

## INTRODUCTION

Theology is not necessarily the study of God. I often think of theology as our best attempt at formulating logical statements about being in relationship with God, who is not contained by boundaries of logic or language. More often than not, it is the study of the language we use when we talk about God. Theology is what *happens* when we attempt to talk about an indescribable God.<sup>1</sup> Although it is often treated as a science it is also a form of performance art akin to the type of event a conceptual artist might deem a “Happening”.

The same line that separates the artist from the scientist easily divides the Church. This dividing line runs right through the heart of every church, every pastor, and even threatens to separate us from the very One we desire to describe. It becomes especially difficult to speak of God if we pit poets against preachers against scientists.<sup>2</sup> Thank God we have metaphors to help us find our way.<sup>3</sup>

Metaphors are useful in that they connect what we understand and what we do not. They extend and contract as needed; you might say they are the very

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<sup>1</sup> “If the task of the theologian is...to render intelligible man's relationship to a God who is ‘forever overflowing custom's bounds,’ he must do so in a vision that is true both to the divine reality and to the human experience of that reality, in order to allow ‘for the immanence *yet* transcendence, the sameness *yet* otherness, the ‘in’ of the ‘out’ and the ‘out’ of the ‘in’ of this strange one called God. ([Cutsinger], ‘Coleridgean Polarity’ 105).” J. Robert Barth, S.J., “Mortal Beauty: Ignatius Loyola, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the Role of Imagination in Religious Experience.” *Christianity and Literature* Vol. 50, No. 1 (Autumn 2000), 72.

<sup>2</sup> “The result for theology has been a series of dichotomies between ‘the immanent and transcendent, reason and revelation, the secular and the sacred, the scientific and the religious, and the natural and the supernatural’ (‘Coleridgean Polarity’ 102).” J.R. Barth, *Mortal Beauty*, 71.

<sup>3</sup> So “how do the poet (or any artist) and the religious thinker, however seemingly different their purposes, both strive after this divine reality incarnate in the world, and what is the role of imagination in that striving?” J.R. Barth, *Mortal Beauty*, 71.

muscles connected to the bones of language. Metaphors may begin as small as a sample subject or as large as an ancient myth. For the purposes of this project, I have chosen to bring certain particulars into the focus and splay them open, to reveal the larger truths hidden within. These particulars are the beginnings of metaphors enabling us to compare what we trust with what we want to trust. The best metaphors are agile, moving expertly between scientific data and religious experiences; and those who employ them move freely between fact and fiction as well. But you don't have to take my word for it.

I found support for my argument in favor of faith formation via metaphor in the creative writing and research of two well-respected conversation partners. The prophetic mind of Madeleine L'Engle and the scientific mind of Dr. James W. Fowler operate in different ways, but they both chronicle stories of common religious experiences. Both begin by looking closely into the small bits of data and describable experience, then they "prophecy" about what might be next. L'Engle tells stories *to children* through the use of characters and worlds she imagines;<sup>4</sup> Fowler tells stories *about children* according to how his subjects imagine themselves in the world.<sup>5</sup> The stories of L'Engle's characters and Fowler's subjects inspire a creative response to research.

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<sup>4</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> "Regardless of our possible remembering of...experiences, their impact or meanings for us are part of our imaginal [sic] knowing... Such impacts or meanings become part of our dynamic storehouse of potential imaginal material, coalescing with previous knowing, augmenting and extending it...Even when we consciously attend to events or to the communication of others, are consciously narratizing what we are 'learning,' we do not yet 'know' what we are seeing" James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981), 11.

Fowler's and L'Engle's ideas are somewhat controversial but the research they present and the stories they tell remain relevant to the task of forming faith through Christian education.<sup>6</sup> Stories that were once shunned by publishers and Christian educators are now taking their place in the church because they interact ably and reliably with both that which we call fact and that which we call mystery. They deal with truth, in various forms.<sup>7</sup> Their works address growing concerns about faith formation, but their foundational theories are solid enough to offer a critique of the whole history of theological methodology.

Fowler and L'Engle work at the intersection of fact and mystery and so perform the same type of work theologians have performed for hundreds of years. Though the two work in different ways, they agree that this intersection of fact with mystery is where faith begins.

Of course, I am not necessarily interested in how they might speak to theological methods for adults, *per se*; I am primarily interested in what their work can teach us about the value in the "little things". L'Engle employs metaphors precisely because they are manageable reflections of the truth she

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<sup>6</sup> "The same rules that apply to *The Brothers Karamazov* (my archetypical adult novel) apply to *Peter Rabbit* (my archetypical picture book). The same rules that apply to Dante's *Divine Comedy* apply to *The Wind in the Willows*. Mankind is always in the human predicament, and this is what people write about. A good children's book is not easier to write than a good adults' book, and it poses to the writer the identical problem of trying to communicate his vision in a language that is not obsolete. This doesn't mean using current slang, but finding a language that will still be understood when this year's catch phrases have been replaced." Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 196-7.

<sup>7</sup> "There is a violent kind of truth in the most primitive myths, a truth we need today...That is why they have lasted. Many books which were once in the Bible have dropped out of sight through the centuries. Those that have stayed with us are those that contain truth that speaks to us in our daily living, right where we are now...The extraordinary, the marvelous things about Genesis is not how unscientific it is but how amazingly accurate it is. How could the ancient Israelites have known the exact order of a theory of evolution that wasn't to be formulated by scientists for thousands of years?" L'Engle, *Circle of Quiet*, 205.

wants to tell children and adults alike. Even for learned adults thinking about the larger truths would be impossible without the help of metaphor. Fowler attends to the details of the stories his subjects tell because those particulars convey our relationship with the larger sample. L'Engle and Fowler tell stories about particular fictional characters and “real” people because these singular truths help us construct manifold truth. In short, *their* stories tell *our* stories.

L'Engle and Fowler are, above all, helpful to us because they came by their stories honestly and revealed them faithfully. The ways we come upon metaphors, as well as the ways we relay them, are just as significant as the metaphors themselves. It is this faithful attention paid to stories we have heard or lived, as well as stories we have imagined, that helps us to trust our experiences and value the experiences of others.

To this end, I have incorporated creative expression of the raw data I have collected over the past eleven years of professional Children's Ministry. My hope is that these stories and poems will be for this paper like the colorful drawings in picture books. I think of them as the illustrations that expand upon my research and you will see how often Children's Ministry is the poetry to parish ministry prose.

We are people of the book because we are a storied people, and these are our stories...

## **Your Self, Your Whole Self and Nothing but Your Self: Metaphor and Emotion in Faith Formation**

*The best way to guide children without coercion is to be ourselves. Sometimes we can fool adults about what we are; it's not so easy with children; they're going to see through us, no matter how elaborate our defenses. But this is one reason they're so exciting to work with; their vision is still clear.*<sup>8</sup>

—Madeleine L'Engle

There is no easy way for a minister to alleviate the suffering of intense emotions for another person. It is often all we can do to offer a parishioner compassion and space in which to learn from her emotions. In such a space Christian education becomes more than discipline and indoctrination; it becomes faith formation. The ability to learn from emotions and see God's hand in emotional experiences is key in forming faith. Should a person be denied expressing or experiencing emotions in a healthy context he will be denied that expression or experience of God.

L'Engle credits George MacDonald with a particular sense of suffering that is relevant here.<sup>9</sup> In a fable called *The Light Princess*, MacDonald elucidates the dangers of limiting access to negative emotions.<sup>10</sup> The princess is cursed as a baby and she defies gravity. She is unable to remain physically grounded, but this defiance is just one indicator of a larger problem. She grows up to be a happy child... too happy. She laughs at everything and yet never experiences real

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<sup>8</sup> L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*, 155

<sup>9</sup> “George MacDonald gives me renewed strength during times of trouble—times when I have seen people tempted to deny God—when he says, ‘The Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like his.’” L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, (Wheaton, IL: Shaw Publishers: 1980), 26.

