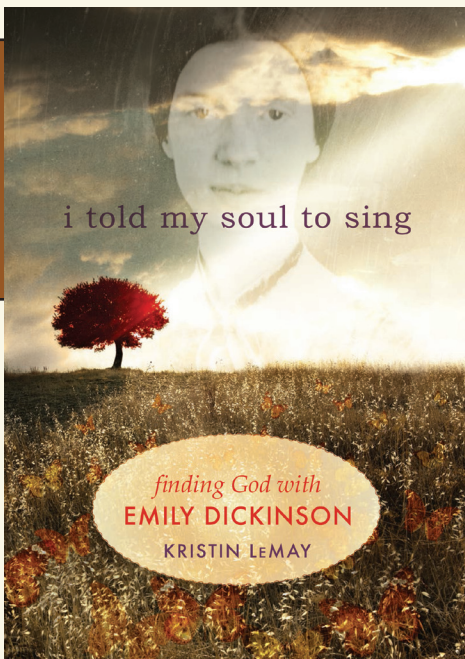


# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## *I TOLD MY SOUL TO SING*

### *finding God with Emily Dickinson*



- *I Told My Soul to Sing* looks to Emily Dickinson for spiritual guidance. What writer or teacher do you most turn to in thinking about life's largest questions? Why that person?
- Many readers think that Emily Dickinson did not believe in God. Would you call her a Christian? What do you think she would have answered?
- Which of the poems in the book was your favorite, and why? Read that poem aloud and share why you chose it. To listen to recordings of the book's poems, visit [www.kristinlemay.org](http://www.kristinlemay.org).

## CHAPTER 1: BELIEF

### CONVERSION

The first chapter shares Emily's experience of conversion and proposes that conversion is a life-long process. Have you ever experienced a conversion? Do you think that conversion only happens once?

### SCRIPTURE

Emily claimed, "The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference." What do you think she meant by that, and do you agree? What is your own history with the Bible? How do you see it now?

### DOUBT

Emily declares, "Faith is Doubt." Do you think that doubt can help us draw closer to belief? What role does doubt play in your life?

### BELIEF

Do you understand belief to be a thought in your head, an action of your hands, or a feeling in your heart? Do you ever struggle to say "Yes" to the things you believe in?

### PROOF

Do you ever ask for proof of love—from God or others? What are the dangers and benefits of doing so?

## CHAPTER 2: PRAYER

### HYMN

As a group, try singing the poem "God is indeed a jealous God —" (page 82) to the tune of "Amazing Grace." What difference does it make to see Emily's poems as

### PRAYER

Do you ever struggle to pray? The poem "Prayer (I)" by George Herbert, quoted in this section, identifies twenty-seven different kinds of prayer: which of these words, or what other words, would you use to describe how you pray?

### INTERCESSION

How can praying for others bring us closer to God? Does it ever make God feel farther away? What would it mean for an intercession to work?

### JESUS

Emily uses creative nicknames to talk about God: "Adamant," "Sorcerer from Genesis," "Awful Father of Love," and "the deep Stranger." What nicknames would you give God and Jesus? What do these names reveal about your relationship to them?

### GOD

The author hypothesizes that Emily pinned her poem together when she realized that God is always present. Do you more frequently experience God as present or absent? Can we do anything to influence how God is present to us?

## CHAPTER 3: MORTALITY

### INCARNATION

Emily uses the verb *stoop* to describe God's interactions with humanity. What verb would you use, and why?

### LEARNING TO DIE

Emily pictures death as a shepherd. What images do you associate with death? Do you think that we, as a culture, think and talk about death enough? Too much?

### MORTALITY

The author calls Emily a saint because Emily is her "Certificate for Immortality." Who is this type of saint for you? To whom do you turn for wisdom about this life or confidence about an afterlife?

### CRUCIFIXION

The author wonders what Emily would answer about how the Crucifixion saves. How do you understand the Crucifixion?

### EASTER

Emily shows a sneaky side to Christ, who "robs" Death's nest. How do you imagine Jesus' personality? Do you think Jesus had a mischievous side?



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Visit [www.kristinlemay.org](http://www.kristinlemay.org) for additional resources, including recordings of Dickinson's poems.

