

The Moral Imagination: The Heart and Soul's Best Guide
Achieving the Goals of a Catholic Education
Through the Good, True, and Beautiful in Literature

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“The eye sees what it has been given to see by concrete circumstance, but the imagination reproduces what, by some related gift, it is able to make live.”
-Flannery O’Connor

Introduction:

In August of 1993, John Paul II released an encyclical to his brother bishops entitled *Veritatis Splendor – The Splendor of Truth*. In this beautiful document John Paul reminded his readers that there is truth, it is knowable, and the human heart craves that truth. The encyclical is divided into three parts; the first part is of particular interest because the question raised is what so many parents and teachers are asking today about Catholic education.

John Paul II begins with the story of the young man who comes to Jesus asking, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus asks the young man why he asks about the good, as there is only one who is good. He then tells him to keep the Commandments, which the young man says that he does. “What do I still lack?” he asks of Jesus. (Matthew 19:16-21).

John Paul II steps back from the Gospel and points out that the young man is not asking for other rules he must follow, but an inner conversion he feels called to obey. When he asks about the good, he is seeking God, who is the source of all goodness. Jesus tells him how to fill his longing for the Good – He, the Truth, evangelizes him with the truth.

We parents, teachers, administrators, and clergy are asking the same question as the young man. We ask not only for ourselves, but for our children and those in our care. “Teacher, what good must I do, and what must be done for them, to help them achieve eternal life?” If we are not pursuing the answer to this question, the point of the Catholic education is meaningless.

Pope Benedict the XVI, in an address to the Bishops of England, Scotland, and Wales said there is an “urgent need to proclaim the Gospel afresh in a highly secularized environment.” This is the new evangelization called for by our Holy Fathers, yet it is an evangelization that demands a personal transformation from each and every one of us. It is not, as the young man who questions Jesus learns, a simple checklist we mark off to grow in our spiritual life.

The new evangelization, according to Catholic writer Stratford Caldecott, begins with a call to discipleship. The desire to be connected to Christ, to Him who is the Good, leads the soul on a “way of beauty.” For children, especially Catholic children, this journey begins in the home as the child sees the relationship of the parent/parents with Christ. For those children, their

parents as first educators is truly a blessing. The recitation of prayers, Bible stories read, saints lives examined – these all hone the moral imagination of the child.

However, there are also those who do not have the benefit of this example, and therefore there must be an awakening in the child of the moral imagination which takes place outside the home. As Caldecott states so beautifully, this awakening, when it takes place inside of a community (the Catholic school), helps to create a place of “shared values and ideals, a moral environment where the individual person is valued, supported, and cherished.”

Suddenly, the character of Christian community permeates the entire school building, reaffirming the way each individual acts towards another, the respect and attention given to each person during the day. That which was once simply a written mission statement comes alive in the acts of prayer and liturgy, kindness and courtesy, humility, self-sacrifice, and self-discipline.

What is Morality?

What does it mean to be moral? If we go back to the Gospel of the young man and Jesus, we must note that the commandments Jesus asks the young man about all have to do with the relationship of one person to another. Jesus specifically mentions murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and honoring one’s parents.

The commandments that guide our relationships with one another are not more important than those which pertain only to God. However, John Paul II is very clear about how these commandments must be lived when he writes, “Both the Old and the New Testaments explicitly affirm that *without love of neighbor*, made concrete in keeping the commandments, *genuine love for God is not possible*” (emphasis in the original).

John Paul II further writes, “The moral life presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man.” We must grow in our gratitude to God by living a moral life that shows our love and respect for one another. How do we prepare the mind of a child to understand what this means? Again, John Paul II tells us that, “God has already given an answer to this question: he did so by creating man and ordering him with wisdom and love to his final end, through the law which is inscribed in his heart (cf Rom 2:15), the ‘natural law.’” The work has been done for us by the Creator, the law of God has been written on the heart of each person. The drawing forth of what has been inscribed there is the challenge.

