

REVIVING A SACRED IMAGINATION

Annie Crawford on reason and the
imagination as necessary for discipleship.

In the fourth chapter of Proverbs, Solomon instructs
his son to diligently tend his own soul:

My son, be attentive to my words;

incline your ear to my sayings.

Let them not escape from your sight;

keep them within your heart.

For they are life to those who find them,

and healing to all their flesh.

Keep your heart with all vigilance,

for from it flow the springs of life.¹

In his exhortation, Solomon intertwines the
workings of mind, heart, and body. He understands that
the words which lodge in the mind of his son will become

¹ Proverbs 4:20-23, ESV

the object of his inner “sight.” Solomon instructs his son to keep the meaning of faithful words seared upon his heart, for the heart is the “springs of life.” The heart is used symbolically throughout Hebrew thought to refer to the inner man, the seat of the soul where mind, will, and emotion are integrated. It is from this seat that the physical life is governed. True words stored as meaningful “sights” and held “within your heart” will bring “life” and “healing to all their flesh.” In this instruction, Solomon affirms that his son is an incarnate soul whose inner life is inextricably intertwined with his outer life. Therefore, he exhorts his son, and us, to remember that both word and heart-sight, both reason and imagination, are essential to discipleship, to walking in the ways of Life.

In our post-Enlightenment context dominated by scientific thought, the importance of reason is well established, but we have largely forgotten the truth-bearing capacity of the imagination. Focused on pragmatism and production, many have lost their taste for wonder and we suffer for it. Priest and poet, Malcolm Guite, in his thoughtful book *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, argues that the church has not well-withstood this Post-Enlightenment loss of vision, but followed suit with the culture.

[Christians] identified [the *Logos*] with the light of pure reason rather than a direct intellectual apprehension or grasp of truth that involves imagination as well. The consequence of this has been a church

culture that starved the imagination, was suspicious of mystery, but was unaware that, in deifying a logical and syllogistic method in theology, it was in fact creating its own idol. This kind of theology refuses the full consequence and meaning of the incarnation, of believing that the word was made flesh.”²

By reducing the incarnation of Christ, the mystery of the God-Man, to a rationally comprehensible reality, we have dulled our sense of awe and weakened our ability to worship. However, in the twenty-first century we are slowly beginning to rediscover the crucial importance of the imagination. Guite praises the current “renewed emphasis on imagination as essential for a fuller knowledge of the world and of ourselves.”³ Indeed, our imagination stands at the center of our being and at the core of what it means to be human. If Christians are to be a people of worship who reflect the glory of Christ, we must intentionally cultivate imaginative ways of knowing and being.

In his final book, *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis explains that for the Medieval mind the *imagination* was the faculty by which one “retains what has been

² Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 11.

³ Ibid.

perceived” and holds a thing or idea “in the mind’s eye”.⁴ This reflects Solomon’s instruction to keep his words in “sight” within the heart.⁵ Later, in the Romantic era, Coleridge explicitly imbues the meaning of *imagination* with an additional creative power. For Coleridge, the imagination is the faculty by which we integrate our perceptions and ideas in order to synthesize and create new images and conceptions. Both senses of the word – the Medieval *beholding* and the Romantic *creating* – are important for understanding this “aspect of the *Imago Dei* in humankind as an active, shaping power of perception exercised both individually and collectively and as a faculty that is capable of both apprehending and embodying truth.”⁶ Imaginative language openly employs metaphor, symbol, paradox, ambiguity, and imagery in order to approach transcendent truth in a way that abstract, analytic language cannot.

This imaginative faculty that both *beholds* and *creates* is at the very center of who we are as humans, as embodied souls made in the image of God. Guite describes the imagination as alone “capable of

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*: (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2016), p 163.

⁵ The word for “heart” in Proverbs 4:21 is *lə·ḥā·ḥə·kā*. This Hebrew word is also translated “mind” in Deuteronomy 30:1 and Ezekiel 38:10 as well as “self” in Judges 19:8

⁶ Guite, 15.

integrating, synthesizing and making sense of our atomized factual knowledge.” We can only think one thought at a time, thus we depend upon our imagination to synthesize many various facts into a coherent vision of reality. Our imagination resides at the crossroads of how our abstract rational thoughts interface with our embodied lives. It is the faculty of the imagination that can take experiences, abstract principles, narrative truths, visual images, poetic language, and unseen realities and bind them together to hold fast in deep wells of the heart. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis also positions the imaginative faculties of the heart, which he here calls the organ of “Chest-Magnanimity-Sentiment,” at the center of being fully alive and fully human. Lewis states that, “It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.”⁷ It is through imagination’s symbolic ways of uniting body and spirit that we will most nearly apprehend the presence of Divine Truth that is both with and beyond us.

