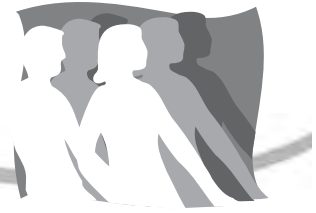


PROGRAM



Workshop/Retreat

Born Again

by Regina Coupar

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Re-conceiving Women's Stories in 12 Steps

This workshop offers a 12-step process to help participants re-conceive women's stories in the Bible. The model can be adapted to a variety of time frames, such as a weekly gathering for 6 or 12 sessions or a retreat. The main ingredients are a community of participants, Bibles (in various translations), concordances, a flip chart, and markers. While the final work of retelling a story may take the form of a painting, sculpture, poetry, or prose, this is not the focus. The aim of the program is to provide tools for re-conceiving the stories of women.

In Judaism, the process of reworking ancient stories is called *midrash*. This practice keeps traditional stories fresh and relevant, generation after generation. This same spirit is the basis for re-conceiving women's stories in the Bible to bring them to life in our own time. As we understand

more fully the dynamics of a story through intentional observation, imaginative exploration, and common sense, we are able to connect more personally with the women in the story.

Some biblical stories about women are vivid, with strong characters and interesting storylines. Others offer few details, unnamed characters, and unsatisfying endings. This program in 12 steps combines intuition with informed judgment, helping to re-conceive stories that may have been lost or distorted. Ultimately, this program challenges the assumptions underlying what we might call "traditional" understandings of women's stories in the Bible.

This process is adaptable. People might take turns providing facilitation, and some might prefer to rearrange the order of certain steps. The focus could be on a single biblical story, or each participant could develop a different woman's story. These could even be printed and made available to others. Creativity is encouraged at all levels!

Introducing the Process

Start the journey of re-conceiving women's stories by exploring motives for undertaking this creative work, both individually and as a group.

- Begin with introductions of participants (if necessary) and "housekeeping" details.

- Take 10 or 15 minutes for personal reflection with soft music in the background, and invite participants to write down thoughts or guidelines they think are relevant for this program.

Questions for reflection may include:

- Why do I want to imagine women's stories differently from how they appear in the Bible?
- How far am I willing to go in re-conceiving women's stories?
- Are there parts of biblical stories that are off-limits for me? If so, what are they and why are they off-limits?
- Have a group discussion on the reflections and questions. List concerns or areas of sensitivity offered by the group. The objective is not to find a solution that will make everyone happy but to help all participants become aware of respecting differences within the group. Encourage each participant to work within her or his comfort zone, agreeing to respect boundaries that differ.

Step 1

Pick a Woman from the Bible or Acknowledge One Who Has Picked You!

Participants consider how they view women's stories in the Bible.

- Think about different women from the Bible and discuss these questions: Do you view these women as historical or mythical? Whose stories are meaningful? Whose stories are disturbing?
- Create a list of possible candidates for re-conception.
- Invite the group to choose a woman's story they want to work on together. It may be difficult to choose one story over another, but remind participants that the workshop is about the process of re-conceiving women's stories. Participants may choose an additional woman's story to work on individually.

I have chosen the story of Lot's wife to illustrate the steps in this process. When I heard her story as a child, it frightened me. I wondered what kind of God would turn the mother of two children to stone? I didn't understand how "looking back" could be such a terrible thing. The story haunted me.

Step 2

What Can Be Learned about the Woman from the Bible?

Explore biblical references.

- Ask participants to use concordances to look up all biblical references to the woman whose story has been chosen by the group.
- Read passages aloud using different translations of the Bible. Read every passage and note responses to the following questions:
 - What do the various stories in the Bible have in common?
 - What are the differences?
 - What do the biblical passages say about the woman and her experience?
 - What is not said about the woman and her experience?
- Contextualize the woman's story within the Bible:
 - What precedes and follows each story about her?
 - What kind of story is it (e.g., parable, narrative, poetry)?
 - What is the setting?
 - What happens in it?
 - What is the main focus of the story?
- Note any differences in how the story is remembered by participants and how it appears in the text.

Biblical references specific to Lot's wife:

- Genesis 19:15–17 (Lot and his wife and daughters are warned to flee from the city.)

