

LOVE. THINK. SPEAK.

INTRODUCTION

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Far overhead from beyond the veil of blue sky . . . either from the sky or from the Lion itself, . . . the deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying: “Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak.

Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters.”

—C.S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew*

These three words—*love, think, speak*—grabbed my attention the first year I guided my seventh-grade literature class through C.S. Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew*. Aslan’s call to his newly-ordained talking animals to awaken and to love, think, and speak was a call to image him to the rest of Narnia. This reminded me of the awe-inspiring truth that humanity being is made in God’s image; we love, think, and speak because the Creator did so first.

Not only do these three commands of Aslan remind us we are image-bearers of God to the world, but they also show us that the words we use and the various ways we use them are part of our image-bearing work. The use and importance of words is woven throughout Scripture as we see God acting for and speaking to His people, as well as commanding and teaching them (and us) how to speak with love and wisdom.

As a parent, church member, teacher, aunt, and friend, I am called to the imaginative and intentional work of shepherding, in large and small ways, the hearts and minds of the children around me. And so are those who find themselves in communities with little ones, tweens, and teenagers. As we love, think,

and speak in our communities, we also need to bring into our children's lives life-giving words, good stories, and meaningful conversations so that they, too, can grow as image-bearers of God. Bible reading, worship, service, outdoor time, movies and plays, stories, books, poetry, humor, artwork—these are seeds we plant in our children's lives that can add to the treasure in their hearts. As Jesus taught, "Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

In her book *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, Marilyn McEntyre says,

Words are entrusted to us as equipment for our life together, to help us survive, guide, and nourish one another. We need to take the metaphor of nourishment seriously in choosing what we "feed on" in our hearts, and in seeking to make our conversation with each other life-giving.¹

The way our taste buds grow accustomed to the foods we eat and how those foods affect the health of our body is an apt metaphor for how we decide which words and ideas to offer our children. A child accustomed to sweet foods and cheese-covered vegetables (I am very sympathetic to this) might struggle to appreciate the variety of flavors and textures found in nutritional foods. A steady diet of dumbed-down stories, illustrations, and conversations will not prepare them for all the glorious ways words can be used in times of joy and delight and in times of sorrow and suffering.

The stories we offer our children are important to their growth as people. As James K.A. Smith says, "My feel for the world is oriented by a story I carry in my bones."² These stories are experienced through a variety of written and visual forms, including history, poetry, fiction, memoir, and songs. Children also learn an orientation to the world through advertisements, social media platforms, video games, TV shows, celebrity culture, and music videos. Smith elaborates,

The imagination is acquired. It is learned. It is neither instinctual nor universal . . . Rather, the imagination is a form of habit, a learned, bodily disposition to the world. Embodiment is integral to imagination . . . This is why the arts are crucial to our collective imagination. Grabbing hold of us by the senses, artworks have a unique capacity to shape our attunement, our feel for the world.³

C.S. Lewis's words about stories solidified what I intuitively knew about children and books when I became a mother. In his essay "On Stories" Lewis states,

“No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty.”⁴ This became my guide for how to choose good books. I found, over time, that if I was reading a book out loud and its illustrations or words were insipid or banal, I would get a knot in my stomach. These books did not stay long in our home.

Lewis’s belief that stories have formative power is intertwined throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia. Prince Caspian*, the second book in the series as Lewis wrote them, highlights the power of stories. The young Prince Caspian, whose nurse and then his tutor told him stories of Old Narnia—full of talking animals, high kings and queens, and Aslan—felt a strong connection with and loyalty to Narnia, so that later he longed to be crowned its rightful king. On the other hand, King Miraz—as well as previous Telmarine kings—perpetuated fear in his subjects by insisting that the stories of Old Narnia and Aslan were myths and that only evil came from across the waters and forests. His subjects lived in this fear and kept away from the seas and woods as much as they could.

“There was a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it,” begins *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the book following *Prince Caspian*. It is a story that fleshes out Lewis’s belief concerning the negative, formative power that the lack of good stories can have on a child’s heart and mind.

From the very beginning of the book, we know that Eustace is truly an insufferable boy. His teachers and parents—whom he called by their first names—gave him facts and opinions, not stories or edifying conversations. “He liked books if they were books of information and had pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools.”⁵ When Eustace entered into an adventure on the high seas, he had no imagination for its possibilities and lacked the largeness of heart necessary to welcome new people (or talking mice) into his life. He was full of disdain and self-righteousness—he needed a heart change.

