

A SENSE OF WONDER: Nurturing Transcendent Awareness in Children

David C. Stancil, Ph.D.¹
Assistant Professor of Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Care
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

It was the coldest night of autumn, a clear night in which the stars seemed closer than usual. The wind was blowing steadily, bringing winter to Kentucky. The fire was slowly dying away in the fireplace. Our family was gathered for one of our frequent story times before bed, munching on chocolate chip cookies still warm from the oven. I began to read where we had stopped the night before

"Why is it so dark in here?" Meg asked. She tried to look around, but all she could see was shadows. Nevertheless there was a sense of openness, a feel of a gentle breeze moving lightly about, that kept the darkness from being oppressive.

Perplexity came to her from the beast. "What is this dark? What is this light? We do not understand. Your father and the boy, Calvin, have asked this, too. They say that it is night now on our planet, and that they cannot see. They have told us that our atmosphere is what they call opaque, so that the stars are not visible, and then they were surprised that we know stars, that we know their music and the movements of their dance far better than beings like you who spend hours studying them through what you call telescopes. We do not understand what this means, to *see*."

"Well, it's what things look like," Meg said helplessly.

"We do not know what things *look* like, as you say," the beast said. "We know what things *are* like. It must be a very limiting thing, this seeing." (L'Engle, 1962, pp. 180-181)

Nathan interrupted the story. "How can they know what things are like if they can't see them? What other way is there to know about things than to use your senses!?! What else is there besides what you can touch or hear or see?"

"That's a good question," I responded, searching for a metaphor that would fit. "This story is kind of like Narnia (Lewis, 1950-1956). It's talking about the same sort of thing—that the things that are most real in the world are not the things we can see . . . like God, for instance. We can't touch or see God, but God is real just the same. Of course, God became like us for a while as Jesus, but that's not what God is really like in the whole universe."

¹ "A Sense of Wonder: Nurturing Transcendent Awareness in Children." *Journal of Family Ministry*, 6:1 (1993), 16-25.

Having made this attempt, I read several pages more, until the beast continued the discussion of sight by saying, "We look not at the things which are what you would call seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal. But the things which are not seen are eternal." (L'Engle, 1962, p. 186).

At this, Nathan interrupted again. "Hey, that's right, isn't it? The things you can see don't usually last as long as what you can hear." Smiling to myself, and knowing that Nathan was catching a glimpse of reality in a new way, I read on

This scene has become a fairly typical one at our house, as Jill and I read wonder-full stories to our children before bed. We look forward to these magic moments when the world is transformed, and can be seen through new eyes. The new eyes are eyes of faith, because our stories serve to create new categories of awareness for Nathan and Anna, categories which are consistent with Reality as Christians understand it.

Bedtime has not always been so for us. We have tried numerous methods of developing spiritual awareness in ourselves and in our children, most of which have been only moderately effective. Perhaps you know what I mean. Have you ever been frustrated with trying to express the depth of your faith to your children? With trying to communicate your sense of wonder along with the facts? When their faces don't light up with understanding? Let me offer a clue to what we have found.

Just for a moment, allow yourself to return in your imagination to the days when you were young. Was there a story that you loved to hear, over and over again? A tale in which you became completely immersed, and to which your daydreams often returned? If it was a truly great story, if you yielded to its mystery and power, you were changed. More than this, its images are still imprinted in your mind, and in critical moments now you find that they come back to you, renewing a sense of ancient security and trust, and making sense of life's confusion over and over again (Thornton, p. 5).

Wouldn't it be wonderful indeed if there were stories that were not only this powerful in their imaginative effect, but which could also open awareness to the unseen realities of faith, granting the gift of "eyes that see and ears that hear" as Jesus said (Mt. 13:15)? What a gift to give to your children!