Imagination inhabits the center of our understanding for an important and divinely ordained purpose. If reality is not only composed of an immanent physicality but also a transcendent spirituality, then we

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*: (New York, HarperCollins, 2001), 25.

will require both literal and metaphorical ways of knowing and speaking truth. Guite asserts that “In order to describe some aspects of our being human, an ‘inexactitude’ may be, paradoxically, more adequate – indeed, more exact – than a supposedly exact expression.”⁸ As incarnate beings, as embodied souls, we require a way of knowing that is “at home with symbol and metaphor and will see in symbol itself a possibility of transcendence beckoning from within immanence.”⁹ As Lewis’s favorite psalm, Psalm 19 teaches,

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.¹⁰

We live in a *signed* world where the invisible God has made Himself known metaphorically and symbolically through the visible world.

To live in a sacramental world means that we live in a world where inner, spiritual realities are being

⁸ Guite, 6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Psalm 19:1-4, ESV.

constantly made manifest through the outward, visible realities. The very nature of reality is symbolic, or as the poet Seamus Heaney writes, “alive with what’s invisible,”¹¹ and so our deepest and truest ways of knowing will be metaphorical. Moreover, Guite explains, “there is no language and no knowledge without symbol and metaphor. . . symbols themselves beckon us through language to that which is beyond language.”¹² As human, incarnational beings, we dwell both between and within the physical and spiritual realms; thus imagination - which is able to behold visible realities as well as creatively envision abstract realities - resides at the integrative crossroads of existence and our apprehension of reality mediating between the visible and invisible. Only through the marriage of rational and imaginative ways of knowing can we fully apprehend the Truth of the incarnate Christ who sets us free. This is why Lewis argues that “reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”¹³ Through reason

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things*, (London, 1991). Quoted in Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.

¹² Guite, 7.

¹³ C.S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flansferes: A Semantic Nightmare,” in *Selected Literary Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). 265.

we discern truth but the imagination gives that truth meaning.

A propositional understanding of truth is essential, but theological statements and formulations, such as the Westminster Confession or Nicene Creed, are like the framework upon which hangs an enormous and elaborate collage of images, metaphors, and narratives built up throughout our lifetime. The images that we store up in our heart wield incredible power. In determining how we will live in the “flesh,” our imaginings are often more powerful than the propositional content to which we intellectually give ascent. This is why Solomon instructs his son to “keep your heart with *all* vigilance, for from it flows the springs of life.” Advertisers understand this; an astronomical amount of time and money are devoted to, not the construction of rational arguments, but the manipulating of our imagination so we will buy certain products and ideas. In particular, the images and stories we collect in association with the word “God” will dramatically affect how we will react to theological principles. If I grew up with a workaholic father who was withdrawn and rarely home, I may imagine God as stoic and distant. Consequently, I will likely be unmoved by an explanation of His love and purpose for my life. If we are to know God in truthful, life-changing ways, we must carefully cleanse and curate the gallery of storied images that have taken root in our imaginations.

The curious priority of the Second Commandment in the history of Israel further affirms the importance of integrating both reason and imagination. God knew the unique power that images would hold over His people in both the way they thought and lived. Accordingly, He insisted that no pictorial representation of Him be made until His Son would come fully in the flesh to reflect the true image of the Father in His work upon the cross. The seriousness of the Second Commandment in the life of Israel tutors us in the importance guarding the imaginative life of His people. As we endeavor to be transformed into the image of Christ, we must both curate the images we behold in our “mind’s eye” as well as sanctify those we create.