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- Genesis 19:26 (Lot's wife looks back.)
- Luke 17:31–33 (Lot's wife is remembered.)

The story of Lot's wife is intertwined with the story of Lot, therefore all references to Lot are also considered.

- Genesis 11:27; 12:5 (Lot is Abraham's nephew.)
- Genesis 13 (Lot chooses to live in Sodom.)
- Genesis 14 (Lot is rescued from captivity by his uncle.)
- Genesis 19:1–29 (Lot is rescued from Sodom.)
- Genesis 19:30–38 (Lot fathers two children with his daughters.)
- 2 Peter 2:7 (God rescues Lot, who is described as a righteous man.)

The story of Lot is part of the bigger story of Abraham. The story of Lot's wife makes up a small part of Lot's story. She is mentioned only in relation to the destruction of Sodom in Genesis, and in Luke as an example of what not to do. I take the story to be more mythological than historical.

Step 3

What Is Known about the Woman from Traditions beyond the Biblical Text?

Consider details from tradition that inform us about the woman and her life. Discuss as a group:

- What have we learned about the story from church experiences (e.g., Sunday school)?
- What have we learned from theology books or teachings?
- How do we understand the story? What does it mean?
- How has our theological lens helped shape her story for us?

I learned from Sunday school that Lot's wife was disobedient because she looked back when she was told not to. God turned her into a pillar of salt as punishment. I grew up thinking Lot's wife lacked trust, which was unlike Abraham, who trusted God

enough to sacrifice his son Isaac. As a result, I believed God would not only punish me for disobedience but also for a lack of faith.

Step 4

What Troubles You about the Story as It Is Traditionally Understood?

Discuss as a group:

- What, if anything, troubles you about the story in the Bible?
- What are the inconsistencies? What are the unanswered questions?

Focus next on the theological lens through which the story is usually viewed, and discuss:

- What liberties does the author take as the story is retold?
- Are there assumptions that need to be challenged?

List whatever participants find troubling about the story.

An inconsistency arises for me when I read 2 Peter 2:7 (describing Lot as a righteous man). I wonder why Lot is referred to as a righteous man when the Genesis accounts show him to be immoral, selfish, and conniving. Not only does he offer his daughters to strangers for sex (Genesis 19:8) but he also takes the best land for himself in an arrangement with Abraham (Genesis 13:10–11). He bargains with God's messengers to get his way (Genesis 19:19–20). Later he sleeps with his own daughters (Genesis 19:36). I have trouble thinking of someone like this as a righteous person, yet it is Lot's wife, not Lot, who becomes the example of weakness. In Luke 17:31–33 it is suggested that the reason Lot's wife looked back was her desire to cling to her old way of life, even though the Genesis texts do not support this. I find these inconsistencies troubling—this and the fact that traditional

theology made no effort to explore more charitable reasons for the behaviour of Lot's wife.

Step 5

What Characteristics of God Are Evident in or Implied by the Story?

Discuss and list the characteristics of God from the story and our traditional understanding of these characteristics. Consider this question:

- What kind of God does the story writer portray?

The story of Lot's wife implies that obedience is more important than compassion. In this story God comes across as cruel, unforgiving, misogynous, demanding, exclusive, and inconsistent!

Step 6

What Do You Think about These Characteristics in Relation to God?

Discuss the following questions (in smaller groups if your group is large):

- Do the characteristics of God (step 5) provide an accurate picture of God from your perspective?
- Does your understanding of God connect with the picture that has emerged thus far? If so, how? If not, why not?

If you discussed in smaller groups, return to the large group to discuss:

- How have these characteristics of God been apparent in Christian history? What has been the result?

The characteristics of God emerging from the story of Lot's wife do not fit with my understanding of God, making it hard for me to relate to this story as being sacred, even though it is included in the Bible. I cannot simply dismiss it as an ancient text with little relevance to Christianity because of the references in Luke 17 and 2 Peter. This story presents a God who is not concerned about women,

and it may have contributed to the justification of witch burnings and other abuses of women "in the name of God" throughout history.

Step 7

How Believable Is the Story as It Is?

Set aside traditional theological lenses and focus on other resources that encourage participants to think critically about the story.

