

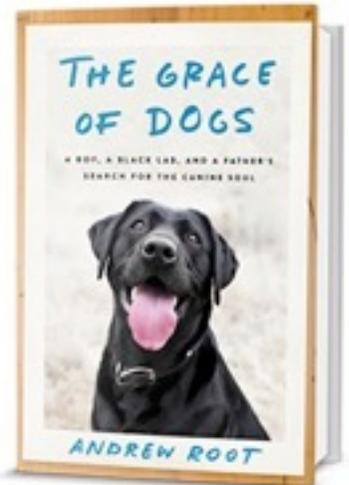
# THE GRACE OF DOGS

A BOY, A BLACK LAB, AND A FATHER'S

SEARCH FOR THE CANINE SOUL

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

#GRACEOFDOGS | ON SALE JUNE 20, 2017 | < CONVERGENT



### Dogs, right?

There's nothing quite like watching a child struggling to find truth to prompt a parent to do the same. When it comes to spiritual things, we tend to leave some of the corners of our personal theology untied until we find one of our kids stuck in one of those very corners, and suddenly we wish we'd cleaned up a bit. This was the case with the death of our beloved Kirby, and I quickly found myself in the hunt for answers not only for my son, but for myself.

My hope is that this discussion guide will deepen the meaningfulness of *The Grace of Dogs* not only for whatever small group you're reading it with, but for you, and for your family, and for your relationship with all the dogs to come.

- Andy

### USING THIS GUIDE

We're not imposing a specific timeframe for this discussion guide, and that's intentional. There are fifteen chapters in *The Grace of Dogs* and it's unlikely that your group will plow through it all in one sitting or spend 15 weeks tiptoeing across its pages. An average speed might shoot for discussing 3 chapters a week over 5 weeks, but we're leaving that up to you.

If you're leading the group, be a good facilitator: your input is helpful, but don't dominate the conversation. As the leader, there is the chance that you'll have read most closely, so use that strength to guide the conversation. Keep an eye on whatever amount of time you've designated for discussion—dog stories have a way of compounding themselves in a group. Don't cut anybody off, but be diligent in moving ahead when it's time.

If you're participating, the *reading* is obviously important. You'll be able to better contribute to your group and more capable of receiving what others have to say if you're caught up. With that said, don't let a week where the reading got away from you keep you from participating. Being a person who cares about dogs and spirituality is three-fourths of the equation in digesting *The Grace of Dogs*. Come participate anyway and catch up in the coming week.

Most of all, enjoy it!

## CHAPTER 1: KIRBY LEAVES

Obviously, we start with our sad dog stories - what resonated with you from Kirby's last moments at the vet's office? Why is it so hard to lose a pet?

What other deep emotional connections to your dogs come to mind?

We see grief hit each member of Andy's family a little differently - what place does grief have in your spiritual life? Do you try to dwell in it for a moment or season, or do you try to rush through it? Why?

What was holy about Owen's personal liturgy over Kirby?

What was important in Owen's mind about being the last thing Kirby saw?

How have you communicated love to a pet near its end?

## CHAPTER 2: THE ORIGINS OF KIRBY

Dogs inevitably cost unexpected money, either up front or in the long run. Spend a few minutes sharing your over-spend stories, whether in acquisition, medical care, or something else.

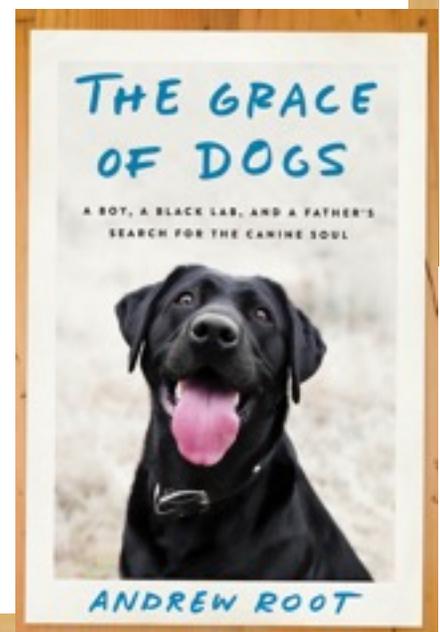
What stages of your life are marked by "when we had (dog name)"? We mark time with dwellings and cars too, but what's different about remembering a season of time spent with an animal?

