

#19 Developmental levels

And now I'd like to talk about developmental levels. If you want to build a strong root system in a child's heart, the heart educators taught that a child must progress through three developmental learning stages, each one serving a specific purpose. To some extent, you can go back and pick up what was missed, but you can't rush the process going forward. Nor would you want to. As I go through this, you'll notice the layering process. Heart-based education is very much a line upon line, layer upon layer, here a little, there a little process which is very different from acquiring facts and information.

The first step is the Familiar Stage and in the learning process, you always need to find or create a familiar link to build upon. My kids tease me because I still use aol and Word Perfect. I know—I'm a dinosaur. They tell me there are much better options out there, but I resist them because aol and Word Perfect are familiar to me and it's human nature to resist that which is not familiar to us. Little children demand the same story be read to them over and over again because of its familiarity and babies cling to mama because she is familiar. A child will resist a subject that has no familiar connections. Attention, desire, interest and enjoyment all depend upon recognition of familiar qualities.

Let me illustrate . . . with a couple of stories, of course.

Last December, my daughter's family was learning about George Washington and she suggested a couple of biographies to her oldest—one was about George and the other one was about Martha. The books sat unread. Then I took my granddaughter up to Mt. Vernon. It was just before Christmas so there weren't many people there and we rocked in the rocking chairs on the veranda and watched the boats out on the Potomac and our hearts knew why Washington loved the place so much. Then our tour guide took us to the second floor to Washington's bedroom—we saw the very bed he died in. She told us that, after he died, Martha was so broken hearted, she closed the door to the bedroom, locked it and never went in again. Then the guide took us to the third floor where visitors usually aren't allowed to go and showed us the little bedroom Martha spent her last few years in. Outside her bedroom was a small round window—the day they buried her husband, the tour guide told us that she sat and looked out that very window because she couldn't bear to go down. As we looked out the window, we could see the vault where his body was originally laid and imagined the sorrowful scene. We did far more 'feeling' than 'talking'.

My daughter told me later, without any urging on her part, that after my granddaughter got home, she had both biographies read by the next night and commented that she wished she had read them before she went to Mt. Vernon, and she now wanted to go back.

This is the attraction of the familiar.

My little 2 year old grandson has been sick so he's been a bit cranky. A couple of nights ago, his daddy went to read him a bedtime story. "Do you want to hear the story of Mulan?" NO! "Do you want to hear the story of the Mouse and Cookies?" NO! Do you want to hear the story of the Little Mermaid? NO! Do you want to hear the story of the little boy who could only say No?

Huh? And he listened attentively while his daddy made up a story of a little boy who could only say no.

He had connected to the familiar of the moment.

Your wonderful and enjoyable job as a mom is to make as many unfamiliar things familiar to your children as you can because then you've given them many connecting links for learning to take place. You can familiarize things by naming them, telling stories about them and bringing your child in contact with them. The first five years of a child's life are primarily for familiarizing your child with the immediate world he lives in. A toddler becomes familiar with the world he lives in by touching, tasting, hearing, smelling and seeing and the more connections to the real world you give him, the stronger foundation for future learning you are laying. I've always found it interesting to watch how connected to true things children are. I can give a child a bright neon colored plastic toy to play with, and his attention lasts about 3 seconds. But if I put him next to mud or grass or water or sand, his attention is held for a very long time.

The first language you have to work with is music. Your lullabies to a newborn bring a sense of calm and comfort to his heart. Both the language of words and the language of music are acquired by exposure, so do play beautiful classical music in your home so it will become familiar to him. And sing songs.

There is also a music to spoken language. In the beginning, a child isn't listening for the meaning of words. He's listening to the music. One of the reasons preschoolers can effortlessly pick up several languages simultaneously is because he's not encumbered by verb conjugations and tenses; he's listening to the music of the language and mimicking it. The reason that reading aloud to your children is so important is because the music in your voice adds a layer of meaning that their hearts understand. For example, take the little two letter word 'oh'. It's not a difficult word to read. But listen as the music in my voice gives 4 different meanings to the word that only your heart can decipher: oh, oh, oh, oh. Much of the deepest meaning of great literature is found in the music of the words and so you want to familiarize your little ones with beautiful language. There are few books in the English language that does this as perfectly as the King James Version of the Bible. Scholars tell us this was written at the peak of the English language. It's full of poetry, imagery and story. Feel the difference between these two passages of scripture. The first one is from the King James Version:

“And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him. And, there came a voice from the heavens saying, “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Now listen to a modern version:

“As he was climbing up the bank again, the sun shone through a gap in the clouds. At the same time a pigeon flew down and perched on him. Jesus took this as a sign that God's spirit was with him. A voice from overhead was heard saying, “That's my boy! You're doing fine.”
Could you feel the difference?

When you read scriptural language to little children, they're understanding it at a different level than you. I have found little children are drawn to scriptural language. My personal opinion is they're hearing a familiar language carried with them that has not yet been completely forgotten. Its familiarity is a heavenly music. Much of the meaning of literature they'll read later will come from the music of the words. Familiarizing them with beautiful language lays the groundwork.

It's the music of words that make Mother Goose so delightful to children. The words are mostly nonsense. That's not what they're listening for. You may not think it, but by giving your one year old Mother Goose, you're preparing him to one day love Homer. And that's not as in Homer Simpson. It's the other Homer. And rhyme begins to bring order to your baby's brain.

As you continue up this developmental ladder and begin to introduce your little ones to art, poetry and story, you want to apply this familiar principle to the subjects you choose. What's more familiar to a little child than family and home, nature and animals? I think it's worth paying attention to the fact that the Old Testament opens with a story of a family in a garden and the New Testament begins with a story of a family in a stable surrounded by animals. Familiar and Family have the same root words. And you will want to make all things family familiar to your little ones in these first 5 years. I'll also mention here, there is a heart-based way to learn Science, too, and stories of Nature begin to grow the root system for that.

