Duke NICHOLAS INSTITUTE for ENERGY, ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

Book Study: *Love's Braided Dance*

Margie Peeler, M.Div.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Norman Wirzba is a theologian and professor at Duke Divinity School, whose research and teaching interests lie at the intersections of theology, philosophy, ecology, and agrarian and environmental studies. Using his 2024 book, *Love's Braided Dance: Hope in a Time of Crisis* (Yale University Press), as our guide, this study will explore the place of hope both broadly in our world today and specifically in the life of your congregation. Over the course of six weeks, this study will guide your congregation through readings and conversations ranging in topics from climate change to AI and social media to intensifying refugee crises and beyond. Drawing on the wisdom of James Baldwin, Desmond Tutu, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Martha Graham, and others, Wirzba presents a compelling vision of hope as a way of life, rooted in deep, practical connection with all living beings.

Using notable quotes, discussion questions, and invitations for engagement, this study aims to bring your congregation and their lived experiences, faith, hardships, and hopes into the conversation Wirzba facilitates throughout *Love's Braided Dance*.

This Cooling Communities project resource was developed by Margie Peeler in Spring 2025 while fulfilling degree requirements as a student Agent of Thriving at Duke Divinity School.

Contents

Week 1—Introduction: The Way of Hope 3
- Notable…Quotable
- Discussion Questions
- Invitation for Engagement

Week 2—Chapters 1–2: Erotic Hope and When Hope Languishes 4
- Notable…Quotable
- Discussion Questions
- Invitation for Engagement

Week 3—Chapters 3–4: Resonant Hope and Hope Grows in Places of Belonging 5
- Notable…Quotable
- Discussion Questions
- Invitation for Engagement

Week 4—Chapters 5–6: A Forgiveness—Seeking Hope and A Forgiveness—Granting Hope 6
- Notable…Quotable
- Discussion Questions
- Invitation for Engagement

Week 5—Chapters 7–8: A Hopeful Architecture and A Hopeful Economy 7
- Notable…Quotable
- Discussion Questions
- Invitation for Engagement

Week 6—Epilogue: Learning to Dance 8
- Notable…Quotable
- Discussion Questions
- Invitation for Engagement

Additional Resources to Consider for Eco-Theological Learning 9
- Books
- Articles
- Websites

WEEK 1—INTRODUCTION: THE WAY OF HOPE

Reading: *Love's Braided Dance*, pages 1–14

Notable...Quotable

Take a few minutes to discuss the reactions your group members had/have to the following quotes.

- "It was the touch of another's hand and the feel of another's flesh that activated within him the power he describes as love." (3)
- "To think that displacement and desperation are problems only for those officially deemed 'migrants' or 'refugees' would be a mistake. People can feel displaced or adrift even while inhabiting what looks to be a home if they are not receiving the care and support they need." (7–8)
- "Hope is a way of being in which people commit themselves to the healing of our wounded world and, in so doing, communicate a future that is worth striving for." (13–14)

Discussion Questions

- After reading the introduction, what expectations (good, bad, and ugly) do you have about this book and book study? What excites you about this book? What worries you?
- Have you found hope to be "linear, systematic, or smooth" or "meandering and circuitous" as Wirzba describes on page 11?
- Where do you hear God's voice shining through in this introduction? Where does God's voice feel absent?

Invitation for Engagement

- How might you "join with all the living" this week, month, year, or lifetime? Be specific… be playful… be authentic. Share some of your ideas with the group. Maybe invite them to join too.

WEEK 2—CHAPTERS 1–2: EROTIC HOPE AND WHEN HOPE LANGUISHES

Reading: *Love's Braided Dance*, pages 15–44

Notable...Quotable

Take a few minutes to discuss the reactions your group members had/have to the following quotes. What other quotes stood out this week?

- "My point is not to deny God or trash technology. It is to indicate that people have not been well served by these expressions of 'faith' that keep them passive or reduced to being little more than spectators of their own lives, mostly deaf to the world's cries for healing and help, and thus exempt from the work of creating a more hopeful future." (15–16)
- "One of the best ways to measure the health of a culture, therefore, is by how it treats its young people and how it helps them to care about their society's future." (38)
- "False, sentimental, and cynical hope needs to come to an end." (43)

Discussion Questions

- How does it feel to read the effects and scenarios listed on pages 42–43? How do they make you feel? Worried, skeptical, overwhelmed, exhausted, disengaged, inspired, _____?
- What stories from your own life or lineage shape the way you understand hope?
- Where do you hear God's voice shining through in these chapters? Where does God's voice feel absent?