<sup>10</sup> George MacDonald, *The Light Princess* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 1969.

joy. The wicked relative who cursed the child is, thus, presented as evil incarnate. MacDonald goes to great lengths to teach us that to deny a person access to emotions is to censor her view of Love. MacDonald tells the story as though the curse deprived this child of her chance to know her emotions. The light princess was led astray. When the evil woman is drowned at the end of the book the warnings of St. Matthew resound.<sup>11</sup> It would have been better for this woman to let the light princess experience difficult emotions. Instead, the princess's growth is stunted as a result of the emotional deprivation.

According to James Fowler's research, we only develop faith if we move through personal experiences (whether they are academic exercises or emotional experiences) by making space for a new way all along the way—we only grow if we endure the growing pains.<sup>12</sup> A person moves from one faith stage to another according to her response to a disruption or departure from what was reliable data. She then subscribes to a new data set by accommodating for new data in the wake of the disruption.<sup>13</sup> Fowler describes faith formation as the journey through a series of staged transitions akin to the stages of cognitive development.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Matthew 18.6 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> "The transition from one [faith] stage to another...can be a long and painfully dislocating process of relinquishment and reconstruction. ...*Even* with the help of sponsoring persons, institutions, or ideologies, development will remain primarily the constructive task of the self ... within the life experiences one has chosen or is given." Fowler, *Life Maps*, 38-39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> "In any holistic approach to the human construction of meaning, account must be given of the relations of reasoning to imagination, of moral judgment making to symbolic representation, of ecstatic intuition to logical deduction. I do not at all mean to imply that we have found adequate ways to model these relationships. But we have found it important to show

disequilibrium, accommodation and equilibration required for cognitive development in turn require faith formation.<sup>15</sup>

We call it cruel to lock a child's body into a cell, but what of her cognitive development? What of confining her budding faith by constraining her giant heart? I am not advocating a lack of boundaries,<sup>16</sup> but imagining a boundless opportunity for formation that includes the whole person. The questions and doubts that elicit strong emotional response are the very bones of faith. Given space to grow, children would be able to move beyond the moralizing stages and take up their rightful place among the most imaginative theologians.

It has been well argued that all the things we claim to know, we know only because we have first developed an ability to take an emotional risk, brave the dangerous new territory and have faith in a new concept, data source or paradigm.<sup>17</sup> Michael Polanyi, to whom Fowler is deeply indebted, believes that

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the correlations we find between Piaget's and Kohlberg's stages... with the forms of knowing and valuing that make up a faith stage. Moreover, we believe that the faith stages meet the structural-developmental criteria for stages. They provide generalizable, formal descriptions of integrated sets of operations of knowing and valuing." James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler explains the difficulty of progressing through emotionally distressing formative experiences. In doing so he argues in favor of support for the child's emotional growth as part of understanding the difficulties spiritual growth and then offers this bit of sympathy: "It is understandable why we defend, shore up, and cling to our constructions of the ultimate environment, even when these prove constricting, self-destructive, or distorted." James Fowler, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith*, (Waco, TX: Word Press Publishers, 1978), 38.

<sup>16</sup> Serene Jones argues that the feminist approach to containing *ourselves* is a vast improvement on attempting to form our selves around outsider's expectations. For more on intrinsic bounds versus imposed boundaries see Jones' discussion of "bounded openness" in *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2000.

<sup>17</sup> "According to Polanyi, all acts of comprehensive knowledge either are or depend upon faith, in the sense of a free commitment to that which could conceivably be false. [(M.

learning is always emotional.<sup>18</sup> Practically speaking this means that a child's emotional response to the data or the way it is presented is a large part of what and how she learns.

Fowler's work, although indebted to Piagetian stages and Erik Erikson's psychoanalytic bent, is enriched by an understanding of Polanyi's epistemology, which is marked by what Bruno Manno refers to as the "degree of personal participation".<sup>19</sup> If Fowler and Polanyi are correct, a higher level of personal participation increases the impact of emotional intelligence on faith formation. It follows that the Sunday school classroom must be a safe place to weep as well as to rejoice. The Christian educator who understands the role emotions play in faith formation has the advantage.<sup>20</sup>

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Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper Torchbooks ed., 1964) 266.] If this thesis is true, theology, as the work of faith seeking understanding, is not an anomaly among the cognitive disciplines. Religious ideas are acquired, developed, tested, and reformed by methods at least analogous to those pursued in the natural and social sciences. Christians, or adherents of any other religious faith, need not be embarrassed by their inability to verify their convictions by formal proof from indubitable premises, for no other science can survive this test. Not only is this Polanyian thesis supportive of the credibility of religious statements; it also opens up rich possibilities for theology to profit from the methodology of the natural and social sciences." Avery Robert Dulles, "Faith, Church and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi" *Theological Studies*, 45, no.3 (s. 1984): 537-8.

<sup>18</sup> For Polanyi learning is "an intelligent effort of the creative imagination guided by a complex system of feelings and emotional responses." Bruno V. Manno, "Michael Polanyi and Erik Erikson: Towards a Post-Critical Perspective on Human Identity," *Religious Education* Vol. 75 no. 2 (Mar-Apr: 1980), 207.

<sup>19</sup> "Polanyi ... specifies the workings of intellectual passions ... by discussing the dynamics which underlie the discovery process — intuition interacting with imagination. ... Imagination produces ideas and thereby keeps the intuition alert ... This process is not totally explicit... The difference in the way one knows in the sciences and the humanities is not one of absolute difference, but one of degree of personal participation in what is being known." Bruno V. Manno, Michael Polanyi and Erik Erikson, 208-9.

<sup>20</sup> L'Engle describes the ability to be with our children—to see what they see, to tell stories with and for them—as requisite for art to be art. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the definition of art but let it suffice to say that her definition of art involves whether or not it is useful for forming a childlike faith. Her inclusion of children supports my own theory that children's ministry is among the highest forms of poetry but only because, as Polanyi

The best Sunday school teacher will foster emotional capability in her students and will be emotionally transparent herself because, well, L'Engle is right. Our children are going to see us, and then they are going to see *through* us. Thank God they are. They will see past the façade of superficially limited emotional vocabulary. Instead of truncating our emotional range, we can bring a battery of emotional experiences and accept a variety of emotional responses. This genuine encounter with the diverse, emotionally charged aspects of faith formation is an oasis of acceptance for the whole child as he experiences the emotional rupture and repair required in order for faith to form. In short, the teacher must draw on her own emotional response to serve the emotional needs of the child. You can imagine us, foibles, emotions and all, as wonderful looking glasses through which students may be ushered into a world that will give them an alternative to the realities we have composed so shoddily, or polluted so wholly.<sup>21</sup> The gaps in our thinking which lead to authentic interaction with surprise, or grief surrounding unanswerable questions may just be the open windows through which their faith might take flight. Only when we bring our whole imperfect selves can we provide the kind of looking glass able to reflect and transport; the kind of embodiment of grace they need to get through the

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would insist, our children are deeply involved in their own formation. For more on L'Engle's definition of Christian Art as it pertains to my project see, "Do We Want the Children to See It?" in *Walking on Water*.