- Through discussion or small-group research, draw together insights from psychology, history, anthropology, sociology, politics, feminism, and mythology to discuss the credibility of the story.
- List problems that arise from considering the story in the light of these perspectives.

I understand the story of Lot's wife to be mythological. I do not believe a real living woman was turned into an actual pillar of salt. Since no details about the woman's experience are given in the story, I understand it to be the product of a patriarchal writer trying to illustrate a point that God punishes immorality and disobedience. However, insights about human nature tell me that, if the story were true, with people dying all around her, it would be natural for Lot's wife to be concerned about them, perhaps causing her to look back out of compassion rather than disobedience. The inhuman treatment of the daughters and the severe punishment of Lot's wife lead me to wonder why the God in this story does not care about women for their own sake. This flies in the face of my personal concept of God as being all-loving. I am led to question the politics of the story and to ask whose interests are being served by the story appearing as it does in the text? Certainly not women's!

Step 8

What Would Be a Good Alternative to the Story?

The results of this intuitive process will produce raw material for many storylines.

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- Brainstorm alternatives to this story. Consider the “what ifs” and encourage participants to let their imagination run free.
- Record on the flip chart as much of the material as possible while it flows. Don’t worry about details at this point—any and every idea deserves attention.

What if compassion is considered an alternative to obedience in this story? What if the focus of the story shifts from morality and obedience to God, to compassion for human beings regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors? What if God rewards Lot’s wife for her caring by turning her into the salt of the earth or salt in our tears of compassion? What meaning do we discover as we consider the healing and preservative qualities of salt? What if her daughters could tell the story from their perspective? What if Lot’s wife could become a symbol of one awakened to see a new way of being in the world?

Step 9

What New Characteristics of God Become Apparent through Re-conceiving the Story?

- Review ideas from the brainstorming session and list characteristics of God.
- Contrast these with the list from step 5. Explain to participants that the intention is not to create a story to match the list but to let the material from the list permeate their thinking as they conceive a new story together.

In a story about the compassion of Lot’s wife, we would see a God who is universal and inclusive. This God would not destroy a nation because of immorality or destroy a person for lack of obedience. Unlike the God from the previous list, this God’s attributes would include loving kindness, forgiveness, egalitarianism, patience, and dependability.

Step 10

Which Details of the Biblical Story Do You Want to Keep in Your Own Story?

Look again at the story as it is in the Bible. Consider:

- Which details of that story, if any, would you retain while respecting your alternative vision?
- Which details, if any, are necessary so your story is as plausible as the biblical story if that is important to you?

In the process of re-conceiving the story of Lot’s wife, I would keep the “salt” and modify it into something life-giving. By contrasting Lot’s God of obedience with his wife’s God of compassion, I would show that everyone is special in God’s eyes. By changing the catastrophe from one originating with God into a natural disaster, I would emphasize that bad things can happen to anyone. I would make Lot’s wife a symbol of transformative love.

Step 11

Re-conceive the Story

Encourage participants to begin an alternative story in whatever form is most comfortable for them, making available the charts and lists from previous sessions. Stress that no one is expected to finish their story during the session but only to find a direction they want to explore.

Invite them to work alone, in pairs, or in groups to develop their ideas and polish them throughout the week for presentation at the next session. (This could include different forms of presentation such as sculpture, drama, art, if they wish.) Share the story “The Daughters of Lot’s Wife.”

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The Daughters of Lot's Wife

This story retells the events of Genesis 19. The women in the story remain unnamed. It seemed wrong to assign names arbitrarily, and borrowing them from other women felt like misappropriation. The story is told from the perspective of the eldest daughter (who eventually becomes the grandmother of the Moabites, the tribe that produced Ruth).

The death of our mother changed everything. The night she died my sister and I had been trying to sleep, making ourselves as inconspicuous as possible. Mother was an expert on the benefits of invisibility. Out of sight, out of mind, she taught us. Our father was entertaining a couple of strangers in our house. The air was heavy with the smell of rancid wine and the sounds of revellers outside made the hair on our arms stand on end. At one point, our father tried to drag us from our mats to the door. But mother stopped him, diverting his attention so we could get away. Such nights were not uncommon at our house, but this one was especially unpleasant.

As the noise level from outside grew, our father suddenly announced we needed to leave—not just the house, but also the village! We started to gather our possessions, but he and his new friends insisted we drop everything and leave immediately.

