

WE HAVE SINNED AND
GROWN OLD: A
REFLECTION ON THE
IMAGINATION AND
MOTHERHOOD

Nicole Howe on the innocence of
youthful wonder.

"I don't want to tell you. It's embarrassing."

My nine-year-old son uttered these words recently as we sat on the couch in my favorite room of our home. I don't even recall what we were talking about, but he had grown suddenly quiet, and a look of intensity and contemplation came over his face. When I asked him what he was thinking, tears began to well.

It took some gentle prodding, but he finally braved the risk of confession. *"When I read my stories, I sometimes pretend that I'm in them."* A sense of amused relief

washed over me, and I quickly leaned in to comfort him. But he interrupted.

“*There’s more,*” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands. After a long pause, the words finally escaped in a scratchy whisper. “*I also just feel sad that they aren’t real.*” Tears plopped like tiny marbles onto his lap.

It was then I was smacked with the true profundity of what he was expressing. My sweet little boy, in all his bravery to give voice to these emotions, had stumbled on an absolute treasure, a key to the universe. And I was astonished at his ability to pay attention to it.

Almost immediately, Lewis, MacDonald, Chesterton, and Tolkien came flooding into my mind, like sage grandfathers from the past. They’ve taught me so much about the imagination and the power of a good story to communicate beautiful truths – truths about the reality of the world in which we live. And about how a proper story can awaken moments of deep longing within us, what C.S. Lewis called “stabs of joy.”¹ These are moments that almost hurt for their intense beauty and where we sense deeply there is more than meets the scientific eye.

As I watched my son wipe away tears from his eyes, heavy with the shame of wanting something he thought

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 21.

he couldn't have, I saw myself in him. I understood exactly how he felt because I've experienced the same sting of longing in my own heart. I think mothers often do. Who among us hasn't, at some point, resonated with Cinderella, dreaming of something outside the bounds of her own home? And who hasn't been knocked down by a flood of embarrassment at such a "childish" dream? All too often, rather than allowing ourselves to be roused by these imaginative experiences, we are embarrassed by the ache we feel.

I couldn't wait to lift the shame off his shoulders.

"Oh buddy, that's exactly how a good story is **supposed** to make you feel!"

Before going on a journey to recover my own imagination, I'm not sure I would have been able to answer him this way. I spent a large portion of my early motherhood years feeling disenchanting with the life I'd been given - a life built upon the virtues of duty, efficiency, and practicality. A life where my clearest goal was just *getting things done*. I was disconnected from that child-like part of myself that kept me tender and available to beautiful things.

So had my son come to me with this confession five years ago, I might have told him he was welcome to enjoy his stories, as long as he kept in mind that they are just pretend. Perhaps I would have considered the dangers of escapism and wondered if he was getting too caught up in a fantasy world. Whatever I might have said, it's a

message that likely would have amounted to, “Enjoy your stories. Just be sure to keep your feet planted on the ground.” You know, stay *practical*.

We’ve been so conditioned to be embarrassed -- afraid, even -- of our imaginations. We are taught to fear they will carry us away to a false reality and that our longing for another world is something to be tamed. Lewis and Tolkien were aware of this concern and have addressed it at length. And, as I’ve pored over their words these past several years, they’ve convinced me that there is a significant difference between the imaginative and the imaginary. There is a difference between escapism, what Tolkien calls the “flight of the deserter,”² and the awakening to the true, good, and beautiful – realities that are often illuminated in a really good story.

Tolkien scholar, Holly Ordway, states in *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, “Although it is possible (and unfortunately all too common) to have one’s longings for goodness, beauty, and meaning dulled and misdirected, it is part of our common human nature to experience longing for something more than what we experience in the here-and-now.”³ My son didn’t create

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 32.

³ Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 131.

this longing; it simply arose. His “imagination was outrunning his intellect,” as George MacDonald says, “and manifesting to the heart what the brain could not yet understand.”⁴ It was whispering to him something *true* about the universe.

Unfortunately, it seems to be the “ordinariness” of everyday life that so often dulls us to this longing. We’ve become too accustomed to the wonders of our world. The magic of stumbling upon a giant elk in the middle of a snowy wood contains its magic, in part, because it is so rare. The beauty of a sunset, because it is just out of reach. We are lulled to sleep by the nearness of things. The people under your own roof are walking miracles, but we’ve become numb to their splendor. Is it any wonder we need stories to jolt us awake? As Lewis tells us, the “value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which had been hidden by the veil of familiarity.”⁵

“The reason you feel that way is because the good things you love in those stories are real.”