I am convinced that many such stories exist, but I want to introduce you to my favorites, The Chronicles of Narnia, by C. S. Lewis. I did not discover these tales until adulthood, and after a seminary degree; but they have enlivened and enriched my own experience of the transcendent beyond my ability to express it, and these stories have become the matrix in which Nathan, Anna and I talk about faith.

Story as the Wood between the Worlds

In the book which is the chronological beginning of Narnia, two children, Digory and Polly, discover magic rings that take them to a most unusual wood:

"I don't believe this wood is a world at all. I think it's just a sort of in-between place."

Polly looked puzzled. "Don't you see?" said Digory. "No, do listen. think of our tunnel under the slates at home. It isn't a room in any of the houses. In a way, it isn't really part of any of the houses. But once you're in the tunnel you can go along it and come out into any of the houses in the row. Mightn't this wood be the same?—a place that isn't in any of the worlds, but once you've found that place you can get into them all." (Lewis, 1970a, p. 34)

From this wood, Digory and Polly exit into the dying world of Charn, and escape from Charn into the very creation of Narnia. The wood is a place where they can return (by use of the rings) whenever they wish, and which opens their awareness to realities much different than the everydayness of life in our see-touch world. All of the Chronicles have this effect; but why? How is it that stories have such power?

Bruno Bettelheim, in his book, The Uses of Enchantment, points out that myths and fairy stories (the genre of the Chronicles) answer "the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself?" (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 45). Stories go about answering these questions in a manner which conforms to the way a child thinks and experiences the world, which is why they are so convincing. A child is more inclined to trust what a "fairy story" tells than to trust adult reasoning and explanations, because the world-view of the story agrees with her own (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 45).

Nor is it true that the "adult" way of looking at the world is necessarily more correct than that of a child. As Wolfhart Pannenberg has noted, the world-view of a child need not be

interpreted simply as a deficiency, but rather as the manifestation of a sense of reality that unfortunately often atrophies in the later phases of development, not least because of a deficient religious education, and yields its place to a rationality that admits no mystery (1985, pp. 351-352. See also James Fowler's discussion of Intuitive-Projective and Mythic-Literal faith, 1983, pp. 189-200).

Fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, take the anxieties and dilemmas of childhood very seriously, and address them directly: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought worthless; the love of life, and the fear of death. Further, fairy tales offer solutions in ways that children can grasp (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 10). J. R. R. Tolkien suggested that fairy tales offer children a way to escape from the great dangers they perceive in the world, a way to recover from existential despair (!), and most of all, assurance that life can have a happy ending—which he calls a "eucatastrophe" (1966, pp. 68-87). (Tolkien did not deny the existence of "dyscatastrophe," but denies that evil will win the day at the end of time.)

Thus, while providing delight and entertainment, fairy stories also direct children along the path to development of character and personal identity. These stories suggest that a rewarding, good life can be attained despite adversity, if the struggles of life are squarely faced. All is not necessarily "happily ever after," however, for the stories also warn that "those who are too timorous and narrow-minded to risk themselves in finding themselves must settle down to a humdrum existence—if an even worse fate does not befall them" (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 24).

This warning is for us as well as for our children, for Jesus said that, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3). Thus it is that the mystery of the kingdom remains hidden from the learned while being transparently available to children. If we want to make sense out of life, story-telling may be the door to enter (Thornton, p. 120). Stories are the "wood between the worlds."

Discovering Narnia

C. S. Lewis had two criteria for good literature: that it be interesting and enjoyable, and that it have a positive and permanent effect (Cunningham, 1965, pp. 183-184). Based on

these criteria, The Chronicles of Narnia are significant indeed. The Last Battle received the Carnegie Medal for the best children's book of 1956, and the Chronicles have been called the greatest addition to children's literature since the Jungle Books (Brady, 1956, p. 103). Roger Green, an authority on children's literature, ranked Lewis among the six best children's authors of the twentieth century (Green, 1953, p. 259).

