



We the People Book Club

CEREMONY  
Reading Guide





This We the People Book Club selection is perhaps the least well known of all the books we have read so far. *Ceremony* by **LESLIE MARMON SILKO** is a story of loss, discovery, and healing on a Laguna reservation in New Mexico. Unique in narrative, style, structure, and perspective it is also a perfect fit with this club's democratic focus. With *Grapes of Wrath* it shares a concern for the land and people's connection to it; with *Between the World and Me* it shares a concern for racist forms of destruction; with *Gilead*, it shares a depth of spirituality and a meditative pace.

**CEREMONY** is a quiet novel until it is not, a devastating story until it is not. It is deeply and multiply moving: troubling, heartening, inspiring, illuminating.

Silko's writing career began when she received a National Endowment for the Arts Discovery Grant in 1971. Her book of poems called *Laguna Woman* won the Pushcart Prize for Poetry in 1977. *Ceremony* won the American Book Award in 1980, the first year it was given; along with *Laguna Woman*, the novel helped get the attention of the MacArthur Foundation, which made her one of their very first "genius" Fellows in 1981. In 1994, Silko received the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas Lifetime Achievement Award. She has also been named a Living Cultural Treasure by the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities Council.

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## About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Leslie Marmon Silko, an overview of *Ceremony*, and observations on the author's literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

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## Background

**Leslie Marmon Silko** was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1948 and is of Anglo, Mexican, and Laguna descent. She grew up on the Laguna Pueblo, which her family has called home for generations. She was educated both in a reservation school and in a Catholic school in Albuquerque, where she was forbidden from using her ancestral language. After graduating from the University of New Mexico in 1969, she spent a brief time in law school before beginning her writing career in earnest.

Silko has made a career as an essayist, novelist, and poet, and is considered to be the first Native American woman novelist. She was a leading figure in the native American literary renaissance that coalesced beginning in the late 1960s; this move to reclaim traditional forms of expression also included N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, James Welch, Joy Harjo, and Louise Erdrich.

Silko taught English at Navajo Community College and at the University of Arizona at Tucson. She lives on a ranch outside Tucson.

## Overview

*Ceremony* is the story of Tayo, a veteran and half-blood Laguna Indian who returns to his reservation after fighting in World War II. He is suffering from what was then called “battle fatigue,” which we know now as post-traumatic stress disorder. The people become fearful of his persistent illness and pressure him to seek healing — both because he has exhibited violent behavior and because his sickness affects the whole web of the community, not just the individual. Because Tayo is not full-blood, neither white medicine nor the traditional ceremonies cure him completely, and he is in danger of being sent back to the VA hospital (or worse); the people are losing faith in him and using him as a scapegoat for problems that go much deeper than the war and much wider than his PTSD. Eventually, Tayo meets an eccentric medicine man named Betonie who prescribes several.

## Genre, Language, and Structure

*Ceremony* will always be shelved as a novel, though it combines prose and poetry, fiction and myth. N. Scott Momaday proposed to resolve the question of genre by simply calling *Ceremony* “a telling.” Silko narrates traditional Laguna stories in poems that she weaves throughout the otherwise prose narrative. These poems mirror and deepen the story of Tayo’s healing and provide a historical and mythical perspective to the contemporary challenges the community is facing.

While the poetry proper is formatted differently on the page, all of Silko’s language is poetic. She clearly enjoys the imagery that makes the landscape visible and palpable for the reader (or perhaps for herself: she wrote *Ceremony* in the cold of Alaska, imagining her Southwest home). There is a cutting edge to her poetry as well, however, and some readers may find her bluntness about Europeans reminiscent of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*.

The structure of *Ceremony* is influenced by both postmodern and native ideas about time, unity, and experience. In the spirit of *Ceremony* being a “telling,” a story in the oral tradition, it has no formal divisions like chapters, only section breaks. Several time frames run parallel in the narrative, and there are only contextual markers to signal where the characters are in space and time. Since the story covers events from Tayo’s birth, his upbringing, his war service, and various stages of recovery, the nonlinear structure can be challenging to untangle. This “confusion” seems to be the point, however, as it puts the reader in Tayo’s place in at least two ways: first, the Laguna sense of time is not linear, but rather circular; second, Tayo himself struggles to distinguish between places, times, and people. As Tayo struggles, so do we. As he becomes healed, perhaps we do too — and the novel itself becomes a ceremony.

