



GOOD SOIL

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Dear reader,

It means so much to me that you'd spend time with *Good Soil*. Though it's a deeply personal story, I hope that you'll also find it to be a hospitable one. I don't think that the questions I ask or the challenges I've wrestled with are particularly unique. In fact, so much of what I explore in this book—a yearning to find belonging, a longing to make sense of what seems nonsensical, a desire to cultivate hope—is pretty universal.

A wise friend once told me that, after a work has been written, it doesn't belong to the writer anymore. You are, in a sense, a cocreator of the story, because you will read it through your own eyes, bringing to the text your particular life experiences and your individual set of strengths and frailties, knowledge and wisdom. This discussion guide is meant to provide you some companionship along your way through *Good Soil*.

If some of these questions make you uncomfortable, do not be afraid. If there's one that hits a particular nerve, you might want to set it aside and come back to it. If you're discussing these as a group, you shouldn't feel that answering aloud is mandatory. But as you react to what I've written and find intersections between my journey and your own, I hope that you'll be bold in your questioning and candid in your reflections. Maybe there's an image that moves you, for reasons that have nothing to do with the story I tell. Maybe something I write revives a memory that had been lost. Maybe you fiercely disagree with my perspective. All of this is wonderful, and good, and welcome.

Especially if you enjoy *Good Soil*, it would be a gift to me if you could share a review online and/or tell a friend about the book. If you have reflections to share with me, I always love hearing from readers. I'm reachable via email at jeff@byjeffchu.com and via old-fashioned post at P.O. Box 68565, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516.

Again, thank you so much for reading *Good Soil*. I hope that you'll finish its pages feeling just a little more hopeful and just a bit more loved than you did when you began.

With gratitude and in hope,



AUTUMN

1. Jeff Chu contemplates his surroundings and station in life and asks himself: “What makes a person matter? Where do I belong?” How would you answer these questions for yourself?
2. For Chu, fried rice is more than just a dish. It’s a kind of comfort food that stirs happy memories and grounds him in his grandmother’s love. What is a food or a dish that serves this purpose for you?
3. Loneliness and disillusionment can happen even in the midst of what might look like “success” to the outside world. Have you experienced that kind of disconnect between how people perceive your life and how you feel? If so, what were the circumstances?
4. Chu shares about and explores his Chinese heritage throughout the book. How does his time at the Farminary help him reconcile his heritage with his personal and spiritual growth?
5. In one of Chu’s seminary classes, the professors ask the students to name the soils they come from. Chu writes, “To name the soils that you come from is to acknowledge that you were not self-made, because there is no such thing as a self-made human. It places you in the context of an ecosystem. It confesses that you are a creature—simply, someone created by forces beyond you—which is to say reared and scarred and sanded and formed. It admits that you are not some nebula floating in the ether but that you have roots and are inescapably interdependent with the world around you.” What are the soils you come from?

WINTER

1. Ancient Chinese poetry about the plum, which bursts into blossom in the deep mid-winter, encourages Chu to think about unlikely signs of hope in the midst of hardship. When and where have you experienced a plum blossom in your life?
2. For Chu, Nate’s teaching about the Sabbath and about rest—that it is pure grace, not something that is earned—is groundbreaking and paradigm-shifting. How do you perceive rest? Have you seen it as something that you earn? And what does “rest” look and feel like to you?
3. For Chinese people, the Lunar New Year feast is the most auspicious meal of the year, with a menu full of “lucky” food. What’s a food that, in your home and at your table, is seen as a sign of luck or that is associated with goodness?
4. Chu writes about confronting in himself the idea that if he somehow proves himself to be enough—good enough, sinless enough, hardworking enough, kind enough, positive enough, virtuous enough—he might somehow be rewarded for it. Have you been prone to the same temptation? If so, what has that looked like in your life?

SPRING

1. Name some fears that you would like to send to the spiritual compost pile.
2. Name some hopes that you would like to hold onto for the future.
3. Nate, the Farminary director, comes from a strong Mennonite background, which expresses itself most flavorfully through dumplings and poppyseed cake. What foods in your life most remind you of the culture(s) from which you come? What recipes have been handed down—or do you wish you had?
4. Chu writes that he, like the chickens that are being raised at the farm, is a hybrid. In his case, he's mostly Chinese but a tiny bit of his heritage is Portuguese. But even beyond DNA, we are all drawing on so many different cultural influences nowadays. What cultures have contributed most to your life? What are the key components of your own heritage?
5. Do you relate to Chu's epiphany that, in an effort to belong, he had instead simply made himself useful? If so, how have you tried to make yourself useful to others?

