



## 2026-2027 Big Read Discussion Guide for Norman Wirzba, *Love's Braided Dance: Hope in a Time of Crisis*

### WHY THIS BOOK?

Norman Wirzba does not directly use the language of vocation in *Love's Braided Dance*. So why was this book selected for the Big Read program this year?

The answer points to more fundamental questions about the purposes (*vocations*) of higher education itself. In his review of the book for *Studies in Vocation and Calling*, Jason Mahn quotes the Environmental Studies scholar, David W. Orr, when addressing the meaning of success and education:

The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture has defined it.

In *Love's Braided Dance*, Wirzba deepens and extends such claims and, by doing so, offers profound connections to NetVUE's vocational themes and emphases. And yet, since the book does not primarily use the terminology of vocation, readers have to identify and translate its vocational themes. The conveners and facilitators of Big Read programs can assist those processes, and this discussion guide is designed to help in that task.

It may also be that some will want to request one of the Big Read selections from a previous year. For some NetVUE members — maybe especially newer members for whom vocational language and themes are still developing on campus — the work of translation that *Love's Braided Dance* requires may not be what is currently needed or preferred. In such cases, NetVUE members can request a Big Read resource from another year that offers more explicit frameworks and direct connections to vocational concepts and themes. Otherwise, we are enthusiastic about the opportunities that *Love's Braided Dance* provide for colleagues and campuses to experience the multilayered and even cosmic dimensions of human callings.

## FOR FACILITATORS.

Big Read events will take different forms on different campuses and with different leaders. This guide offers discussion questions and linked resources to assist campus communities and program leaders engage the content of *Love's Braided Dance*. It divides the book's chapters into three sections, each with corresponding questions and resources (e.g., articles, videos, audio clips). This format can be used as a step-by-step outline for a three-session program or as a loose guide to fit different leadership styles and program formats.

Leaders and participants can also benefit from the following NetVUE resources that showcase *Love's Braided Dance* and Wirzba's wider contributions to NetVUE events:

- Jason Mahn's [review](#) of *Love's Braided Dance* in *Studies in Vocation and Calling*.
- NetVUE's podcast "Callings" from October 2023: "[Agents of Repair: Norman Wirzba](#)."
- Kari Kloos' [reflections](#) in the newsletter "Connections" on Wirzba's plenary presentation at the 2026 NetVUE Conference in Kansas City.
- Erin VanLaningham's webinar [synopsis](#) of that same plenary presentation at the 2026 NetVUE Conference in Kansas City.
- Also be looking for [three Big Read webinars](#) that NetVUE will host on *Love's Braided Dance* during the 2026-2027 academic year (Sept 16, 2026; Nov 4, 2026; Feb 3, 2027).

## DISCUSSION GUIDE.

### SECTION 1: READ THE INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTERS 1, 2, AND 3 (pages 1-59).

In preparation, also listen to a brief [clip](#) of Wirzba on “Callings” from October 2023. Here he references the book before it had come out and considers how to invite undergraduates into deeper considerations of hope and love.

#### From the Introduction (The Way of Hope):

- After telling the agonizing story of Carmine Menna encountering a sinking boat of migrants, Wirzba says: “In an important sense, the migrants he rescued also rescued him because they put him in touch with life’s meaning and purpose” (p5). How does this introduce the book’s vocational themes? While few have had such intense encounters, what is an experience that you have had that offered a similar challenge or lesson?
- On page 11, Wirzba cites a Wendell Berry poem to introduce notions of place, grace, and love. Did the poem and Wirzba’s use of it resonate with you? Why or why not?

#### From Chapter 1 (Erotic Hope):

- Wirzba says that admonitions to “be hopeful” often “lull people into accepting the status quo” (p15). What does he mean by that? What does he offer an alternative?
- How does Wirzba draw on Audre Lorde’s understanding of erotic love? What does he mean by the following: “the pornographic impulse can be described as the enemy of genuine eroticism” (p20)?
- In this chapter, Wirzba draws on a variety of voices including Greta Thunberg, Rebecca Solnit, James Baldwin, and the Apostle Paul. Which especially stood out to you? Why?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?

#### From Chapter 2 (When Hope Languishes):

- On page 39, Wirzba notes that millions of young people now consider or decide to not have children. He also gives examples of people of all ages who seem to lose hope in humanity (p32) and love for the world (p39). How do you see such trends at work in your students, colleagues, or yourself? What does this chapter offer in response?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?

#### From Chapter 3 (Resonant Hope):

- On page 49, Wirzba introduces a student perspective – Carolyn Walworth from Palo Alto High School – to support this chapter’s opening reflections. What is his point and how does this student voice contribute to it? Have you had a similar experience or encounter with a student?

- In this chapter, Wirzba draws on Hartmut Rosa’s notion of *resonance* (pp 52f). What is the vocational significance of the notion? How does it relate to the idea that “Resonance cannot be manufactured or engineered” (p55)?
- Summarize Wirzba’s point about sabbath (pp56-59). How might sabbath be imagined and practiced on our campuses and in our communities?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?