<sup>21</sup> L'Engle explains that there is a relationship between the storyteller and the story and that this relationship requires a degree of humility and even obedience to the creative impulse: "Obedience is an unpopular word nowadays, but the artist must be obedient to the work, whether it be a symphony, a painting, or a story for a small child. ...Each work of art... comes to the artist and says, '...Enflesh me. Give birth to me.' And the artist either says, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord.'... Or refuses; ...not everyone has the humble, courageous obedience of Mary. As for Mary, she was little more than a child when the angel came to her; she had not lost her child's creative acceptance of the realities moving on the other side of the everyday world." L'Engle, *Walking on Water*, 18.

difficulties of faith-stage transition. Carefully placed metaphors ply our children with openings through which to glimpse God for themselves.

Metaphors have the power to balance the lies we accidentally tell when we try to answer every question in the Sunday school classroom.<sup>22</sup> Rote “right” answers cannot be trusted to leave room for responses we have not yet imagined. Children’s ministry relies on metaphors, rhythms, diction, and repetition in response to unexpected emotional responses. Christian education for those in the earliest stages of faith is more metaphorical than technical, more rhythm than precision. Aristotle describes the mastery of metaphor as an “imperative grace;” it cannot be learned but it is invaluable for revealing deeper meanings.<sup>23</sup> Christian education follows a different set of constraints and an innovative use of linguistic constraints, more repetition than novelty, more imagination than institution, more slow revelation than efficient rote. The (inter)play between the metaphor and the so-called reality is where indoctrination leaves off and true ministry begins. Children’s ministry is the poetry to parish ministry prose precisely because it is an opportunity to artfully incorporate emotion. Of course, this is always easier said than done.

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<sup>22</sup> “This is why... the Jesuit tradition ... has privileged the work of artists. Religion deals, almost by definition, with works of the human imagination. Our sources of revelation include sacred Scripture, with all its rich variety of images and literary forms and tropes. ... But even apart from the art that is bound up with revelation and ritual, all art can attempt to express the ways in which God touches us and the ways in which we search for God, whether it be through the poetry of Dante and John Donne, the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Graham Greene, the painting of Rembrandt and Georges Rouault, the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Olivier Messiaen, the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti and Auguste Rodin, or the films of Ingmar Bergman and Martin Scorsese.” J.R. Barth, *Mortal Beauty*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> “The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblance.” Aristotle, *Poetics* (Minneola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997): 47.

Many adults have difficulty accessing emotions. Emotional intelligence is not easy to come by. A friend of mine recently traveled across the country to care for his ailing father. He remembered to pack all the usual traveling accoutrements, as well as a calendar drawn up by a seasoned marathoner. He knew exactly which days to run and how far to run on each day. One afternoon we talked briefly about the many feelings he was having and I joked that he ought to have two calendars: one for running and one for feeling so as to attend to both physical health and emotional health. And then he shocked me.

With nothing but childlike faith in my ability he said, “You should make one for me, you can do it.” And for a moment he spoke with the surety of a four-year-old relinquishing control of a task, rather than a grown man commissioning a solution to emotional distress.

Not even the most experienced poet or Sunday school teacher can predict what will elicit a particular feeling or what a feeling will require of us once we are in its clutches. I could not very well tell him to feel his sadness one day, for 30 minutes, and then take the next day off. We cannot train for feeling marathons... or can we? He seemed to think he could use some training and that I was going to make a good trainer.

Partly flattered, partly flabbergasted, I sat down and thought about what it might take to get through all the feelings in one day. I thought of dread finding him early in the morning, or sadness creeping up if he walked away from his father’s bedside for a cup of hospital coffee. I thought of the quotidian tasks

blurring together, depriving him of any sort of reprieve. This poem came of his request, it is called “Today”, but we speak of it as The Feeling Schedule.

## Today

Wake up  
Stare at the ceiling  
Refuse to get out of bed  
Think of the things that make you feel  
overwhelmed, angry, hateful, sad, depressive  
count to ten, slowly  
Roll over, yes you have to.  
Think of all that you don't have and feel pretty shitty, count to ten, or maybe twenty  
But you can't stay there  
There are birds learning to fly just outside

Push away the mattress, slide out from between a blanket or sheet, stand up as tall as  
you can  
Lift your head, yes you have to.  
Think of the people that make you feel  
Loved, angry, loved, angry, loved...

Eat breakfast, watch television, pull on some clothes, socks, a hat maybe, yes you have to  
Feel the soft clothes against you  
Don't worry about what it smells like, looks like or  
the way they mock the shape of you and the shape the day will take.

The day is hot and wet, give in to the sweat and feel the knot in your stomach, or throat  
Think of all that grows here: trees, boys, and clouds that refuse to gather and  
Tell yourself that is good

And when the anxiety comes  
When the hatred and fear swell like a tsunami  
When the nausea and sickness threaten to engulf you

Try them on,  
think of wind and rainstorms inside your body,  
thunder and lightening in your veins  
Think of boys racing down the slight sloped hill on skateboards  
girls hoping you will call and lots of lost love  
Try to think of mothers screaming in the throes of birthing pains and  
Little boys with fat tears falling on scraped knees  
Think of bandaids generous enough to cover new wounds  
And scars covering old wounds  
&  
when you are alone again,  
Hiding in a public bathroom stall, against the wall holding you vertical  
Or in the car, put on your seat belt and let it press into your chest  
Like the hand of God pressing against your lungs  
so all you can do is  
Stay right there  
Slump down, against a wall or window and  
put your hand On your head,  
cover your face and cry. Let the sadness and frustration and grief  
shake your shoulders, shake itself out.

The hot tears are sticky and ooze out and you have to let them out

Let them out, spit them off your lips, blow them out your nose,  
Push them out, not in  
Wipe them on your shirtsleeve like snail trails,  
So you can see the tracks of slow moving sadness

Breathe in and out  
Breathe in and out like a dog panting in the heat of your emotions  
Open your mouth and lungs  
and the ache will either get worse  
or dissipate

If it gets worse, stay a little (one) longer, wipe away a few more tears

If it goes away, and trust me, that ache will go away eventually,  
If you respect it,  
Then you can go on.

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At the end of the day when you crawl back into the bed  
Just lie still  
Scrunch up your nose at the stench of wrongdoing all around you  
Clench your jaw and steel yourself against the nightmare you are living.  
Think back on the day, the downward spiral you are riding  
Jokes and drunks and all  
And imagine what you would tell the one person you want to talk to most

That this is bad  
this is not good  
That you are so lonely and you don't know what you are doing here and  
Why did your mother fail and your father get you into this mess?

Imagine the face of a friend, tearing up, eye lashes sticking together and nose running  
For you  
All for you, over you, all around you

Wrap the blankets around you tight and think of the warm bodies of close friends  
Next to you  
On a porch, on a bench, on a beach, on the hood of a car, on a diner booth bench,  
on a bar stool, on a couch,  
on a hopeful day

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think of how hard it is  
to lose your innocence over again, just when you thought  
you didn't have any more innocence left to lose

think of a carpenters' roof beams raised high above your head and let your soul lay across

think of the ancient Egyptian pylons and let self and body stand tall between them

think of Grecian columns, slant 6 engines, old growth redwoods, and tug boats  
because you are stronger now and you are taking your place among them  
whenever you feel this way  
whenever you feel  
whenever  
you feel  
this way  
everyday.

The poem requires a lot of imagination—the images are familiar enough, but the reader has to imagine moving through them. “Today” is an invitation to imagine the daily tasks like getting out of bed, dressing, or putting on a seatbelt as opportunities to imbue the quotidian with meaning and thus move through feelings of hopelessness. There is a serious prescriptive tone throughout. Readers coming to the poem for direction will be rewarded; the tone directs readers to attend to feelings throughout the day. It invites them to recognize a feeling and then uses images to turn their minds toward the next movement. It causes an integration of body and mind through imagining the integration first.

