

Without Explanation by Rod Jasmer

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Reading Group Discussions

Chapter 1: Premonition

- a) Have you or anyone you know ever had a premonition or an intuition that something would happen? Has this happened to you more than once?
- b) What was the intuition? Did it come true?

Chapter 2: Past Experience versus Present-Day Existence

- a) Many times it can be easier to talk about doing something than actually following through and doing it. With a busy life, how do you manage this balance?

Chapter 3: The Essentials

- a) Some say that preparing for a trip can be as much fun as taking the trip. Do you agree or disagree?
- b) What is an essential part of your travel pack?

Chapter 4: Disappearing Sounds

- a) Do your loved ones get concerned when you leave on vacation or travel for work?
- b) Do you write notes to people before you leave on vacation?

Chapter 5: Back on the Travel Bicycle

- a) I discuss some anxiety when arriving at a new destination, particularly a place you have never been previously. Have you ever felt this?
- b) Have you ever lost anything or been swindled on vacation?
- c) Do you think bottled water is pure no matter where you get it?

Chapter 6: A Great Day

- a) How long does it take you to relax and really start to enjoy a vacation: immediately, hours, days, weeks, never?
- b) Have you ever accepted a ride from a stranger?
- c) Valerie talked about what she thought her children would be like as adults. Have you ever thought about that? Were you accurate in your assessment?
- d) Do you prefer photographs of people or landscapes better?
- e) What is your best travel packing tip?
- f) If you have ever been to Tikal, what was your impression and experience?
- g) The sudden swarm of fireflies became a metaphor for the book. Have you ever experienced a non-life-threatening event that you knew would dramatically impact your life? What was it?

Chapter 7: The Awakening

- a) Do you or your partner ever have nightmares? Are they always a similar dream or do they vary?
- b) I describe what I did after realizing that Valerie was in trouble. What would you have done?

Chapter 8: Desperate for Help

- a) Have you ever needed to perform CPR on anyone?
- b) Have you ever been asked to help someone in need of emergency assistance? What did you do?
- c) It is understandable the other people staying in Tikal would have been scared by someone banging on doors and yelling at them from outside their room in the middle of the night. How would you have reacted?
- d) Have you ever drawn a conclusion about someone (like Caroline) and then had them prove your original perception was wrong?
- e) I have thought about the odds of having three doctors at Tikal on the night we were there. Coincidence or something else?
- f) Having someone slap Valerie's face and then strike a forceful blow to her chest was difficult for me to watch. How would you have reacted in this situation?

Chapter 9: It's Already Here

- a) When the ambulance arrived near the room, did you wonder where it had come from? Did you immediately question what it might contain in terms of supplies, or were you thinking, like me, this was a real ambulance with all the amenities?
- b) Did Ludovic's and Julie's willingness to get into the ambulance and perform mouth-to-mouth CPR surprise you?

Chapter 10: Santa Elena / Flores, Peten

- a) Finally reaching the hospital was relief, but not being able to enter was immediately deflating. Have you ever tried so hard to get somewhere only to be completely disappointed once you got there?
- b) Jenn stated that, on any other occasion, she might not have made it over the iron gates, but she was able to do it twice. Has there been a time when you did something without hesitation and now wonder how you did it?

Chapter 11: Planes, Dogs, Military and Money

- a) How do you think Jenn felt being in a military facility in the middle of the night without a lot of clothes on and speaking a foreign language?
- b) With the focus on saving Val's life, nothing else mattered at that time. It was as though the world had stopped. Has there been a time in your life that everything stopped?
- c) I've wondered if we should have asked how many hospitals were in the town and why we were taken to that particular one. Would you have asked these questions?

Chapter 12: Refuting the Unfathomable

- a) When do you believe Ludovic and Julie knew Valerie would not make it?
- b) Why do you think Ludovic needed to prove to me that Valerie had expired?
- c) Have you or anyone you know fainted from hearing or seeing something disturbing?