Create In Me a Clean Heart, O God

Dr. Vigen Guroian, Professor of Theology and Ethics at Loyola College in Baltimore writes in his book, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*:

“Mere instruction in morality is not sufficient to nurture the virtues. It might even backfire, especially when the presentation is heavily exhortative and the pupil’s will is coerced. Instead, *a compelling vision of the goodness of goodness itself* needs to be presented in a way that is attractive and stirs the imagination. A good moral education addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of human nature. Stories are an irreplaceable medium for this kind of moral education – that is, the education of character.” (pg. 20)

The moral imagination, Guroian says, is the “distinctively human power to conceive of men and women as moral beings, i.e., as persons, not things or animals whose value to us is their usefulness. It is the process by which the self makes metaphors out of images recorded by the senses and stored in memory, which then are employed to find and suppose moral correspondences in experience.”

Why is this so important, the ability to create metaphors for oneself? It is because they are, unconsciously for the most part, what each person uses to make sense of the world. New York University Professor Neil Postman is adamant about metaphor being not simply an ornament in an English class, but an actual organ of perception:

“Through metaphors, we see the world as one thing or another. Is light a wave or a particle? Are molecules like billiard balls or force fields? Is history unfolding according to some instructions of nature or a divine plan? Are our genes like information codes? Is a literary work like an architect’s blueprint or a mystery to be solved?” (Postman, *The End of Education*, pg. 174)

Jesus taught us time and again with metaphors that stay in our minds and hearts. He is the Good Shepherd, we are his sheep. We are called to be salt and light for others. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. The grain of wheat, the mustard seed, the pearl of great price...all of these are metaphors to help us understand those things we cannot easily comprehend.

Jesus even teaches the people that their hearts are like soil: rocky and hard, full of thorns and weeds, or fertile and ready to receive the Word of God. For those who were willing to hear, open minded and willing of heart, the metaphors and parables of Jesus makes sense. It is for this reason that the moral imagination is best formed in the young heart and mind. The soil has not, God willing, already been turned to a barren or rocky wasteland, nor is it choked with brambles. The beautiful, fertile heart and mind of a child is the perfect resting place for the seeds of the moral imagination.

What Then, Shall We Read?

Nearly forty years ago psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim published his study on the need for moral education for children, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Bettelheim very pointedly stated that children needed a moral education; not one that uses “abstract ethical concepts” but rather one that teaches through “that which seems tangibly right and therefore meaningful...The child finds this kind of meaning through fairy tales.” (p. 5)

Fairy tales are filled with the people and images understood by children: the rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish, the lazy and the industrious, the good and the evil. The symbols are not vague and hidden but extremely overt: flowers, water, dirt, ashes. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge said, the best symbol “always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible.” Symbols are not chosen randomly but point to an abstract meaning naturally because of what they are physically. Water symbolizes cleansing because it cleanses. The rose symbolizes beauty because it is beautiful.

Fairy tales present “other worlds,” but they still employ “real” moral laws of character and virtue. The challenge to the reader or listener is to make sense out of these worlds, to imaginatively navigate him/herself as a resident of the tales, to take the risks, joys, failures and triumphs therein along with the characters and emerge transformed.

The virtues now come to life, with a greater significance and personal identification. The powerful images of good and evil found in stories such as “The Snow Queen” or “Cinderella” stimulate the imagination and help form the metaphors necessary to interpret the world. Relating these imaginative stories to those Bible stories that the child hears at home, at Mass and at school reinforces those virtues that one needs as a mature person.

Russell Kirk wrote in *Enemies of Permanent Things*, “The fantastic and the fey, far from being unhealthy for small children, are precisely what a small child needs; under such a stimulus a child’s moral imagination quickens. Out of these early tales of wonder comes a sense of awe – and the beginning of philosophy. All things begin and end in mystery.”

