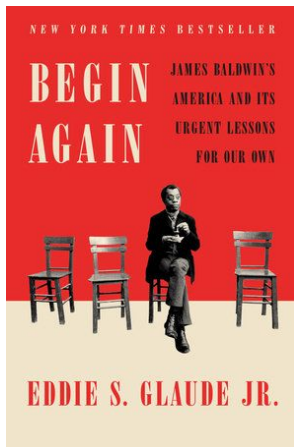


“Reading Prompts and Study Companion for *BEGIN AGAIN*”



As Baldwin put it, “If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law’s protection the most!—and listens to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person—ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice or any concept of it. It is certain in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” pp. 178-79

Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and its Urgent Lessons for our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020).

Organization: Study groups will be formed by individual academic classes, religious groups, book clubs, social networks, in individual homes, families, zoom or other virtual or face to face meetings as the pandemic and time and space allow. These can be formal or informal. Groups may be diverse and represent different faiths, races, experiences; or they could be monoculture, or represent a single faith. Groups may meet over Zoom on a weekly basis or follow their usual format. For example, groups which meet only once a month can still read the book on their own, come together, and use these questions to guide their one-two hour conversation.

Purpose: The goal is to respond to Glaude’s book, *Begin Again*, and reflect on how the thinking/writing of James Baldwin and Eddie Glaude intersects with Fresno, and our own personal lives. ISW hopes to have at least ten groups of 4-8 persons each, at least two academic classes of 10-40 University and/or seminary students, plus other individuals who read and reflect on their own without the benefit of a group experience.

Resources: In addition to Glaude’s book, the writings of James Baldwin, and this study companion, there are other resources available on the ISW website. It is helpful to first read or skim the Introduction, Conclusion, Author’s Notes, and Acknowledgements in *Begin Again*, as these give an anchor for Glaude’s thesis and provide background for readers who are unfamiliar with Baldwin’s work. If you are part of a group, it may be helpful to share which of James Baldwin’s works each of you have read, studied or screened, so you know what others are acquainted with.

Remember: The best questions are those you bring!

As you read, note things that stand out, and jot down questions or thoughts you may wish to process with others. The quotations and questions which follow are only some beginning ideas and suggestions for personal thought, reflection, or sharing.

I. Chapter One: The Lie.

“The American idea is indeed in trouble. It should be. We have told ourselves a story that secures our virtue and protects us from our vices. But today we confront the ugliness of who we are—our darker angels reign. . . . Revealing the lie at the heart of the American idea, however, occasions an opportunity to tell a different and better story.” (xxviii-xxix)

How have new experiences in your own life cast things you used to believe or feel or say in a new light? (xxvii)

“We must tell the truth till we can no longer bear it.” (4)

Read pages 7, 8 and 9 and answer: “What is/are the lie(s) I have told myself, or been told by others? What truth(s) do I avoid facing? How has the lie hurt me personally? How is it hurting others?”

Glaude discusses the shattering of King’s dream and says, “Baldwin understood the anger of Black Power and its harsh judgment of the country. He witnessed what was happening in ghettos, where the working of the lie impoverished millions. He saw the beginnings of mass incarcerations, and its effects on black communities. He also felt the trauma of dashed hopes and expectations, and the costs of the fight. Baldwin set himself the task to make sense of this vicious cycle in the country’s history by naming the betrayal and exposing the lie that gave it such bite.” (16-17)

What has been hard on your soul?

“To bear witness in the after times is hard on the soul.” (17)

II. Chapter Two: Witness.

“Narrating trauma fragments how we remember. We recall what we can and what we desperately need to keep ourselves together. Wounds, historical and painfully present, threaten to rend the soul, and if that happens, nothing else matters.” (43-44)

What have you seen, experienced, felt, heard?

“Today, our task remains the same, no matter its difficulty or the magnitude of the challenge. Some of us must become poets, but we all must bear witness. Make the suffering real and force the world to pay attention to *it*, and not place that suffering all at the feet of Donald Trump, but understand it as the inevitable outcomes in a country that continues to lie to itself.” (54)

How can we bear witness to what is happening here in Fresno, and the San Joaquin Valley?

“Like Baldwin, we have to bear witness to it all and tell the story of how we got here—and then, just maybe, we can muster the resolve and will to push this damn rock up the hill again.” (55)

III. Chapter Three: The Dangerous Road

“How can the shining city on the hill be capable of such evil? We would rather find comfort and safety in the lie than try to resolve this question. But, in the end, we have to allow this “innocent” idea of white America to die. It *is* irredeemable, *but that does not mean we are too.*” (80)

What dangers, trials and injustices have you experienced on the road?

“This is not an easy conclusion to accept. One of the unique features of American nationalism is how closely interwoven the idea of America is with the individual identity of white people in this country. American history corroborates a particular sense of the self rooted in liberty, self-reliance, and hard work. That history validates who white Americans take themselves to be,

and the lives they lead, in turn, validate the specialness of America itself and its mission to the world.” (80-81)

What needs to be redeemed in your own soul and mind and heart? In the heart and soul of this nation? In your faith or friend community?

“If the condition of the love of country is a lie, the love itself, no matter how genuine, is a lie. It disfigures who we are because we engage in self-deceit. In the end, we have to free ourselves of the hold and allure of such a self-deceiving love because that is the only way we can imagine ourselves anew and love truly.” (81)

For those of you who embrace a particular religious tradition, articulate the vision of love and truth found in your sacred Scriptures and teachings.

