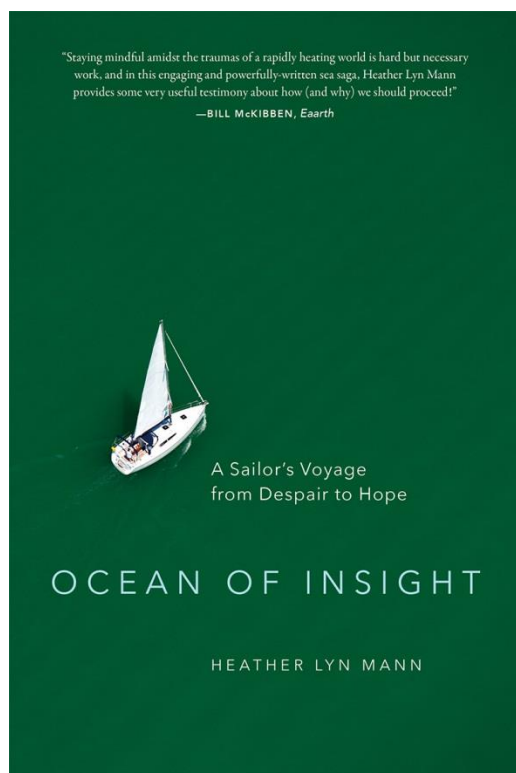


Reading Group Study Guide for *Ocean of Insight*

Setting Sail on the Voyage from Despair to Hope

By Heather Lyn Mann



With vivid, hair-raising detail, environmentalist Heather Lyn Mann shares her adventures and deep healing during six years of living aboard a small sloop. Mann unfolds disasters and discoveries, including life-threatening storms, the boredom of isolation, societies on the brink of extinction, sinking ships, colorful Caribbean characters, near collisions, a pirate scare, and more. Throughout, the ocean becomes Mann's teacher, transforming her with uncompromising lessons on how to harmonize with natural order, and the exact moments and ways to learn fearlessness, resilience, happiness, impermanence, compassion, skillful action, and beginner's mind.

Below I offer reflection questions pertaining to the pages of Ocean of Insight to support your meditation, journaling practice, or study group discussions.

I organized the questions by chapter so you have the option to reflect at the end of each chapter as you read or at the end when you've finished the book. Some questions will speak to you more than others so feel free to release preconceived notions about a right and wrong way to proceed; follow your heart and be personally selective in what you explore.

This is your chance to consider how lessons from the Great Atlantic Teacher resonate in your life. Fair Winds!

--Heather

General Questions

1. Ocean of Insight's structure is a braid of three themes: sailing, climate change, and spirituality. Which theme were you most drawn to and why?
 2. What outdoor activity do you enjoy most? Please share an especially memorable encounter with nature.
 3. Often, we hear talk of earth as a storehouse of raw material, sewer for our waste, garden for tending, or sacred temple. Nature can be an entertainment destination, savage instinct, pretty greeting card, or catastrophic threat. How do you think about the natural world? Have you ever experienced earth as an ally or teacher?
 4. Was Dinghy the Sailor Cat an essential crew member aboard sailboat Wild Hair? Why or why not?
- Suggested Reading: Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Counterpoint; expanded edition August 17, 2010)

Chapter One: Fear

1. Close your eyes, calm your body and mind by focusing on the sensation of your breathing for a few moments, and notice what it is like to feel relaxed and safe. Open your eyes and share your experience of the sensations in your body at this present moment.
 2. Now close your eyes again and keep part of your awareness on the sensation of your breathing as you call to mind something that frightens you—a threat to you or a loved one. Notice the sensations in your body as you hold fear in your awareness. Do other strong emotions surface. Please open your eyes. Can you describe your feelings and body-sensations?
 3. Mann says our body sensations and emotions are vital points of information and not something to ignore or suppress. Do you agree? Why or why not?
 4. The reality of climate change is frightening enough to provoke unconscious coping skills. When you reflect, do you see yourself creating distance from our climate reality just to make it through your day? What are you doing to cope?
 5. How might the spiritual technology of frequent body awareness scans help you in ordinary life?
 6. Fear is the topic of the first chapter of Ocean of Insight. Why do you think waking up and tuning into strong emotions is the first step on the voyage from despair to hope?
- Suggested Reading: Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have* (Parallax Press, 2008)