⁴ George MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood*, Project Gutenberg, accessed February 17, 2019, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5773>.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *On Stories: And Other Essays On Literature*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 138.

I watched his anxiety begin to let go of him as we talked about what those stories are showing us and how they reveal good things he was *designed* to want. Don't we all long to live in a land where there is adventure, purpose, and beauty? Where evil is overthrown once and for all? Christianity teaches us that this is precisely how things were meant to be, and more, that this is how they will, in the end, finally be.⁶

And perhaps the most surprising turn is that awakening to the truth, goodness, and beauty in other worlds actually helps us awaken to the wonder in our own world. It becomes even more alive, teeming with possibility and hope. Far from a desire to escape the barrenness of the seemingly mundane, we are given eyes to see the "new thing" springing up in the wilderness.⁷ Lewis tells us it is those who think most about heaven who think most about earth.

"Stories tell us of golden apples only to refresh the forgotten moment we found that they were green,"⁸ I say to my son, quoting Chesterton. "Remember the first time you saw a green apple, and how much you loved them? It's true. He was captivated by green apples for a time

⁶ "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Revelation 21:4

⁷ Isaiah 43:19

⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Project Gutenberg, accessed February 17, 2019, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/130>.

and, I'm convinced, able to ignore their sour taste simply for the magic of their color.

I watched as he began to give in to joy while he considered a whole new possibility...that this story he has come to love may be closer to his own world than he had first realized. It was my turn for tears to fall.

The 'truthiness' of our longing is why we can never really outgrow it, try as we might. The least we can hope for is to suppress it. But even then, we'll find it leaking out at the most inconvenient times, beckoning us to come right to the edge of the world and look over it, *beyond* it. It might come when we witness the birth of a baby, fall upon a stunning work of art, visit a cathedral, or study the intricate pattern of a spider web. For a moment we will be stricken, captivated. And the longing will rise.

But for too many of us, this point of longing is usually where our story comes to an end. We will not allow it to take us any further than to be momentarily stunned. We would feel shame if we did. And it may be too bold to say, but I wonder if some of the depression we feel as grown-ups is precisely because we've become disenchanted with the world as we see it. We've forgotten who we are. And as MacDonald says, we forget that we have forgotten.⁹

⁹ Ibid.

I am certainly not perfect, but I became a better mother when I recovered my own imagination. Much of my own “re-enchantment” happened during the course of my studies at Houston Baptist University, while pursuing a Masters in Imaginative Apologetics. I had no idea all that I had lost until my classmates and professors helped me find it again. It was like coming home. And now I understand why Jesus said we must have a childlike faith. Children have something remarkable to teach us; they know far more than we do sometimes. Are we listening? Lewis asks, “who in his senses would not keep, if he could, that tireless curiosity, that intensity of imagination, that facility of suspending disbelief, that unspoiled appetite, that readiness to wonder, to pity, and to admire?” I’m with him.

“Remember how much Mommy loved the trees when we walked through the woods the other day?”

It was a rare 60-degree day in the middle of a Midwest January, so our whole family took an impromptu walk through the forest preserve. All along the path were towering oaks, and their bare branches snarled and wandered in a hundred different directions. They were like guardians to another universe. They seemed serene yet powerful, and it felt as though they might scoop me up at any moment to give a closer look at the sky. I was smitten with them. “Look kids! These trees look like Ents!” I felt like *I* was 9 years old. My joy was impossible to squash. I took a thousand pictures. Lewis is exactly right: “He does not despise real woods because he has

read of enchanted woods; the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.”¹⁰

And this delight in the world around us is precisely what prompts us to fall to our knees, unbidden, and marvel at a God who is so gracious to give us these good gifts. The heavens -- and trees, and deer, and spiders -- declare the glory of God.¹¹

My son smiled with a smile of recognition as I talked of that day in the woods. He remembered the walk, and I think he understood a little more deeply why I was so enamored with those trees. It’s because I could really *see* them and all the promise they hold. He can see them, too.

And now we both share a wonderful secret.

¹⁰ Lewis, *On Stories*, 57.

¹¹ Psalms 19:1

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