Chapter 13: Checking the Clock

- a) Clearly my thought of taking Valerie out of the hospital and getting back to the States in the same day was an unrealistic plan. Why do you think it seemed like such a real possibility to me?
- b) Have you ever seen a hospital with openings without doors or windows? What could be the purpose?

Chapter 14: The Official

- a) As the day progressed we became more and more frustrated with the hospital staff. My instinct tends to be to isolate myself and figure out a solution alone. This is very different from what Val would have done. How do you react when you need to work through a problem?
- b) What do you think would have happened if the official had smelt alcohol on me or Valerie?
- c) Edmundo's assistance was very helpful and appreciated. Do you think most hotel owners would have provided this level of assistance?

Chapter 15: Waiting to Hear

- a) Jeff remained at Tikal to gather our belongings while Jenn came along in the ambulance. Would it be harder to wait or go in the ambulance? What would you have preferred to do?
- b) At times complete strangers can provide comfort to each other. Have you ever been comforted by a stranger or provided comfort to someone you did not know?

Chapter 16: Weathered Faces and Perplexing Voices

- a) The hospital bathroom was merely a storage closet for new and used medicine supplies. Have you ever been somewhere and seen something you would never expect to see at that location?
- b) I thought the men were Catholic priests, but I was speculating. Do you know what ritual they bestowed on Valerie?

Chapter 17: Friend or Foe

- a) Even though the other hospital was not a pristine facility, do you think it could have provided additional help for Valerie?
- b) It is still a mystery as to why the three local funeral workers showed up at the hospital. What do you think their motivation was?
- c) I was not eager to give my passport to anyone. What is your most important possession on a vacation?

Chapter 18: The First Box

- a) We never thought to inquire about another part of the hospital until later in the day. Should they have mentioned this to us earlier or was it up to us to inquire about it?
- b) The episode with Caesar, the tourism guy, was very strange. Why do you think he came to the hospital?
- c) Changing Valerie's clothes was an impactful experience for the three of us. What are your thoughts about this?
- d) The old, used, western-style plywood box casket startled us. Is this something that you would have expected?

Chapter 19: Misery Road

- a) Would you have taken the small late-model pickup not knowing that the next vehicle would be an old Suburban?
- b) Time moved incredibly slow during the first part of the trip to Guatemala City. Has there ever been a moment in your life when time virtually stood still?
- c) What would be your solution if the third tire had blown without an additional spare?
- d) We saw people laughing and received strange looks as we moved slowly through crowded towns. Would this happen in any country?
- e) I have wondered many times why I could not transfer Valerie's body when we switched caskets half way to Guatemala City. What do you think might have been the reason?
- f) My mind had some wild thoughts when riding alongside Val's casket in the back of the hearse. Was it lack of food and water, the cramped, dark conditions, or the situation itself that made my mind drift?

Chapter 20: Guatemala City

- a) We thought there might be a possibility that we were in serious trouble and that Fernando would call the police to investigate us. What do you think would have happened if he would have made that call?
- b) Why do you think Fernando wanted us to conduct the autopsy in Guatemala?
- c) After 10:00 p.m. the funeral home was bustling with activity. It seemed everyone was in their best clothing and we looked and felt at our worst. Where have you felt the most out of sync with everyone else?
- d) Have you ever hurt yourself and then forgotten about it until later?
- e) Suddenly Val's possessions became precious to see and handle. If this has ever happened to you, what were the objects?

Chapter 21: Poor Connections

- a) After a tragedy, who would you call first?

Chapter 22: A Promise

- a) Would you have expected to find the bloody rags, bag and bottle next to Val at the funeral home? At the time, the material surrounding her did not seem important to me. What would have been your thoughts?
- b) It was very important that I tell Val about how I would try and raise our children. If I thought she already knew this, why was it so necessary to say it?
- c) Jeff described "seeing death" when Val was on the floor of the bungalow. Do you believe that was what he really saw?