How has a dog unexpectedly changed your habits, routines, or behavior? Andy's dog refused to run with him - when have you had to face up to a pet having a mind of its own?

Name your dog's favorite family members in order, from "most favorite" on down. Why do dogs seem to have genuine preference between people? They'll take a treat from anybody, but where does loyalty stem from?

What is it about dogs?

Why do our hearts seem to live and die with them?



## CHAPTER 3: BOUND BY SPIRITUAL TIES

Discuss the Lorenz quote from the first page of chapter 3. What do you make of the idea that your dog may have spiritual ties with you? Have you felt that in the past? How is the dynamic between you and your dog different than that which you share with other animals?

This may be beyond your level of things-to-care-about, but what theological challenges arise in the idea of personhood (being human vs being animal) if there is a two-way spiritual connection between us and dogs? (For example, we can connect to God through nature, but that's a one-way street.)

How do you start a spiritual quest, like Andy did in exploring the spiritual nature of our friendship with dogs? When you have a spiritual question, how do you dig in?

What spiritual/theological mysteries have you taken on? Do you find that seeking to be thrilling, challenging, or frightening?

At the risk of estranging some of you, cats probably are NASCAR fans. But how do you feel about the closing quote - do you think that dogs can seek beyond their own mind in an effort to connect with ours?

## CHAPTER 4: MINDLESS, FURRY MACHINES

What are some of your favorites from the dog-shaming meme Andy mentioned? (If your group is unfamiliar with it, take a moment to check it out online.) What other internet content grabs the eye of dog owners?

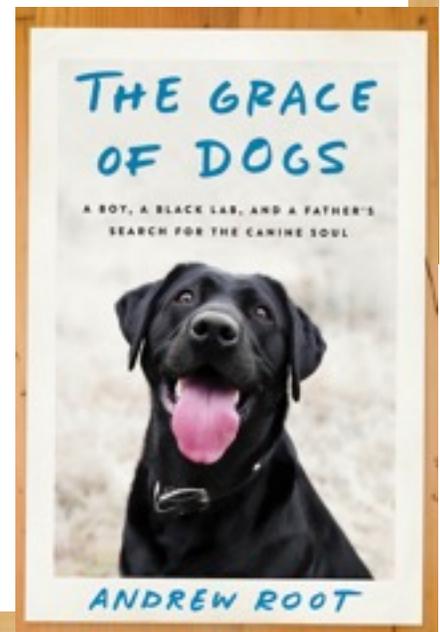
Descartes states that what makes us uniquely us is the ability to doubt, and therefore possess the ability to reason. What evidence have you seen that indicates dogs can or can't reason on their own?

Do you feel like dogs are behind us logically (like Stanley Spadowski) or ahead of us (like Kramer)?

Is our own behaviorism any different than that of dogs? Our dogs are attuned to prompts from us; what does it say about us that our behaviorism is driven non-life forms: Amazon, Netflix, or other consumer interests?

Do we really engage the spiritual, or do we just operate in a more complex system of behaviorism than dogs?

What is difficult about processing rationally and emotionally at the same time?



## CHAPTER 5: IT HAPPENS ONLY FACE-TO-FACE

Describe your friendship with your dog. How do you show love? How do you receive love from your dog?

What desire was driving Owen's prayer for a dream about Kirby? What was he seeking?

Does it make any difference if love between beings turns out to simply be a behavioral response? What does a spiritual component add to that?

What does eye contact contribute to a conversation - or even a silent interaction - between two people? What can be communicated about emotion, trust, or intent? What do you make of the fact that dogs look to our faces as a source of communication?

On a less serious note, and somewhat in reference to the meme we talked about in chapter 4, what has your dog communicated with its face to you? Joy? Guilt? Love?

As much time as our dogs spend enraptured by their owner's faces, why do you suppose dogs don't sit around gazing into the eyes of other dogs? What does relationship with a human offer that a dog cannot receive from a dog?