## CHAPTER 4: IMMORTALITY

### LIFE

Emily is legendary for having been a recluse, but the author suggests that any of our lives, looked at selectively from a distance, could seem strange. What elements of your own life and personality might seem odd, taken out of context?

### AFTERLIFE

The author describes a moment when she knew that inner vastness that Emily terms “dew.” Have you ever had an experience that made you feel more than just “dust”? What happened?

### RESURRECTION

Neither the Bible nor theology tries to explain what physically will happen in the resurrection. Do you believe in resurrection? What do you think will happen?

### SILENCE

Emily suggests that the deepest truths in life are the hardest to discuss: “Abyss has no Biographer.” What do you find it hard to talk about? What do you tend to leave silent in your life?

### IMMORTALITY

Emily gains her trust in immortality “the lower Way,” through her everyday life. Where in your life do you gain conviction in immortality? Where do you struggle to believe it?

## CHAPTER 5: BEAUTY

### ECSTASY

Emily shares “ecstasy”—the irrepressible joy she found in life—by sending out her poems and letters. How do you share your ecstasy with the world? Do you share it enough? Does everyone have an obligation to share their gifts with others?

### PORTRAIT

Emily often uses humor to talk about religion, and the author argues that this is a sign of affection for it, not rejection of it. How do you use humor in your life? Do you ever joke about God, or along with God? Might God have a sense of humor?

### GRASPED BY GOD

The author’s spiritual life fluctuates between moments of intensity and periods of fading. How has your spiritual life unfolded across time? Can the intensity of moments of revelation be sustained?

### REVELATION

Where do you see God in the natural world? Does nature ever challenge this connection?

### BEAUTY

Describe an experience of beauty that felt more than just earthly, that became transcendent. What did you learn in that moment? Do you think beauty can communicate something of God?

## RECIPES

To sweeten your gathering, share one of the treats Emily Dickinson was famous for baking. These recipes are adapted from her “receipts.”

### EMILY DICKINSON’S “COCOANUT” CAKE

Adapted for *Bon Appétit* by Carolyn Smith

1 cup coconut  
2 cups flour  
1 cup sugar  
1/2 cup butter  
1/2 cup milk  
2 eggs  
1/2 teaspoon soda  
1 teaspoon cream of tartar

Beat the butter and sugar, then stir in the other ingredients, adding the coconut last. Pour into a greased loaf pan and bake at 350 degrees for 65 minutes.

### EMILY DICKINSON’S BLACK CAKE

From *Emily Dickinson: Profile of the Poet as a Cook*

2 cups sugar	1/4-1/2 cup brandy
1/2 lb. butter	1 lb. raisins
5 eggs	2/3 cup currants
1/4 cup molasses	2/3 lb. citron
2 cups sifted flour	
1/2 tsp baking soda	
1 tsp clove	
1 tsp mace	
1 tsp cinnamon	
1/2 tsp nutmeg, ground	

Place a shallow pan of water on the bottom of the oven. Preheat oven to 225 F.

Add sugar gradually to butter; blend until light and creamy. Add unbeaten eggs and molasses. Beat well. Re-sift flour with soda and spices. If you’re using unsalted butter, add 1/2 tsp salt. Beat sifted ingredients into mixture, alternately adding brandy. Stir in raisins, currants, and citron.

Pour batter into two loaf pans lined with waxed paper. Bake at 225F for 3 hours. Remove pan of water for last 1/2 hour. Let loaves cool before removing from pans. Remove paper and wrap in fresh paper.

### EMILY DICKINSON’S GINGERBREAD

Adapted from *Emily Dickinson: Profile of the Poet as a Cook* for use at the Emily Dickinson Museum.

1 quart flour  
1/2 cup butter  
1/2 cup cream  
1 tablespoon ginger  
1 teaspoon soda  
1 teaspoon salt  
Make up with molasses (a little more than a cup is about right)

Cream the butter and mix with lightly whipped cream. Sift dry ingredients together and combine with the other ingredients. The dough is stiff and needs to be pressed into whatever pan you choose. A round or small square pan is suitable. Bake at 350 degrees for 20–25 minutes.



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