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## Themes

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### Destruction

The earth is fragile and can be destroyed, and *Ceremony* explores what can only be considered the concerted effort to destroy life. As the novel begins, World War II, over now, is still going on inside Tayo's mind. The war technology he saw and the death he experienced — notably his cousin Rocky's — are haunting his dreams and sickening him in waking moments. The doctors diagnose him with "battle fatigue." It is battle fatigue that makes him think the Japanese colonel they ask him to kill is actually his beloved uncle Josiah. It is battle fatigue that makes it impossible for him to tell the difference between native Americans and Japanese, battle fatigue that makes him feel invisible and takes all borders from his memories, so that they entangle, the present melting into the past and vice versa.

From the Veterans Affairs hospital in Los Angeles — the white place with the white walls where he himself feels like white smoke — Tayo returns to the reservation, where destruction is built into the mentality of his family and his friends. His Auntie is nurtured by the idea that the culture has been destroyed by people like Tayo's mother, who slept with white men and mothered "half-breed" children. Without this tear in the culture's fabric she could not be the good Christian martyr she is always reminding Tayo she is. Auntie is not only fed by the destruction; she feeds it. She clings to Christianity, a colonizing force on the reservation, to prove her goodness, and rules her household with poisonous ideas about cultural purity that lead to shame (for Tayo and his mom) and further weakness in the community.

Tayo's friends Harley, Leroy, Emo, and Pinkie suffer from their own form of PTSD, not so much from the terrors of war but from exposure to the white world. Having been treated like whites when they wore their uniforms, they return to the reservation depressed by all they have lost — the land — and covetous of the white world. They spend their time numbing the pain with alcohol and reminiscing about the war, about the brief time they were treated like whites and lived in the white world: "Here they were, trying to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America the way they felt during the war. They blamed themselves for losing the new feeling; they never talked about it, but they blamed themselves just like they blamed themselves for losing the land the white people took. They never thought to blame white people for any of it; they wanted white people for their friends. They never saw that it was the white people who gave them that feeling and it was the white people who took it away again when the war was over."

Of course, shame at being Indian and envy of the white world are markers of a thoroughgoing colonialism, a colonialism that has successfully conquered the land and the mind. Colonialism done right — from the colonists' point of view — replaces native forms of knowledge with "science" and "technology." Rituals of killing designed to honor a deer for its sacrifice and recognize the web of ecology are considered superstition; the white way is cleaner, faster: treating animals like objects, killing people from afar, people whose faces you cannot even see. Colonial schooling destroys the culture by making young people ashamed of who they are. His family's

traditional knowledge and practices become embarrassing for Rocky, who sets his sights on success off of the reservation and studies in school to earn a scholarship. The desire to belong to the world with the books and the scientific knowledge leads him to enlist. The destruction here is literal — Rocky never makes it back from the Pacific. Tayo does, and the impact of colonialism follows him and impedes his healing: *No Indian medicine, the white doctors say; Maybe the ceremonies won't work because he's not pure Laguna, Auntie says.*

The destruction that threatens Tayo, his community, and the planet did not begin with colonialism, however. Colonialism is an effect of a deeper cause: the witchery. When Tayo questions Betonie about “what good Indian ceremonies can do against the sickness which comes from *their wars, and their bombs, their lies*” (emphasis added), Betonie responds with a crucial correction, one which changes the frame of reference we as readers and Tayo as protagonist have had for the source of destruction: “‘That is the trickery of the witchcraft,’ he said. ‘They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place.’”

What follows is *Ceremony*'s longest poem, the story of the witchery contest that resulted in the creation of the most powerful force ever unleashed on the world: the creation of “white skin people/like the belly of a fish/ covered with hair,” people who “grow away from the earth,” the sun, the plants, and the animals; who “see no life,” “only objects”; who “fear the world” and “destroy what they fear.” These people, the witches' most terrifying creation, will provide

*corpses for us  
blood for us  
killing killing killing killing.  
  
