

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."

Seventh Grade:

Love of Family/Gratitude

Where the Red Fern Grows (Rawls)

Little Women (Alcott)

The Long Winter (Wilder)

The Singing Tree (Seredy)

The Fisherman and His Wife (Grimm)

Brief Synopses:

The book ***Where the Red Fern Grows*** is such a good book that it could be in many different categories. It is here with family life and gratitude because Billy and his family all profit from the love of Billy and his dogs. Billy is such a memorable character as he grows in wisdom and charity, diligence and faith - and all through his relationships with his two hunting hounds, Old Dan and Little Ann.

Billy's mother desperately wants to move the family out of the back woods and into the city where they can get a better education. Billy love the way of life in the hills and he especially loves his dogs. He has no intention of leaving them behind and heading for the city.

Billy has given totally of himself for the dogs, too. He worked hard for two years saving the money to buy them, working any odd jobs he can find. Once he has enough money, he brings the puppies home and carefully trains them, promising them he will work as hard for them as they work for him. Billy keeps his word to his dogs, even when it means chopping down a tree to get at a raccoon. The chopping leaves Billy's hands sore and blistered, but his dogs know he will give of himself for them.

Eventually Billy's dogs grow into two of the best hunters in the area. They win a hunting competition that carries with it a sizeable cash prize. Now the family has the means to move to the city, but Billy refuses to go and plans to stay behind, alone, with his dogs. His mother's heart is broken, but she doesn't know how to change his mind. One night, the dogs protect Billy from a mountain lion and Old Dan lays down his life for his master. When he dies, Little Ann dies too, of grief. With the death of Billy's dogs there is no longer any reason to stay on the farm; Billy buries the dogs and leaves with his family. The red fern growing above the graves of the dogs is a testament of their love for one another, and Billy is comforted.

In Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women*** the home and family are equated with the richness of a harvest and the fruitfulness of harmonious love between mother and father, and parents and children. Mrs. March constantly reminds the girls of their duty to be the kind of women that would make their father proud. The girls follow the example of their mother, sharing their own things with those less fortunate, even though they are hardly living in luxury. Still, they have a roof over their heads, food on the table, and their father is surviving the war.

The girls are definitely NOT goody-goodies. There is vanity, selfishness, anger, snappishness, and jealousy raising their ugly heads from time to time. It is the love the girls have for their parents, especially their mother, which makes them sorry for their actions. Her approval is so important to them because she has set an example of goodness herself. We watch in particular,

August 2014

Jo, learning to control her passions and becoming a steady, focused young woman. By the chapter of the book, “Harvesttime,” Mrs. March tells her girls that she can wish no greater happiness for them than the joy of seeing them with their own families, filling their own homes with love for one another.

While a story of home life may seem tame, *Little Women* definitely demonstrates that life within a devoted family is anything but that. We see the March girls displaying happiness, imagination, hospitality and energy. Their home is definitely an example of being a “castle,” full of the riches God sends to those who accept them.

Although it is wonderful to read the entire series of the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, if there is one of the books about her family that stands out as a testament to family love it is ***The Long Winter***. Pa Ingalls is the first to notice that something is different about the way nature is preparing for the coming winter. He draws Laura’s attention to the thickness of the muskrat houses in the slough. The animals use their instinct, Pa tells Laura, to know how to build for a bad winter. Laura asks why God doesn’t just tell us the same way, and Pa tells her that, “We’re not animals...That means we got to take care of ourselves.” Laura asks him if God takes care of us, and Pa answers her, “He does, so far as we do what’s right. And he gives us a conscience and brain to know what’s right...That’s the difference between us and everything in creation.”

Before the long winter of 1880-1881 is through, the small population of Dakota Territory inhabitants will find out how to use the good sense and reason God has given them, along with the charity He demands of them. How do we spend our long winters? Even with the creature comforts we enjoy – a roof over our heads, heat, lights, food – do we find time to love our families or fret about the time we “have to” spend together?

The Singing Tree can be read as a stand-alone story, but it is even more enjoyable if you have read *The Good Master*. This book deals with the First World War and the effect it had on the peace-loving Hungarian farm families, pushed into the conflict. This is a more serious book, one which openly presents the hardships that war brings upon the young and innocent. The book is never preachy, just very matter of fact about the cost of war and the hope that men can learn to live together.

As the war progresses in the book, Janci’s father is called to serve and his mother is left to run the farm with Janci as her trusted overseer. They take in refugees from the war – from little German refugees to Russian POW’s. Everyone works together to make sure the crops and animals are taken care of so there will be enough to eat. Even though they may have been enemies in battle, the message is clear that we are all brothers in Christ and working together as a family makes more sense than shooting each other. This is a great book to introduce WWI and the sorrow it brought to Europe, destroying a way of life for so many families.

It is good to read a story such as **“The Fisherman and His Wife”**, because it really does remind us of our own ingratitude – but in a way that makes us laugh. The Fisherman catches a magic fish who promises to fulfill wishes if the Fisherman will throw him back. The Fisherman hurries home to his modest little house and tells his wife of their good fortune. Immediately she orders new houses and better positions in life on a daily basis. The good little fish does his best to accommodate her, even letting her be Pope and sit on the Papal throne. But when she decides to rule all creation – well, there is only one thing the fish can do. This is a great story for examining ourselves and our response to the good things we receive daily from God.

August 2014

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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