## CHAPTER 6: WINDOWS TO THE SOUL

Spend a few minutes sharing stories of your dogs seeming to possess extra-sensory perception: when has your dog responded to unexpressed sadness, distress, or even physical pain you're experiencing?

What are some life events your dog has "been through with you"? Are there things your dog has endured with you? What is spiritual about that companionship?

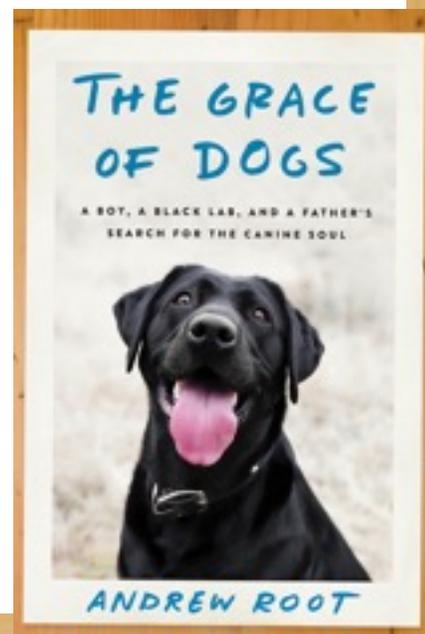
When have you avoided eye contact with another person? Why does letting someone look into your eyes create a feeling of vulnerability? What is shared in an exchanged gaze?

What do you think that dogs are seeking when they look into our faces?

This should take a minute: what is spirit to you, and what is spirituality?

How can the capacity to connect deeply with another person be misused?

How can we avoid misusing or abusing spiritual connections?



## CHAPTER 7: THE SURPRISING POWER OF CANINE COMPASSION

Share stories of when you've witnessed tension in a situation dissolve around the arrival of a kind spirit. (We're mostly talking about dogs, but babies are pretty good at this, too.)

What is it about this kind of presence that can so quickly engage a whole room? Why is it unifying?

When have you been surprised by an overwhelming feeling of empathy? How is empathy more personal than sympathy? How does empathy move to bonding in relationships?

What does play look like in relationships where actual playing doesn't take place?

What's the strangest animal you've ever heard of becoming someone's pet? How did they transcend the ordinary barriers of domestication? (Search engines may be your friend here.)

If you had to choose, in which specific environment would you most want the empathy of a dog?

When have you been caught emotionally off guard by a moment of transcendence in a relationship?

## CHAPTER 8: BONDING FOREVER

If you've experienced this, share some of your favorite - though bittersweet - memories of moments when you most missed your dog in the days and weeks after its death.

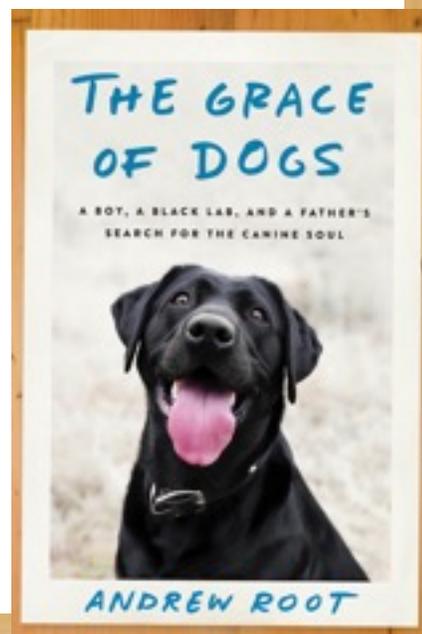
Apart from a relationship with a pet, when have you experienced a severed bond? What effect did it have on you?

Talk through this thought from the book: "Without humans, there would be no dogs." What do you make of that? Even lost dogs seem quickly bent on finding a new owner. What do you think would change in the nature of a dog that never reconnected with a person? What changes might that effect in the spiritual nature of the dog we've been discussing?

Every now and then you do see a friendly bunch of dogs trotting around together, usually just two or three. Just for grins: what do you suppose they're thinking or doing? What is this temporary bond?