“For Baldwin, if the country continued to believe the lie and to embrace a history that obscured its deadly consequences, then King’s death would be in vain. And we—all of us—would remain on this godforsaken racial hamster wheel, running around and around, littering the landscape with dead bodies and destroyed souls.” (81)

Share some specific ways you/we can redeem our city, our country and ourselves. How do we get off the dangerous road?

IV. Chapter Four: The Reckoning.

“The question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide the graver questions of the self. That is precisely why what we like to call ‘the Negro problem’ is so tenacious in American life, and so dangerous . . . The questions which one asks oneself begin at last, to illuminate the world, and become one’s key to the experience of others. One can only face in others what one can face in oneself. On this confrontation depends the measure of our wisdom and compassion.

This energy is all that one finds in the rubble of vanished civilizations, and the only hope for ours.” (101; quotes Baldwin in *Nobody Knows My Name*)

Why are we so prone to create an “enemy”? Why do we get swept up in power and policy and politics and protectionism and pessimism?

Baldwin asks us to do something unprecedented: “to create ourselves without finding it necessary to create an enemy.” (90)

Make a list of the questions which you ask yourself? How do these questions illuminate the world? How have they become the key to your experience of others?

Baldwin speaks eloquently about love in a 1969 interview with Nazar Buyum in Istanbul when black power was blazing across the country: “If only [people] could trust that ‘thing’ they would be less afraid of being touched, less afraid of loving each other, less afraid of being hanged by each other. Life would be different. Our children would not be the victims that they are now, we would not be either. But for some reason love is the most frightful thing, something that the human being is most in need of and dreads most. . . Like all poets . . . I am full with the question of how the human being will be put to right. You know it is for this reason that all this black, white, Armenian, Turkish, Greek, Jewish, etc., etc., etc., never carried any meaning for me. The question is how to fix ourselves. Give birth to ourselves. To make us live free of all these swaddling clothes, free of these habits.” (102-103)

What are we afraid of facing in Fresno? Or other communities represented in your group?

Where and how do you agree or disagree with Baldwin’s statement: “One can only face in others what one can face in oneself.” Illustrate your answer with stories and examples.

V. Chapter Five: Elsewhere.

Elsewhere is that physical or metaphorical place that affords the space to breathe, to refuse adjustment and accommodation to the demands of society, and to live apart, if just for a time, from the deadly assumptions that threaten to smother. Living elsewhere can offer you a moment of rest, to catch your breath and ready yourself to enter the fray once again, not so much whole and healed, but battle-scarred and prepared for yet another round. Seeking an elsewhere affords a different vantage point to assess your commitment and the depth of your loves and hatreds. Without recourse to an elsewhere, we can be, as some of us surely are, “broken on the wheel of life.” (129-130)

Take some time to acknowledge and celebrate what you have learned from each other thus far in the conversations and dialogue. If you are conversing with others who share similar values, beliefs, and customs as yourself, then take some time to tell each other about times when you went (or lived) *elsewhere* and how that changed your views and perspectives.

Glaude in reflecting on Baldwin’s life and writings, concludes, “I believe an elsewhere can and must be found *here*: in our efforts to refuse to accommodate and adjust to the status quo and in those very small moments when we make choices that place us outside of the norms and expectations that confine us, when we cultivate the capacity to say no. In both instances, we stand askance to the way things are. That affords us the critical distance to imagine our lives and hopefully, the country differently.” (140-41)

Talk about how you imagine your life, our community of Fresno and the San Joaquin Valley, and our country, differently.

If you struggle with despair, shame, or discouragement, reread this chapter for wise insights about how to “search for an elsewhere to start anew—to love, to critically assess who we are and

who we aspire to be, and to seek refuge in the margins in order to fortify our imaginations so that we can rejoin the battle. . . Hope is invented every day.” (145)

VI. Chapters Six and Seven: Ruins Help us to Begin Again

“. . .the belief that white people still mattered more than others continued to choke the life out of American democracy. . . The horror is that America changes all the time, without ever changing at all.” (149-150)

“Human beings are much more complicated than these stories suggest. Trump cannot be cordoned off into a corner with evil, racist demagogues. We make him wholly bad in order to protect our innocence. He is made to bear the burdens of all our sins when he is in fact a clear reflection of who we actually are.” (171)

“Emptiness is revealed in knowing that a lie undergirds it all. Panic ensues when crises reveal the truth, because we are snatched from our fantasies and forced to confront who we really are.” (173)

“But not to see yourself in Trump is to continue to lie.” (174)

Where and how do you agree or disagree with Baldwin and Glaude?

“If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected--those, precisely, who need the law’s protection the most! --and listens to their testimony. . . ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice or any concept of it. It is certain in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” (178-179)

What resonates with you?

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” –Maya Angelou quote from the Legacy Museum in Atlanta. (186)

“Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost; it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again.” (193)

Where are you involved in bringing justice and seeking the good of all? What needs to be changed in yourself, your neighborhood, our region, our country?

“Both (a New America and a New Jerusalem) call for a world and a society that reflect the value that no human life, no matter the color of your skin, your zip code, your gender, or who you love, is sacred.” (206)

How would you describe yourself and your own sense of calling and responsibility?

“What is happening today isn’t unprecedented, it’s just uniquely of *our* times. We have to understand our own anger and disappointments and figure out for ourselves how to pick up the pieces, to hold off the temptations of hate and despair, and to fight the battle once again.” (200)

How can we help you and ourselves to begin again?

“An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key.” (206) quoting James Baldwin, *No Name on the Street*.

“The labor has been long and hard, and the new world has yet to be born. We are not in our after times, but responsibility has not been lost. Whatever happens next will be up to us.” (206)

**Thank you for participating in the
Interfaith Scholar Weekend 2021 Book Study**