

A Life in Light: Meditations on Impermanence

Mary Pipher

About The Book

Throughout our lives, we will all face challenges, loss, and despair. Yet, as Mary Pipher shows in her new memoir-in-essays, we can also experience incredible beauty and deep joy. Even in times of great struggle, we can choose to focus on the things that soothe and replenish us. It is simply a matter of attention.

In *A Life in Light*, Pipher offers insight into coping with life's inevitable impermanence. Drawing on her expertise as a developmental psychologist as well as her personal experiences as a resilient child, loyal friend, young mother, orphaned daughter, and loving grandmother, she explores ways we can all cultivate light in dark times.

For Discussion

1. Mary Pipher begins the book by describing her first memory: light dancing in the leaves of a tall tree in her grandmother's front yard. She writes, "I didn't have the language, but I knew that what I was watching was beautiful." How did that experience inform her life going forward? What is your earliest memory? Is it positive or negative, and does it carry this kind of significance for you?
2. In the introduction, Pipher describes resilience as the ability to find light in dark times. "We build it by our attitudes, efforts, and coping skills." How, specifically, did Pipher's attitudes, efforts, and coping skills lead to her ability to be resilient?
3. Pipher's parents were complicated figures in her life. How did you feel about them when they were introduced in "A Motherless Child" and "My Father's Shirt"? How did you feel about them by the end of the book?
4. When she was a child, swimming filled Pipher with a deep sense of love, safety, and well-being. What was it about swimming that generated these feelings in her?
5. In "A Best Friend," Pipher writes about the importance of friendships in childhood and says that having a best friend and confidant at age nine changed her life. How did her friendship with Jeanie change her life at this age? How did your own childhood friends help shape you and, perhaps, change your own life?
6. Pipher writes about the importance of animal companions in childhood, both wild and domesticated. What did these early encounters with animals teach her about herself, humanity, and the world?
7. Books were a solace for Pipher in her formative years. What books helped construct your identity beyond the bounds of family?
8. In "House Calls," Pipher's mom explains that parents often gave their children what they never had, not necessarily what the children wanted or needed. Have you seen this happen in your own, or someone else's, life?
9. Pipher's grandmother, her fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Oliver, and her pottery teacher Mrs. Van Cleave all made her feel truly seen. How did these adults help shape her into the woman she would become?
10. Working at the A&W taught Pipher a great deal about the world and herself. What did she learn there about people, and about work?
11. While in San Francisco with her parents, Pipher is able to see how she is both like her parents and different from them. She realizes that part of growing up and being ready to

- leave home is being able to accept these differences without judgment. What does she realize about her parents in this section?
12. How does Pipher react to the death of each of her parents?
 13. Fame is not what Pipher wanted, but she got it anyway. What does she find challenging about it, and how does that affect her future life choices?
 14. Light at different times of the day penetrates the book. Quiet dawns, bright midday sun, sunsets, and moonlight feature often. Why has light been so significant to Pipher?
 15. How did the pandemic change your relationship to your home, and to the word *home*?
 16. In the last section, Pipher distinguishes between ordinary happiness (which depends on the circumstances of the day) and deep happiness (which is independent of conditions). She says, “It is a matter of attention.” What allowed Pipher to offer that attention? Do you agree?
 17. The Japanese word *komorebi* appears throughout the book, referring to “the interplay of light and leaves as sunlight shines through trees.” Pipher says that it can also “refer to a melancholic longing for a person, place, or thing that is far away. Or it can refer to impermanence. Dappled light shows us that what is here now will be gone in an instant. Nothing stays the same.” How does this word deepen our understanding of impermanence? How does it relate to Pipher’s feelings about resilience?

Recommended Reading:

Women Rowing North by Mary Pipher; *The Art of Living* by Thich Nhat Hanh; *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* by Pema Chodron; *No Time Like the Present: Finding Freedom, Love, and Joy Right Where You Are* by Jack Kornfield; *Upstream: Selected Essays* by Mary Oliver; *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* by Florence Williams; *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant; *Educated: A Memoir* by Tara Westover