



Observations on the Reading Between The Lines method by leaders and groups—how we do it, why we do it, and what happens in our circles.

The following collection of group resources was developed when *Reading Between The Lines* was published under the name *BibleWorkbench*.

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Reading Between The Lines Guidelines

- Focus on the *text*.
- "I statements" are encouraged.
- Pauses between responses are important.
- The goal is not consensus, agreement, or a right answer.
- There is no expectation that you explain, justify, or defend anything you say.
- Silence is part of the process.
- You can change your mind as often as you like.
- Honestly try the nonverbal exercises.
- What is said in the *Bible Workbench* group stays in the group.

Find the Guidelines with fuller explanation at <https://educationalcenter.org/>

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 19.2

In the Circle

Preparing the Space (and yourself)

Mark's story of Jesus' baptism, his immersion into the Jordan, the Spirit entering into him, and his experience of the voice telling him he is *beloved*, then compelling him into the wilderness (Mark 1:9-15; see Lent 1, p. ??) – this story is your story, my story, our story. The important use of place in the story itself—the Jordan river, the wilderness, and back to proclaim the *good news* in his community—has prompted me to reflect a bit on the use of space and place in this good work we do together in *Reading Between The Lines*. I want to offer some thoughts about how to help create a space in which we can hear those numinous voices within the text, each other, in our outer lives, and within those inner characters that populate our soul.

I find it helpful to prepare the literal space you work in. Whether you lead a group, or work it alone, it is helpful to prepare it—look around and ask yourself, "How can I help provide those living waters? How can I clear out enough of the clutter of life so that the wilderness voices can be heard?"

If I'm in a public space, I usually have to move some furniture around, and perhaps take some intrusive or distracting materials off the walls. Put a candle in the center, or perhaps something from the text—a cup of water, a pile of sand, a rock. Find the matches; put them nearby. Gather what you need ahead of time—art supplies, paper, music, if you are using it.

The other space to be prepared is internal. Do your homework. Work through the material, then put it aside to work the text as that day and those people will do it. Take a deep breath, and clear the clutter of your own mind and day away. Let yourself be present to the text, and to the people around you.

Remind your group (and yourself) of the guidelines for groups (see below). They make the space safer and deeper work possible.

Light the candle, begin with silence. Take a breath. Let the text, the questions, and the silence do its work.

Doing *Reading Between The Lines* can be a rich spiritual practice. How might you prepare for today's session?

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 19.3 **In the Circle**

The Role of the Leader

A *Reading Between The Lines* group is built on an understanding of religious education that affirms that each individual in the group is an expert in how the story of the text connects with their own story. There are several ways one might choose to work with the Bible; one is to seek to transmit information about the Bible to group members. A second is to use the Bible as a source of illustrations or topics for discussion. *Reading Between The Lines* at its best is *transformative* engagement, in which participants experience the text as a reality within their own lives. In the first issue, Editor Bill Dols wrote, "The task is to awaken the entire drama within you in ways that bring energy and consciousness for creative choice to both your personal and public lives."

Each approach demands something different from the leader. The first requires that the leader be the source of information about the Bible. The second requires that the leader identify themes or topics and relate them to the needs of the group. A *Reading Between The Lines* leader, however, is called upon to help create and then to protect the open space within the group in which individuals are free to explore what the text may open up within them.

In the last issue, Beth Harrison offered suggestions for preparing both the physical space in which the group will meet and the leader's own inner space. At the beginning of the session, the leader might remind the group of the guidelines, invoke some silent time, light a candle in the center of the group.

As the group begins to work with the questions, the goal is to enable the members of the group to enter into the "bubble" created by the story and to make their own connections with their world and their lives. The leader's role is to keep the focus on the story and the text, to encourage participation by those in the group, and to see that no one individual dominates the discussion. He or she is not there to be an expert or a source of information, but to guide the process. One challenge for a leader is to encourage all possible points of view without introducing one's own preconceptions or insights, or responding positively or negatively to what another might say.