Lewis was not the first writer to attempt serious fantasy (witness Danté, Milton, and Coleridge), but he did introduce the highest quality of fantasy writing to children's literature. One of Lewis's central goals in all of his writings was to convince persons of the reality of the world beyond nature—not other worlds within the universe, but other dimensions of reality. Believing that the modern world has a tunnel vision which is limited to the near horizon of human knowledge, Lewis tried through Narnia to allow children sufficient imaginative freedom to break through and glimpse the "more" (Johnston, 1977, p. 261). He intended for his writings to strike deep chords within the imaginations of his readers, helping them to break out of their everyday mode of consciousness, and to shock them "more fully awake" than they are for most of their lives (Lewis, 1962, pp. 16-17).

Thus Narnia is not another place so much as it is another dimension in the universe; it is "a potent introduction to the idea of transcendence, of unseen, non-empirical reality, of the possibilities of life transcending the natural order, of a God who creates, redeems, preserves, and consummates in the form of a Golden Lion in another world" (Cunningham, 1965, p. 285).

The Chronicles tell the history of Narnia from its beginning to its end, and the stories involve a series of adventures, beginning with the creation of Narnia by Aslan, the Great Lion, after two children, Digory and Polly, discover an empty world on the other side of the Wood between the Worlds.² The entrance of evil into the pristine creation is described, and later, after Narnia is overrun by a host of evil creatures, Aslan offers himself as a substitute for the captive Edmund and is killed on a Stone Table by the White Witch. After rising from death,

² The chronological order of the story is The Magician's Nephew (1955), The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (1950), The Horse and His Boy (1954), Prince Caspian (1951), The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (1952), The Silver Chair (1953), and The Last Battle (1956). The stories were actually written from 1949-1952.

Aslan destroys the White Witch and her followers, and crowns the four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, as kings and queens of the realm. In another episode the children return to help Prince Caspian, the rightful heir to the throne of Narnia, defeat his uncle, who has usurped the throne. Two of the books (The Voyage of the Dawn Treader and The Silver Chair) are journey stories, in which the children travel to regions unknown in search of missing persons from the kingdom of Narnia, learning much about evil and about temptation on the way.³ The final book recounts the end of Narnia and Aslan's judgment on evil, describing the resurrection and final happiness of Aslan's followers.

Narnia demands much of the children who enter its realm, for no one can visit that land and return unchanged. Edmund discovers his traitorous heart and must seek and receive forgiveness for his treachery. Eustace needs to be converted from his greed and selfishness. Digory must learn to obey at great cost. The presence of and the danger of death in each of the stories provide the context in which these lessons are learned.

Lewis uses all the major events of the Christian story for the plot of Narnia. Just as Christ came to earth from his Father in heaven, Aslan comes to Narnia from his Father in the Utter East. As Christ died and rose again, so too does Aslan. Like the resurrected Christ, who rules the earth through his disciples, the resurrected Aslan rules Narnia through Kings and Queens whom he appoints. As Christ will return at the end of time to overthrow the Antichrist and execute final judgment, so Aslan returns at the end of the Narnian world to expose the counterfeit lion and to carry out judgment on the realm. While after their deaths at the end of Narnia the children find that they escape from death to Life, Narnia is not universalism in fancy dress. Susan does not get into the final Narnia (Forbes, 1976, p. 10).

By placing his adventures in fairyland, untouched by our usual prejudices, Lewis catches us off guard and helps us to attend to things which matter most. As Walter Hooper, Lewis's long-time friend reflected,

By degrees which are often unnoticed by even the most cautious atheist, we progress from a love of Narnia, to a greater love of Aslan himself, to a sharp regret that there is no Aslan in this world, to a sudden recognition which makes the heart sing that there *is* an Aslan in

³ These volumes seem to have been significantly influenced by Dante's Divine Comedy. See Marsha Ann Daigle (1985, pp. 41-58).

this world—and then, if my own experience is any guide—Narnia and this world interlock and Aslan and Christ are seen as one. (Walter Hooper, Introduction to Lindskoog, 1973, p. 13).