Invitation for Engagement

- Wirzba uses and will use a number of metaphors for hope in this book. Based on your reading and lived experience, think of your own metaphor for hope, one that feels authentic to *you*. Chew on the metaphor this week. Where does it flourish? Where does it fall short? Bring your metaphor and observations to the group next week.

WEEK 3—CHAPTERS 3–4: RESONANT HOPE AND HOPE GROWS IN PLACES OF BELONGING

Reading: *Love's Braided Dance*, pages 45–73

Notable...Quotable

Take a few minutes to discuss the reactions that those gathered had/have to the following quotes. What other quotes stood out this week?

- "Previous generations would have thought it impossible for anyone to have the whole world in the palm of a hand, but today the impossibility lies in imagining daily life without a smartphone. To lose it is like losing the bodily appendage that gives you a hold on life and all that the world has to offer (and sell)." (51)
- "The remedy for a broken, lonely, and commodified world is fairly straightforward: nurture the places and creatures that nurture us." (70)

Discussion Questions

- How did you experience the rise of technology (internet, smartphones, social media, etc.)? What impact does technology have on your daily life (home, work, social)?
- Leaning on the discussion of "rest" and "restlessness" on pages 58–59, what inspires restlessness in you? What inspires restfulness?
- Where do you hear God's voice shining through in these chapters? Where does God's voice feel absent?

Invitation for Engagement

- Discuss the metaphors for hope you were invited to come up with last week. What encounters, experiences, or thoughts informed your initial metaphor? How did that metaphor progress and/or change throughout the week?

WEEK 4—CHAPTERS 5–6: A FORGIVENESS—SEEKING HOPE AND A FORGIVENESS—GRANTING HOPE

Reading: *Love's Braided Dance*, pages 74–106

Notable...Quotable

Take a few minutes to discuss the reactions your group members had/have to the following quotes. What other quotes stood out this week?

- "We are needy beings from the womb to the tomb. The neediness is why it's so important to identify when and where we have harmed the relationships that sustain us, show genuine remorse for the harm done, and then commit to being a healing presence going forward." (82)
- "Apology needs to be accompanied by accountability on the part of those committing injustice." (104)

Discussion Questions

- "How does a person go about seeking forgiveness from the land? Who is being asked?" (78)
- When have you forgiven? When have you been forgiven? What does forgiveness feel like?
- Where do you hear God's voice shining through in these chapters? Where does God's voice feel absent?

Invitation for Engagement

- Consider two poems: "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers" by Emily Dickinson and "Hope Is Not a Bird, Emily, It's a Sewer Rat" by Caitlin Seida. Which resonates more with you and your community? This week, seek out a poem that matches or meshes with your understanding of hope.

WEEK 5—CHAPTERS 7–8: A HOPEFUL ARCHITECTURE AND A HOPEFUL ECONOMY

Reading: *Love's Braided Dance*, pages 107–149

Notable...Quotable

Take a few minutes to discuss the reactions your group members had/have to the following quotes. What other quotes stood out this week?

- "Built environments always encode a framework of meaning and values. They give material expression to what their builders think is important and to a vision of how life should be ordered and arranged." (110)
- "A world reduced to resources, ready to be exploited, is a world without meaning of its own." (114)

Discussion Questions

- What do built environments in your community communicate about the values and priorities of the "builders"? How do communities decide how to sustain, alter, and/or rebuild built environments?
- What reactions do you have to Robin Wall Kimmer's words on relating to the land on pages 144–145? Where do her words feel feasible? Where do they feel far from possible?
- Where do you hear God's voice shining through in these chapters? Where does God's voice feel absent?

Invitation for Engagement

- Explore the landscape of worker-owned cooperative enterprises in your area using this online resource: https://www.usworker.coop/directory/. What patterns do you notice? What is expected? What is surprising?