As Catholics, what more could we ask for our children and students than the child awakening to awe, to being born into wonder? The mystery which is the Mass, the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation – they become more easily accepted and held dear in the heart when that heart has been prepared to receive the most precious of all mysteries.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “The truth of our human tradition and handing it on with a voice of authority, an unshaken voice, that is the one

eternal education: to be sure enough that something is true to dare to tell it to a child.” Likewise, Ethel Pochocki, in her introduction to *Once Upon a Time Saints* writes, “Fairy tales clear the way for sanctity. They are the child’s first morality play, clear-cut, no-nonsense black and white, good and evil, life and death – with a bit of fun thrown in to alleviate the pain.” How well said!

Fairy tales, because of their accessibility, are one of the greatest storehouses of wisdom and moral insight about the human experience. They are a tonic for the old soul, a source of delight for the young. They restore our love for life and strengthen our desire to be good. They lighten our hearts, engage our resolve, and sweeten our minds.

Happily, the moral imagination of the child is not dependent on fairy tales alone for sustenance, but on the best of literature appropriate for children. This does not mean, however, books written expressly FOR children, and certainly not the didactic tomes which often pass for children’s literature. Good literature should allow us to enjoy our lives more or to endure it better. Fortunately, there is a wealth of children’s classics which do both.

Dr. Mitchell Kalpakgian, Professor of English at Simpson College in Iowa, gave a beautiful summation of what good children’s literature should do for readers:

“Children’s classics which illuminate the mysteries of life both increase our capacity for joy and strengthen our patience and perseverance. They whet our appetite for life and instill a love of the noble, heroic, and the courageous. They make us rejoice in our childhood and the simple, innocent pleasure which form a lifetime of fond memories, and they remind us that, though we are older, our childhood remains within us and comes alive as we enjoy the company of the young or revel in our children and grandchildren...Our lives make a difference in the lives of others. That wishes are answered, that luck is real, that dreams are not too good to be true, that heroes conquer monsters, that little tailors defeat giants all testify to a world governed by Divine Providence, not by might, cunning, or chance. That the world is “so filled with a number of things” – fun, friendship, stories, homes, families, adventures – acknowledges that life’s deepest sources of happiness are for everyone. That the simple outwit the cunning, that the weak defeat the strong, that the humble are exalted, that children in their innocence have a “power” which makes men and beasts serve them reassure us that, in Don Quixote’s words, ‘where there is life, there is hope.’” (The Mysteries of Life in Children’s Literature)

Classic children’s literature is the solid base on which the moral imagination is constructed. Having read the classics early in life, students have a firm grasp of virtues and values as they read more adult literature in the high

schools and in college. Reading upper level texts with a “Catholic eye” becomes second nature. For example, when the book *Little Women*, with the theme of a happy home life is read in grade school, the tragedy of a family torn apart in Elie Wiesel’s *Night* is easier to understand and take to heart in high school.

In the best books for the young there is a recurrent theme of wishes and desires, the heart’s longing to be fulfilled. Often the wishes and dreams come true, but only after much praying, hoping, working and waiting. The virtues of patience, loyalty, courage, charity, compassion, and perseverance are all instrumental in bringing about the desired outcome – and always dependent on the will of God Himself.

These are the very virtues we, as Catholics, nurture in our children. They are not to be confused with values, which may be as changing as the Kansas weather. Children’s classics reinforce real virtues, reminding us that human happiness often comes in the form of self-abnegation, not self-gratification. The perennial truth of children’s classics, the “good books,” is that it is in giving of oneself completely, without expecting to receive something back, that we find redemption.

The Cardinal Virtues

The Catholic Church admonishes us to grow in the Cardinal Virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude. All other virtues fall under these, and each one is necessary for growth in the spiritual life. Each of the books chosen for the school grade levels is one that encourages that mysterious inner growth towards the good, the true, and the beautiful.

It is important to have the meanings of these four firmly in our minds so that we can see how the other virtues we are working on sit safely under them, each deepening the faith and growing the soul toward God:

Prudence: This is right reason applied to practice. It is not simply looking at all the possibilities and choices and then choosing one, it is making a choice toward action based on that which is known to be right and true. Prudence allows us to take counsel carefully with ourselves and others and then direct our activity toward the Good.