Several months after I wrote this poem, I was a guest in a friend’s home. In the morning I opened my eyes to find she had written the words, “but you can’t stay there/there are birds learning to fly just outside,” on the bed sheets to remind whoever slept between the sheets that the feelings holding us captive are not holding birds captive—she used them as a reminder that we might learn to break free. A particular person commissioned the poem, as it were, but another person was able to put it to use because it spoke to a common experience of the connection between the world we feel when we reach out our hands and the world we feel when we reach out with our imaginations.

The feelings themselves are named directly, and described honestly, as powerful impulses, but they are not the only images on the landscape of the poem. There is breath (wind), tears (water), and there is mention of sweat so that the heat of the moment becomes real (fire) and there is a stench and dirt (earth) located in time and space to guide the reader through a new reality, which is akin

to the old hopeless reality. This connection between the feelings and the world below our feet helps to ground the whole person.

The moral of the stories (of my friends struggling through their emotions, and of the Light Princess) is that emotions are a gift and if we stay grounded we will move more cautiously through them. Metaphors will make manageable the details that belie the largesse of difficult truths. We will learn coping skills instead of coping mechanisms and respect our emotions as warnings so that we may better absorb the lessons they teach us about caring for others. Attention to our feelings and their sources is the way toward compassion—feelings are a part of God’s enabling our compassion. And if we hope to help our children to live in harmony with the movements of God that provide both impetus and outlet for emotion, then we must be attentive to the lessons wrapped in emotional experience and what better venue is there for this than Children’s Ministry?

We must respect emotions as we respect anything powerful, regardless of size, from the largest Grey Whale and thickest Baobab Tree to the stem cells we research and the atoms we split to make a bomb.<sup>24</sup> Ministers, parents, storytellers and poets alike are equally charged with the responsibility to trust and guide our

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<sup>24</sup> “Ignatius, as we all know, was driven to seek out ‘the greater glory of God.’ And since, as the Psalmist says, the heavens and the earth ‘show forth the glory of God,’ it is there that we find God— in the beauties of creation. It is the special gift of the artist to be able to show us that creation, and that glory, in a new way. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's words, the poet (and by this he means any artist) ‘lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar’ (282), showing us ‘the before unapprehended relations of things’ (278).” J.R. Barth, *Mortal Beauty*, 71.

children as whole people—emotions and all.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is vital that we value all emotions for the powerful and instructive, faith-forming forces they are.

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<sup>25</sup> “So what must it take to capture our children’s imaginations, and then souls, through the hope and magnificent love of God’s kingdom? It takes people—moms, dads, Sunday school teachers, pastors, children’s directors, and youth ministers who themselves have had their imaginations captured by the kingdom of God. It takes being intentional with story, ritual, and relationships at home, in the faith community, and in worship with children. And it takes understanding the power of these elements to inspire and form children into adults who not only desire to live in the way of Jesus but who daily make choices to live that way.” Ivy Beckwith, *Formational Children’s Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 15.

## Potty and Soul: Metaphor and the Body in Faith Formation

*This operation of the imagination in choosing, gathering, and vitally combining the material of a new revelation, may be well illustrated from a certain employment of the poetic faculty in which our greatest poets have delighted. Perceiving truth half hidden and half revealed in the slow speech and stammering tongue of men who have gone before them, they have taken up the unfinished form and completed it; they have, as it were, rescued the soul of meaning from its prison of uninformed crudity<sup>26</sup>*

-George MacDonald

Incontinence and anal retention have such an important place in Freudian analysis that they are part of the academic culture as predictors or qualifiers for a degree of care. Very few of us remember anything but the most traumatic aspects of the potty training process we underwent. In the years I have served children, I have gained a new appreciation for potty training stories for this very reason.<sup>27</sup> You can tell me children use a bathroom pass as a “get out of jail free” card. I am the kind of teacher to administer the pass, but only after considering how very like George MacDonald’s “prison of uninformed crudity” my classroom may well have become.

After eleven years of Children’s Ministry in diverse settings, I am no longer surprised by how often providing for the whole child means asking the

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<sup>26</sup> George MacDonald, “The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture from *A Dish of Orts London*: Edwin Dalton, 1908” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2002), 101-102.

<sup>27</sup> Fowler explains the episodic nature of recollection vis-à-vis the many interruptions a child experiences: “Undeveloped understanding of causal and temporal relationships gives to the child’s construction of experience an *episodic* quality. It is as though life were a series of vivid tableaux, each interesting and complete in itself, but having no necessary relation to earlier or later tableaux. [This is reason children are so “forgiving”. I frequently hear parents reflect on how glad they are that, for young children, each day is a new day—it is much more a new day for a seven year old than for a 17 year old.] ... It does not matter how often you take a child at this stage to the... restroom at a movie. He or she will in any case remember from the film only episodes and not the narrative line of the story. These considerations mean that the child’s sense of coherence vis-à-vis the environment is largely derived from the *external* pattern of sameness and continuity provided by others...” Fowler, *Life Maps*, 43.

questions about clean bathrooms and clean diapers: where will they be when I/we/s/he needs one? Because individual physical bodies come into the worship space, their spiritual well-being is closely tied to their physical well-being. Heretofore, you may have considered the potty break a huge inconvenience. I am here to tell you that it does not have to be.

Adults take so much for granted. We easily move from one task to another: we can get in and out of the car or climb down off the bus easily enough; we pass the peace without craning our necks to make eye contact; the chairs in the Fellowship Hall are sized for our legs and buttocks; and pews are designed for our heads and shoulders. For all our technical advancements and our growing appreciation of the physical, psychosocial, and environmental difficulties our children face, we still overlook the simple things that cause problems... Additionally we forget to implement the simple fixes—because they are so few and far between.

When I taught reading to grammar school students, the bathroom break was no small thing. It was an important indicator. I knew when a child had hit a wall because she would ask to go to the bathroom. Sure, she may have been conscious of using this as an excuse to get up and walk away from her studies. But it is equally probable she is entirely unconscious of ulterior motives. Due to the ways we acculturate our children toward micturition, the potty break is always connected to more than a simple bodily function. This is especially true

when a child is confronted with an adult's attempts to have total control or, on the contrary, an adult's extreme powerlessness.<sup>28</sup>

As a Children and Family Minister, I planned room usage around each classroom's proximity to the restrooms in the children's ministries corridor. Schedules were designed around bathroom availability for a large population from several age groups. Intergenerational ministry requires an awareness of the diversity of needs, but special attention must always be paid to making restroom facilities available to every single attendee - because a cadre of sixth-grade girls is going to want to use the bathroom mirror no matter what, as is an octogenarian.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In her brilliant treatment of encopresis, the "Poop Lady" Angela Riccelli, LCSW explains the tie between our relationship with undesirable toilet habits and our relationship with our peers: "Perhaps the help most needed [for families dealing with encopresis] is a relationship in which the families' most vulnerable selves are recognized and reflected back to them, a relationship in which we recognize ourselves in each other. Perhaps they can begin to feel that they may have to suffer a problem, but not have to be the problem. And most importantly, perhaps they will learn that the only way one can possibly bear all this is in connection with others who understand." Of course Riccelli deals with extremes of untimely defecation and yet it is true that all children experience powerful urges toward unhealthy or inconvenient behaviors. Riccelli's advice is good advice for anyone in a position of power over children learning to control their impulses in formal settings such as Sunday morning worship services. Angela Riccelli "Memoirs of a Poop Lady" *Families, Systems & Health*, Vol.21 no. 1 (2003), 116.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Wangerin Jr. tells the story of searching for Jesus everywhere—even the inner sanctum of the women's bathroom within his family church. "The heart of a child is capable of great desolation and thereby of great cunning. The more I felt abandoned, the sharper became my baby wit, trying to figure where Jesus was hiding. ...The girls' *toilet*, you understand. Boys don't ever pass it without spasms of awe. But I was determined. And the need had made me very bold. As bold as my mother. I knocked. I nudged the door inward. 'Jesus? Are you in there, Jesus? Jesus?'" ...Mom could kill me for all I cared. I had looked in the last place, and the last place was empty. There was no more." *Little Lamb, Who Made Thee?*, (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1993), 15-18. In the end Wangerin realizes, upon catching the scent of communion wine on his mother's breath, that Christ is within his mother. His hope that Jesus would be found in the Ladies room bespeaks his minimal understanding of what is possible in private places. It illustrates beautifully that to children private places are so often confused with sacred spaces due to the abundant mysterious they are asked to inhabit so respectfully, hopefully and faithfully. And though adults are often scary, we are also needed guides.