And those they do not kill  
will die anyway  
at the destruction they see  
at the loss  
at the loss of the children  
the loss will destroy the rest.  
  
Stolen rivers and mountains  
the stolen land will eat their hearts  
and jerk their mouths from the Mother.*

White colonization of Indian land, dead soldiers, the drought, the abuse of the earth, the discourse of racial and cultural purity, and the losses mourned by Tayo's friends — all are tools of the witchery. So, too, is the ultimate form of destruction, nuclear power:

*Up here  
in these hills  
they will find the rocks,  
rocks with veins of green and yellow and black.  
They will lay the final pattern with these rocks  
they will lay it across the world  
and explode everything.*

[She was] shamed by what they taught her in school about the deplorable ways of the Indian people; holy missionary white people who wanted only good for the Indians, white people who dedicated their lives to helping the Indians, these people urged her to break away from her home.

— From *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko



THINK

1. How do the traditional Laguna stories in the poetry help to illuminate the novel's narrative of evil and destruction?

REFLECT

2. The witchery separates people from one another and from the land, turning relationships between living things into relationships between objects. What "forces" could you name in your own context (or the world over) that work the witchery of objectification, numbing the feeling we have for other living things?

PRACTICE

3. The colonization of native lands and livelihoods is an ongoing evil. Do some research on oil companies and native water rights and share with your book group or on social media what you discover. Some geographical areas to research are North Dakota and Louisiana. What can you do to resist the colonization of clean water (which affects all of us)?

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## Healing

Tayo must be able to identify this witchery in order to heal; his healing process, like our reading process, involves learning who is to blame for the destruction.

His process begins in the VA hospital, where he begins to feel the outlines of his self again. But the white hospital cannot cure him because it sees only part of him: it sees only his battle fatigue, not the confusion of being caught between the white and native worlds. Likewise, old Ku'oosh's Scalp Ceremony cannot cure him because the Scalp Ceremony has not adapted to the changing ways of war to white ways of fighting: it is designed to cure those who know who and how many they have killed (those who have come close enough to take "scalps").

In Betonie, Tayo finds someone who is willing to see him fully and provide help consistent with the real state of the world, a world that experiences change, a world in which racial and cultural "purity" is a fiction. As Tayo walks through the elements of Betonie's ceremony, from the sand painting to sweating with the elders, Silko offers up so much wisdom about what it takes to feel whole again, whole in ourselves and whole as communities. Tayo is not just an individual fighting PTSD and the shame instilled by his Auntie. He is a symbol for the survival of his entire community; his healing reveals the ways in which the community needs to change as well.

In his journey to healing, Tayo must learn to trust others and make himself vulnerable. Initially, when he meets Betonie, he is wary. He sees the piles of newspapers, calendars, and phone books; he watches Betonie put his whisker in a box for safekeeping and thinks of bolting. Betonie senses this and tells him he can leave. They both must trust one another in order for the ceremony to work. Tayo chooses trust, and the more he trusts, the more he sees signs that he is healing.

Of course, part of trust is being able to trust oneself, and even after he has found the stars and the woman and is on the mountain, Tayo's self-doubt returns and must be overcome: "His chest was aching with anger. Whatever made him think he could do this? The woman under the apricot tree meant nothing at all; it was all in his own head. When they caught him, they'd send him back to the crazy house for sure. He was trapped now, tricked into trying something that could never work.

"He still had time to get back. He could pull the sections of wire together and twist the strands into place, and then ride like hell off the mountain. They'd never know who did it; they'd blame Mexicans from Marquez. It would be the smartest thing he could do. All the rest — old Betonie and his stargazing, the woman and her star-pattern blanket — all that was crazy, the kind of old-time superstition the teachers at Indian School used to warn him and Rocky about."

Tayo hears in his head the voices of Auntie and the voices of the colonial schools, convincing him not only that he is just not good enough but that his people are just not good enough. It is rare that a journey of healing progresses like the crow flies. There are setbacks. As they say in 12-step programs, relapse is part of recovery. The key is to persevere, and Tayo does.

