meaning that he has much to learn.

One evening, after five years of teaching at his old high school, Freddy goes to his mother's apartment for a special dinner. Right before it is time to eat, the phone rings, and it is a friend of Freddy's. The friend, weeping, explains that several of his family members have been in a terrible car accident, and he is waiting for a plane to take him to them. He wants Freddy to come keep him company while he waits, but Freddy, in a moment of selfishness, tells his friend that he will call him back in ten minutes with an answer. Freddy does not want to admit that he would rather eat dinner with his mother, but he knows what is the right thing to do. His mother, on the other hand, is shocked that the friend wants Freddy to come, since Freddy cannot possibly help the situation. Freddy calls the friend back and agrees to come, but by then the friend says that there is no need, and so Freddy stays through dinner. However, something inside him opens up, and he realizes that he needs to go out of his comfort zone and do good for others, not merely for their sake, but for his own sake.

Freddy moves to New York to be a writer, but finds that he can not write. He tries a handful of different things, but nothing works out, and in his loneliness, he starts attending church on Sundays. One day, the pastor, Mr. Buttrick, talks about the great laughter that accompanies salvation by Jesus, and something clicks inside Freddy. He suddenly feels that Jesus is the answer to the strange, hilarious, tragic farce of life, and Freddy wants to know more. He asks Mr. Buttrick about it, and Mr. Buttrick drives him to a nearby seminary, to enroll. In the end, Freddy feels that what is offered by Christianity is the same treasure that King Rinkitink has in the Land of Oz, and Freddy feels that he finally has the divine tools necessary to find strength by laughing at his weakness.



# Characters

## Frederick Buechner

Growing up, Freddy is a total nerd. He loves reading, especially books in the Wizard of Oz series, and fantasizes constantly about the characters of Oz. A shy boy, he does not make any friends until he goes to boarding school, where he meets some other boys that have something in common with him. Freddy loves when it rains, not because he likes getting wet, but because the rain makes it so nice to be snugly indoors. He loves hearing stories from his grandmothers, especially amusing, light anecdotes. Freddy has the unconscious innocence of a child until the day his father commits suicide. Then, the ten-year-old boy has to become the man of the house, which is both scary and gratifying to him. Freddy is haunted by expressive faces and wants to be an artist so that he can portray what people are thinking and feeling. Instead, he finds that he has a gift for writing, and he decides to become a writer. Once he is successful, Freddy does not gloat about his fame, but instead hushes it up, not wanting to make others feel bad. Freddy makes a conscious effort to get out into the world and experience the moments of life. He sees great value in persisting despite weakness, and in the end, he decides that this is the voice of God.

## Grandma Buechner

Grandma Buechner is strong, like a rock in the ocean. Freddy supposes that she can take anything in stride and still recover, as evidenced by her reaction when two of her three sons commit suicide. The scars of painful events in her life are evident in the lines on her face and in her demeanor, but she is not broken. Grandma loves passionately, and when emotion seizes her, she does not hold back. Grandma is the daughter of a wealthy brewer, so she still has a lot of money, and she uses this to help his family out during the hard years of the Depression. When the family wants to go to Bermuda, Grandma is against it, saying that they should stay home and face reality. However, she still pays for the trip and the rent in the Bermuda house, showing that her love for her family is stronger than her desire to meddle. Grandma loves to listen to passionate opera, identifying with stalwart viking heroines who wail about life's misfortunes, and then hold their heads high. Whenever the subject of religion comes up, Grandma refers to the good lord in French, with a half-smile on her face, as though she herself does not know whether she believes in such a notion. Although she seems strong enough to weather any storm, Freddy pities her for her lack of religious faith, imagining that at the end of her life, she has nothing to pull her through.



## **Frederick's Mother**

Freddy is close with his mother throughout his life, and the two of them lean on one another a lot for support. When she senses that he needs to become independent of her, she sends Freddy to boarding school.

## **Jamie Buechner**

Jamie is Freddy's little brother. He is able to grieve for their dead father, although Freddy cannot.

## **Freddy's Father, Fred Buechner**

Freddy's father kills himself one morning, leaving a hasty note on the last page of a novel. This is the first moment when Freddy is aware that death is on the way.