When I taught preschool, we planned the curriculum around a daily schedule of potty breaks. We waited patiently for students to take their time and care for themselves, which is to say we spent a lot of time in the bathroom. We tracked their toileting for them and, at the same time, taught them to speak to their needs, as they became aware of them. Now that I work in day care, I am aware that children who need diapers changed benefit from access to one on one time with their care providers. Likewise, students who use the bathroom independently get a few moments of solitude and privacy. Children of all ages at every stage of faith development connect the needs of their bodies to the needs of their souls and so must their care providers, ministers, teachers and parents.

Children's ministry is messy business. There is a poetic justice in the physical body being tied to the spiritual being. St. Paul's metaphorical use of the body helps us to understand interpersonal connectedness. He reminds us that the body is a great metaphor because it is so messy.<sup>30</sup> The science behind cognition has found that our ways of dealing with a child's urgent physical concerns such as "accidents," potty training or changing soiled clothing communicates to that child about our ability to care for the messy details surrounding any of her difficult transitions.<sup>31</sup> Fowler furthermore insists that any meaningful transition

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<sup>30</sup> "Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." 1 Corinthians 12:22-26 (NIV)

<sup>31</sup> "If the quality and consistency of our feeding and cleansing are inadequate and if there is no person (or persons) with whom we can achieve a dependable complementary

will be difficult—things will get messy.<sup>32</sup> The body’s messiness as metaphor reinforces spiritual messiness as a reality. The patterns of the healthy physical body communicate (with a punctuated equilibrium) both the necessity for change and the attention to particulars change will require. Seeing the physical needs of the child as an integral part of faith formation helps us to capitalize on all that our bodies teach us about our souls. Our souls in turn communicate through the bodies they inhabit. As a result bodies are often the outward expression of the inward processing and development. Though it may seem small, the child’s body is his whole world and, as such, it ought to be taken seriously.

Once the child’s body comes into play as a metaphor through which we learn and communicate with each other, it no longer serves to assume that her stature is less than mine. Her body may be small but it has large needs and many of them. Until her physical development slows, her mental, spiritual and emotional developments are secondary priorities for her biological systems. Adults experience the world according to an opposite paradigm. In order to remind myself and my colleagues of this disparity in perspectives, I look for opportunities to employ alternative terms when I refer to those in my care.

I prefer to refer to those in my care as “birds,” instead of calling them students, children, little ones, babies or other common, diminutive terms. I find that once we are together in the nursery, classroom or playground, they are less

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relationship of mutuality, our trust of the world and in ourselves can be outweighed by distrust and infantile despair.” Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 120.

<sup>32</sup> “Stage transition means enduring the dissolution of a total way of making sense of things. It means relinquishing a sense of coherence in one’s near and ultimate environment. It frequently entails living with fundamental ambiguity and with a deep sense of alienation for considerable periods.” Fowler, *Life Maps*, 38.

like students or babies anyway, and more like birds. They rarely sit idly by taking in my knowledge: they are noisily chirping and singing bravely at my urging, they put their little beaks up or down as I offer large healthy seeds for them to crack in the strong beaks of their minds, and they always seem ready to take flight on a whim.

Thus, many of my poems describe their birdlike behavior and mine—it is a stalwart metaphor for us—much better than a pied piper with rodents. As you will notice in this next piece, I took a tone sympathetic with the plight of the birds. It is the best way I can think of to elucidate the value of sympathizing with the difficulty of having a bird's eye view: a bird may have a broad view but it is difficult for her to share her perspective with anyone on the ground and, if you are too large to meet her in her treetop, it will be very difficult to share her perspective.

### **Wearing this thin(g)**

, aren't you?

And I perched on a silver chair: the bird you paid to sing the children out of their slumber  
, poised for the next perfection: beak down to break open the soil  
, I dive between the blades and pinch to retrieve the worm wriggling deeper down.

To:

The (small) things

, I live among them,

the,

(ahem)

no

Things

a raindrop is a tsunami, a teardrop, a tidal wave

And you!—

, make a cacophony like the angry crows—do they never take turns?

Stoic on the branches of the sycamore, berating one runt leaf, one grunt  
at a time.

Like Zaccheus, looking down his nose at salvation on parade.

, I dive, below the surface of the waters rising, I cannot hear

Your voice

In the dim light of my faintest attempts to meet you, higher up, among the lofty, heav(y)n.

, your face arranged to reveal distaste, remains uncovered by vestments as I climb, I am  
too high too

only backed into the tree fort and begin to cry

, knowing the climb was easier

than the dissent will ever be.

How could, would, should

(will)

you

(ever ask)

, join me?

This piece makes a clever use of punctuation to ask the reader to imagine that each line may stand on its own, as a secondary clause to the title, the preceding line or another thought entirely. The eye moves from the top to the second line, then up again and slowly makes its way down, as if referring back to the title and first lines cause the reader to bump against the lines. The lines become like branches and the eye lands or bumps each branch on the way down the page.

“Wearing this thin(g)” is also about the confusing aspects of Children’s ministry. I never pretend to know more about the faith of the children than they do. I know what is common or uncommon in each stage of faith formation and I know how to speak and listen to children. I may be a superb storyteller, but I cannot tell the story of their faith forming the way they do.<sup>33</sup> It is especially difficult to see God in their stories when I am in charge and thus prone to confuse my own will with God’s or, worse, when I have seen the face of Christ in man so many times that I begin to try to please him rather than his Creator.

The piece also belies my exhaustion as I worked year after year and finally realized that my position was cloaked in mystery. I was told by one boss, an ordained minister for 25 years, that it was a mystery to him how I accomplished the things I did. In my exit interview, he confessed for the first time that he had often wondered to himself about when I had found time to

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<sup>33</sup> “Erik Erikson, himself a great theory maker, once said, ‘We must take our theories with a serious playfulness and a playful seriousness.’ In that gentle warning there is a kind of double faith—faith that we can in some measure grasp, clarify and work effectively with the most vital processes will not be exhaustively contained in our theoretical frameworks.” This was “an introductory remark Erikson made at the beginning of his 1972 Godkin Lectures at Harvard. The lectures were subsequently published under the title *Toys and Reasons* (New York: Norton, 1977)” according to Fowler *Stages of Faith*, xiii.

attend to the minutiae. Well, I told him, it is my job to take care of the little things. It is the Children and Family Minister's job to attend to details like diaper changes and potty breaks—it is in fact a large part of my ministry.