Lewis wanted his writings to be "one of God's bellows to blow upon the half-dead coals of longing" in his readers' breasts (Lindskoog, 1973, p. 273), kindling the fires of imagination to help persons discover that they were made for, and in fact long for, God. Do children really get that out of Narnia? Probably not. But if the imagination has been kindled (Lewis would say "baptized"), and the nerve of religious awe enlivened, the time will come when the child (adolescent, adult) senses the "beyond" breaking into life, and will say with conviction, "So that's what Aslan meant!"

If the ultimate ideal toward which the religious development of children should point is to Christian experiences and Christian values by which they can make life decisions (White, 1983, p. 231), then Narnia serves such purpose well. In Narnia children encounter heroism, truth, beauty, justice, honor, duty, courtesy, self-sacrifice, pleasure, and happiness. Here they experience differing concepts of time, learn what pride is, how difficult obedience can be, and how temptation works. True to the world as we know it, Narnia also includes violence and bloodshed, suffering, pain, cruelty, and death—a somber backdrop against which character is formed.

Bruno Bettelheim considered that the value of fairy tales lies in their ability to enhance children's ability to work out unconscious conflicts and developmental struggles (Barker, 1985, p. 10). Christians see that Narnia does this while being true to the way the world is as well.

Using *Narnia* in the Home

From the Christian perspective, religious development is one of the basic and fundamental concerns of the home. Indeed, as Ernest White commented, "Talking about the role of home in the religious development of children is almost like talking about the value of nutrition in eating" (White, 1983, p. 231).

While religious development is often thought of as an "exercise of the mind," a holistic approach recognizes that religious development is at least as much "an affair of the heart" as

of the head (Grimes, 1983, p. 221). Children need instruction, but they also need experience. Rational examination of faith is often stillborn if it precedes the experience of God in one's life. Morton Kelsey has suggested that the most important task for parents in nurturing the spirituality of their pre-teen children is to affirm the reality of the "other world," and to help them experience it, not to understand it (Kelsey, 1986). Parental use of formational stories such as Narnia can provide a foundational predisposition for theological thinking and Christian world-view. Jesus called it "having eyes that see and ears that hear."

Stories in general, and Narnia in particular, need to be read aloud to achieve their full effect. (Lewis tried to write chapters of equal length for convenience in reading aloud.) Good storytellers use gestures, facial expressions, laughter, voice variations, and other devices to convey the meaning and experience of the story. The enchantment comes from hearing the story as though it were happening at that instant. Further, reading aloud suggests to the child that what is being read is precious (Perera, 1979, p. 27).

By reading fantasy stories to their children, parents convey that they consider the children's inner experiences as embodied in fantasies worthwhile, legitimate, and in a fundamental sense, real. Such parental acceptance of the inner experiences of childhood enable children to feel that they themselves are also real, and are accepted for who they are (Perera, 1979, pp. 63-64).

With books such as Narnia, which can be understood at more than one level, it is probably best to avoid most interpretations of how the events in the story "stand for" something or someone in the Bible (Lewis claimed that the books are not allegorical)—at least at the time of reading. As Bettelheim noted, "Explaining to a child why a fairy tale is so captivating to him [sic] destroys . . . the story's enchantment, which depends to a considerable degree on the child's not quite knowing why he is delighted by it" (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 18).

At the same time, it is important to give children ample time to reflect on the story, to immerse themselves in the atmosphere that hearing it creates in them, and to talk about it. There will be times later when, in responding to a question about some relationship or event, parents can say, "Do you remember when Jill and Eustace were in Underland and were longing for the Overworld, hardly daring to believe that it was real? This is like that."

