

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

Thank you to Sharon Markey from St. Paul Catholic School for providing this document. This document is an excellent resource for all teachers.

August 2014

“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."

Sixth Grade:

CHARITY/KINDNESS

The Good Master (Seredy)

The Railway Children (Nesbit)

The Secret Garden (Burnett)

The Kitchen Madonna (Godden)

Boys and the Frogs (Aesop)

Brief Synopses:

Set in pre-World War I Hungary, ***The Good Master*** by Kate Seredy introduces us to the high spirited Kate, her cousin Janci, and her loving uncle and aunt. Kate's mother is dead and her father decides that he is gone too much of the time to take care of her properly. She is sent to live with her Uncle Marton on his ranch. Janci, her boy cousin, is trying his hardest to become accepted as a man on the ranch, and his newly arrived cousin Kate is making that nearly impossible. He had expected a quiet, refined little girl to come to their home, but they get an irrepressible tomboy with a quick wit and an even quicker temper.

Janci and Kate start out fierce enemies, but they learn from each other and become heart-felt friends. Kate helps Janci to see the beauty of his life on the ranch, and Janci helps Kate learn to tone down her high-spirits and control her anger. Both of them are guided throughout the year they spend together by the "Good Master," Uncle Marton. This book captures a way of life in Hungary that was destroyed by the war. It is truly a book from which we can learn compassion and charity, laced with prudence and good judgment.

The Railway Children by E. Nesbit is a simple story about three children who are fairly well off, until their father is arrested for a crime he did not commit. They have to move to the country to make ends meet, and their mother works on her writing. Much of the story is based on Nesbit's own childhood, so it rings quite true. The children are not perfect – they argue and emote, occasionally making poor choices. However, their respect and love as well as admiration for their parents is unmistakable. They are guided by the steady faith of their mother that things will come out alright in the end.

The children not only show kindness to others in the story, but kindness is shown to them several times in their hour of need. This is a book of a simpler time, and it moves at a slower pace. However, it is a story that one remembers long after the book is closed. Nesbit's writing is so effortless it is a joy to read.

Mary Lennox, a spoiled ten- year- old orphan, comes from India to live in England with her nearest relative. Unlike Uncle Marton in *The Good Master*, Mary's new guardian is never at home because he is mourning still, after ten years, the death of his wife. He neglects his own son, Colin, whose birth caused the loss of his wife. Mary comes into this mix with little capacity for friendship, no curiosity, no desire to play, and really, no imagination. She has no life of the child, until she is given a jump rope and she goes outside to learn to skip it. Mary's outdoor play leads her to the garden of the house, which lies untended behind a wall. Before long, Mary

will find the key to ***The Secret Garden*** and help the whole family recover from the pain of loss. Mary will share the garden with both Dickon, her friend who loves plants and animals, and Colin, her sickly cousin who at ten years of age is sure he is ready to die. The magic of the garden reinvigorates the lives of all the children. Even Colin's father is healed, seeing the beautiful garden restored to the beauty it once had under his wife's caring hands.

This is a wonderful book about the power that love has over the most tragic of situations. The children, in their innocence, transform themselves, each other, and those around them by simply being happy children.

This is a book that also has not been on reading lists lately, but it should be. ***The Kitchen Madonna*** by Rumer Godden is the story of two children whose parents are very busy with their jobs as architects. Gregory and Janet are left in the care of Marta the Ukrainian woman who cooks for them, cleans for them, and is always there for them. But Marta is sad- she longs for an icon for her kitchen, like there was in the old country. She needs a kitchen Madonna.

Gregory is a rather aloof child, not very friendly towards others; however, he is moved by his love for Marta and his fear that she will leave them. He sets out to find for her a real kitchen Madonna, an icon that will make her heart happy again.

The journey will not be easy as he takes his precocious sister all over London to find the right gift. Gregory is met with difficulties that test his resourcefulness and his diligence, but his love is greater than his fear. This is a wonderful book about the power of love – something we sometimes forget as we grow older.

Another short Aesop's fable, **"The Boys and the Frogs"** is a gentle reminder about kindness towards everyone. This little story tells of boys throwing rocks into the pond, skipping them and making splashes. Finally, a brave frog puts his head out and asks them to stop, reminding them that what is fun for one group, may be the cause of unhappiness for another.

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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