Yet, if the imagination is so central to our understanding, why do we find ourselves so desperately needing to reawaken it? In short, the Age of Reason has eroded our sacramental understanding of reality and marginalized the truth-bearing function of the imagination. The Cartesian revolution of the 17th century divided “the world between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, a dualism from which science and philosophy are only just recovering.”¹⁴ This absolute division of mind from matter precipitated the Enlightenment endeavor to wholly comprehend reality through the power of reason

¹⁴ Guite, 3.

alone and severed rationality from the faculties of imagination and intuition. Rationalists and analytic philosophers sought to remove all ambiguity from language and so discarded poetic, embodied ways of knowing truth. Guite argues that the “philosophers and scientists declared war on the imagination... If it cannot be weighted and measured, these men were saying, it is not really there.”¹⁵ This revolutionary shift in thinking seemed unquestionably verified by the burst of technological progress and material wealth. The rational powers of man appeared able to control the world as never before and reason would not brook the protesting fancies of imagination. Reason alone was elevated as the only legitimate way of knowing, and our material, measurable existence was defined as the only knowable reality. Imagination and spirituality were forced to accept a subjective, relative status that prevented them from having a serious voice in academic and intellectual discourse.

Consequently, materialist philosophies disengaged Western culture from the sacred realities that are essential to a life of worship. If the material world is the only knowable realm, then either spiritual realities have almost nothing to do with physical reality or there actually is no spiritual reality. This made the Apostle

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Paul's injunction to "glorify God in your body"¹⁶ almost impossible to comprehend or live out. The modern church accordingly abandoned the crucial task of cultivating the kind of art, narrative, metaphor, and poetic language that would ensure our inner spirituality remained meaningfully integrated with our external world. Liberalized churches increasingly provided sentimentality divorced from any objective meaning while conservative traditions became suspicious of anything mysterious, promoting a starvation diet that fasted from all vain imaginations.

The post-Cartesian ostracism of imagination has resulted in an atrophy of virtue. Since the imagination is seated at the heart of how we know and live as humans, our values and behavior will emanate from imaginative collage we have curated in our mind's eye. When imagination was dismissed, she took spiritual vitality and morality with her. Lewis lamented that the elevation of reason above moral imagination produced a society of bobble-heads, or as Lewis calls them "Men without Chests ... [whose] heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so."¹⁷ Our imaginative faculty is what gives meaning to the propositional truths which we

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:20, ESV.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*. 25.

apprehend by reason. Without the integrating power of imagination, moral injunctions lose their potency. As Lewis described, it is within the 'chest' that physical and abstract realities gain moral power. If we have marginalized and ignored poetic and imaginative ways of knowing, we will experience moral anemia. Dry propositions do not rouse a man to courageous action or sympathetic kindness. The words "A child is starving" can only light the fire of sympathy and duty if the imagination is capable of bringing to mind the image of a child to whom we can relate through a storied experience. Only the Transcendent beckoning us through a signed and storied world can rouse the heart to action.

Although imagination was marginalized by both those inside and outside the church, she has, of course, refused to go quietly. Imagination forms an irreducible aspect of human nature; our minds will store up images, stories, metaphors, and poetic language whether we wish them to or not. We must have stories and art, a realm where the symbolic imagination can feed. Despite the exaltation of scientism and rationalistic ways of knowing, movies and music are more popular than ever. Accordingly, if we are not intentional in what we *behold* and *create*, the potent powers of our imagination will be shaped by other forces which may or may not support the values we wish to be developing in our lives. Lacking careful cultivation, the contemporary imaginative landscape is clogged with weeds. Our starved

imaginations have become ravenous monsters consuming massive amounts of junk food: violent movies, self-absorbed narratives, kitsch, slogans, clichés, and commercials. In the absence of compelling moral imagery, we have embraced a devastating deluge of sexual imagery and are suffering from an epidemic addiction to pornography. Furthermore, the idolization of scientific knowledge has caused Darwinian evolution to replace the Gospel as the unifying cultural myth in the Western world. The victory of evolutionary myth over academic institutions and cultural discourse has resulted in a proliferation of dehumanizing narratives and imagery. Powerful leading scientists such as Jerry Coyne describe humans as “meat computers” who “don’t really have free will” or moral responsibility.¹⁸ Technology has replaced Christ as our saving hope, and as a result, scientific and technological metaphors serve as the soul-shaping descriptors of what it means to be human.