Folks are often complimentary when they see me doing such scary stuff as changing diapers on two year olds or explaining why grandmas die to nine year olds. They commend me—some even *re*commend me—as a kind of pied piper (“but in the best way!”) captivating the minds and hearts of children and leading them away to... well, who knows where. In fact, very few parents or lead pastors want to know exactly where we are going—they just want to know we, the wiggly noisemaking contingent, are taking leave.

Dirty diapers and the death of a grandma do scare me but apathy is much scarier. The fact that folks trust their Children's Minister, without knowing how or why I do what I do, is that which scares me most. I am not faulting them for this. They trust me with the details in a way that belies a profound exhaustion. Sometimes apathy is their only resting place. They have lumped all the little things together and tried to attend to them as one small problem. They have relied on small things to be insignificant because it is all they can bear.

What one pastor thinks of as a singular detail is, in Children's Ministry, the whole picture. For example, I have seen the pastor of a large congregation worry what she was going to do with the kids during the congregational meeting, and rightly so—it is her job to deal with this so-called detail. In seminary, she was taught that, first and foremost, it is her responsibility to hear what the elders of the congregation have to say about the endowment fund at the congregational

meeting. She was taught to pay attention to them as individuals with voices because they are confirmed, contributing, committed, and they vote. The elders of the church are often known and heard as individuals. So why are all the children lumped together and dismissed?

Perhaps a Children's Minister is hired to think, "What would the sixth grade girls have to say at the congregational meeting?" But it could easily be the lead pastor's job to be curious about this too. Even in churches that profess the value of "child-like" faith, it is acceptable for a pastor to overlook the child's contribution because it often presents as limited in scope and influence. What is more, most church members are overtly sympathetic when a pastor is overwhelmed by the myriad minutiae that make up the religious life of the child—they are too!

Children's Ministry is all about *the little things* and so requires a paradigm shift. The details of Children's Ministry are sometimes the very same components of faith formation to which every minister attends. A senior pastor attends to names and places and faces—as do I; a lead pastor plans events according to the needs and desires of those they represent or wish to serve with the fervor of a Sunday school teacher. It requires a nuanced skill set. Faith formation sometimes requires us to limit vocabulary on demand, tolerate chaos or minimize it appropriately for children of all ages. It means changing a lesson to accommodate a learning disability as easily as changing a diaper. An attitude of inclusion toward the powerless among us, and a willingness to let particularities guide, set us apart.

There are many parts of my work that should be common among clergy. For example, Bishop John Shelby Spong recently admitted to hundreds of folks that he does not even know how to talk to anyone under the age of eighteen.<sup>34</sup> Bishop Spong confessed that he is not yet interested in the details of faith formation for a class of two year olds. This learned man studied ancient languages, but never learned to speak to the next generation or two, while they were still young and tender. Was he scared or apathetic? Was the child's input undervalued as a minor detail? We may never know.

This new model does not require all pastors to *do* everything or *think* of everything; I am merely proposing that they do what they do and think what they think *a little differently*. I am asking that they face their fear of the devil in the details. I am asking that they quit confusing small things with minor things when it comes to their youngest members. I want us to learn from Bishop Spong's mistake because I know we can.

The ability to do the things I do and know what I know was not magically or mysteriously imparted. In order to attune myself to the facts and fictions of the least of these I have worked hard, studied hard, listened hard, played hard, prayed hard, and cried hard over the last eleven years. I have navigated the ocean of Systematic Theology and Pastoral care with my eye on the compass of child-like faith. Though it has not been easy, it has not been impossible, as many would like to believe. In fact, attending to the potties and souls of these birds has brought such great joy that I am grieved when I think of what someone like

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<sup>34</sup> Bishop John Shelby Spong, October 9, 2010. Lecture at University Christian Church, Seattle, WA.

Bishop Spong may have missed. So, no, I am not asking anyone to put on a clerical collar and hover over the changing table in the parish nursery. I am asking instead that we each remember this one fact: that with ordination comes the holy charge to participate in the holiest and lowliest of changes among the whole people of God, cleaning and clothing each one in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit... and this is not a detail, not just a part, but the whole.

## **“You Put Your Whole Self in; You Put Your Whole Self Out...”: Metaphor and Confession of Faith**

I was trying to think out loud about the concentration essential for all artists, and in the very little child I found the perfect example. The concentration of a small child at play is analogous to the concentration of the artist of any discipline. In real play, which is real concentration, the child is not only outside time, he is outside *himself*.<sup>35</sup>  
-Madeleine L'Engle

The poet is in a unique position to be in the life of the child through play because the poet plays; s/he can step outside of the boundaries of *en curvatus* adult language,<sup>36</sup> into concentrated wordplay. In doing this she becomes grounded in something larger than her immediate experience of her own suffering or her own work. This movement outside of time and beyond self is an important similarity between the work of the poet and the work of the theologian. They both speak of something beyond the purview of their realities because they imagine.<sup>37</sup> And it is their imaginative use of language that allows for their unique experiences to convey meaning to others with dissimilar experience or narrow perspective. In religious community the poet and theologian are engaged in the same type of play. No longer required to choose between confession of faith and telling stories of all sorts, one person can be both pastor and poet. The following story stands as testimony that one carefully crafted Children's Sermon may be all it takes to make a child aware of his status in the community of faith.

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<sup>35</sup> L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*, 40

<sup>36</sup> Jenson, Matt, "Sin" (Lecture, Mars Hill Graduate School, Seattle, WA, October 18, 2008.)

<sup>37</sup> "The relationships between Ignatius and Coleridge are personal for me, but there is a strong connaturality between them: both are deeply grounded in the Incarnation of Christ; both traveled their journeys of faith through suffering; both saw the working of the human imagination as central to their experience." J.R. Barth, *Mortal Beauty*, 71.

Brandon was four when his family began attending our church.<sup>38</sup> Their attendance was sporadic, a fact that would bother some ministers. This story reminds me that regular attendance may not be required for faith formation.

The lead pastor at our church had a practice of using each person's name as he administered the host. If he did not know a guest's name, he stopped to ask or referred to the guest as "Child of God." During Lent, he referred to all of us as "Child of God." Our christened names were let go and we were all called to remember our first identity as Children of God. On one such Lenten Sunday, I chose to call attention to his practice of calling us all Children of God during Children's Sermon. I explained that it was not as if Pastor had forgotten all our names. He had chosen instead to remind us that before our families named us, God named us and called us Children of God. I told them, "You are a child of God; you always have been and you always will be."

A few weeks later, the story of Brandon equilibrating this information found its way back to me. The version I got went something like this: Brandon and his father had been working quietly together on a small wooden boat. Their hands and minds had been engaged in the task for some time when, all of a sudden, Brandon looked up at his father. He said, "Dad, I'm a Child of God. Abigail said so." His father was quite shocked, but also pleased to affirm that yes, this is true.

It is not theological ability that prompted such preaching. It would be more accurate to call what I possess "theological imagination". I must confess I do not know which branch of systematics to consult or which theologian to

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<sup>38</sup> This story is about a real boy, so I have changed his name.

reference should I need to defend the sermon I preached. I chose instead to access the child's awareness of his present situation in order to invite him to compare his earthly status and his heavenly status. I took a risk; Brandon trusted. He saw me take a leap of faith and he jumped too.

I would never have known of his faith had he not taken this next step as well. He was so deeply invested in the idea that he was brimming and so confessed. There are moments when we are so deeply fixated on the truth that we press concrete narrative beyond previously satisfactory limits and so proclaim, "Yes! And..!"<sup>39</sup> Faith is not faith at all until it comes pouring out in confession.<sup>40</sup> According to both Moses and Fowler, we take one step toward God when we believe and another when we confess that believe. And both are the steps of faith.