Justice: This entails the habitual inclination of the will. Justice calls us to a constant and permanent determination to give everyone his rightful due. In other words, it is the respect we owe to others because they are not us – we protect their rights as children of God to our fullest ability.

Fortitude: This virtue is the virtue of martyrs. It serves prudence and justice – which tell us what needs to be done – by giving us the courage and

strength to act. Fortitude allows us to cope with sorrow and loss, steadies our will, and helps us overcome fear.

Temperance: The moderation of our own desires, especially the desire for legitimate goods, lest the inordinate desire for them should take over. Temperance reminds us we are more than animals, and that we are capable of acting for the Good even though our nature desires otherwise.

When we fully understand the Cardinal Virtues, other virtues quite naturally occur to us that are subordinate to these. They include respect, responsibility, diligence, gratitude, generosity, courage, loyalty, compassion, hope, self-control, charity, faithfulness, courtesy, perseverance, honesty, gentleness, love of country, and last, but certainly not least, a sense of wonder at the world which God has so generously provided for us.

The following pages are recommendations by grade level of stories and books which promote virtue. Though not overtly Catholic, they are treasure troves of life's richest wisdom. In their simplicity they help us to appreciate the gift of life, the enjoyment of playfulness in learning, and the ability to clearly see things as they are. Chosen with the specific intention of forming the moral imagination, they will, as the poet Percy Shelley once wrote, "allow us to experience life from the perspectives of others, which is thus essential to love itself."

Fifth Grade:

COURAGE

Twenty and Ten (Bishop)

The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe (Lewis)

Prince Caspian (Lewis)

The Winged Watchman (van Stockum)

Belling the Cat (Aesop)

Brief Synopses:

World War II and the treatment of the Jews by the Nazi's can be an overwhelming topic for young children. Claire Hutchett Bishop's *Twenty and Ten* is one of the most beautiful and gentle introductions to that terrible war and the inhumanity of man. Twenty French children have been sent to the countryside under the care of Sister Gabrielle. Although they do not have much to eat, they do have their lively imaginations. They spend the days playing, sometimes acting out the Bible stories that Sister has read to them. Into their rather quiet lives comes a French Resistance soldier, asking them to take in ten Jewish children who are being sought by the Nazis. Sister and the children agree, sharing their food and blankets with the newcomers. When Sister goes to the village for mail and food items, she is arrested and detained, leaving the children alone on the hill. Two soldiers arrive at the school, sure that the Jewish children are hiding there. What happens when they begin questioning and intimidating the children is nothing short of a small miracle. This is one of those books that begs the question, "What would I do in this situation? Would I lay down my life for my brother? And who is my brother?"

There are two of the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis on the list for fifth grade, because they are so well written and have so much Christian imagery that they both should be read. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is the introduction of the Pevensie children to the world of Narnia and the great lion, Aslan. This is a book with big themes: sin, repentance, suffering, and forgiveness.

Edmund, one of the four children, suffers from self-centeredness and pride. He sulkily wishes to be able to show up his older brother Peter, to be the one who calls the shots and make others subservient to his will. When Edmund quietly follows Lucy, his younger sister, into Narnia, he meets up with the beautiful but cold White Witch.

The White Witch preys on Edmund by offering him food – Turkish delight – and Edmund eats until he is no longer cold or afraid. His hunger is fed with a frothy delight of food, but nothing substantial. In fact, Lewis writes, "the more he ate the more he wanted to eat." The emptiness inside of him cannot be filled with the empty lies of the White Witch. Edmund returns from Narnia to his world, lying about having been there. All he can think about is having more Turkish delight – he is addicted to the emptiness (sin) and what it promises.

Edmund is a character who is easy to identify with – we all feel disenfranchised, angry, unappreciated by others at times. However, it is the response we give – either sullen and sulky or faithful and hopeful that defines who we are. Evil in Narnia is vanquished, just as in our world, when the soul turns away from pride and selfishness and turns toward God.