Creating open space in a group is not easy, but can be achieved with consideration, openness, and care for the group members. Trust the process, allow for pauses and silence, and know that the Spirit is at work.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 19.4 **In the Circle**

Staying with the Text

In the *Reading Between The Lines* Guidelines, the very first item is "Focus on the text."

In most traditional Bible Study, the focus is more often actually on the teacher, considered to be the authority on the text. The teacher has studied the commentaries and histories and devotional literature, and the class session is an occasion for the teacher to impart that expert knowledge about the text to the students. It is essentially a one-way operation. (See diagram at right.)

A *Reading Between The Lines* session begins with the assumption that everyone is an expert in how the text crosses their own experience. It is in reflecting on what we know deep within and in sharing those insights with others in the group that the richness and power of the biblical text comes out. The text itself stands at the center of the group, and as members of the circle share their perspectives, the text has a greater chance of coming alive within our lives.

Last month we noted that it is more important for the leader to be a defender of the creative space within the group, and one of the ways to do that is to focus on the text. When conversation begins to wander into arguing over what the “correct” meaning of a text might be, or its historical setting, or personal anecdote, a gentle suggestion that the group “return to the text” or restating a question about the story in the text can help to refocus the conversation.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 19.5 **In the Circle**

Pauses between responses are important.

A year ago, in an interview on *The Diane Rehm Show* on NPR, Jim Lehrer was asked what an interviewer could do when someone was avoiding a question. (This was during the early debates in the Republican primary race.) Lehrer commented that it was not the responsibility of a moderator to compel someone to answer a question. “You can ask a question and you can ask it a second time, you can ask it a third time... I don’t have to yell, hey, you didn’t answer the question. You know, I mean, it’s there. It’s there to be seen and you got to move on. ...Now sometimes you move on too soon, sometimes you move on too late. But that’s a fine line call.”

A *Reading Between The Lines* circle is far from a debate platform, and certainly the questions are not the kind the familiar interviewer would ask. But what should a leader do when there is no response to a question?

Many people, especially in today’s culture, are uncomfortable with silences. They will rush to fill the space with something, anything. A leader might be tempted to offer answer the question themselves, or call on someone in the circle. But often the most important work is happening in silence. Some people need more time to reflect and process than others. Others may need to get past their initial reactions to a deeper encounter with the question.

Pauses between responses allow participants to listen to each other, rather than focusing on formulating what they are going to say next. Pauses can interrupt the tendency to argue with what a previous speaker has said. Pauses can allow the question to hang in the air, to be heard and pondered without necessarily requiring an answer.

So what can a leader do? First, remember there is no “right” answer to the question, and that the leader cannot force an answer from people. Second, try asking the question again. You might ask the same question, or rephrase it slightly. Again, allow for silence. If there is still no response, let it be and move on.

As Lehrer says, sometimes you will move on too soon and sometimes too late. Experience, sensitivity, and respect for pauses will make for a good leader.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 19.6 **In the Circle**

Honestly try the nonverbal exercises.

Often in a *Reading Between The Lines* session, you will be invited to try a nonverbal exercise involving drawing or sculpture, movement, acting out a scene, or the like. And perhaps you have experienced resistance to the exercise, either within yourself or the members of your group.

In Gleanings this month, we share Walter Wink's observations on the reason for approaching the text in nonverbal ways, and the fact that resistance is bound to arise. His advice is rather blunt:

Perhaps an irascible member of the group will snort at the assigned exercise and refuse to do it. Challenge him to try it as an experiment. *Do not make it optional.*

Wink's insistence underscores how important these experiences are to deepening our engagement with the text in a way that can truly transform us. Yet in our surveys of *Reading Between The Lines* groups, we find that groups will often skip over those exercises, and offer many excuses for doing so.

Sometimes you will be invited to contemplate someone else's artwork which may have been their response to the text. You often have that opportunity in reading the Parallel Readings, or Kathie Collins' poetry, or Beth Harrison's suggestions for music to listen to. These are all good, and can deepen one's understanding of the text. But remember that in doing so, you are meeting someone else's interpretation, and that what they have brought of themselves to the art colors their perceptions, and yours.

