

Transforming Bible Study

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SECOND EDITION
COMPLETELY REVISED & EXPANDED

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To
Elizabeth Boyden Howes
with gratitude

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Speaking of sacred texts, Heinrich Zimmer wrote:

“They are the everlasting oracles of life. They have to be questioned and consulted anew, with every age, each age approaching them with its own variety of ignorance and understanding, its own set of problems and its own inevitable questions. . . . The replies already given, therefore, cannot be made to serve us. The powers have to be consulted again directly—again, again, and again. Our primary task is to learn, not so much what they are said to have said, as how to approach them, evoke fresh speech from them, and understand that speech.”

—*The King and the Corpse*

Preface to the Second Edition

A second edition is like a reprieve. One seldom has a chance to undo mistakes publicly made, or to expand on ideas too truncated or ill-developed, or to note the large omissions that have glared, unforgiving, like unfed cats. Ten years of peripatetic workshops, repeated attempts to train others in this approach, and further developments in my own thinking have taught me much that I have now been able to incorporate into this book. My thanks to Paul N. Franklyn of Abingdon Press for proposing this revision and seeing it through publication.

At the time I drafted the first edition in 1979 I was already hard at work on what has ballooned into a three volume work on the principalities and powers (*Naming the Powers*, 1984; *Unmasking the Powers*, 1986; and *Engaging the Powers*, forthcoming). I had come to this approach to Bible study through the highly personal, introspective orientation of the Guild for Psychological Studies, and most of my questions and exercises focused on the transformation of individuals. I was wanting to find ways to add to that emphasis a more balanced perspective on social transformation. But it is not easy to tackle the political implications of Scripture in our Western culture, for our whole ideology is undergirded by individualism. We think psychologically, not sociologically. Whenever we encounter injustice, we attempt to individualize it. The victim must be at fault, or some morally corrupt person in the system. We seldom address the systems themselves. They are, for many people, virtually invisible.¹

I have therefore now included questions for a number of passages on the principalities and powers. But it is not a matter of simply adding a question here and there, but of trying to build a whole alternative metaphor to counter individualism. I have attempted to do that through the concept of the Powers. I find that I am still unable to integrate

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that metaphor fully into this book. It is a massive cultural problem and will not yield easily. I have done what I could to integrate the social with the personal here, but there is much that remains to be done. I urge the reader to join me in the search for better ways to integrate these concerns, and to seek, in each study, or at least over a series of studies, to keep the personal and social in balance.

When I first used the right/left brain research as a way of picturing for the reader the value of a more wholistic approach, I was taking something of a gamble, because the field of bilateral brain research was relatively new, and continuing developments might easily have disconfirmed or outdated my report. My hunch was vindicated shortly after publication, however, when Roger W. Sperry, one of the pioneers of split brain research, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology in 1981. Further developments in the field have not fundamentally changed the data I had presented, but I have updated the chapter and added more recent bibliography.

Now, however, I face the opposite problem: right/left brain theory has become so popularized, oversimplified, one-sidedly interpreted, emptied of its subtlety, and trivialized, that the whole subject is threatened with banality. Misuse, however, is no grounds for abandoning such a helpful resource.

The most significant new development in my own work with this approach is the introduction of body movement as an integral part of our workshops. My wife, June Keener-Wink, now begins all our sessions with 45 minutes to an hour of relaxation, centering, meditation, stretching, and a whole series of simple movements that gradually enable participants to move freely and spontaneously, many for the first time in their lives. When we then turn to Scripture, the discussion moves at a far deeper level, free of the usual intellectual one-upsmanship and competition.

More fundamentally, people begin to realize that the goal of the Bible study is not merely understanding or even new insights, but incarnating the Word, enfleshing it, getting it into the substance of our living. Christianity has been unkind

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to the body; there has been a docetic rejection of the flesh, sexuality, sensuality, even of nature. This rejection becomes most poignant in the profound hatred many people feel toward their own bodies. A great deal of healing is needed in order to restore people to a sense of their bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

June's work is too extensive to add to this book; for the time being one can only attend a workshop and/or buy a set of tapes of June's work, which can be ordered from Nancy Sugars, 66 Lincoln Ave., San Anselmo, CA 94960.

Training seminars in this approach are available through Auburn Seminary (3041 Broadway, New York, NY 10027), as is a schedule of our workshops. Auburn has also recently introduced an advanced seminar in Bible study leadership as well, for those who have been leading in this mode for some time. If there is any way we can be of help, please let us know!

This is a “how-to” book on Bible study. The approach (which I did not invent) is the most revolutionary and far-reaching in its implications of any I know about. So, while in one sense it is simply a how-to book, it is also a satchel bomb packed with high explosives. You can scarcely try this mode of group study without being forced to change. If you doubt that is the case, stop now! It is intended only for those who *want* to be transformed and to work toward transformation with others. Those who wish simply to pilfer easy skills should look elsewhere.

The approach is one that I have adapted from the Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco, California. Their basic seminars at Four Springs, the Guild’s center near San Francisco, run for seventeen days and are enhanced both by the intensity that such a setting makes possible and by the healing *mana* that pervades the place. Their leaders are rigorously trained in biblical criticism and depth psychology, have submitted to a long apprenticeship and personal psychotherapy, and have committed themselves to their own religious journeys.