Chapter 23: The Embassy and La Cumbre

- a) You can find many ironies in this story. Doesn't it seem ironic that we were spending our nights at a bastion-of-happiness hotel where new families were being formed all around us? Was it serendipitous that Jeff and Jenn had been thinking about adoption? What other examples of irony did you notice?
- b) I did not know what to say to other hotel patrons who casually asked me how I was doing. What should I have said?
- c) It took a while at the embassy to speak with someone who knew the answers to our questions. Was this a surprise to you?
- d) Were you at all surprised when Ms. Sophie and Dr. Carlos told us they were still missing some important documents?

Chapter 24: Not Quite Home

- a) Even surrounded by all the people in the airport, I felt completely isolated. Do you think that feeling is common among people? Has it ever happened to you?
- b) Have you ever thought that you should have been the one to die instead of your friend or loved one?
- c) In many countries, medical treatment that is just minutes away is taken for granted. What else we do frequently take for granted?

Chapter 25: Facing a Formidable Day

- a) What is the most difficult thing you have ever had to tell someone?

Chapter 26: Understanding the Meaning of Words

- a) It was truly amazing to me the difference between how my adult friends and family reacted to news of Valerie's death versus my children's reactions. Do you think this would be the same for other people? Other situations?
- b) There can be certain times when you question what you have done in your life or the accomplishments you've made. This was one of those times for me. Have you ever seriously questioned what you have done in your life?

Chapter 27: Sangria

- a) The locking white casket I purchased in Guatemala looked beaten up and stained by the time it reached Susan in America. What do you think happened?

Chapter 28: Inconsequential Selections

- a) Even after I told Steve and Eileen that Valerie might not look like herself, they were completely shocked when they saw her. By this time, I was comfortable viewing Valerie's body. Do you think it was the makeup and presentation or just the shock of seeing Valerie not breathing for the first time that made it so hard for others to view Valerie?
- b) I couldn't have cared less about most of the funeral arrangements. In your opinion, who is a funeral really for?
- c) Telling the story of the incident and talking about Valerie has always been easy for me. Some find it very difficult to talk about loved ones who have passed. What is your comfort zone?

Chapter 29: Driving Away

- a) The visitation and funeral felt at times like a series of processions that were unrelated to Valerie. Have you ever been at an event that felt surreal?
- b) Many people do not understand the deep remorse I felt leaving Val on top of the ground. Do you know of anyone who has stayed to cover the casket?
- c) If you are reading this far, I can hardly believe it, but thank you. As we were leaving the interment, I placed my hand on the top corner of the casket and it suddenly moved on its metal supports. I was shocked and wondered what I had done. I grabbed the casket's side railing hoping it would stop moving in the direction of the large, freshly dug hole. I remembered others touching it before without any movement, but somehow the structure had shifted and it was free to move. Susan was the only other person who saw the movement and quickly came over to help me hold it in place as she directed one of her assistants to secure the latch on the supports. I'm not sure what to think of that. Spiritual message, physics, or something else?

Chapter 30: Understanding the How

- a) How important would it be to you to know the specific cause of a sudden death?

Chapter 31: In the Recesses of the Mind

- a) Do you believe there could be any connection, on any level, between Jeff's email, Valerie's statement the night before the trip, and the eventual reality of her death?
- b) As a scientist, I wanted specific answers, logical sequence, and a conclusion as to why. Few aspects of Valerie's death had those elements. I have tried to change my life to accept this reality and embrace it without wondering why. What are your conclusions?
- c) I have tried to learn what I can from this tragic ordeal. To accept events, people, and moments in life and embrace them for what they are without trying to always figure them out. Has there been an event that changed your perspective on life?

Postscript

- a) If you have children, do (did) you have any bedtime or waking up rituals?

- b) I describe being overwhelmed with the daily routine of raising children. If you have children, how have you managed these tasks?
- c) I waited a long time before watching the video we took on the trip to Tikal. Would you have waited so long?
- d) What do you think of me traveling back to Tikal? Should I bring my children?