We talked earlier about your dog having a favorite person in your family. What forms that bond? Is it at random, or due to something specific in the relationship? Does your dog divide your family into roles, perhaps playing more with one, being protective of another, or saving its cuddliest self for the favorite?

Have you ever had a dog's personality just not work out with your family? What happened there?



## CHAPTER 9: DOGGY PLAY AS SOUL TALK

Share your favorite kinds of play that you and your family enjoy with your dog. Get over pretending you don't talk out loud to your dog: what do you say that winds your dog up? What are its favorite games? What kinds of play does your dog take initiative in starting?

It's not all gravy - when are bliss and pleasure absent from your relationship with your dog? What's going on, spiritually speaking, when those gaps occur in our human relationships?

We all play the prank Lucy plays on Charlie Brown with our dogs (probably not with a football, though). What's your favorite trick to play on your dog? How long will your dog put up with it?

Does your dog "let you win" at games?

What physical signals do you and your dog use to communicate with each other?

In any relationship, what's holy about moving beyond empathy and bonding into play?

## CHAPTER 10: A HEALING PRESENCE

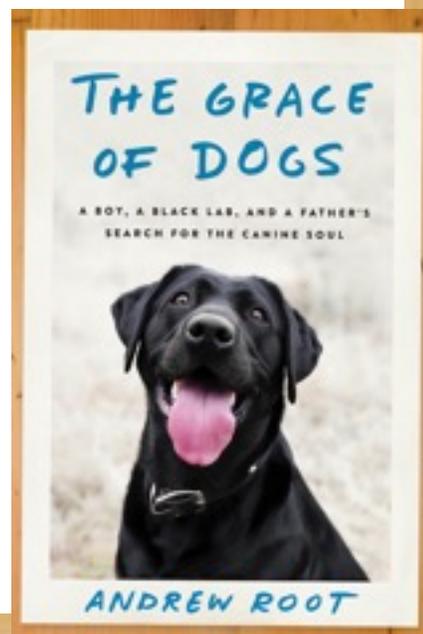
Share your home's dog boundaries: inside or outside? Allowed on the bed, or no? Welcome on the couch, or "bag dog!"?

When have you experienced a healing moment with a dog - something that restored your soul just when you needed it?

What different roles do service animals play in the lives of people they care for? How is it that a non-human companion can offer fulfilling relationship qualities?

How have you seen children interact with dogs in even more meaningful ways than adults do?

How do dogs invite us into a deeper sense of Sabbath?



## CHAPTER 11: COULD IT BE LOVE THEY'RE FEELING?

Before jumping in to this chapter's questions, go around your group and have everyone share how they would define love? What is love? What makes it possible? What makes it real? What makes it fade, sometimes?

Obviously love isn't about showing off or finding pride in it, but when have your actions shown extraordinary love for another person? If it's more comfortable - when has someone shown extraordinary love to you?

What are your dog's "trigger words," the ones that send them into a spinning circle of excitement and anticipation? What tricks have you come up with to avoid triggering your dog at times?

What does it say about dogs that they seem capable of interpreting not just words or gestures, but also emotion?

How do you know your dog loves you?

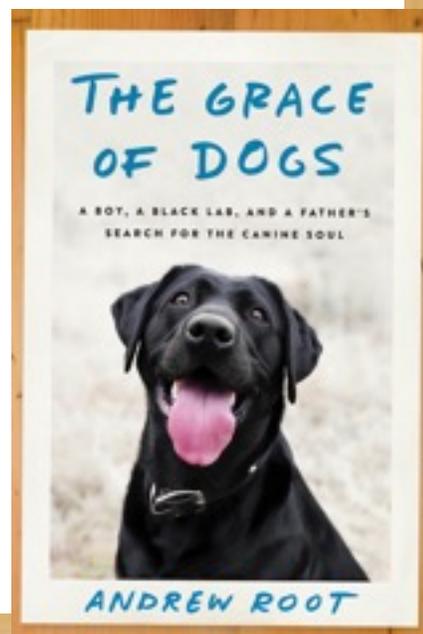
## CHAPTER 12: BOBBY AND THE "RIGHTEOUS" DOGS OF EGYPT

When have you witnessed a dog showing humanizing love or care to someone that wasn't receiving it from people? What does this (or Levinas story from the prison camp) say about the ability of dogs to transcend our social constructs and love all equally? What does it say that we can't seem to do the same?

