Love. Think. Speak.

*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.* CS Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew*

These three words—love, think, speak—grabbed my attention the first year I guided my 7th grade literature class through CS Lewis’ *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 of humanity being made in God’s image; we love, think, and speak because the creator did first.

Not only do these three commands of Aslan remind us we are image bearers of God to the world, 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, a church member, a teacher, an aunt, and a 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 that they already are who speak in God-honoring and people-loving ways. 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 “…for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)

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 conversations with others life-giving.” 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 what words and ideas we offer our children. A child used to sweet foods and cheese covered vegetables (although I am very sympathetic to this) might struggle with a variety of flavors and textures found in nutritional foods (I am still amazed when other people like green beans…). A steady diet of dumb-downed 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.” 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 other means, such as 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. . .”

C.S. Lewis words about stories solidified what I intuitively knew about children and books when I became a mother. From his essay “On Stories” Lewis stated: “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 and beyond.” This became my guide for how to choose good books. I found, overtime, 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.

Intertwined through the *Chronicles of Narnia* is C.S. Lewis’ belief that stories have a formative power. Throughout these books, people know the right thing to do because of the stories they have read.

*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, talking animals, high kings and queens, and Aslan, felt a strong connection and loyalty to Narnia, so that later he was desirous 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 the name,” opens up *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 of the lack of good stories on a child’s heart and mind.

From the very beginning of chapter one, we know Eustace, one of the main characters, is truly an insufferable boy. Facts and opinions, not stories or edifying conversations, were given to him by his parents, whom he called by their first names, and his teachers. “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.” When he entered into an adventure on the high seas, he had no imagination for its possibilities and no largeness of heart to welcome new people (or talking mice) into his life. He was full of disdain and self-righteousness, and in need of a heart change. The adventures in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* include why Eustace needed a change and how this came about.

Marilyn McEntyre says, “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.” 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.

By reading an abundance of diverse stories, from *Beowulf* to *The Tempest* to *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 story bigger and outside of themselves of which their story is part. Although Sam, in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, wishes for future story-tellers 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 victorious outcomes.

In the overarching story of God’s kingdom and its chapters of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, each individual is important. Every believer has a salvation and sanctification story that is part of eternity’s new creation story. However, each person is not 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 us protagonists as part of something bigger than themselves helps us see, even at a slant, that though we are important, the story is not just about us.

Reading widely and deeply can also bear fruit in how children enter into Scripture. One is introduced to not just facts and ideas in different stories, one also grows to understand poetic language, motif, foreshadowing, metaphor, and symbolism. God’s Word is all divinely inspired truth that comes to us not only in historical accounts and commands, but in poetry, prophecy, and parables. To understand how a story works will help our children intuit how Scripture is a large true story, full of connections, conflicts, and resolutions.

We are people who have deep down in our DNA words and stories. 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 death and resurrection, our hearts, minds, and imaginations can be enlarged for the glory of God. “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 Corinthians 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. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Knowing Scripture because it is what can truly change hearts, minds, and souls should be a priority for us. Throughout Psalm 119, the psalmist declares the need and 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 children in our lives 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…” And with these seeds growing in their lives, our children will have deeper wells to draw from in how they love, think, and speak.

What a good work for all of us to be in on.

Book Recommendations for young children:

This list would also include picture books illustrated by Barbara Cooney (especially *Roxaboxen* and *The Ox-Cart Man*) and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but they are listed in other essays in this book…

1. *My Very First Mother Goose*: Iona Opie (author) and Rosemary Wells (illustrator)
2. *A Child’s Calendar*: John Updike (poet) and Trina Schart Hyman (illustrator)
3. *Mr. Putter and Tabby Pour the Tea*: Cynthia Rylant (author) and Arthur Howard (illustrator)
4. *Bible History ABCs*: Stephen Nicolas (author) and Ned Bustard (illustrator)
5. *Twig:* Elizabeth Orton Jones (author and illustrator)

Book Recommendations for teenagers:

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

1. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*: Agatha Christie
2. *Parables and Paradox:* Malcolm Guite (poet)
3. *Peace Like a River*: Lief Enger
4. *The Day the Angels Fell*: Shawn Smucker
5. *My Name is Asher Lev*: Chaim Potok

1. 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.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)