The approach described in this book, by contrast, is intended for use by laity or clergy in congregations, prisons, hospitals, and homes, in groups with limited time (a Sunday morning class, an evening series, a seminary or college class, a weekend retreat), with persons far more tentative in their commitment to transformation. Lacking the total environment, leisure for personal reflection, and adequate use of the arts to amplify the experience of the text, these local study groups cannot hope to reach the depth of involvement that one can experience at an extended seminar or at Four Springs. Nevertheless, the texts are so powerful and the need so profound that I have modified elements of the Guild’s approach in order to make available something of the

experience that Scripture studied in this way makes possible.

Whereas the Guild for Psychological Studies and I work in close collaboration and have mutually benefited from the exchange, the Guild has reservations about the manner in which the method should be disseminated. The Guild has not popularized its method because of the conviction that people who lead need to have had experience of the seminars. This applies to the seminar method and to particular nonverbal techniques described in chapter 8.

The basic rationale for this approach has already been worked out in *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973). Chapter 1 of the present work goes a step further, using "split-brain" theory to illustrate the importance of holding critical study and personal encounter with Scripture together in indissoluble unity. Some practical idea of how these two poles are kept in tandem is provided in the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the process that a group experiences, while chapter 3 depicts a group in action by means of actual transcripts. Chapter 4 then analyzes the steps involved in group process, with suggestions to help the reader at all stages of leadership.

To teach in this mode requires that the leader also be in process of transformation. Therefore the next chapter, which treats of the leader's own needs, requires special attention. Additional material that should accompany the reading of this chapter is found in the Appendix.

The essays in the Appendix are also of critical importance to the practical task of developing and using questions, the theme of chapter 6. Special problems for the questioning approach are presented by biblical criticism, for while literary and historical data are essential, the leader will have to decide when and to what extent they are applicable. Chapter 7 suggests a variety of solutions. Chapter 8 then builds on the split-brain theory discussed in chapter 1 by suggesting ways to deepen the encounter with the text by activating the right side of the brain. Finally, having analyzed all the components, we are ready to look at the way all the parts fit into the whole, in the sample questions of chapter 9.

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I have tried to make this handbook as practical as possible. No written account of an approach which is so personal and experiential, however, could possibly convey the full contours of what happens in actual groups. If you have not experienced the process firsthand, I can only urge you to find a way to do so. The purple columbine on the page is not the one that grows in the mountain glade.

Transformed by the Renewal of Our Minds

If thy right eye offend thee . . . (Matt. 5:29 KJV)

For years I had been looking for a way to heal the split between the academic study of the Scriptures and the issues of life. For it was the Bible's way of addressing me that had led me into biblical scholarship in the first place. The sharing of those life-shaking truths was the very vocation to which I had felt so unmistakably called. For a time my generation of scholars was able to light our lamps at the fading flames of what Barth and Bultmann had achieved. When we were on our own, however, it was back to academic scholarship-as-usual. Even our concern for "biblical theology" was largely academic; we assumed that pastors and laity could make the connections to their own lives. More disastrously, we assumed that the *ideas* were all that counted, all that had to be applied. So we were a little hurt, and considerably mystified, when a growing chorus of voices outside academia insisted that what we were doing was not addressing human existence.

It was not until I became a parish minister in southeast Texas, however, that I recognized how profound this split had become. There, faced with the need to speak meaningfully twice a week from the biblical tradition, I discovered how isolated scholars had become from the pressures of living, how little of what they found fit to say had any applicability to preaching, to counseling, to the human struggles of those who regarded the Bible as somehow the key to life.

This was the pattern: scholars to the one side—like musicians so enamored of technique that they only practice scales; clergy and laity to the other—like people who love music but are too busy to learn to play.

Those five years in the parish did not produce anything like a solution. I was two different people: a scholar engaged in pure research unsullied by the needs of parish life, and a

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pastor desperately seeking a judging and healing word to a blue-collar congregation in the throes of the civil rights struggle and the onset of the Vietnam war. Those years did, nevertheless, produce something perhaps even more important. I now knew the right question. It was not, as I was taught, What is the meaning of texts? It was rather, Why is what we say is the meaning of texts not meaningful to people living today?

In 1967 I returned to Union Theological Seminary where I had studied, now to teach. I found that I missed the life-and-death struggles of the parish—birth, marriage, disease, tragedy, death. But I found plenty of anguish in seminary as well—draft resistance, war protests, black economic development, the Columbia “bust.” The need to bridge the gulf between classroom and crises was never greater. I could only throw threads across. My sense of the malaise grew deeper, and grew apace with an awareness of inner malaise as well. For all my research was not deepening my own life one whit. If anything, it was keeping life at bay. And the Bible itself, which had always been the greatest stimulus to my growth, was becoming increasingly sterile and remote. Something had to change. So I began a journey . . .

. . . Which took me at length to a seminar of the Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco. Directed there by two former students, David and Penny Mann, I found full blown and beyond the farthest reaches of my own conception the elements of my own experience that had been most meaningful, gathered with new insights into a total pattern of stunning integrity. I had gone to seminary in the first place because I wanted to be an instrument of God in the transformation of persons. At the time that I began the study of the New Testament I also entered Jungian therapy; the connections were immediately compelling. During that same period I was doing field work with a group of teen-agers in upper Manhattan. Tired of watching them drift off to sleep during my Sunday school lessons, I decided on the bus one morning to turn the whole lesson into questions and let them figure out their own answers. The result was startling. Over a period of two years I watched those street kids turn into rare