Again, these are the stories I return to when I wonder if I am getting through to my birds. It is a luxury when someone speaks to what they are discovering but it is a necessary luxury. It is necessary to the speaker's faith formation, necessary to the teacher's faith formation. The things we are learning, the beliefs we are taking on, the risks we are taking, this faith will not grow until

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<sup>39</sup> Fowler, *Life Maps*, 55.

<sup>40</sup> "Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: 'The person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'"(that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the deep?'"(that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.'" Romans 10: 5-11 (NIV)

we risk fellowship at which point it more often than not brims over and spills out.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “Throughout the Bible (Coleridge's privileged example of symbolic expression) God—the Eternal—is constantly revealing Himself in and through the temporal, whether it be a person like Abraham or David, an action like the crossing of the Red Sea, or the rich profusion of the very creation itself. ‘In the Bible,’ Coleridge says, ‘every agent appears and acts like a self-subsisting individual: each has a life of its own, and yet all are one life’ (*Lay Sermons*, 31). God is distinct from Abraham, from the Red Sea, from His creation—but He is not separate from them; He remains abidingly present in His power and in His love.” J.R. Barth, *Mortal Beauty*, 75.

## “The End” and Other Great First Lines

The rational intellect doesn't have a great deal to do with love, and it doesn't have a great deal to do with art. I am often, in my writing, great leaps ahead of where I am in my thinking, and my thinking has to work its way slowly up to what the “superconscious” has already shown me in a story or poem.<sup>42</sup>-L'Engle

Midway through my research, before the typing of footnotes and subheadings, I wrote “Where Wind Comes From.” It illustrates my findings about the intersection of science and story, education and faith, science and art...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> “Polanyi liked to speak of the scientific community as a society of explorers. M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1967) 53-93. The term is an engaging one. ... it raises the question whether the same designation could be applied to the Church. The Church is ... committed to preserving a precious patrimony handed down in Scripture and tradition, but she must continually rethink and rearticulate her faith in relation to new sociocultural situations and in relation to a growing body of human knowledge. The theological community, as a kind of intelligentsia of the Church, could perhaps be designated as a society of explorers. Creative theologians, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher, Tillich, Barth, and Rahner, have never been content to repeat what has been said by their forebears. Their systems have been brilliant achievements of the religious imagination, transposing the Christian message into a new key which is both faithful to the past and accommodated to contemporary culture. In this way they have discharged what may be called their theological vocation. Trusting in their own grasp of the revealed mystery in a limited cultural context, they have dared to articulate the mystery in a novel way. Polanyi was conscious that the Church, like the scientific community, must undergo constant modification. “Christianity,” he wrote, “is a progressive enterprise. Our vastly enlarged perspectives of knowledge should open up fresh vistas of religious faith an era of great religious discoveries may lie before us.” M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper Torchbooks ed., 196) Polanyi recognized, however, that there are limits to the Church's mutability. She is committed to certain substantive beliefs that she could not abandon without self-destruction. Thus in religion, Polanyi asserted, “there prevails a measure of official doctrinal compulsion which is almost entirely absent from science.”<sup>30</sup> The exercise of doctrinal authority, according to Polanyi, is more centralized and more specific in Catholicism than in Protestantism.” Dulles, “Faith, Church, and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi”, 544.

He had never learned about wind. The wind itself almost carried the question away. And so, in earnest, he wondered aloud. “Where does wind come from?” It was like a gull against the breeze, or like a seed with wings and it landed at my feet, hoping for a crumb or at least, hoping to be spared the boot.

I knew. I know where wind comes from. I know about rotating planets, ocean currents, molecular movements, atmospheric pressure and barometers. Don’t ask how or where I learned; I can’t tell you. Nevertheless, I had a choice to make. Either let him in on the secrets of meteorology, or leave him alone to imagine. Instead of choosing one or the other I chose a path right through the deepest waters of his question.

“Lots of molecules moving at once.” I tried to say it the way I offer a reassuring comment, as though to second his amazement because, well, wind is amazing, whether or not you know what makes it. It was such a tender moment and had I not participated as he noticed the wind and the grandeur of creation, the teachable moment would have been lost. The gull would have flapped away; the seed would have been crushed under my foot.

He hadn’t imagined I would know. Now that I did know, he seemed to feel safer asking more question. Nestled in the following conversation were two seemingly common queries that belied his beloved bewilderment: “What do you mean? You know? How?”

Never mind how hard I studied in grammar school. Disregard the months of preparation for my California teacher credentialing exams. Teachers and

pastors alike know that the states of matter don't matter in moments like this.<sup>44</sup> The best teachers remember that if I speak without love I am just a noisy gong. So we exercise the muscles of our awareness, we memorize facts and proverbs; all the while remembering that we too are fragile when we ask questions and teachable moments must be handled with care.

To know me is to know that although I truly enjoy reliable answers to my questions and participate in modernity's love affair with empirical data, I much prefer imagination to factoids. In a matter of seconds I run through a checklist in my head whenever a question like this is laid at my feet. I ask myself does the query matter to me? How? Why? Why not? But mostly, finally, fundamentally, I wonder how I can foster a love for creativity, imagination alongside the desire for knowledge? In other words, I wonder how can I use any question to deepen faith in all the things that make up a whole life.

I do not want to offer facts alone, as though they were all we ought to try to believe. I do not want to neglect facts or scientific method, as though they don't matter at all. I want to use what I know of the world and the way life works as a springboard so we can jump together into what we don't know. And I want to do so in a way that communicates my own curiosity and doubt.

It does not always work out. My attempts to co-construct knowledge misfire if a more solid answer is requested. A child continues to pursue the adult

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<sup>44</sup> "This [Polanyi's] view of knowing opens the way toward an understanding of religion. The great power of religion lies in its capacity for integrating large, seemingly incoherent experiences in brief actions of ritual and symbol. Polanyi says: What science says about its own subject is for the most part true and interesting. But it does not give us an image of the world in which our position as responsible beings can be understood. Michael Polanyi, "Acceptance of Religion" (unpublished manuscript, University of Chicago, 1969) p. 11. This epistemological perspective has implications for defining the real." Manno, 208.

asking, “but why?” until she is satisfied. Adults tend to quit vocalizing quandary while they’re ahead: “hm hmmm”-ing along with the explanation even if they are lost early on—but then keep wondering, searching or feeling frustration for hours, days, years... But this time it worked. I took a small stick of driftwood and drew the Earth in the sand; I blew the grains across it as if they were molecules of oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen. He said, “wow.” I said, “yeah, wow, right?” Even as I explained I thought of holes in the plot of the story of a breeze. I found myself asking questions too. I explained that I do not know whether this breeze is because of the water or the hills or both. We wondered aloud together and then imagined these molecules had once flown over Argentina or been puffed out of a whale’s spout in the Atlantic Ocean.

And then it kept working. Months later (many moons and traumas later) I heard him pose the question to a friend at a party. This time it was with wonder and awe that he posed almost the exact same question: “Do you know where wind comes from?!” It was a shining moment for this self-designated teacher, preacher and poet. I caught his eye as I overheard him in conversation and we smiled at one another. It was as if he were about to describe a gift he had been given or a story he had read recently. He was honestly posing the question out of his hope for more knowledge, even though he knew more about the topic now than he ever had before. There was a tiny twist of pride in his voice, but not enough to stifle the curiosity of the person he asked. So it was.

Those who know me have heard me tell stories like this about my students *ad nauseum*, but this one is especially important to me because it is not about

answering a child's question. It is about a grown man—a powerful, business suit wearing, beard-growing, bill-paying grown up. Apparently you can pay bills without knowing where the wind comes from and thank God—even meteorologists get it wrong half the time.