The most powerful exercises are those in which you yourself are engaged—painting pictures, writing dialogues, mime and movement, role play, working with clay, writing a parable, psalm or poem. Wink says, "These activities are capable of striking deep archetypal chords in the unconscious, chords already set vibrating by discussion of the text but not fully activated".

How does your group deal with nonverbal exercises? What sorts of things seem to work well? What resistances do you encounter as a leader or a group member that make it difficult to explore the exercises?

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 20.2 **In the Circle**

What *Reading Between The Lines* Is Not

Founding Editor Bill Dols often quotes the title of an article by Elsom Eldridge, who was director of the Educational Center for nearly twenty years: "It's Nice to Know What You're Doing." It may also be useful to know what you're *not* doing!

"Bible Study" is a term that covers, if not a multitude of sins, at least a multitude of experiences. There are many reasons that people get together in a groups of any kind, and the intentions of the participants will always shape the discussion. Here are a few of the things that a *Reading Between The Lines* session is *not*:

· *Reading Between The Lines* is not about passing on information about the Bible text from teacher to student. It is a community of equals sharing together around the text as teacher.

- *Reading Between The Lines* is not a search for the one, true “meaning” of the text. Participants are encouraged to explore different ways of understanding it and to be aware of what emerges in their encounter with the text.
- *Reading Between The Lines* is not a group therapy session. Although personal issues may emerge in reflecting on the questions, the group is not a place for trying to solve anyone’s issues.
- *Reading Between The Lines* is not a discussion group, a place for argument or debate. Participants are encouraged to work out their own encounter with the text, not try to correct someone else’s. Engage the text, not each other.
- *Reading Between The Lines* is not a place for citing experts or “authorities.” It is an opportunity to explore your own expertise in how the text intersects with your own experiences and to claim your own authority.
- *Reading Between The Lines* is not for showing off. Respect those who may be challenged by the questions or the nonverbal exercises. It’s important to give each participant the room to explore as he or she needs to.

To everything there is a season, as Ecclesiastes reminds us. Teachers, information, meanings, therapy, discussion, debate, and authorities all have their place. The *Reading Between The Lines* circle offers a unique chance to connect deeply with the Bible story and to recognize it at work in our own depths.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 20.3 **In the Circle**

The Leader’s Role

Henry Burton Sharman developed a process for careful study of the Gospels in a group process based on close questioning of the text. Sharman’s process is one of the grounds for what became *Reading Between The Lines*. In an introduction to Sharman’s *Studies in Jesus as Teacher* (Harper & Brothers, 1935), L. Earl Willmott offered some suggestions for participants in the study groups, which, with some slight editing, remain useful still:

- Stay open to the text and to new insights that may come from it.
- Don’t presume to explain to the group what another person means by what they say.
- Listen to others. Don’t be so busy formulating your own next comment that you miss what someone else is saying.
- Avoid stereotypical or formulaic language. Try to find fresh ways to express what you are discovering.
- Participate. Don’t hold back an idea that seems half-baked or incomplete; sometimes by speaking aloud you can clarify what you are thinking.
- Pay attention to what moves you, challenges you, startles you in the text. A strong emotional response to a text is often an invitation to explore deeper.
- Speak your truth. Don’t try to impress others with your insight or learning, but be honest about how you are experiencing the text.
- Stay focused on the text. Don’t range off into sidetracks.
- Try to set aside your preconceptions and be aware of your biases.
- Speak briefly, and allow others to speak. Sometimes it takes a while for others to join the conversation. Leave space for them to contribute.

- Be open to changing your mind, and don't be hesitant to admit it when you do.
- Respect the statements of others as their perspective and opinion. Do not try to argue with or correct another member of the group.
- You may ask another to clarify what they have said, but do not try to challenge them or attempt to argue their position. If your perspective differs, share it and let others decide which they may favor.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 20.4 **In the Circle**

Space Invaders

The task of a *Reading Between The Lines* leader is, above all, to *create and hold space* in which the group can explore the text together. The leader is not there to give the answers or direct the discussion, but to enable the group to engage the text deeply and listen to themselves and each other. Each leader will find his or her own style, and every group is different.