SUMMER

1. The farmhands are asked to raise and then help slaughter chickens as part of their time at the Farminary. If you've hunted or slaughtered poultry or livestock, how does that process feel to you, and what does it mean to you? If you have never done it, and especially if you're a meat eater, would you be willing to do so, and why or why not?
2. Chu writes candidly about struggling to love his body. What is a part of your body that you love? What is a part of your body that you struggle to love, and why?
3. "I do nothing to keep breathing," Chu writes. "I do nothing for my heart to keep pumping, for blood to keep coursing through my veins. I do nothing for the neurons in my brain to keep firing. I do nothing to keep my fingers typing these words." He lists all these things as signs of ordinary grace. What's a meaningful sign of ordinary grace in your life?
4. Trace our ancestries far back enough, and most, if not all, of us will find some agrarian roots—farmers, hunters, foragers, people who live off the land. Where in your life do you see some evidence, however seemingly insignificant, of your agrarian roots? What have you inherited, or perhaps returned to, that was part of your people's story?
5. Chu writes about the reluctance of the farm's CSA shareholders to try long beans, a vegetable with which they are unfamiliar. What's a food that you might have been reluctant to try—or that you actually disliked—that you have come to enjoy over time? How did that shift in perspective happen?
6. After the baby goat August arrives at the Farminary, Chu forges an unexpected kinship with the youngster. Think of a time in your life when you were surprised by friendship. What were the circumstances, and how did it happen?

7. In the pond at the farm, Chu repeatedly encounters herons. In her poem “Some Herons” Mary Oliver visualized two of these birds as, respectively, a “preacher” and a “poet.” Can you think of a non-human creature that has, in some way, been a preacher or a poet in your life?

AUTUMN

1. Chu wrestles with the concept of “good soil,” particularly in the context of the parable of the sower. How do you understand “good soil”? What room in your conception of “good soil” is there for processes of change and growth?
2. What does this book have to say about the nature of strength and resilience? You may wish to reflect on this quote from the chapter “Ax”: “A knot can form on a tree where a branch has been broken, where the wood has been attacked by a fungus, or where the tree has otherwise been hurt. It’s a coping mechanism: The wood becomes denser as a means of survival. A knot signals not only weakness but also strength, not only injury but also resilience.”
3. Talk about a time when you chose to do something even though you knew you were bad at it, much as Chu tries to wield the ax at the farm to chop wood.
4. Nate, the farm director, asks Chu one day, “What do you want?” He then says: “I have no idea what God will do with your desires. But I have to believe that God cares very much about what you want.” How would you candidly and bravely answer the question, “What do you want?”?
5. Chu talks about being able to express, through food, feelings that he struggles to name in words. What’s one wordless way in which you have expressed love or know how to show your affection for someone else?

WINTER

1. In the wintertime, people stop visiting the farm, believing everything to be dead. Where do you find beauty in midwinter? What signs and symbols give you encouragement?
2. Chu talks about one of his dearest friends asking what he calls “a loathsome question”: “How near does God feel to you right now?” How would you answer that question?
3. One day, when there’s plenty of hard work to be done in the garden, Chu instead procrastinates and opts for something easier and more relaxing. What are your go-to acts of procrastination and activities for stalling?
4. Chu writes about finding the remnants of a dead tomato, including the seeds, which he plants as a sign of his hope for healing in a friendship. Reflect briefly on a relationship that, in your life, could be represented by those tomato seeds.

SPRING

1. Chu reflects on the shockingly loud seasonal calls of the frogs known as spring peepers. What's a seasonal sign that reminds you of spring, with all its new growth and possibility?
2. Chu writes about the table as a place where his family gathers no matter what: "Failure to show up for meals was inconceivable . . . At the table, whatever tension we'd brought with us would inevitably dissipate, rising into invisibility with the steam from each dish." What place has the dining table played in the life of your loved ones?
3. Toward the end of his time at seminary, Chu cooks a meal for his professors and friends that tells something of his personal story (herbs from his birth state of California, flavors of Cantonese cuisine that reflect his ethnic heritage, etc.). If you were to cook a meal that says something about your story, what dish or dishes would you prepare?
4. Chu writes about the varied reactions that his friends have regarding his decision not to cut off his relationship with his parents, who do not approve of his marriage. What did you feel as you read about his decision and the reasons behind it, and what would you have advised him to do?
5. In reflecting on his friendship with Lincoln the Jack Russell Terrier, Chu writes: "I learned to see love as a renewable resource, which grows almost without limit in the one who has felt well loved." Do you agree or disagree, and why?
6. Chu describes a gentle pool created in the Farminary's stream by a visitor who builds a small dam, creating stillness and respite and a place for baby fish and tadpoles to grow. Name a place that has served as such a space of restoration in your life. Where was it, and what were the conditions that made it possible?
7. If there's one question you could ask Jeff Chu—about his background or current life, his writing process, or what he hopes readers will take away from *Good Soil*—what would it be?
8. How can the lessons and experiences shared in *Good Soil* be applied to your own life? Are there specific practices or insights that you found particularly meaningful or actionable?