WEEK 6—EPILOGUE: LEARNING TO DANCE

Reading: *Love's Braided Dance*, pages 150–157

Notable...Quotable

Take a few minutes to discuss the reactions your group members had/have to the following quotes. What other quotes stood out this week?

- "The art of improvisation can be of considerable help to us if our aim is to participate in the dance and try to negotiate what is often a bruising and unpredictable world." (153)
- "The hope that emerges and grows in 'love's braided dance' is our most worthy hope. But it is a hope that is without perfection; a hope born of excitement for life's goodness and beauty; a hope tied to the nurture, protection, and celebration of each other; a hope committed to mercy and forgiveness; a hope manifest in the construction of built environments and just economies that honor the lives that move within and through them; a hope witnessed in the creative gestures that resonate with the world's symphony of life." (157)

Discussion Questions

- "How should we move within life's receiving/responding dynamic? What should the goals of our intertwining movement be? Are some forms of embodied engagement more beautiful and more hopeful than others? Is there such a thing as a false move?" (151)
- What has shifted or stirred within you as you've read and discussed *Love's Braided Dance*?
- Where do you hear God's voice shining through in the epilogue? Where does God's voice feel absent?

Invitation for Engagement

- Revisiting an invitation from week 1, how might you "join with all the living" this week, month, year, or lifetime? Be specific… be playful… be authentic. Share some of your ideas with the group… with your neighbor… with a stranger. How would it feel to invite them to join too?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO CONSIDER FOR ECO-THEOLOGICAL LEARNING

Books

- *The Green Bible*. 2008. Harper Bibles.
- *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community, and the Land*. Norman Wirzba. 2022. University of Notre Dame Press.
- *The Planet You Inherit: Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing*. Larry L. Rasmussen. 2022. Broadleaf Books.
- *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Melanie L. Harris. 2017. Orbis Books.
- *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. Willis Jenkins. 2008. Oxford University Press.

Articles

- "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?" James H. Cone. *Sojourners*, July 2007. https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2007/whose-earth-it-anyway.
- "Care for the Environment Is Biblical. It's Also a Witness to Environmentalists." Dennis Greeson. *Christianity Today*, April 26, 2024. https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/04/hope-gods-creation-andrew-spencer-environment-stewardship/.
- "Nature and Grace: Making Environmental Issues Matter for Christian Life." Willis Jenkins. *Reflections*, Spring 2007. https://reflections.yale.edu/article/gods-green-earth/nature-and-grace-making-environmental-issues-matter-christian-life.

Websites

- Heat Policy Innovation Hub. https://nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/project/heat-policy-innovation-hub.
- Creation Justice Ministries, Resource Hub. https://www.creationjustice.org/resources.html.
- Blessed Tomorrow, *Moving Forward Guide*. https://blessedtomorrow.org/moving-forward-guide.
- Interfaith Power and Light. https://interfaithpowerandlight.org/bookrecommendations/.
- Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World*. https://www.jimantal.com/book.

Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability

The Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability at Duke University accelerates solutions to critical energy and environmental challenges, advancing a more resilient and sustainable world. The Nicholas Institute conducts and supports actionable research and undertakes sustained engagement with policymakers, businesses, and communities—in addition to delivering transformative educational experiences to empower future leaders. The Nicholas Institute's work is aligned with the Duke Climate Commitment, which unites the university's education, research, operations, and external engagement missions to address climate challenges.

The Heat Policy Innovation Hub

The Nicholas Institute's Heat Policy Innovation Hub is the first program in the United States dedicated to cross-disciplinary innovation on extreme heat policy and practice. Located in a region profoundly affected by extreme heat, Duke University is particularly well-situated to influence—and potentially transform—our nation's approach to this critical issue. The Heat Policy Innovation Hub brings together Duke's globally recognized expertise in medicine, health, policy, engineering, the environment, and ministry.

Cooling Communities

The Cooling Communities initiative brings together community leadership, trusted faith-based institutions, and financial innovation to explore scalable, locally rooted strategies for heat resilience. The first phase of the project has been led by the Heat Policy Innovation Hub in partnership with Duke Divinity School and Interfaith Power & Light.

Contact

Nicholas Institute | Duke University | P.O. Box 90467 | Durham, NC 27708
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue NW | Suite 500 | Washington, DC 20004
919.613.1305 | nicholasinstitute@duke.edu