Occasionally in a group, a leader might be challenged by a "space invader," someone who wants to dominate the conversation, start an argument with another participant, or lead the group off onto a tangent. This is where a skilled leader will intervene to bring the group back to the text at the center. There are several ways to do this:

- Clearly mark the beginning and end of the *Reading Between The Lines* study. You might light a candle in the center of the group, or have a moment of silence, or take a deep breath.
- Bracket out sidetrack discussions; keep focused on the text and the questions. ("This is interesting, but what does the text say?" or "Let's hold that question for later.")
- Create space for everyone by leaving enough silence between questions to allow participants to gather their thoughts, or by encouraging more verbal members to allow others to speak. ("How about hearing from someone we haven't heard from yet?")
- Head off argument or debate quickly. Remind participants of the guidelines. ("We're not here to argue about who's right, but to hear different perspectives.")

By holding the space open for free and safe discussion, the leader enables the participants to explore the text attentively and to connect the story in the Bible text with their own worlds, both inner and outer.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 20.5 **In the Circle**

Listening

It has often been said that the Bible text is like a gem; the more you turn it and look at it from many angles, the more you can see in (and through) it. That's one of the advantages of doing study in a

group—others will see what you do not, and your own views may be challenged or sharpened by hearing from others.

How often do you actually listen to what others are saying about their experience of the text? Or are you formulating what you are going to say and just waiting for a lull to jump in with your own insight? In his book *The Idolatry of God*, Peter Rollins observes that we have four common ways to respond to a perspective different from our own. The first is *consumption*, by which we try to assimilate the new to our customary way of thinking. The second is *vomiting* the other out—rejecting and dismissing the new. Third comes *toleration*, when we try to put up with the new and gloss over its strangeness. And the fourth is working to find *agreement*. We emphasize the familiar in the new perspective while overlooking or downplaying the difference.

All of these responses share something in common, Rollins says—the assumption that my perspective is the superior one. In the first three responses, I am right and the other is wrong; in the latter, we are both mostly right.

He proposes what he calls *literalistic listening*—trying as much as possible to hear what another is saying from their point of view, rather than filtering it through our own experiences. “It is, of course, impossible not to hear things from one’s own position, but it is possible to listen in a sensitive and careful way that has the power to unsettle our preconceived ideas. This means that one pays attention to what the other says, allowing the words and phrases to place our own assumptions into question”.

In your next *Reading Between The Lines* gathering, try this way of listening to each other and see what you might discover.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 20.6

In the Circle

Guidelines from the Guild For Psychological Study

In general, to guide the flow of discussion, the leader can keep these points in mind:

1) Do not fear silences. Groups need to *know* that periods of silence are helpful to enable them to ponder the question and their reactions and responses to it. Speeches by leaders to fill in silences are poor leadership. If a silence seems uncreative, restate the question or ask a similar one. If it seems necessary, ask the group to state what is not clear. If this is not productive, move on.

2) When one or more individuals in a group “over-talk” and thus tend to dominate the group, it is good practice to ask a question that encourages the quiet ones, such as, “And what do the rest of you think?” or “Could we hear from those who haven’t spoken?” or some other ingenious words of your own designed to redistribute participation.

3) Keep the discussion focused on the question and bring it back if it tends to wander too far afield. Never get caught in approving or disapproving individual answers. If an answer seems quite beside the point, restate the question. Otherwise, honor every contribution no matter how awkward it may seem to you regardless of whether you agree with it. You are not teaching, but guiding. The criterion of a good discussion is whether each participant has gained new insight.

4) Do not engage in back-and-forth dialogue with single members of the group. If a point needs clarification, ask another question to get at it.

5) Allow plenty of time for “personal” approach to material but do not bring it in until the import of the text *per se* has been covered.

6) Do not linger too long on any one point once its import seems to have been grasped. Keep conscious of time so that all the main questions are sufficiently honored in the time allotted for a passage. This requires sensitivity to the group and where it needs to linger, where it needs to move on, where a question must be rephrased, where a secondary question you had intended to ask may have to be left out. And you may recognize where a question you had not thought of beforehand becomes urgently needed and so can be included. In other words, the leader prepares beforehand yet remains flexible, out of his/her sensitivity to the group, its direction and needs.¹

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 21.2

In the Circle

Creating a Group Covenant

What expectations are present consciously or unconsciously in your *Reading Between The Lines* group? What do participants expect of the leaders, or the leaders of the participants? How does a new member of the group learn how to participate? What happens if a conflict arises within the group?