We slipped out the back. Father and his friends wouldn't let us light a torch so we stumbled about in the dark, my sister and I each clasping one of our mother's hands. We found the path to the north of the city and began to climb the hill. The strangers kept yelling "Flee for your lives! Don't look back!" But we did look back. We stopped to catch our breath and turned just in time to see our house burst into flames. Fire shot into the air and in its light we could see people scattering in all directions. Many appeared to be hurt. Our mother was frozen to the spot. "We can't just leave them!" she cried. "For the love of God, we have to help!" But father tore us from her and dragged us off with him.



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When we reached a cave near a small village we noticed that our father's friends had disappeared. My sister and I wanted to go back to find mother, but father forbade it. She was disobedient, he told us. He said that God punishes disobedience and that our mother had been turned into a pillar of salt. So we stayed with him, setting up housekeeping in the cave, fear becoming part of our daily lives.

Father made new friends in the mountains where we lived and it seemed that life for him was almost as it was before. Nevertheless, for us the days were long and filled with sorrow and the nights were even worse. Father's appetite for strong drink had not diminished and his temper had grown more volatile. Life without mother was hard; the memory of her gentle ways contrasted starkly with his angry rages. She had protected us in ways we had come to respect even more since her death. My sister and I remembered her advice—to stay invisible—and we tried to stay out of his way as much as possible.

At night we slept side by side, hoping that together we could create a barrier. At first we were successful. When he would wander onto our mats we both would protest vehemently and he would leave. But soon, our voices lost their effect and we were powerless to stop the night ritual. He would use the weight of his body to

pin us to the ground, one at a time, as he heaved and grunted, and spilled himself into us. Sometimes he offered us to his drunken friends. Even when we became pregnant, he didn't stop. We prayed to God for help.

God answered our prayers, speaking to us in the rustling of leaves and the songs of birds. To our surprise, we heard a woman's voice whispering words of reassurance that brought us comfort during the days and strength to get through the nights. The more we listened, the stronger we grew. Then one night, after our father had fallen asleep, we left. We took nothing with us. We knew he would be angry. We knew we were disobedient. But the sound of God in the woman's voice gave us courage and faith to move on.

We were led to the place where we had last seen our mother. Our babies were born there, first mine, then my sister's. One night our mother appeared to us. She held our children in her arms and kissed them, the salt from her tears dissolving the stains from our father's sin. Blessing each of them, she said, "God measures love, not by obedience, but by compassion. These children will be the grandmothers of all who love mercy." We didn't see our father again. My sister and I stayed in that place, raising our children there. We lived out our days in peace. And we never looked back.

Step 12

Birth New Stories

Encourage participants who feel comfortable doing so to share their story.

After the stories have been read, viewed, danced, and sung (or whatever), break into groups of two or three and discuss the following questions:

- How is your story helpful for women who wish to remain part of your religion (not necessarily in the traditional sense)?
- What do you think might be objections to your story, and how will you address them?

I think my re-conception of Lot's wife is helpful because it provides a way to look at her story that

does not demean women. It offers hope for those who understand God differently from how God is presented in patriarchal models. Most people who object to my story do so because they see it as “taking liberties” with the text. I answer this objection by reminding them that my story is a work of fiction intended to illustrate the love and inclusiveness of God, just as the original story was intended to show consequences of immorality and the necessity of obedience. Others might think Lot is treated unfairly in my story. In my opinion, some of the facts about him provided by the biblical text—his willingness to lend out his daughters, his neglect in consulting his wife about the situation

from which they were to flee, his drinking, and self-centredness—support my story as an alternative.

Have a concluding celebration of the women who have been born again! **E**

Regina Coupar is an artist and writer living in Nova Scotia. Her works explore connections between creativity and spirituality, often with an emphasis on women. She is the author of five books, including *The Art of Soul* and *The Seeker’s Heart*. Regina can be reached through her website, www.reginacoupar.com, or at regina@reginacoupar.com.

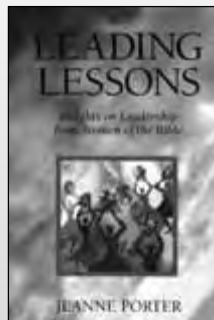
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