## **Naya**

Naya is Freddy's other grandmother. She is a lot of fun, and loves to surround herself with eccentric people.

## **Mr. Buttrick**

Mr. Buttrick is the minister at the church Freddy attends. He takes Freddy to enroll in seminary.

## **Mr. Martin**

Mr. Martin is Freddy's English teacher. When he gives Freddy a one hundred on a paper, Freddy realizes that he wants to become a writer.

## **King Rinkitink**

Rinkitink is the fictional King of the Land of Oz. He is a fat, silly man, who somehow always manages to come out on top. He is Freddy's hero, and the main character of Freddy's first book is based on Rinkitink.

## **Mrs. Taylor**

Mrs. Taylor is Freddy's nurse in early childhood. She shows him all sorts of wonderful things.

## **Jimmy Merrill**

Jimmy is Freddy's first real friend, a nerd who he meets at boarding school.





# Objects/Places

## Bermuda

Freddy's family goes to Bermuda to try to forget about his father's suicide. Bermuda seems to Freddy to be the Land of Oz.

## The Land of Oz

Oz is a magical country in a series of books by L. Frank Baum. Freddy is obsessed with Oz.

## The Roulette Wheel

Freddy and Jamie are playing with a roulette wheel one morning when their father looks in on them. While they are still playing, their father kills himself.

## Lawrenceville, New Jersey

Freddy goes to boarding school in Lawrenceville, and later he teaches there as well.

## New York City

Freddy and his mother both end up living in New York, with him trying to make a living as a writer.

## Grandma Buechner's House

Since Freddy's family moves around so much, he sees his grandmother's house as his real home.

## North Carolina

Naya lives in North Carolina, and Freddy's family moves in with her for a while.

## Alabama

Freddy goes through his basic training for the army in Alabama, before being disqualified for combat.



## **World War II**

World War II created a passionate patriotism, and a feeling that the world could end at any moment. This event strongly influences Freddy's teen years.

## **A Long Day's Dying**

"A Long Day's Dying" is the name of Frederick's first novel. It is very popular, and he becomes famous for a while.

## **Union Theological Seminary**

At the end of the book, Freddy goes to seminary to train to be a Christian minister.

# Themes

## God Speaks in Unexpected Ways

In the Introduction, Frederick talks about how God speaks in unexpected ways. Although he acknowledges that not everyone believes that God speaks to us at all through our lives, he possesses a conviction that if God does speak to people, he speaks into their personal lives. Although the book takes the form of a memoir, really the book is about how Freddy hears God speaking to him throughout various parts of his early life, and how, unexpectedly, Freddy finds exactly what he is looking for in Jesus Christ. He finds this somewhat surprising, since he is raised in a semi-atheistic household, and not having been taught any religion as a child. Some of the people who God speaks through are Freddy's nurse and both of his grandmothers. They teach him to name things, to weather the storm, and how to have fun and meet interesting people.

Some of the ways in which God speaks are not evident at the time. Instead, seemingly trivial events stay lodged in Freddy's memory, and years later, he is able to understand their meaning. For example, after signing a contract to publish his first novel, Freddy runs into a boy he went to school with, who has a job as a messenger boy. Freddy decides not to brag about his success, and does not mention his book. This event seems to Freddy like a turning point, the moment when he realizes that he wants everyone to be happy, not just himself. Later, Freddy starts attending church out of boredom, never expecting that he will end up going to seminary. Later, looking back on the path that has brought him to this point, Freddy considers the unexpected nature of acts of God to be a part of God's strategy, suggesting that many people would make sure to stay out of God's way if they knew what he had planned for them.

## Strength Found in Weakness

Throughout his life, Freddy is always fascinated by the character of King Rinkitink, the King of the Land of Oz. Freddy loves Rinkitink because the fat little man is so obviously weak, breaking down emotionally, and not much of a fighter, but somehow Rinkitink always manages to win, emerging victorious and ridiculous from a cloud of dust. Other literary characters that remind Freddy of Rinkitink are also his favorites, and when Freddy writes his first novel, the main character is a little fat man inspired by Rinkitink. Freddy notes that he himself is thin and that obesity might be considered a weakness, but he sees the fat more like armor, protecting the wearer from the outside world. At any rate, Rinkitink's fat seems to protect him.