## SECTION 2: READ CHAPTERS 4, 5, and 6 (pages 60-106).

It is clear that Wirzba is a Christian theologian who leans into theological themes and resources, while also engaging diverse ideas and people. How does he hold all that together? Is he successful? The following resources can supplement such discussions:

- In this brief [clip](#) from the podcast “Callings,” the environmental scientist, Katharine Hayhoe, discusses her religious motivations as well as the importance of collaborating with people from different backgrounds (note her emphasis, like Wirzba, on love)
- Consider Wirzba’s own reflections when asked whether his theological language might be a barrier for those who are not familiar with it or do not embrace his assumptions – this is from the [Q&A](#) after his plenary at the 2026 NetVUE Conference

### From Chapter 4 (Hope Grows in Places of Belonging):

- Wirzba cites the botanist and Potawatomi citizen, Robin Kimmerer, as saying that “we need to recover a ‘grammar of animacy’.” What does that mean and how does Wirzba draw on the idea?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?
- Addendum: Listen to the episode of “Callings” that features the Métis artist, Christi Belcourt: [“Art Saved the Mountain: Christi Belcourt.”](#) How does the episode supplement this chapter? How might Belcourt’s testimony challenge or resonate with your students?

### From Chapter 5 (A Forgiveness-Seeking Hope):

- Wirzba claims that hope requires confession, repentance, and the seeking of forgiveness from both human and non-human entities. How do you hear and process these claims?
- What resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?

### From Chapter 6 (A Forgiveness-Granting Hope):

- Discuss the difference between “saying sorry” and “doing of sorry” (p103). How does that contrast support the thesis of the book?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?

### SECTION 3: READ CHAPTERS 7, 8, AND THE EPILOGUE (pages 107-157).

In preparation, also listen to this [clip](#) of “Callings” in which the theologian, Willie James Jennings, challenges the foundations of western education and its notions of self-sufficiency, and promotes the values of gathering and engaging communities of diversity.

#### From Chapter 7 (A Hopeful Architecture):

- Wirzba considers the anxiety that many young people experience given the “state of the world” that they are inheriting (pp112f). What did this section stir in you as you think about our students and your work as an educator?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?
- Addendum: Read “[Robert Pampel and Common Good Places](#),” an interview on the “Vocation Matters” blog in which Robert discusses his chapter in *Called Beyond Our Selves: Vocation and the Common Good* (Oxford University Press, 2024). How does Pampel’s consideration of campus spaces expand Wirzba’s discussion of “architectures of terror” and architectures of “aliveness?”

#### From Chapter 8 (A Hopeful Economy):

- According to Wirzba, how might we imagine an economy animated by sympathy (p128)?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?

#### From the Epilogue (Learning to Dance):

- How does Wirzba use notions of dance and improvisation to bring the book’s themes to conclusion?
- What else resonated with you in this chapter? What vocational themes do you see?

#### Conclusions:

- What is the vocational significance of the book’s multidisciplinary approach and the way Wirzba blends empirical data, theoretical frameworks, and personal narrative?
- Given Wirzba’s background, farming themes emerge in many parts of the book (see the entry for “farming” in the index). How are these references used and how do they illustrate both the concerns he raises and the opportunities he introduces?
- In the book’s Introduction, Wirzba begins with a quote from the Hebrew scriptures: “Whoever is joined with all the living has hope” (Ecclesiastes 9:4). How could that quote be used to explain to someone the overall point of *Love’s Braided Dance*?

Index of supplemental resources (listed in the order they appear above):

- Jason Mahn's [review](#) of *Love's Braided Dance* in *Studies in Vocation and Calling*.
- NetVUE's podcast "Callings" from October 2023: "[Agents of Repair: Norman Wirzba](#)."
- Kari Kloos' [reflections](#) on Wirzba's plenary presentation at the 2026 NetVUE Conference in Kansas City in the newsletter "Connections."
- Erin VanLaningham's webinar [synopsis](#) of that same plenary presentation at the 2026 NetVUE Conference in Kansas City.
- A podcast [clip](#) from "Agents of Repair: Norman Wirzba."
- A podcast [clip](#) from "Crisis, Hope, and Action: Katharine Hayhoe."
- A clip from the [Q&A](#) during Wirzba's plenary at the 2026 NetVUE Conference.
- The episode of "Callings" that features the Métis artist, Christi Belcourt: "[Art Saved the Mountain: Christi Belcourt](#)."
- A podcast [clip](#) from "Attention and Contradiction: Willie James Jennings."
- The [interview](#) in "Vocation Matters" of Robert Pampel on the university as a "(common) good place."

Be looking for [three Big Read webinars](#) that NetVUE will host on *Love's Braided Dance* during the 2026-2027 academic year (Sept 16, 2026; Nov 4, 2026; Feb 3, 2027).