



The Yellow House
by Sarah M. Broom
Small Group Discussion Questions
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
September 2020

Grace to you and peace! We offer the following quotations and questions from Sarah M. Broom's *The Yellow House* not as "assignments" but as ways to launch and support your group discussion.

1. Consider Broom's description of growing up on the "short end of Wilson" in New Orleans East. "The houses were ordered inside and out by the standards of the times and so were the children. The adults wore titles in front of their names – Miss, Mrs., Mr., Sir, Ma'am. No one knows what would have happened if you failed to address an adult in that way, because it never happened. Children belonged to each other but not to themselves. The street seemed to know when someone deserved chastisement and any parent could oblige. When one did, everything held quiet for a time" (p. 65).

How do you understand the "standards of the times" in Broom's neighborhood and how do they compare to those in communities you have known? What do you make of children "belonging to each other but not to themselves"?

2. Our names (and nicknames) are markers of relationship and of shifts in our identity. The author is known by various names: Sarah (after three admired Sarahs), Monique because her brother Michael, "who was in Charity Hospital's psych ward tripping on LSD when I was born, insisted that the new baby's name start with an M so that we would be forever aligned, alphabetically at least" – p. 120), Mo/Auntie Mo, and Slim. Although she had never been called Sarah at home, when the author heads off to the first day of kindergarten, "my mother says to me: when those people ask your name, tell them Sarah. 'Those people' is the phrase she uses for strangers (mostly white, mostly men) who decide how the world works" (p. 120).

By what names have you have been called? Who gave them to you, and what relationship was established by the one who gave you that name? What morphing of identity do you associate with the changing of

names/nicknames in your lifetime? Do you have a cherished name for yourself, one that you allow only one (or a few people) to use? Scripture suggests that - when we reach the Throne of Grace - we will be given a new name inscribed on a blank, white stone. (Rev. 2:17) What name would you like your “forever” name to be?

3. Broom shows us how she and her siblings grow increasingly aware of differences in wealth as they grow. Her brother Eddie prefers to spend time in St. Rose: “I knew they had...I knew they had...you know what I’m saying?” (p. 94). Broom herself insists her mother drop her off at the edge of the parking lot at her high school, Word of Faith: “We seem, in our car and in our lot, not to match the school to which I belong” (p. 144). At home in the Yellow House, “by not inviting people in,” says Broom “we were going against our natures. That is shame” (p. 147).

When did you become aware of differences in wealth between yourself and others? When you consider our life as church, what signals might we be sending that some “match” Trinity Church and others do not? What do you make of Broom’s definition of shame: “not inviting people in”?

4. “Church had become our main outing, a second home where we could make new selves” (p. 167)

How does Broom’s understanding of church compare to your own?

5. Broom refers to her mother, Ivory Mae, as the house’s “sovereign” (p. 190) and quotes her at length about the house’s last days before August, 2005: “And then you see the lives of the children, and they become the living people of the house, the house lives in them. They become the house instead of the house becoming them. When I look at you all, I don’t really see the house, but I see what happened from the house. And so in that way, the house can’t die” (p. 192).

Do Ivory Mae’s words evoke any scriptural passages for you? What has happened “from” some of the houses in which you have lived? What happens “from” Trinity Church that might invite others to see “not the house” but “what happens from the house”?

6. Movement III (*Water*) begins by recounting Broom's family's whereabouts as Hurricane Katrina makes landfall in New Orleans in August 2005: "All told, we scatter in three cardinal directions, nine runny spots on the map" (p. 197).

If you can recall Hurricane Katrina personally, what do you remember most clearly about the storm and its aftermath? How do those memories or images compare or contrast to the remembered experiences of Carl, Ivory Mae, Michael and Broom's grandmother (pps. 198-208)? What do you make of Broom's observation, upon her first return to the Yellow House after Katrina, that "remembering is a chair that is hard to sit still in"? (p. 223). What event in Boston's history marks time and place like Katrina does for New Orleans? What event in Trinity's history marks time and place – and shapes one's sense of belonging – in a similar way?

7. "Houses provide a frame that bears us up," write Broom as she reflects on the city's demolition of her family's home. "Without that physical structure, we are the house that bears itself up. I was now the house." (p. 232). Broom concludes the entire book with the words: "The story of our house was the only thing left" (p. 372).

Demolition of the Yellow House begins for Broom a period of remembering, recording, interviewing and investigating. The Yellow House, in other words, becomes a book, *The Yellow House*. Which stories – personal, historical, scriptural – provide a frame that bears you up?

8. In the concluding movement of *The Yellow House* Broom moves for a year to New Orleans' famous French Quarter. "When you come from a mythologized place, as I do, who are you in that story?" she asks (p. 299) "This [New Orleans] is the place to which I belong," she continues, "but much of what is great and praised about the city comes at the expense of its native black people, who are, more often than not, underemployed, underpaid, sometimes suffocated by the mythology that hides the city's dysfunction and hopelessness" (p. 301). While Broom can easily access detailed historical information about her new neighborhood and apartment, "it was hard, as it turned out, to find anyone who was willing to speak in any official capacity about the area where I grew up" (p. 313). She imagines the stories that might one day be told about her by the tourists who snap pictures of her on the balcony where she happens to be watering her plants: "Here is

a Creole woman watering her flowers. Or here is the descendant of an old New Orleans family, free people of color. Or else, here is a wrought iron New Orleans balcony..." (p. 326). "Who has the rights," she asks, "to the story of a place?" (p. 329).

Boston, like New Orleans, is an older American city with its own mythology. How do you understand the power of mythology in our city? The power of mythology around and within Trinity Church? Whom does such mythology privilege and whom does it "suffocate"?