Chapter Two: The Middle Way

1. Biologist Craifton J. Isaac from the island of Grenada says, “I don’t know how you get Americans to understand natural resources are finite. It’s easier for me. I can see the end of my island; people here know the limits of what we must care for.” In what ways are America’s natural resources finite?
 2. Thich Nhat Hanh says extreme consumption is fed by greed, hatred, and delusion and the path of The Middle Way can end society’s hungry expansionist view. Do you see greed, hatred, and delusion as the roots of extreme consumption? If so, where and when?
 3. Do you see greed, hatred, and delusion at work in your consciousness? How would you describe what’s happening and what can you do to moderate your actions or lifestyle?
 4. What is your vision of a Middle Way for coastal cities like Miami to respond to the climate threat—a vision that neither ignores the certain reality of rising sea level nor hyper-reacts to changing conditions?
 5. What threatens the community where you live and how do you anticipate responding? What might you do to prepare?
- Suggested Viewing: **Bhikkhu Bodhi talks “Four Noble Truths of the Climate Crisis” at White House**, <http://bit.ly/2a9f2iX>

Chapter Three: Skill

1. Sailors obsess over weather forecasts and environmental conditions. The natural world governed Mann’s daily agendas and timetables. On land, society can afford to largely ignore weather and environmental conditions. Have people lost anything by limiting our exposure to the elements? How does civilization continue to be shaped by natural forces regardless?
2. Do you tend to analyze and make sense of the world by dissecting a riddle and considering the component pieces (reductionist reasoning) or by clumping the parts and focusing on the interactions and outcomes (emergence reasoning)?
3. Some of Mann’s descriptions make sailing seem complicated, physically challenging, and risky. What do you think motivated the author and her husband to keep going—especially in the early years—when so much went wrong?
4. Mann writes about climate change as a kind of all-encompassing darkness; no one can see exactly what it will be like in advance. Given all we cannot know, what steps can society take now to help humankind function with skill in the future?

5. Define personal resilience. How do you think a mindfulness practice can boost personal resilience?
 - Suggested Reading: Sustainable World Coalition, ***Sustainable World Sourcebook: Critical issues, Inspiring Solutions, Resources for Action, the Essential Guidebook for the Concerned Citizen*** (Vinti Allen, 2014)

Chapter Four: Happiness

1. An experience with her mainsail gave Mann these insights: ordinary is perfect and Nirvana is here and now. Describe a time when you observed perfection in something ordinary.
 2. What do you think Thich Nhat Hanh meant when he called doubt the saddest of all human conditions?
 3. How do you define happiness? Do you agree with the statement happiness is humankind's natural state of being when doubt and craving cease?
 4. Do you think happiness is the purpose of life? Why or why not?
 5. How does money make you happy? In what ways is money irrelevant to happiness? Could you be happy with half your income? Are you happy now?
 6. What is your understanding of the connection between individual unhappiness and global warming? Do you agree with Mann's claim that happiness is an antidote to climate change?
- Suggested Film: ***The Economics of Happiness***, a 2013 documentary by Helene Norberg-Hodge, Steven Gorelick, and John Page, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/theeconomicsofhappiness>

Chapter Five: Ethics

1. Many of us have encountered people or entire communities with a rich history whose time on Earth is about to end. Who were these people for you and how did they live? Do you remember any of their stories?
2. Do you agree with the author that ethical codes are similar across cultures, religions, and time? Why or why not?
3. Can you describe an event when it was inconvenient for you to live your ethics? What did you do?
4. Ethics are more art than absolute rules. Can you name a time in the past month when you have "killed," spoken unskillfully, or taken something that didn't belong to you?

5. When and how does consumption become unethical?
 6. Do most people apply their ethical code to the fine grain of daily living? Why or why not?
 7. How in your experience have ethical boundaries saved you from hurting yourself or another?
- Suggested Study: *The Five Mindfulness Trainings*, Thich Nhat Hanh, <http://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/the-5-mindfulness-trainings/>

Chapter Six: Time

1. Ocean of Insight is among other things a love story. What makes Dave and Heather's relationship strong? Does anything surprise you about their way of being together?
2. What is your understanding of the Buddha's instruction to "drive all moments into one?"
3. What advice do you think your great, great grandparents would have for you today?
4. What message would you like to convey to a relative born 100 years from now?
5. Would society shift if it became more collectively conscious of the hopes and dreams of past and future generations? If so, how?