Somehow this man, this son of Adam, managed to access wonder, awe, and imagination in spite of all the chaos of his childhood reverberating in his heart, the aches in his overworked muscles, and the daily stressors of adult responsibilities. But it is the perfect example of imagination at work and it gives me hope that it is possible for adults to learn to imagine faithfully and to pass it on...

In conclusion I would like to point out that it was never my hope to argue that the science and art of faith formation are two sides of the same coin—that is much too large a task for this paper. Nor had I hoped to convince anyone that I know what I am talking about. I only ever imagined I had something to say about the way artful metaphors come to my aid whenever I mistakenly think science is failing me.

It has been my intention to invite ideas about the artistry behind well-researched, data driven Children’s Ministry. The confluence of faith formation and Christian education is one of L’Engle’s “Probable Impossibles”.<sup>45</sup> We never thought of them as two different things—how could we have thought seriously about their interaction? We assumed the two concepts were interchangeable because we figured that if we educate our children, faith will follow... now it seems that might have been putting the cart before the horse. We never knew one was dependant on risky data and one was driven by traumatic spiritual experience; we never imagined the trusting of imagination might take precedence in the Sunday school classroom. We thought there was a formula, anyone could follow a lesson plan, or halfheartedly pray the Sinner’s Prayer and our children would follow us into the fold.

This is precisely the phenomenon L’Engle describes in the excerpt above. We are always playing leapfrog—another’s faithful act or expression of faith supports my own. The game continues because faith acts as a springboard for faith. L’Engle describes it here as occurring within an individual, but she

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<sup>45</sup> See L’Engle’s “Probable Impossibles” in *Walking on Water*, Chapter five.

describes it elsewhere as occurring between friends or even in larger communities.<sup>46</sup>

L'Engle describes her urge to study biochemistry and astrophysics as stemming from her desire know more about the ordering of what James Joyce first dubbed the “chaosmos.”<sup>47</sup> Her theories on art are founded on the artist’s ability to see God’s creation as good because it is ordered according to love’s design.<sup>48</sup> In *Walking on Water*, she describes an artist as the one who sees the chaos and is fueled by the energy from her emotional response to such chaos so that she is able to express the larger story of God’s goodness manifest in and through the chaotic.<sup>49</sup> The artist is thus able to express the Eschatology of the “already and not yet” order of the chaotic elements by ordering them according to her image-ing of God. Her faith allows her to look through the chaos (maybe even Chaos theory!) and see, as a sculptor can look at a piece of stone and see the bust before he takes up the chisel. And then, because this is her vocation, she orders the chaos. And while we may call it art, it is art because it is a co-

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<sup>46</sup> “Long before Jung came up with his theories of archetypical understanding, William James wrote: ‘Our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest, which co-mingle their roots in the darkness underground. Just so, there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea or reservoir.’ The creator is not afraid to leap over the ‘accidental fences.’” L’Engle, *Walking on Water*, 90.

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze explains, “Art is not chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes, as [James] Joyce says, a chaosmos, a composed chaos—neither foreseen nor preconceived. Art transforms chaotic variability...Art struggles with chaos but it does so in order to render it sensory” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 204-5.

<sup>48</sup> “If every hair of my head is counted, then in the very scheme of the cosmos I matter” L’Engle *A Circle of Quiet*, 99. And “My reading of Einstein, Planck, Dessauer, Eddington, Jeans, Heisenberg, etc., was for me an adventure in theology...If I could not believe in a God who truly cared about every atom and subatom of his creation, then life seemed hardly worth living.” *Walking on Water*, 117.

<sup>49</sup> See L’Engle’s “Cosmos From Chaos” in *Walking on Water*, Chapter one.

creating. It is a faithful act that expresses how such faith begets faith and so God may call it ministry.

The last three decades of research into faith formation via Children's Ministry establish it as a constant that we need to lead,<sup>50</sup> so why would we not put our whole selves into the task? When we reflect on what we said or did that went beyond the traditional scripts of Christian education, those of us who have experienced the miracles of faith formation have intuited that Christian education and faith formation inform each other, but they are not the same thing. We sit around the campfire after the little ones go down for the night and tell the spooky stories about times we almost led them astray, only to conclude that it remains to be seen how we might avoid doing so in the future. I believe the answer lies in whether the two seemingly disparate fields of poetics and Christian Education will be given equal but specialized attention in the future of faith formation.

We *imagine* God acting in ways that we never *knew* to be possible. We wrap the old stories in new language and no longer fear myth or metaphor. When we allow for theological imagination to carry equal weight, to bear the burden of proof, we can freely reevaluate our dependence on empirical data. We can trade in our addiction to proof for a kind of courageous knowing and language that calls forth a new way of being with our children. The child's imagination will

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<sup>50</sup> I say this not only because our children need us to lead them, but also because we need to participate in reciprocal leadership. Fowler credits E. H. Erikson with establishing that "the meeting of bodies and minds in intimacy leads to a gradual expansion of ego interests and to the investment of life-energies in that which is being generated...Our common attention to the child's dependence upon adults often blinds us to the dependence of the older generation on the younger...maturity needs guidance as well as encouragement from what has been produced and must be taken care of." Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 85.

find its own food;<sup>51</sup> God provides for us to feed the child's imagination through the use of our own. We have been given the opportunity to employ the metaphors (be the poets, tell the stories, take our place among the saints by following their example) of faith.<sup>52</sup>

There are many ways to form faith; we should not be bogged down in doing it according to rote. It is a privilege to bring my imagination to the task without worrying I have deviated from one right way. In fact, none of it *needs* to be done at all. God does not need me to teach English to an immigrant's daughter, comfort your crying son or preach to a congregation. They may think they need me, but God does not. I may think God needs me, but God does not. This is very difficult for many pastors to understand. So I am asking you instead to imagine. Imagine that...

God only asks us to participate.<sup>53</sup> God never requires us, only asks us to give from the wealth of knowledge *and* imagination we have been granted, to express, connect and confess in new ways. Imagination is key because we will

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<sup>51</sup> "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 7:9-12 (NIV)

<sup>52</sup> "Ignatius, as we all know, was driven to seek out 'the greater glory of God.' And since, as the Psalmist says, the heavens and the earth 'show forth the glory of God,' it is there that we find God— in the beauties of creation. It is the special gift of the artist to be able to show us that creation, and that glory, in a new way. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's words, the poet (and by this he means any artist) 'lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar' (282), showing us 'the before unapprehended relations of things' (278)." J.R. Barth, *Mortal Beauty*, 71.

<sup>53</sup> "...For the mind imbued with what Coleridge calls a 'living and spiritual philosophy,' there is not only a connaturality between the mind and the world it knows, but also an innate and active participation of the imagination in the eternal creative act that empowers it. As Coleridge insists in *Biographia Literaria*, imagination is 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM' (1:304)." J.R. Barth, 72.

never see the big picture, never know it all. We will *only serve what we can imagine*. Maybe it is better put this way: the end of the struggle begins whenever we imagine a way to end it.

We will only ever do all that we can, use all at our disposal—not because we need to, not because God needs us to—but because God is a worthy recipient of all that we have been given to offer God’s children. We have been given so much more than knowledge alone—we can only imagine all that I have to give...

God does not need me to get the facts *right* or to tell the *whole* truth. God has given us the gift of metaphor so that when the confines of language impinge or we reach the limits of knowledge we will still be able to respond faithfully. It is in that response, that the offering of imaginative restraint will be the window, the looking glass through which the child may venture. There, in the poetics of the quotidian explanations, our children will see God’s providence and blessing beyond the teacher’s limited awareness.

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