One form perseverance must take is the insistence on one's own value. For Tayo such an insistence involves resistance both to colonial devaluing of native forms of knowledge and to his own community's devaluing of him as a half-breed. Tayo learns to value his position in between worlds as the healers who help him model the special skills of those who represent "transition" rather than borders. Both Betonie and Ts'eh have the eyes of mixed-breeds like Tayo, and as they embrace him, he learns to embrace himself.

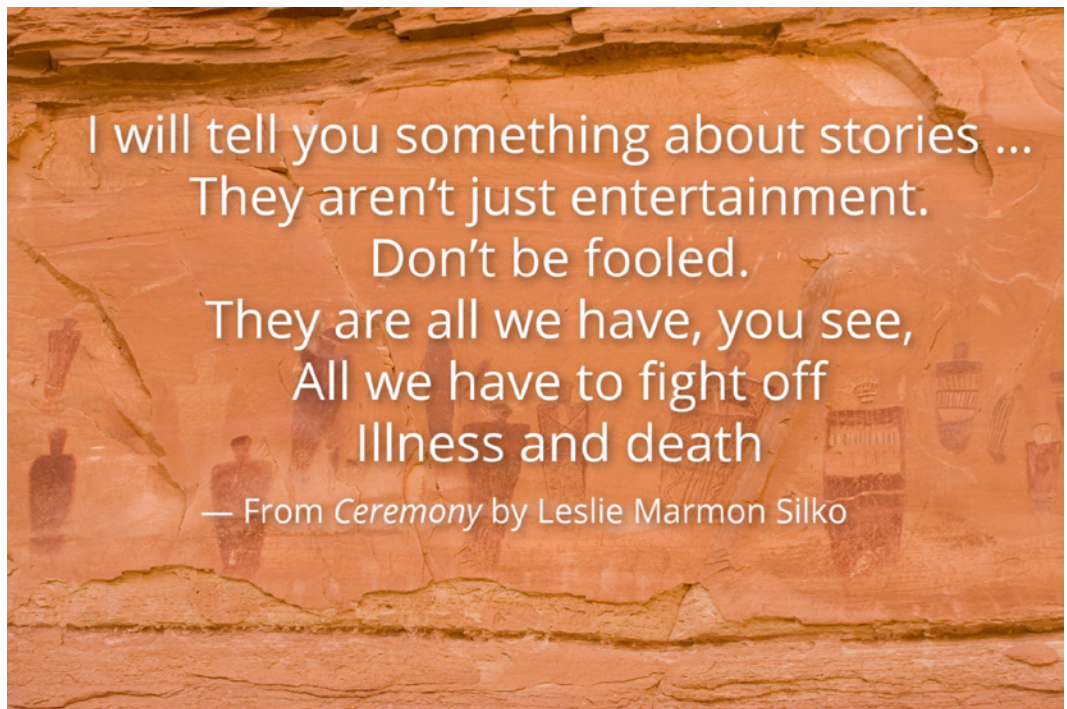
Crucially, Tayo realizes that healing requires change. He changes himself by learning to value his "in between" position; more importantly, though, the ceremonies themselves have to change with the people. The ceremonies have to acknowledge that borders and boundaries are static concepts ill-fitting for a fluid, hybrid world; Betonie's ceremonies, rather, acknowledge "transitions." All of life is about transitions, shifting practices, shifting identities, shifting meanings. Betonie's ceremonies work because they draw on tradition and adaptation to help Tayo gather what will give him strength for his transition back to health: the stars for direction, the woman for love and wisdom, the mountain for realization, and the cattle for connection.

However, even when it seems his ceremony is complete — after he has found the stars, the mountain, the woman, and the cattle — Tayo is not whole until he resists the urge to destroy the destroyers; he is not cured until he recognizes how the forces of evil want the story to end according to their plan. The final step in his ceremony was not mentioned by Betonie, but Tayo and Ts'eh both feel the forces of evil still whirling. Tayo's final test takes place in the uranium mine, the place from which the witches drew their final pattern, the pattern they will lay across the world to "explode everything."