The images conveyed through the "baptized imagination" of Narnia and other such tales are much like the seeds Jesus spoke of in the parable of the soils (Mk. 4:1-20). The reading is like the scattering of the seeds, only some of which will become implanted in the mind of the child. Some will begin working in the child's conscious mind right away; others will set unconscious processes in motion. Still others will need to rest for a long time, until the child's mind has become ready for their germination, and many will not take root at all. But those seeds which have fallen on fertile soil will grow into beautiful flowers and sturdy trees, will give validity to important feelings, will promote insights, reduce anxieties, and nourish hopes—and so doing will enrich the child's life at that moment and forever after (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 154).

A young woman, seeing a professor carrying several of the Chronicles, commented, "I love Lewis. I once read the Narnia books as quickly as my little sister let me have them! There has to be a place like Narnia somewhere. Someday I'll find it" (Zuck, 1975, p. 604). Her yearning confirms that Lewis has achieved his goal. To paraphrase Thornton's words about Danté, Lewis provides the vivid images and sings the haunting, joyful songs of the spiritual journey, articulating what is virtually beyond words and enabling persons to become awake to the Spirit in this earthly realm (p. 1). As Aslan said to Lucy and Edmund before their final departure from Narnia,

"Dearest," said Aslan very gently, "you and your brother will never come back to Narnia."

"Oh, Aslan!" said Edmund and Lucy both together in despairing voices.

"You are too old, children," said Aslan, "and you must begin to come close to your own world now."

"It isn't Narnia, you know," sobbed Lucy. "It's *you*. We shan't meet *you* there. And how can we live, never meeting you?"

"But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan.

"Are—are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund.

"I am," said Aslan, "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there." (Lewis, 1970b, pp. 215-216).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barker, P. (1985). Using Metaphors in Psychotherapy. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Bettelheim, B. (1976). The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales. New York: Knopf.
- Brady, C. A. (1956, October 27). Finding God in Narnia. America, 96, 103.
- Cunningham, R. B. (1965). The Christian Apologetic of C. S. Lewis Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.
- Daigle, M. A. (1985). Danté's Divine Comedy and C. S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles. Christianity and Literature, 34:4, 41-58.
- Forbes, Cheryl. (1976, April 23). Narnia: Fantasy, But Christianity Today, 20, 6-10.
- Fowler, James. (1983). Gifting the Imagination: Awakening and Informing Children's Faith. Review and Expositor, 80, 189-200.
- Green, R. L. (1953). Tellers of Tales (rev. ed.). London: Edmund Ward.
- Grimes, H. Teaching the Bible to Children. Review and Expositor, 80, 221-230.
- Johnston, R. K. (1977). Image and Content: The Tension in C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia. Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 20, 253-264.
- Kelsey, M. (1986, October 8). Discussion with the Psychology of Religion Colloquium of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.
- L'Engle, M. (1962). A Wrinkle in Time. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Lewis, C. S. (1950-1956). The Chronicles of Narnia, in seven volumes. New York: Macmillan.
- Lewis, C. S. (Ed.). (1962). George MacDonald: An Anthology. New York: Dolphin Books.
- Lewis, C. S. (1970a). The Magician's Nephew. New York: Collier Books.
- Lewis, C. S. (1970b). The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. New York: Collier Books.
- Lindskoog, K. A. (1973). The Lion of Juday in Never-Never Land: The Theology of C. S. Lewis Expressed in His Fantasies for Children. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Pannenberg, W. (1985). Anthropology in Theological Perspective (M. J. O'Connell, Trans.). Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Perera, E. L. (1979, June 8). Reading Aloud: A Vanishing Commodity of Culture. Christianity Today, 23, 25-27.
- Thornton, E. E. A Story that Helps make Sense out of Life: Danté's Comedy. Unpublished manuscript.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1966). On Fairy Stories. In The Tolkien Reader. New York: Ballantine, 33-99.
- White, E. (1983). The Role of the Home in the Religious Development of Children. Review and Expositor, 80, 231-243.
- Zuck, J. E. (1975). Religion and Fantasy. Religious Education, 70, 586-604.