As Freddy studies the Bible, he is impressed by Saint Paul's ideas about God's grace being all the more evident when created through weakness. Freddy thinks that God can use even the weakest, most messed-up people for good, and that the worse the person is to begin with, the more miraculous it is when God works through them. Freddy says that the strength of living is found by exposing our weak selves to the scary world



outside our comfort zones, instead of hiding inside ourselves. He considers living for the self to be a slow, dull path toward death, a sure way of losing track of what really matters. In order to really come to life, he thinks that it is necessary to live for others, even when we would much rather hide from it all.

## **Life Happens in the Little Moments, So Pay Attention**

Frederick begins and ends his tale with a description of an ordinary moment, in which he suddenly listens to all of the sounds around him and is moved by the holy uniqueness of that moment. He realizes that time and life are finite and made of a string of moments, some ordinary seeming, and others which seem life-changing. Freddy says that the moments we can remember are well worth looking over again, because they can tell us who we have been, who we are, and who we are becoming. He notes that nostalgia can relive many of the moments of the past, but that we can never return to those times. Frederick acknowledges that each age in life has its own feel to it, with its own unique sensations and interpretations. Although we can reminisce about the past, we can not feel the same way we remember feeling, because we have become different people. His purpose in writing the book is to look over the various moments of his life, and see what he can learn from them now, at the age of fifty. He believes that he is still growing and changing, because time continues to move past, and he wants to truly live life. Thinking about memories, he warns the reader not to get trapped in a cycle of constantly looking back at the past, for fear of being turned into a pillar of regret and yearning. This is a reference to the Biblical story of Lot's wife, who escaped from Sodom and Gomorrah but was warned not to look back at the destruction of the cities. She did look back, and turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's wife is often used as a caution against regret, and this story is one of many references that Frederick makes to the Bible. Many of the moments that he recalls from childhood are ones that have unexpected religious significance, like the way that Freddy is fascinated and moved by the face of Jesus in a painting. By looking over the many moments, Freddy can see the pattern of his life emerge.



# Style

## Perspective

The Sacred Journey; a Memoir of Early Days is a portion Frederick Buechner's autobiography, so it is told in first person from Frederick's point of view. He thinks of himself as Freddy, to differentiate him from his father, who is called Fred. This is significant, since Freddy's father kills himself, and when Freddy's uncle follows suit, Freddy worries that he will turn out to be too much like his father and kill himself as well. The story is told by a fifty-year-old Freddy, who is looking back on his memories of his early life, and he recognizes that his viewpoint is necessarily biased by the many years which have passed and the ways in which he has changed over the years. Freddy tries to understand what is going on in the heads of various people, but in reminiscing, he is not even sure which thoughts he really remembers having. He confesses that some mysteries he still does not understand, although he does not mind so much now. He does not let the reader in on all of his secrets right away, but often hints at how events will turn out. For instance, he tells the reader early on that his family is not religious, but he often points out the religious importance of various details, as though he himself knows that later, religion will be very important to him. In spite of all this foreshadowing, he does not usually hint at what the details of the conclusion will be, so it is a surprise when he goes to seminary to study to be a minister. Freddy turns out to have a very Christian perspective.

## Tone

The book has a sort of exploratory tone, encouraging the reader to explore Frederick's life. Freddy lives through some tragedy and some wonderful things, and in his youth, he stumbles around trying to make sense of the world. Early on, he talks about how he feels a sense of longing, of searching for something, but he does not know what. Eventually, he comes to realize that the thing he is searching for is faith in God. Even when his life seems very confusing and Freddy is sure that he will fail, he learns from the people around him and grows. Once he learns to laugh at his own weakness, Freddy finds that God can transform that weakness into strength, and he learns not to be so fearful of the world. When Freddy publishes his second novel and it is a flop, he tries several different jobs to find the correct career, but each of these paths goes completely wrong for some reason. For example, he decides that he is in love and asks a girl to marry him, and she utterly rejects him. He tries applying to the CIA, but discovers that he is unwilling to torture a suspect to get information. Nothing seems to work out smoothly until Freddy decides to go to seminary and give his life to God. He indicates that the opportunity to go into the ministry has been waiting for him all along, but he has only just realized that it is the direction in which God wants his life to go. This is in keeping with the tone of searching for unknown delights, which are perhaps there all along. Freddy believes that these gifts indicate that there must be a giver (God).