- Suggested Reading: Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story* (Harper One, 1994)

Chapter Seven: Power

1. US Coast Guard Petty Officer Joshua Bouknight signed his correspondence with the Latin phrase, Dum spiro, spero—"While I breathe, I hope." What does this phrase mean to you?
2. Do you tend to feel optimistic or pessimistic about humanity's future? How does your optimism or pessimism shape your actions? Are optimism or pessimism ultimately useful in addressing challenges?
3. Have you ever responded to an urgent need "just because," without regard to outcome? How might focusing too much on outcomes before taking action be harmful?
4. How do you understand Joanna Macy's phrase "Active Hope" (p 179)?

5. Why does Mann call awareness, volition, and choice “spiritual superpowers?” How can these superpowers transform the climate challenge?
 6. In what large and small ways do you express your *power to act*?
 7. Why is a willingness to do something small in the direction of a preferred reality vital—even when the action appears fruitless?
- Suggested Reading: Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, ***Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy*** (New World Library, March 2012)

Chapter Eight: Impermanence

1. Name three ways the reality of impermanence is at work in your life.
 2. Mann claims anything is possible because everything in the cosmos is impermanent. What opportunities does the reality of impermanence generate in your life, your community, and in society?
 3. What is your understanding of the term “transcendent endurance?” Have you experienced happiness beyond tyranny of your senses? If so, when.
 4. What did the Buddha mean when he said a rose isn’t a rose and therefore it is a rose?
 5. Just for fun, pick a random, distant thing, place, or circumstance and describe the chain of cause and effect that connects you personally.
 6. How are formlessness and the unknowability of the universe good news for modern times?
 7. The author did not want to return to land after more than two weeks at sea. Why do you think navigating the dangers of the wilderness was more appealing than navigating society? Have you personally experienced resistance to integrating with society?
 8. Why is letting go of our beliefs and stories to surf waves of change important as we face the climate challenge?
 9. Where do you find evidence of humanity’s love for each other and the earth?
- Suggested Reading: Edited by John Stanley, David R. Loy, and Gyurme Dorje, ***A Buddhist Response to THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY*** (Wisdom Publications, 2009)

Chapter Nine: Mindfulness

1. What do you think Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh mean when he says, “mindfulness is not a religion, but a miracle?”
 2. Describe a time when you experienced a calm moment of heightened awareness. What were you doing and how long did it last? Did it give rise to a particular insight?
 3. How do the qualities of love, compassion, ethics, justice, moderation, and simplicity help lead society away from the threat of climate change?
 4. When do you release personal oversight responsibilities to scientists, politicians, commercial interests, or technology? When do you do your best to engage in complex issues? How you benefit from increased mindfulness?
 5. In daily life, how can we train ourselves to become more *ecologically* mindful (boost our awareness about the dangers and suffering of Earth’s systems and life forms)?
 6. Is it important to become mindful of the consequences of inaction? If so, why?
- Suggested Reading: Edited by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, ***Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*** (the Golden Sufi Center, 2013)

Chapter Ten: Fierce Compassion

1. We exercise Fierce Compassion when we bravely choose not to go with the flow but instead take action to stop people from causing harm. Can you think of a time when you acted with Fierce Compassion? What happened?
 2. How do you extend compassion to yourself when confronting difficulty?
 3. What Fiercely Compassionate steps might you consider taking to stop yourself, other people, corporations, and governments from harming Earth?
 4. In your experience, are blame and anger toward those perpetuating harm helpful? Why or why not?
 5. The lives of Christ, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King (among others) demonstrated it can be personally costly to go against the flow; Fierce Compassion opens us to risk—even when our actions are non-violent. Can you name some ways in which acting from a place of Fierce Compassion can nourish and sustains us?
 6. What fiercely compassionate healing action can you take today that will be both symbolic and effective?
- Suggested Reading: Mary Pipher, ***The Green Boat: Reviving Ourselves in Our Capsized Culture*** (Riverhead Trade, June 2013)