Reading Between The Lines offers an approach to the Bible which is unusual, and a group that meets to work with *Reading Between The Lines* may look and sound somewhat different from what you have experienced in other Bible study groups. It's a good idea to work out group guidelines and expectations before a question arises. It is far more difficult to sort things out in the midst of disagreement.

Each group is unique, and only you know what will work the best in your situation and with the people who are in your group. The *Reading Between The Lines* Guidelines that we have developed (see below) have to do with what makes the process work smoothly and effectively, but there are additional issues that you might want to clarify in your own group:

- **Leadership:** Who will lead the group? Will it be one person, or a team, or rotated among members of the group?
- **Duration:** Will this be an ongoing group? Will there be time limits or logical points to start or stop with the group?
- **Attendance:** Is there an expectation about how often group members will attend?
- **Preparation:** Are group members expected to review the text or the questions before the group meeting? Do group members have the materials?
- **Respect:** How will members of the group behave toward each other?
- **Confidentiality:** What are the limits on sharing outside of the group?
- **Conflict:** How will the group deal with conflicts that might arise between group members?

Take some time to talk in your group about these issues or others that you might identify. Ask them what they expect from the group and how they think that can best be achieved. Whether the discussion results in a written covenant or a verbal group agreement, it's a good idea to be as clear as possible about the group and its workings.

¹ *Questions for a Seventeen Day Seminar Based on the Synoptic Gospels*, Guild for Psychological Studies, 1998, pp. 122-123.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 21.3 **In the Circle**

Developing an “Art Kit”

You’ve seen the phrase often in *Reading Between The Lines* questions: “using whatever art materials are available, represent ... in form and color.” Unless you happen to be an artist, or have been doing *Reading Between The Lines* exercises for a long time, it’s likely that you don’t really have much readily available. Many group leaders have assembled kits of materials to enable people in their groups to explore more freely. Here are a few suggestions of things you might want to gather so that they’ll be handy the next time.

You know best what will work in your own group. Your collection of materials will depend on how much space you have available, whether you need to transport them often, what clean-up facilities might be at hand, etc. Here’s a few suggestions of things that have worked well:

- **Paper.** Paper is a versatile medium. You can even recycle used paper, if it has at least one blank side. Paper can be used for drawing, painting, or even sculpting—it can be torn, crumpled, or manipulated into different shapes. Construction paper in various colors is also useful. Sometimes choosing the color of paper to use is part of reflecting on the text.
- **Old Magazines.** Magazines with photographs that can be cut or torn out for collages.
- **Pencils.** At the most basic level, a pencil or pen can be used for making quick sketches. A selection of colored pencils will add richness and variation to what people can draw. Again, selecting the appropriate colors can be a reflective process.
- **Crayons.** Small boxes of the basic 8 colors per person, a masters collection of 96 colors, or even a bag full of random, broken, and unlabeled crayons make for easy and familiar drawing.
- **Art markers.** Inexpensive (water-based) markers can be purchased in multi-color boxes.

Messier, but still valuable:

- **Charcoal.** Charcoal lends itself well to free-flowing movement and discovery.
- **Pastels.** Like charcoal, pastels allow freer movement and expression. Both can be messy, so allow paper towels or rags for cleanup.
- **Water colors.** Small paint-boxes and brushes. A water supply and cleanup capabilities are needed.
- **Clay.** Clay is a particularly responsive and flexible medium for exploring, but potters clay can be very sloppy and difficult. There are, however, several kinds of modeling clays that can be used with little difficulty. They come in different colors and in forms that are reusable or that will harden (if you want to be able to keep your work).

You may also want to toss some small pairs of scissors and glue sticks or tape into your box. Be creative, but remember that the point is to allow people to express their connection to the text, not to produce a work of art. All this can be easily contained in a portable tote box so that it can be available when needed.