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The second of the Narnia books, ***Prince Caspian***, tells of the return of the Pevensie children to their beloved land. But time has moved at different speeds – things have changed in Narnia. Much time has passed and the children must assume their roles again as kings and queens of Narnia to help Prince Caspian regain his rightful place as ruler. This story really centers on Lucy, the youngest of the family. It is Lucy who can see the truth in what is going on in Narnia (even her name is a hint: Lu-cy). She can see Aslan when the others cannot, because her heart is pure and she has great faith.

At a crucial point in the book, Lucy cannot get the others to follow what she know in her heart to be the path up through the mountains that Aslan wants them to take. When she is confronted by Aslan in the night, she tries to make excuses for her own refusal to take the right road. But Lucy overcomes her fear and strengthened by her love of Aslan, she is able to persuade them to follow her as she follows the lion. She is the smallest, yet the bravest and most steadfast of the group. Her character definitely makes thinking about young martyrs much more clear – they had their eyes on He whom they could see.

Lewis did intend for these books to have strong Christian imagery, but they also have great adventure and admirable characters. Even though many kids will have seen the movies made from these books (and they were fairly good), there is no substitute for the rich imagery in the books themselves.

The Winged Watchman by Hilda van Stockum is a look at the family life of the Verhagen family during the Nazi occupation of Holland. Ten year old Joris and his family live in one of the windmills out on the dikes – one of the “winged watchmen.” He can barely remember a time that the Nazis and the war have not been a part of his life. As he has grown older he has watched and observed how the different families and people of his village respond to the Germans. His own mother takes in a little Jewish baby, hidden in the bushes by her mother, on the day the Nazis take away the rest of the family.

Joris learns that his family is even more courageous than he has dreamed – they are a part of the Dutch Resistance, helping downed flyers escape from Holland. But there are others in their villages who have no qualms about aiding and abetting the Germans. This is another of those books that evoke the questions about how we would react in a similar situation. Do we protect ourselves, or do we lay down our lives for others? How do we do that in our own lives right now? Do we sacrifice for others? Forego pleasures to give our help to others? This is a great book for stimulating discussion.

A great little Aesop’s fable, “**Belling the Cat**,” is perfect for a discussion of courage. The mice all agree it would be wonderful to put a bell on the cat so they could hear her coming, but who will risk his life to do the deed? A nice way to think about the consequences of our actions, and think about the difference between courage and foolish bravado.

Conclusion

Although there are quite a few books on the preceding pages, there are many others that should be on the shelves in all Catholic school libraries. While it may be true that young people want to read the newest “hot” books, it is questionable as to whether they should be promoted so readily in our Catholic schools. Some people feel that it doesn’t matter what a child reads, just as long as they are reading something, anything.

Of course it matters what we do with our minds, because they are to be used for making prudent decisions about our lives. Filling our heads with nothing but empty at best and questionable at worst stories when we are young doesn't help us to form our moral consciences. Childhood is so brief – we should use this short window of time to fill hearts and minds with the “truest of true things.”

This paper began with the discussion of the moral imagination, which is a way of looking at life, making metaphors out of images. As we grow, these metaphors find a moral correspondence in experience. The most important word here is, again, “metaphor.” It has its root meaning in the Greek and is a “carrying over” or carrying beyond.” It lifts our mind up from one thing to another to another, linking them by suggesting a likeness. The more we shape the moral imaginations of Catholic students, the easier it should be for them to choose and employ the good, the true, and the beautiful in their lives as they link experience from childhood to the world they experience as young adults and beyond. Returning once more to Dr. Guroian and a quote from his book, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*:

“Children are vitally concerned with distinguishing good from evil and truth from falsehood. This need to make moral distinctions is a gift, a grace, that human beings are given at the start of their lives.” (pg. 3)

The innate moral sense that we are all born with, if not tended carefully, will fail to put down roots into our very beings. Nourishing the moral imagination is not something we might do, or we could do, it is something we must do. And, thankfully, it is a pleasant task for both the child and the adult. Let us end with another quote from Flannery O'Connor. Why are stories so important to children? And why are good stories the best?

“A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way...”

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