This is ground zero; it is here that Tayo resists being drawn into the witchery's story, where he refuses to make "corpses for us/blood for us killing killing killing killing": "It had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way the witchery had wanted, savoring the yielding bone and membrane as the steel ruptured the brain. Their deadly ritual for the Autumn solstice would have been completed by him. He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud; and the Army doctors would say that the indications of this had been there all along, since his release from the mental ward at the Veterans' Hospital in Los Angeles. The white people would shake their heads, more proud than sad that it took a white man to survive in their world and that these Indians couldn't seem to make it. At home the people would blame liquor, the Army, and the war, but the blame on the whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies, reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves, for one of themselves they could not save."

When Tayo ends the story his way, his healing is complete. He creates a new story that is not the story of destruction. He thwarts the witches' ritual by refusing to provide bodies for them, refusing to engage in common, acceptable, and expected violence. And with that, he heals his community as well: "Whirling darkness/has come back on itself. / It keeps all its witchery to itself."





THINK

1. What was the importance of the cattle in terms of Tayo's healing? Did they have both a literal and symbolic impact? Explain.

REFLECT

2. What phase or step in the healing process did you most identify with? Why? Which step is most challenging for you, and why? What growth might flower from that most challenging step?

PRACTICE

3. The saviors in the story — Betonie, Ts'eh, and Tayo — are all marginalized to a degree because they are of mixed heritage. They represent hybrid, not "pure," racial identities. And yet they hold the keys to their culture's survival. They are the "outsiders" who see more clearly than those who are "inside" and resist change. How can we create communities that are built to listen to those who challenge and question by their very existence? How can we amplify the voices of those most affected by political and social intransigence?

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## Connection

Since the state of destruction is defined by disconnection, it only makes sense that the novel ultimately defines the state of health as defined by connection. In a way, Tayo had always been healthy, but he had no one to *confirm* this because he was surrounded by people who believed “the lie” of the witchery and the destroyers — Army doctors, his colonized Auntie, his deluded, patriotic friends. These people see Tayo as crazy because he can’t keep people, memories, and places separated into categories, into linear time: he cannot kill the Japanese colonel because he looks like Josiah; he cannot distinguish between where he is and where he was, between memory and the present. But this inability is a sign of his health, a sign that he is not a destroyer: “He cried the relief he felt in finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together — the old stories, the war stories, their stories — to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time.” Boundaries and separations are the work of the witchery; they cause wars and racism and suspicion and envy and hatred. Tayo was ahead of himself! But, even though he saw reality in a healthy way, this alienated him from his community, which could not see. For him to be truly healthy, he had to bring the community along. He had to connect with the elders, as he does after the solstice, through the story of his healing.