Prior to the triumph of Darwinian materialism, the Christian Gospel dominated the West as the unifying myth and source of meaning. The imaginative traditions of the church nurtured a vigorous set of values including faith, hope, love, courage, and integrity. The shift to a

¹⁸ Jerry Coyne, “Why You Don’t Really have Free Will,” *USA Today*, Last Modified January 1, 2012, accessed September 11, 2016, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2012-01-01/free-will-science-religion/52317624/1>

Darwinian narrative and industrial imagery has radically shifted our values as well. The imagery and stories of evolutionary advancement promote a thinner set of values including efficiency, speed, productivity, progress, and sexual freedom. The will to power remains the only rational value left for a heart utterly given over to the evolutionary imagination. Although orthodox streams of the church have retained the Gospel narrative and its attending virtues, the church has also been influenced by our culture's transactionalism and feverish productivity. Our imaginations have become broken cisterns that do not hold well the living waters. Thus, we presently find ourselves living within an epoch of immense material wealth, knowledge, and power but atrophied spiritual understanding. Because we have ceased to see the world sacramentally, we have stopped paying attention to the spiritual meaning in all the manifold details of our embodied lives. We have lost our sense of *wonder* and *awe*.

Fortunately, we are beginning to repair the ruins and again reintegrate body and spirit in the ways we live and understand the world. As Guite points out, the recovery of imagination both within and without the church has begun. Indeed,

Science in particular has come to acknowledge the vital role imagination plays in shaping and making scientific models and theories as well as the experiments designed to test them. Theology, likewise, has recovered from an atomizing, reductive, demythologizing period

and is beginning to look at the importance of imaginative shaping and symbolic apprehension in the discovery of meaning and theological truth.¹⁹

As we acknowledge the power and truth-bearing capacities of the imagination, we can begin to guard and curate that which we *behold* as well as that which we *create* - art, stories, poetry, and other forms of imagery that cultivate Gospel-centered virtues. Guite encourages us that “even in our ‘post-modern’ world, the old unity of vision, the ancient window of mystery, can be suddenly and beautifully re-opened.”²⁰ As we reintegrate reason and imagination, we can revive a sense of the transcendent which is essential for leading lives of worship.

But before we would create, we must behold. We must store up old narrative treasures and imagery saturated in moral beauty. In Lewis’s essay *On the Reading of Old Books*, he argued that “every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that

¹⁹ Guite, 1.

²⁰ Guite, 16.

means the old books.”²¹ Since our age is particularly liable to dualistic and reductionist ways of thinking, if we are to revive the “old unity of vision” and learn how to read the world as a *signed* reality that is full of meaning, then we must soak our imagination in the old books of an age whose imagination was fully alive. By immersing ourselves in the imaginative world of people who still dwelt within a holy cosmos, we can rehabilitate our imaginative faculties and sacramental ways of understanding, an essential step in the reintegration of our physical and spiritual lives. If we would nourish lives devoted to Christ, we must store up narrative treasures and poetic imagery that keeps the eyes of our heart awake to the sacramental realities of life.

In short, we must read old books; we must read Scripture and the work of those who knew it well. Our minds must learn to dance again with the rhythms of poetry and the twists of paradox and the flickering lights of ambiguity. Particularly, the poetry, allegories, fairy tales, and epics of the Medieval era provide us with an especially helpful imaginative foil to our modern world. The contemporary imagination struggles to shake off the specter of materialism which insists that mind, spirit, and God are just words that express the emergent results

²¹ C.S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 219.

of neuronal complexity. However, the Medieval world was “the realm of the marvelous, the colored lands, the islands of the blest; the realm where ‘stones have been known to move and trees to speak’, a realm of shape-shifters and sudden transformation, of doors and windows opening into other worlds ... where beneath the shimmer of French or Latin courtliness we feel the strength and sinew of heroes from a much more distant past.”²² The Medieval imagination is steeped in the enchanting light of the *Logos* and Gospel of Christ which orders all things wondrously well. This is a world of old books that will breath girth back into our chests, an imaginative world that will help us rediscover the sacramental realities that fuel the life of faithful Christian worship.

²² Guite, 33.

Bibliography

Reviving a Sacred Imagination by Annie Crawford

- Coyne, Jerry. "Why You Don't Really have Free Will." *USA Today*. January 1, 2012.
<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2012-01-01/free-will-science-religion/52317624/1>
- Guite, Malcolm. *Faith, Hope, and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Lewis, C.S. "Bluspels and Flansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). 265.
- . "On the Reading of Old Books." in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. ed. Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970.
- . *The Abolition of Man*. New York, HarperCollins, 2001.
- . *The Discarded Image*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2016.