

Contemporary Memoirs: Stories of Conversion

***This is not a journey from failure to success,
but from frailty to grace.***

Leader, p. 28

Because the Year A Lent cycle emphasizes stories of conversion – turning away from an old life to enter a new life, you may want to consider offering a small group study or Sunday school elective focusing on contemporary stories of conversion during Lent. Adults who have been Christian for many years may experience renewal of their love for Christ as they read and reflect on the stories of new Christians. Reading such stories together might also encourage congregations to gain a greater awareness of and appreciation for the complexity of conversion in a postmodern world – thus strengthening their capacity to love others and witness to their faith in the world.

Fortunately, contemporary memoirs of conversion are in abundant supply today. What is especially noteworthy about many of these recently published books is their honesty and transparency. These writers do not hide their doubts or their sinfulness. By writing so truthfully about their lives, they indeed give powerful witness to God's transforming work as they make the arduous yet joy-filled journey from frailty to grace.

In *Echo of the Soul* (Morehouse Publishing, 2000), Philip Newell writes:

The starting point for spirituality in both Jewish and Christian practice is the Genesis 1 description of humanity made in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God. This is the foundation text of our scriptural inheritance. Everything else that is said about us in scripture needs to be read in relation to this truth. The image of God has been woven into the fabric of our being.

A nineteenth-century teacher in the Celtic tradition used the analogy of royal garments woven through with gold. If the golden thread were to be ripped out of the clothing, the whole garment would unravel. So it is with the image of God woven into the mystery of our being. If somehow it were to be extracted, we would cease to exist. The image of God is not simply a characteristic of our humanity. It is the essence of our being. Sin has not removed it but rather distorted it.

In the biblical tradition, the Garden of Eden is our place of deepest identity. It represents our genesis in God and the essential goodness of our origins. It is not a place from which we are separated in space and time. Rather, it is a dimension within us from which we have become divorced. The Genesis picture is not of the destruction of Eden, but of Adam and Eve living in a type of exile from the Garden. Our place of profoundest identity has not been destroyed. Rather, we have become fugitives from it.

Genesis celebrates the goodness of creation at its birth and the sacredness of humanity made in the image of God. It also speaks, however, of sin 'lurking at the door.' The picture is of evil at the doorway of life ready to pounce on all that is born...Life is infected by wrong at its earliest stages of development.

Creation is forever being born. It is continually issuing forth from the mystery of God...The goodness that is within us and within all life becomes like occupied territory. Redemption is about being reconnected to our true self.

The Gospel of Christ, which means the good news of Christ, is given to tell us not what we already know but what we do not know. It is not given to tell us that we have failed, because we already know that about ourselves. That is not good news. It is given to tell us what we have forgotten, and that is who we are... The grace of repentance is about turning around in our lives, but it is not about turning around in order to become someone other than ourselves. It is not about conforming to some exterior standard of truth and good behavior. Rather, it is about turning around in order to be restored to what is deepest in us. It is about becoming truly ourselves. The gift of grace reawakens our memory of Eden.

(pp. xi-xiv)

Guide for Lenten Series: Become Who We Are

Lent 1: Emptiness in the Wilderness

Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*
Ballantine Books, 2007

Raised as an atheist, Sara Miles lived an enthusiastically secular life as a restaurant cook and writer. Then early one morning, for no earthly reason, she wandered into a church. "I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian," she writes. "Or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut." But she ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine, and found herself radically transformed.

Lent 2: Painful New Birth

Tony Hendra, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*
Random House, 2004

A startling departure for this acclaimed satirist, *Father Joe* is a sincere account of how Tony Hendra learned to love. It's the story of a whole generation looking for a way back from mockery and irony, looking for its own Father Joe, and a testament to one of the most charismatic mentors in modern literature – a surpassingly wise Benedictine monk named Father Joseph Warrillow.

Lent 3: Thirsting for Life

Lindsey Crittenden, *The Water Will Hold You: A Skeptic Learns to Pray*
Harmony Books, 2007

Poignant, personal, and unflinchingly honest, this book is a skeptic's story as much as it is a believer's story. It explores the power of the ineffable through a compelling narrative of family, loss, and love. It also tells the story of how prayer

opened the author to the present moment and to those around her and eventually brought new life.

Lent 4: Seeking the Light

Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*
Anchor Books, 2004

A luminous story of becoming human, being recognized, and finally recognizing oneself, this powerful memoir tells of a woman's journey from solitude and a terrifying illness – diagnosed only years later as epilepsy – to a rigorous quest for understanding God. Armstrong's book, *A History of God*, has won extensive praise and has contributed enormously to greater understanding among Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Lent 5: Coming to Life

Patricia Hampl, *Virgin Time*
Ballantine Books, 1992

Longing to shake off the lifeless dogma of her religious upbringing, Hampl undertakes a springtime walking pilgrimage to Assisi. Leaving security and comfort behind, she feels the pull of contemplative prayer and a new kind of faith. Inevitably her pilgrimage is peopled with other pilgrims – about whom she writes with wit and insight. Her journey is long and takes surprising turns.

Palm Sunday: Pilgrimage to Holy Places

Scott Cairns, *Short Trip to the Edge: Where Earth Meets Heaven – A Pilgrimage*
HarperOne, 2007

Seeking a path to prayer, the author makes several visits to Orthodox monasteries and holy sites on Mount Athos during a sabbatical year as a professor at the University of Missouri. On one level, the book is a lively, engaging account of the rigors of pilgrimage, along with the obstacles and people he encounters. On another level, it is a candid and refreshing spiritual autobiography of an ordinary Christian who wants to grow closer to God. Perhaps the best part of the book is his account of the trip on which he brought along his 14-year-old son to share the struggles and joys of pilgrimage.

Suggested approach: In groups of six, each person could choose one of the books to read and present to the rest of the group. The following ideas might guide the presentations:

- 1) A brief account of the author's life context, including religious background
- 2) Description of conversion (when? where? how? why?)
- 3) Summary of key learnings about prayer and spiritual growth
- 4) Questions for discussion?