Stories can train our imaginations and help us grow in empathy and sympathy, but stories can also help us understand how we fit into the kingdom of God, as well as prepare us for a life of being molded by the word of God. As Marilyn McEntyre writes,

We derive our basic expectations from the narrative patterns we internalize . . . Stories provide the basic plotlines and in the infinite variations on those plots help us to negotiate the open middle ground between predictability and surprise.⁶

By reading an abundance of diverse stories—from *Beowulf* to *The Tempest* to *The Lord of the Rings* to *A Wrinkle in Time* to *Harry Potter*—children learn that although they may be a central character in a story, the story is not only about them; there is a bigger story and outside themselves of which their story is part. Although Sam, in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, wishes for future storytellers to sing tales of his and Frodo's quest with the Ring, we know that he is one part of the epic fight for the life of Middle-earth. His part is vital, but he is not the only one to make brave sacrifices and face his enemies. When we get to the end of the story, we celebrate Sam, but we also celebrate the other heroic characters as we marvel at the story's victorious conclusion.

In the overarching story of God's kingdom and its chapters of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, every individual is important. Every believer has a salvation and sanctification story that is part of eternity's new creation story. No one human, however, is the center or the hero of this ongoing plot. The Kingdom Story is about God drawing near to and dwelling with His people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom Story is about the Triune God. Reading stories that show protagonists as part of something bigger than themselves helps us see, even at a slant, that though we are important, the story is not only about us.

Reading widely and deeply can also bear fruit in how children enter into Scripture. Through stories, children encounter not just facts and ideas, but also poetic language, motif, foreshadowing, metaphor, and symbolism. God's word is divinely inspired truth that comes to us not only in historical accounts and commands, but also in poetry, prophecy, and parables. Understanding how a story works will help our children intuit how Scripture works as a large true story, full of connections, conflicts, and resolutions.

We are people who have words and stories deep down in our DNA. Our God created the world through His words, and He brought us into life and fellowship with Him through the Word-of-God-Made-Flesh. Jesus embodied to those around Him the life and light of God the Father. Through His words and stories, and then through His death and resurrection, our hearts, minds, and imaginations can be enlarged for the glory of God. As Paul writes, "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). We can help our children be formed by Scripture as we help them enlarge their imaginations and minds through both reading Scripture and experiencing a multitude of well-told stories.⁷

Scripture is what can truly change hearts, minds, and souls, so knowing it should be a priority for us. Throughout Psalm 119, the psalmist declares the need for and the goodness of God's laws. All 176 verses focus on God's testimonies and instructions as the writer's life-blood. Verses 36 and 37 sum up this prayer:

Incline my heart to your testimonies,
and not to selfish gain!
Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;
and give me life in your ways.

These young image-bearers of God will be formed by many, many things. Therefore, we must provide the children in our lives with words, conversations, and stories that will plant the seeds of abundance in their hearts and minds. As Marilyn McEntyre affirms, "To accept the invitation of good stories is to enter into deep and pleasurable reflection on very old philosophical questions: what can we know and what must we do."⁸ And with these seeds growing in their lives, our children will have deeper roots to draw from in how they love, think, and speak.

What a good work for all of us to participate in.

My Very First Mother Goose

Edited by Iona Opie | *Illustrated by Rosemary Wells*

All my memories of reading this book to my daughters are happy ones—someone sitting on my lap as we recited the words together and enjoyed the bright, colorful, whimsical illustrations. Rosemary Wells has taken Mother Goose rhymes and made them better with her lovable characters and pictures. No longer do these famous verses seem dry and distant—instead they are fun and enjoyable to memorize. Even though my daughters are grown, we often randomly recite "To Market to Market to buy a fat pig / home again home again ... jiggity jig" to each other.

A Child's Calendar

John Updike | *Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman*

The stunning paintings in this book follow the members of a multi-generational, multiracial family through the months and seasons with their friends.

I cannot imagine a better introduction to poetry for young ones. This Caldecott Honor book has been in our family for twenty years. Even after many, many rereads, the verses, rhymes, and meter still feel fresh and magical.

Mr. Putter and Tabby Pour the Tea

Cynthia Rylant | *Illustrated by Arthur Howard*

This is the first book in a charming series that my family enjoyed as much as I did, despite the fact that one of the main characters is a cat and we are a dog family. Arthur Howard's rumpled illustrations capture Mr. Putter to a tee. In later books, his neighbor and her dog join in their everyday adventures. This story affirms friendship, old people, and good food.