Do you think that dogs are capable of pursuing righteousness? Why?

If dogs are capable of righteous acts, what culpability is there for people who interfere with that instinct in dogs - training them to fight or attack, essentially thwarting their natural instinct to seek beauty and wholeness in all people?

What do you find inspiring about dogs? If you watch local news, they generally string the viewer along for 23 minutes with the promise of a human interest story. About a third of the time there's a dog involved - why are they capable of things we find heartwarming and noteworthy?



## CHAPTER 13: A STORY FROM THE CAVE OF DREAMS

It's easy to forget that humans weren't always as domestically inclined as we are now. What parallels can you draw between the progress of humanity and the gradual appearance of dogs as distinctly different animals than wolves?

How have you memorialized your pets in the past? What is holy about that returning of an animal to God?

Drawing from the story about wolves relationship with humans beginning with a shared food source, and the likelihood of wolves following humans back to their dwellings and watching them prepare meat - what examples can you think of where your dog learned something about you strictly by observing your behavior? In what ways did their behavior exhibit that they had learned something from you?

How does sharing food enhance or change our human relationships? What food-sharing habits do you have with your dog?

How has the simple act of shared presence changed your relationship with your dog? What is sacred or transcendent about that?

## CHAPTER 14: THE GRACE OF DOGS

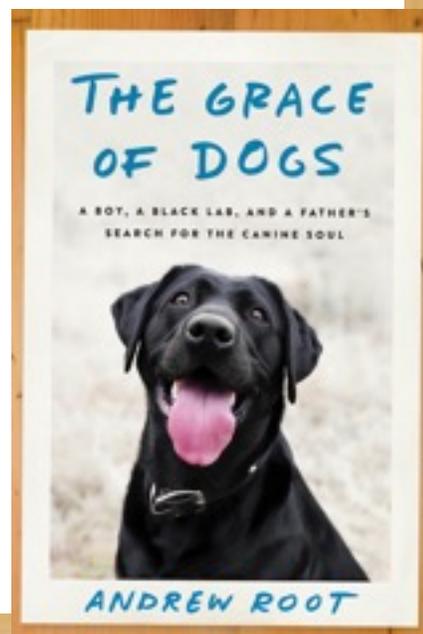
Dogs in heaven: Ready, set, go - what does your group think?

You could the rest of your time together unpacking this phrase: if "God loses nothing that God loves," what does that mean for humanity, regardless of our response to God? To animals? All of nature and creation?

What beliefs do you hold to by faith, even if you can't fully work them out in your mind? What's beautiful about that aspect of faith? What's troubling?

If a child asked you if dogs go to heaven, how would you answer? What if there was a follow up question: "But why?" How do you answer?

How would you define "the grace of dogs"?



## CHAPTER 15: KHALEESI ARRIVES

What is it about love that makes us willing, sometimes eager, to love again - even if we've experienced loss in love?

What do you long for the most when you're grieving?

How do you invest differently at the beginning of a new relationship than you did near the end of another?

What's the process for choosing a new pet name in your home?

The new puppy went straight for Owen's face - what's holy in that? How do you show eagerness in new relationships? What hesitations do you have that dogs seem capable of skipping right past?

## APPENDIX: "DO DOGS GO TO HEAVEN?" AND OTHER QUESTIONS

In the appendix to the book, I've listed the most common questions I received while talking with people leading up to and during the writing of *The Grace of Dogs*. I've also included my answers, but thought you might enjoy processing these same questions with your group. I've listed the questions here for convenience, but it may be helpful to your conversation if your group has read through the appendix first:

Do you think dogs have a soul?

Do dogs sin, then, or are they innocent?

Will dogs live eternally in the afterlife?

So...what about cats? (At the very least, be sure your group consults my answer on this one.)

But what about other animals? Do they too have a spiritual connection to us?