Let us know what you use for your “art kit”!

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 21.4 **In the Circle**

Art and Movement

You ask about moving people into the art and movement. You write: "It needs a very special facilitator to get people through the drawing and posturing exercises without their feeling inane. Still, if a group can be dragged through them, they will learn from each other's responses."

After a number of years of doing this work, I still get a knot in my stomach every time I arrive at this moment in the session. Invariably, I ask myself if there is really enough time to do it! I never think it is going to work. It always does.

A few suggestions:

- The less preparation and fewer instructions the better.
- Assuring people that they need not be anxious makes them more anxious.
- Give the instructions, then turn away or close your eyes, and do it yourself; do not look around to see if they are doing it.
- When doing art use as wide a variety of materials as possible and allow the participants to choose what they want to use. I have a large box I simply put in the middle of the floor filled with construction paper, crayons, chalk, several different kinds of clay, scissors, tissue paper, glue of various colors, glitter, pipe cleaners, scotch tape, masking tape, and feathers.
- Be careful about playing music while this is going on since it will always set a tone and influence how people do the story in art and thus within themselves.
- Rather than "draw" I talk about "expressing ourselves in form and color."
- After saying that we are going to do it in silence, I let the small talk and giggling go on, confident that after a few moments as the experience begins to happen the silence comes.

It does take "a very special kind of facilitator," the kind who is willing to take the risk of sounding foolish and being thought inane; one who owns up to how hard it is for the teacher as well as the student to play; one who trusts the story and is brave enough to awaken it in a new and deeper way.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 21.5 **In the Circle**

The Midwife Leader

Midwives play a major role in subverting the intention of Pharaoh to wipe out the Hebrew people in Egypt, as the story is told in Exodus 1:15-21. The command to kill any male children born as they attended pregnant women must have felt like a complete negation of their calling.

Reading Between The Lines grows out of the Educational Center's focus on *maieutic* education, based on the Greek word for midwife. Sometimes called the Socratic method, *maieutic teaching* assumes that learning is a process of helping the student to rediscover something they already know. Like a midwife who understands her role as assisting a woman to bring forth the child that has already been growing within her, the *maieutic Reading Between The Lines* leader seeks to enable the members of his or her group to discover their own understandings and connections to the text.

Mary Field Belenky writes:

Midwife-teachers focus not on their own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but on the student's knowledge. They contribute when needed, but it is always clear that the baby is not theirs but the student's....The cycle is one of confirmation-evocation-confirmation. Midwife-teachers help their students deliver their words to the world, and they use their own knowledge to put the students in conversation with other voices—past and present—in the culture.²

What difference might it make in your own *Reading Between The Lines* group if the leader (perhaps it is you) were to focus on enabling each group member to discover the truth that is within their own lives and experience? How might understanding your role as a midwife-teacher change how you prepare for and guide a session?

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 21.6 **In the Circle**

Connecting Three Worlds

Those who are familiar with the *Reading Between The Lines* process will recognize the three dimensions that shape every Sunday design: the story in the text for the day, the world that surrounds us every day, and our inner world. We are challenged to explore all three dimensions and to discover the connections and resonances between the Bible story, our experiences and observations of the world in which we live and the depths of our own hearts and souls.

There are all kinds of groups, but the challenge of a *Reading Between The Lines* is to enable participants to discover that place where all three of these dimensions come together. If we were to picture these overlapping worlds, we'd get something like the diagram above. The three circles overlap in several ways. Where the Bible story meets the world around is often the arena for familiar kinds "Bible Study." By learning about the world of the Bible and the context in which it came to be, we might ask what it has to say to our current political, social, or economic situations.

When the focus is on how the Bible story overlaps my own world, I might have a more devotional approach. Asking "What does this text mean to *you*?" a group working in this overlap might serve as a support group or a place for people to share their concerns.

The overlap between the world around us and our inner world is where we live most of our daily lives. It may be an opportunity for developing relationships or planning strategies. All these are important and valuable activities, and there is a need for them all. But the transformative energy that often emerges in a *Reading Between The Lines* group comes out of the integration of all three dimensions.