## Structure

The book is divided into an Introduction and three parts, each named after a specific relationship with time. In the Introduction, Frederick explains to the reader why he has decided to write his memoirs and what he hopes to learn from the experience. He also encourages the reader to look over his or her own life, to find out what God has to say to him or her.

The first main part is called *Once Below a Time*, and tells of Freddy's childhood up until the age of ten. He uses the phrase "once below a time" to indicate a portion of life when he is totally unaware of the constant passage of time, when death seems nonexistent, and there is no need to hurry.

The next part is called *Once Upon a Time*, and begins the moment that Freddy's father kills himself. Freddy is suddenly painfully aware of the approach of death, and of the fact that the world can fall apart in an instant. This part follows Freddy to school and college, and he grows a lot, finally pushed into the scary outside world.

The final section is called *Beyond Time*, and it describes the first five or so years after Freddy graduates from college, up until the point when he decides to dedicate his life to God and enters the seminary. He calls this part *Beyond Time* to indicate that now, as an older man, he is reaching across the years to his younger self, and trying to glean new lessons from his memories. Although he knows that life is finite, in a way he feels that each moment can last forever.



## Quotes

"Faith in SOMETHING—if only in the proposition that life is better than death—is what makes our journeys through time bearable." II: Once Upon a Time, Section 2, p. 58

"I found that . . . love is . . . a grave, fierce yearning and reaching out for Paradise itself, a losing and finding of the self in the Paradise of another." II: Once Upon a Time, Section 2, p. 54

"But even if it were possible to return to those days, I would never choose to." Introduction, p. 6

"My assumption is that the story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all." Introduction, p. 6

"From that moment to this I have ridden on time's back as a man rides a horse, knowing fully that the day will come when my ride will end and my time will end and all that I am and all that I have will end with them." II: Once Upon a Time, Section 1, p. 39

"Childhood's time is Adam and Eve's time before they left the garden for good and from that time on divided everything into before and after." I: Once Below a Time, Section 1, p. 10

"Oz might be full of magic and danger, but even so it was safer than Washington was." I: Once Below a Time, Section 2, p. 19

"Any house where my father and mother were was home to me, but for that very reason, whenever they left—even for a day, even for an evening—it was home no longer but a house with walls as frail as paper and a roof as fragile as glass." I: Once Below a Time, Section 3, p. 35

"Memory is more than looking back to a time that is no longer; it is a looking out into another kind of time altogether where everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still." I: Once Below a Time, Section 2, p. 21

"We had the sense—all of us, I think—that our time was running out, and that was why we tried to fill it as full as we did with whatever came to hand, why in the face of death it was a time with so much life in it." III: Beyond Time, Section 1, p. 81

"the people you love have two sides to them. One is the side that they love you back with, and the other is the side that, even when they do not mean to, they can sting you with like a wasp." I: Once Below a Time, Section 3, p. 32

"How they do live on, those giants of our childhood, and how well they manage to take even death in their stride because although death can put an end to them right enough,

it can never put an end to our relationship with them." I: Once Below a Time, Section 2,  
p. 21





## Topics for Discussion

What are the meanings of the different ways of representing time in the book? Which type of time makes the most sense to you?

When Freddy's father commits suicide, Freddy is not able to face his grief for many years, although his brother does grieve. What influence do you think these styles of mourning have on their lives? Which way do you think is healthiest?

How does Frederick define "home"? What causes him to give it this definition?

Freddy is fascinated by the fictional Land of Oz. What imaginary worlds fascinated you as a child? Why are fantasy worlds so compelling?

How is King Rinkitink like Freddy? How are they different?

Many times, Frederick notes that there are multiple ways of interpreting what he considers to be messages from God. What do you think? Is he just deceiving himself, or is God really speaking to him?

Why are ordinary moments so important to Frederick? Do you find moments to be sacred?

What does it mean for something to be sacred? What do you hold sacred?