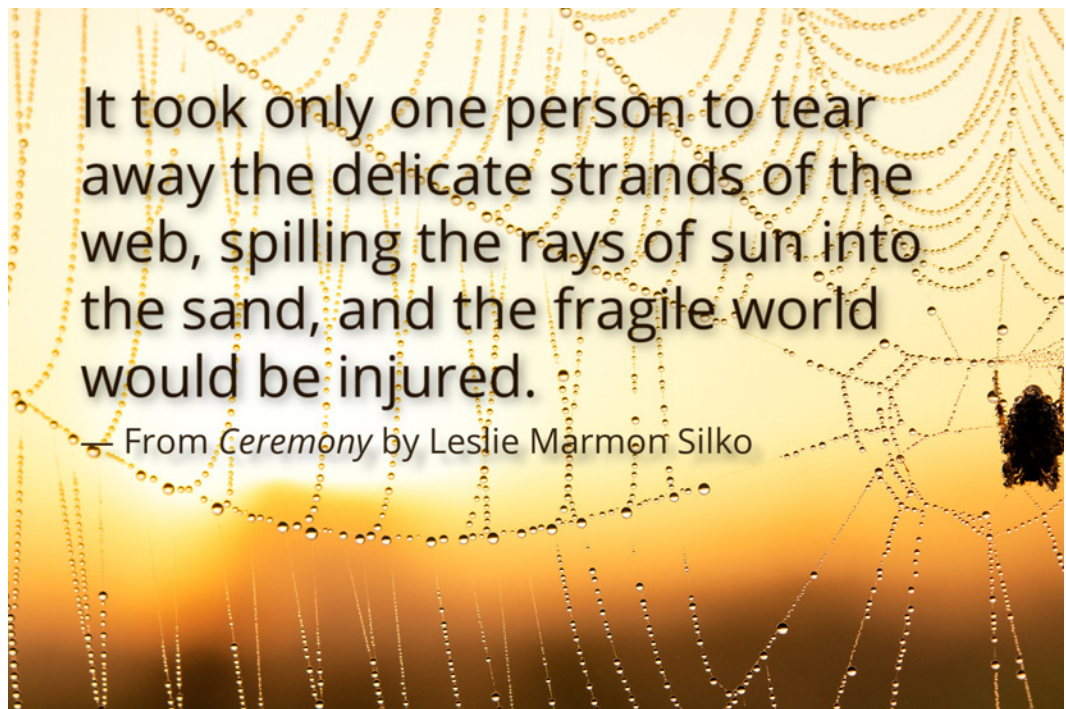
When Tayo finishes the ceremony, he is able to fully articulate the reality of the world, to save it from the lies of the witchery. Before, he was unable to embody and promote the healing power of connection he felt inside. Once he gathers the stars, the woman, the mountain, and the cattle, he gathers himself together as well — mind, body, and spirit — and is able to reflect on the meaning and purpose of his experience: “The dreams had been terror at loss, at something lost forever; but nothing was lost; it was always retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself. He had lost nothing. The snow-covered mountain remained, without regard to titles of ownership or the white ranchers who thought they possessed it. They logged the trees, they killed the deer, bear, and mountain lions, they built their fences high; but the mountain was far greater than any or all these things. The mountain outdistanced their destruction, just as love had outdistanced death. The mountain could not be lost to them, because it was in their bones; Josiah and Rocky were not far away. They were close; they had always been close. And he loved them then as he had always loved them, the feeling pulsing over him as strong as it had ever been. They loved him that way; he could still feel the love they had for him. The damage that had been done had never reached this feeling. This feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained.”

Each cut of the barbed wire fence releases Tayo to this healing realization: possession, too, is witchery, the witchery of ideology turned into common sense. To be freed from the lie of possession is to be freed *from* loss and freed *to* love. It is a healing that leads to more healing.

One of the specific manifestations of connectedness in the novel is the connectedness of animals to their environments, the sense that they are part of their environment

in a way that is difficult for human beings: “Tayo thought about animals then, horses and mules, and the way they drifted with the wind. Josiah said that only humans had to endure anything, because only humans resisted what they saw outside themselves. Animals did not resist. But they persisted, because they became part of the wind.”

Ts’eh is able to gather all of the cattle together — a key to the ceremony — simply by thinking like an animal does, by working with the environment rather than resisting it: “They went just like the runoff goes after a rainstorm, running right down the middle of the arroyo into the trap. That’s why it’s there. Livestock come down off the mountain that way. All I had to do was go down and close the gate behind them.” To reverse what the witchery has done, one has to restore life to whatever has been objectified, to approach human, animal, and environment with the assumption that feeling and interdependence bring health to us all.



THINK

1. Why does Tayo feel that he has caused the drought? What allows him to take this fear seriously?

REFLECT

2. One of the last poems says, “It isn’t very easy to fix things up again.” Why is it so much easier to hurt than to heal?

PRACTICE

3. Set aside 15 minutes for an encounter with an animal; quietly and meditatively watch their behavior. You might sit with a pet, or go to the zoo, or even watch a nature video. What can we learn by assuming that animals have something to teach us? Notice how you feel after spending time concentrating on animal behavior.

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**Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:**

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

*Tenth of December* by George Saunders

*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson

*Puddnhead Wilson* by Mark Twain

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*The Partly-Cloudy Patriot* by Sarah Vowell

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

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**The Practicing Democracy Project** offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

**For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](https://www.practicingdemocracy.net).**

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