

“Swimming with Elephants” Book Club Questions

1. Medical education left Sarah feeling ill prepared to speak with her dying patient. Did this surprise you? Whose responsibility is it to address the spiritual needs of patients in traditional medicine? Does your physician address your spiritual needs in some way? What do you wish they knew about you?
2. Have you ever wanted to comfort or help another person but didn't know how? What did that feel like? How would you approach that situation now? Do you know somebody who is an expert at comforting those who suffer? How do they do it?
3. Sarah felt inspired to buy and renovate a new home when she was feeling completely lost. She thought it might bring her and her husband, Mark, closer. Have you ever tried to fill an emotional void by making a dramatic physical change? How?
4. Sarah was advised by her life coach, Michelle, to do things that felt good to her, like decoupage, working part-time, and (eventually) downsizing their home. All of these changes obviously had an impact on her husband and children. Do you think it was right for Sarah to follow her feel good in those ways? Could those pursuits be harmful? Do you think Sarah should have done something differently and if so, why?
5. In South Africa, Sarah and Suzi met with a shaman or sangoma to ask for divine help. Have you ever sought sacred guidance from another? How did it feel? Was it helpful? If you haven't, and would like to, what question would you ask first?
6. Sarah finds subtle yet powerful messages from the wild animals she encounters in real life, in her dreams, and on her journeys. Do you believe that we can receive messages from Beasties and if so, what's the most significant message you have ever received? Do you know who your core beastie or power animal is? What do you love most about them?
7. Sarah meets a very special spirit elephant named Alice, who becomes an important companion for her on her hero's journey. What did Alice do for Sarah? Do you have a direct relationship with the divine that feels close and companionable like that or how is your relationship different?
8. In Shamanism, mental illness is often viewed as an initiation or opportunity for a person to come back into balance and to discover a gift that they can share with their community. Can you think of a person you know (or famous person) who had a bout (or bouts) with mental illness who shared a powerful gift with the world? How might this view of mental illness shift your approach to a friend or stranger who is struggling with bipolar, depression, anxiety, or other challenge?

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9. Sarah has a soul retrieval done for her by a fellow physician during a shamanic training. Do you believe in the idea of “soul loss”? Looking back over your life, what parts did you lose and when? Have they returned to you now? If so, how did you get them back?

10. Mark and Sarah are a unique couple in they are both seekers. How would you respond if you had a partner who decided they needed to take a sabbatical and they weren't sure they were in the right line of work anymore? How much freedom do you allow yourself to explore your options? If your philosophy differs from your partner's, how do you bridge that gap?

11. When Sarah travels to India, she goes on a pilgrimage. Have you ever gone on a trip in hopes to gain deeper understanding about something? What was the result? If you could go on a pilgrimage this year, where would you go and why?

12. Sarah met her shadow and it looked like a disturbing blow up version of Dolly Parton. If your shadow was a person, who might your shadow resemble? Is it important to acknowledge your shadow self and if so, why?

13. Sarah felt drawn to the Kumbh Mela even though she was raised in the Midwest in a Christian household. Why do you think so many non-religious people are drawn to go on pilgrimages to India, to the Camino de Santiago in Spain, or to Mecca?

14. What do you think about Nathan, the teacher or guru figure in Khahurajo? Have you ever met a spiritual teacher that others were gaga over, but you just didn't “get”? How did that feel? What do you think of the idea of devoting yourself to a particular human being in order to become enlightened? What are the potential gifts or pitfalls?

15. Sarah helped Mollie to become more of herself and more at peace at the end of her life. Were you surprised that Mollie was not asking for a complete cure of her cancer? Do you think that we need to be healed in order to die peacefully? What does healing mean to you?

BONUS QUESTION: Do you know what you need in order to truly be well? Where do you limit the love or goodness in your life? How could you open up just a bit more? How good are you willing to let it get?