How does your *Reading Between The Lines* group explore all three dimensions? Do you have a tendency to focus on only one or two? How might you intentionally include questions or conversation that would round out your encounter with the text, the world, and your inner being?

² Mary Field Belenky, *et. al.*, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, Basic Books, 1986, pp. 218-219. Quoted in William L. Dols, *Awakening the Fire Within*, The Educational Center, 1994, p. 29.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 22.2 **In the Circle**

On Opinions

In an early study guide for the method now used by *Reading Between The Lines*, the Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco offered some suggestions for both individuals and group participants. One rather blunt remark asserts:

Opinions *about* material are irrelevant and a waste of time for everyone. Respond *to* material and the questions asked, and contribute as if to a common container in the center of the group, rather than to the leader. Above all, dare to say from heart and head what seems real and important to you. Remind yourself that you are not in this search to impress others, or necessarily to help others, but to discover your real self in a new and unique way.³

Opinions can serve to distance us from experiencing what is around us; they often serve more to reinforce our habitual ways of thinking living than to open us up to seeing things in a new way. By letting go of opinions (or at least bracketing them out of our sharing in the circle), we make room for the story to unfold before us, around us, and within us.

An early issue of *Reading Between The Lines* explained the difference this way: most Bible study tries to connect the Bible with belief (another way of saying opinions) and hopes that connection will affect our lives (diagram at right).

Reading Between The Lines works instead at the intersection of the Bible and our lives, which in itself is a worthwhile process. In so doing, it may have the added benefit of transforming your relationship with whatever religious tradition you may hold or holds you. “The urgency in this resource is how God is working in our lives now.”⁴

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 22.3 **In the Circle**

How Old Should Participants Be?

Reading Between The Lines is created with adult groups in mind, but that does not mean that younger people could not participate usefully in a *Reading Between The Lines* session. The Educational Center publishes *TeenText* in two editions—one intended for use with young people in High School and the other for younger students in grades 6-8. These are created with younger folks in mind, and are aimed at addressing their concerns and engaging them with the Bible in their own lives.

But how about a *Reading Between The Lines* group that included both young and old? Experts in education have held for years that children and young people learn best with approaches that are intuitive, experiential, feeling, and imaginative. While a child or young person might be overwhelmed in

³ Sadie M. Gregory, Elizabeth Boyden Howes, Dorothy Berkley Phillips, *Study Guide for The Choice is Always Ours*, Guild for Psychological Studies, 1966, p. 4.

⁴ Bill Dols, “From the Editor’s Workbench,” *BibleWorkbench 2.2* (Epiphany 1995), p. 5.

a setting in which they would be expected to master large bodies of information, or come up with the “right” answers to difficult questions, how might they respond in a setting that invites them to use their imagination and treats their offerings with respect?

One of the foundations of the *Reading Between The Lines* approach is the recognition that, while some in the circle may have more “book learning” or history with the scripture, everyone is the sole expert in how they experience the text. Allowing young people to hear how adults have different reactions or understandings of a text and modeling for them how to enter into the Bible story and make the connections with one’s own life might allow for a deeper and more meaningful kind of teaching.

Patricia Van Ness, a former contributor to *Reading Between The Lines*, wrote *Transforming Bible Study with Children* in 1992. She suggested that “the intent of Christian education is to provide faith development and to awaken to consciousness the spiritual awareness of people of all ages and all levels of maturity.”⁵

If you have a multi-generational group, try using *Reading Between The Lines* for a session. Discover what happens!

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 22.4 **In the Circle**

The Power of Questions

Questions are at the heart of the *Reading Between The Lines* process. Why questions? Questions allow participants to explore for themselves the resonances of the biblical texts within their own lives. Rather than being told what a text “means,” participants in the circle are encouraged to discover how the text connects with their own lives and their own experience.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language... Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answers.”⁶

If we are given answers before our life experience is ready to integrate them, they will simply go in one ear and out the other. Encountering the Bible becomes little more than memorizing information and parroting back the “right” answers.