The Father Brown Reader: Stories from Chesterton

Adapted by Nancy Carpentier Brown | *Illustrated by Ted Schluenderfritz*

Brown adapts four of the Father Brown mysteries for nine- to twelve-year-olds. These include "The Blue Cross," "The Strange Feet," "The Flying Stars," and "The Absence of Mister Glass." But the real mystery is: Who borrowed our copy and when will we get it back? What a fun way to introduce these classic detective stories to the next generations. And kudos to the author for making Chesterton's writing accessible without dumbing it down.

Twig

Elizabeth Orton Jones | *Illustrated by Elizabeth Orton Jones*

This is the kind of book that you discover one day in a used-book store and wonder where has this been your whole life. Twig has a number of adventures in her backyard, with birds, an elf, and other wee folk. Elizabeth Orton Jones pairs this magical story with charming illustrations that will remind you of the work of Garth Williams or Joe Sutphin. This story has continuously satisfied everyone I have read it out loud to.

I'm taking editor's privileges and also sharing my favorite books for teenagers.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles

Agatha Christie

This was Agatha Christie's first book—her debut novel, as well as the book that introduced the character of Hercule Poirot. She started working on it while serving as a nurse during WWI; it was published it after the war. Like all her

future mysteries, this story has clever twists and turns and a surprise ending, making it a truly good place to start reading this famous murder-mystery writer.

Parables and Paradox

Malcolm Guite

Guite writes, “All poetry avails itself of the wider symbolic reach of everyday experience which is the basis of any parable, and poetry is especially fitted to point towards and deepen that experience of paradox which pierces us so often when we try to grasp a spiritual truth.”⁹ In this collection of fifty sonnets, Guite allows poetry to help us experience afresh the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels.

Peace Like a River

Leif Enger

This highly praised, award-winning novel is a quest, a tragedy, and a love story. Leif Enger is a master storyteller. Many folks disagree over which of his books is the best, but this is my favorite. I am always happy to return to it, and several scenes still make their way into my thoughts often. I love how Enger puts words together, and how he builds both the ordinary and extraordinary into his tale. This book is rooted in the heartland of America and will make you believe in the possibilities of both murder and mystery in one family’s story. But the foundation of this story is one dad’s love for God and for his family—and the sacrifices he makes for both.

The Day the Angels Fell

Shawn Smucker

I discovered this book several years ago, after reading that Shawn Smucker’s writing was like a mixture of Madeleine L’Engle, Chaim Potok, and Leif Enger. Since these are three favorite writers of mine, I quickly ordered his book. A little while later, I learned that Shawn and his family lived close by and that we even had several mutual friends. The happy ending to that story is now we are friends . . . and I am still a big fan of his. Shawn writes the types of sentences that make me say “Listen to this!” to whoever is close by. Like Leif Enger, Shawn creates hyper-realistic American landscapes in which out-of-the-ordinary events grow up and you don’t question them. This story will make you laugh and cry and tremble. The sequel, *The Edge of Over There*, takes you to a place you didn’t expect to go—it’s a cannot-put-it-down type of story, too.

My Name is Asher Lev

Chaim Potok

My Name is Asher Lev is about a practicing Hasidic Jew who, from a very early age demonstrated a gift in drawing as well as the deep soul of an artist. For the rest of his life, as he pursues growth as an artist while also practicing his faith, he comes in direct conflict with the ones he loves as well as with his faith community. Although this story rests on a particular faith (Judaism) and calling (artist), the story's many universal struggles become real for the reader. I first read *My Name is Asher Lev* in high school. Images from several scenes stayed with me for years, and when I later reread the book, I was delighted to find them again. Recently my love for Potok's stories and his writings have been passed on to a couple of my daughters, which makes me very happy.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), p. 2.
- 2 James K.A. Smith, "Healing the Imagination: Art Lessons from James Baldwin," *Image Journal*, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://imagejournal.org/article/healing-the-imagination-art-lessons-from-james-baldwin/>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 C.S. Lewis, "On Stories," in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (New York: HarperOne, 1982, orig. publ. 1966), p. 20.
- 5 C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1952), p. 1.
- 6 McEntyre, *Caring for Words*, p. 124.
- 7 Eugene Peterson in *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* says, "The Holy Scriptures are story-shaped. Reality is story-shaped. The world is story-shaped. Our lives are story-shaped . . . We enter this story, following the story-making, storytelling Jesus, and spend the rest of our lives exploring the amazing and exquisite details, the words and sentences that go into the making of the story of our creation, salvation, and life of blessing" (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), p. 62.
- 8 McEntyre, *Caring for Words*, p. 115.
- 9 Malcolm Guite, *Parable and Paradox: Sonnets on the Sayings of Jesus and Other Poems* (London, UK: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2016), p. xi.