Chapter Eleven: The Great Togetherness

1. What is your understanding of the term “Inter-being,” a phrase first used in the west by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh?
 2. Name three ways in which you identify as a “separate self” and three ways in which view yourself as “a cell” in a larger body.
 3. What do we gain by seeing our interconnectedness with beings who are human, non-human, animate, and inanimate?
 4. In what ways does your life and well-being depend upon the natural world?
 5. In 1902, historians tell us the media, business, and political leaders on Martinique wanted to sway an election and maintain the status quo so they convinced the general population they were safe from the ill-effects of a belching volcano. More than 30,000 perished when it blew. Do you agree with the author that this story presages our time? Why or why not?
- Suggested Reading: Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax Press, 1991)

Chapter Twelve: Perceptions

1. Describe a time when you were convinced you understood the reality of a thing or situation only to discover your perceptions were flawed or just plain wrong.
 2. As a spiritual practice, Mann does her best *not* to believe everything she sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches, and thinks. Why is questioning certainty an important spiritual practice?
 3. Is the modern American lifestyle a form of “eating our children?” (p 305) Why or why not?
 4. Have you ever felt—as Aldo Leopold describes—like “the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise?” When? What strong emotions accompany this kind of knowing?
 5. Sōtō Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki wrote “Hell is not punishment; it is training.” What do you think he meant and why is this idea helpful?
- Suggested Reading: Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (Times Books, April 2010)

Chapter Thirteen: Beginner’s Mind

1. What is your understanding of the phenomenon “Beginner’s Mind?”

2. Have you experienced the deadening of creativity or awareness from “expertise?” If so, please share a story about you or another that reveals the numbing effects expertise.
 3. Being present, not leaping ahead to future plans or past concerns, noting the unexpected as it happens, keeping your mind open to a full range of possibilities, staying cautious and aware, knowing what you don’t know—these are proven strategies for cultivating Beginner’s Mind. Do you remember an instance when you shut off the autopilot of your brain and really zeroed in on the now? What happened?
 4. Name three ways the world today is unchanged from the world of your childhood. Name three ways the world is profoundly different.
 5. Why does humanity need Beginner’s Mind at this point in history?
 6. How does curiosity nourish Beginner’s Mind?
 7. The future will not continue like the past. As individuals and as a society, should we let go of old plans for ourselves to better address today’s needs? What plans are outdated?
- Suggested Film: *The Case for Optimism on Climate Change with Al Gore*, a February 2016 TED Talk, <http://bit.ly/2dn4Xjq>

Closing Questions

1. Do you think Mann experienced loneliness at sea? Why or why not?
 2. Returning to land, Mann found it necessary to establish personal boundaries to better live her spiritual values. In what ways is/was your work an expression of your deepest values? How might you add boundaries to your work or change your job to more fully express your deep aspirations for a better world?
 3. Heather applies a secular form of Buddhism to make sense of her experiences. How is her spirituality the same or different from your spiritual tradition?
 4. Have you ever been on an adventure that changed you? What happened and what did you conclude?
- Suggested PDF: *The Earth Peace Treaty Commitment Sheet*, Plum Village, <http://www.mindfulnessbell.org/wp/2014/09/earth-peace-treaty-commitment-sheet/>



Spiritual ecologist Heather Lyn Mann is a practitioner of Buddhism, sailing, and mindful advocacy. She founded and led the not-for-profit Center for Resilient Cities—an organization mobilizing inner-city residents to restore natural beauty and function in damaged neighborhood landscapes. In 2007, together with her husband and cat, Mann set sail on a six-year, 15,000 nautical-mile ocean voyage.

Learn more at www.HeatherLynMann.com.

Ocean of Insight
A Sailor's Voyage from Despair to Hope

by Heather Lyn Mann

5.5" x 8.25", 384 pages

Trade paper, \$18.95

ISBN 978-1-941529-30-0

Random

Publishing November 8, 2016

Services

Distributed by Penguin

House Publisher

Ocean of Insight is published by:



PARALLAX PRESS

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