By entering into the questions we open ourselves to the unexpected, allowing something new to be born in the midst of our awareness. Through the questions, query and response, we enter into dialogue with the text, with the members of our group, with life itself.

Living the questions means always discovering new dimensions. Each “answer,” rather than being the end of the journey, opens a door to further investigation, leading us deeper and deeper into our own lives and our relationship to God. One writer compares living the questions to “living with a fruit tree that continually generates fruit -- in this case insights -- for our nourishment. There is never

⁵ Patricia W. Van Ness, *Transforming Bible Study with Children*, Abingdon Press, 1992, p. 18.

⁶ *Letters to a Young Poet*, Random House, 1984, pp. 34-35.

anything final about any particular apple from an apple tree. More will follow. They don't answer, they just nourish. And they're full of seeds, as well..."⁷

So no answer to a question is final. No response is a description of the whole truth or a position to be attacked or defended, but rather a stepping stone in the continuing journey to understand ourselves and our world better through engaging the Bible text.

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 22.5 **In the Circle**

What About Context?

When I first led a *Reading Between The Lines* group, there was a member of the group who might be familiar to many of you. We met each week in the Church Library, and each week Jerome (not his real name) would arrive an hour early to prepare for our session.

When I entered the room, I could barely see Jerome over the top of the pile of reference books – Bible dictionaries, commentaries, atlases, and the like—all carefully opened to the page referring to the day's text.

While I appreciated his zeal, I was concerned that he could easily pull the *Reading Between The Lines* group away from its core purpose of engaging the story deeply. Jerome, as you might have guessed, was seminary trained, and had learned the importance of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation. That's a very important way to approach the Bible, but it doesn't always help us see the story within the text. There's a lingering belief that, if only we can get the right context, the "correct" interpretation will unfold almost automatically.

Be sure to take a look at Marcus Borg's exploration of the "historical-metaphorical-parabolic" approach in this issue's Gleanings. If we read a story parabolically, some historical context can help us grasp the story more fully, but most parables include few details and allow room for the imagination to roam.

Often, a *Reading Between The Lines* design will offer some context for a text—what's happening within the community, how the author has framed the story within their gospel, or suggestions of other stories in the Jewish and Christian traditions that may have resonance with the story under consideration. But these are presented as ways to help the story come alive and to invite imagination, not as explanations of the "meaning" of the text.

If you find your group members caught up in discussion of the context of the story, it's probably time to invite them to come back to live *in* the story, rather than stand outside debating it.

⁷ Tom Attlee, "Moving beyond answers to live the questions," *The Co-Intelligence Institute*, <http://www.co-intelligence.org/LivingQuestions.html>

Reading Between The Lines/BibleWorkbench 22.6 **In the Circle**

In the Bubble

When the *Reading Between The Lines* contributors get together at our annual conference, we spend a lot of time talking about how to develop the “story bubble” for each study design. Because the core of the method is to enable people to step inside the biblical story and then to make connections to the world around them and their inner world, that story is very important.

The “bubble” is that imaginary space created by the story that makes it unique. It connects us to deep resonances within ourselves and sometimes pushes back against our efforts to tame or control it. That’s why it’s important to be sure that a group spends sufficient time in the world of the story “bubble” before jumping to finding contemporary connections or talking about their own experiences. Too often, we have become so familiar with Bible stories that we leap to our preconceived interpretations without ever looking carefully at the story itself. If we do so, we may discover that we are not as familiar with it as we thought. When we take the time to enter the “bubble,” we open ourselves to the possibility of being surprised or challenged in a new way, and thus gain a deeper understanding of how that story might move around and within us.

How much time should a group leader expect to spend developing the “bubble”? There’s no hard and fast rule, as the time it takes will differ depending on the group, on the story itself, and on the leader. Some groups have more or less time to be together. If time is short, too much time spent on the lectionary text will not allow the participants the space to explore their connections to the story.

As a general rule of thumb, the first third to half of the time available should be spent living into the text before moving on to the other sections, but this should not be rigid. And even when the questions have moved on to the world around or the world within, it is always possible to return to the core story to add a detail, to highlight a tension, or to point out an unexpected insight.

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