The next language is pictures or images. Why do toddlers love picture books? Because they speak to their hearts; it's a language their hearts understand. You can help them acquire a taste for beautiful fine art by exposing and familiarizing them with it when they are young and allowing it to speak to their hearts. I was sitting behind a little 2 year old girl on her daddy's lap at church and was watching her stare intently at a little book of fine art prints her mom had created for her. The pictures depicted Jesus' life and she had glued them on bright colored paper and put them in a little photo album that was just the right size for her little girl's hands. She stared at each picture for the longest time. I knew the pictures were speaking directly to her heart.

And I thought— you can do the same thing with fine art images of mommies and babies and kittens that are 'familiar' at this age. I picked up a little photo album for 97 cents at Walmart—it's just the right size for little hands. You can print out some fine art prints of mothers and babies and kittens and put them in a little picture book like that.

Learning by heart is a lot like eating cake. Estelle Hurlll, an art educator from 100 years ago, wrote, "If you are giving a child a piece of cake, it adds nothing to his enjoyment to tell him that it contains certain ingredients and was made by certain rules or that it will contribute to his nourishment. If it is good, he eats it and wants more."

I gave my daughter a little picture book about how all the farm yard animals go to sleep at night. She called me one night and said, "Thanks a lot for the book—Her little 18 month old had just made her read it to her 17 times in a row. She finally got her to go outside to play with her sisters and my daughter hid the book in the bottom of a big pile of books. As soon as her little girl came back in the house, she dug through the pile of books until she found it again, and made her mom read it again.

We were trying to figure out why the fixation and then it dawned on us—we had just spent a week in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in Amish country. Her little girl had been petting baby lambs and little ponies and watching the sunsets over barns and farms. We think this book recreated all those feelings that were still so fresh and familiar to her and she wanted to keep reliving them.

Again, the attraction of the familiar. Familiarity gives pleasure.

By age 3, children are ready for stories. Look for stories with that familiar family element— the story of a mama bear, papa bear and little baby bear; stories of how mommy birds and mommy squirrels take care of their babies; stories of when daddy was a little boy; simple stories of family life. Play time allows them to process what they're learning as they pretend being mommies and daddies and taking care of little babies.

When they pick up a crayon and start to draw circles and squiggly lines, don't be too quick to say, "Look what you can do! You can draw a letter A!" There is nothing in the letter 'a' that is familiar or appealing to a 3 year old. They want to draw sunshines and flower, kittens and mommies—all with smiley faces. Let them improve their manual dexterity by drawing pictures, not letters. Once the heart sees a use for letters, writing will happen easily. No need to rush it.

By age four, they're transitioning into the imaginative years and they love to hear stories of familiar things in imaginative ways—like Raggedy Ann, a doll who comes to life, or Peter Cottontail. And the more they listen to stories they love, stories that make them feel something, their little hearts send a message to their brains: Brain, mom doesn't have enough time to feed us as many stories as we want down here. I need you to learn how to read so I can get at more stories. And the brain gets to work. I have met many people who were raised in story rich environments who had no recollection of being taught how to read. It happened as naturally as acquiring speech. I've seen research that backs it up.

Now we enter the prime years for Imagination, starting at around age 5 when the heart longs to see familiar things from new angles. And the Imagination makes it possible by creating its own images of things the eyes have actually never seen. Don't rush or slight these years. This is the stuff upon which dreams are built, and as Laboulaye cautions: "Mothers who love your children: Do not set them too soon to the study of history; let them dream while they are young."

There are many reasons for cultivating imaginations. For instance, creativity is dependent upon imagination. Nothing in this world has ever been created that didn't first exist as an image in someone's mind. And Felix Adler wrote, "Much of the selfishness of the world is not due to actual hard heartedness but to a lack of imaginative power . . . the faculty of putting one's self in the place of others." Plus, a vivid imagination is crucial in the study of history, because it is impossible to reproduce history except through the imagination.

Fairy tales and simple stories from mythology are the perfect foods for feeding the imagination. As your children listen to fairy tales, they are not only expanding their capacity to create pictures and images in their minds, their young, impressionable hearts are processing right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice in a way that could never be taught directly. They're going to

need that as they start applying those lessons to the stories of history. As you tell them fairy tales and folk tales from around the world, you are also providing a layer of familiarity to names and cultures from other lands. A young child loves the music of names like Aphrodite, Prometheus and Eurydice. They're difficult words to read, but when the music of their names is familiar, they'll be like old friends. And there is one more important benefit of introducing these fairy tales and myths. These Imaginative stories can connect your child's heart to the hearts and spirit of the families of historic times because the stories flowed out of their hearts and were passed from generation to generation, from mother to child, down to your child.

As you start to share these stories, you'll want to help your children begin to pay attention to those things that strike their hearts and help them hold on to them. For little children, it can be as simple as this. After my daughter read *The Frog Prince* to her little girls, she said, "I liked that story. I want to remember it." So she sat down and drew this picture and she wrote the gem from the story-"A promise is a promise." Her little 6 year old said, "I want to do that." And her 4 year old said, "I want to do that." And her 10 year old said, "I want to do that." And they did.

But I'll talk about that more in the Notebooking section.

A six year old who is familiar with beautiful language and can create pictures in his head will love to have you read the wonderful children's classics aloud to him, like *Secret Garden*, *Treasure Island* and *Heidi*. A child listening comprehension at this age far exceeds his reading comprehension, so you can offer impressions to his heart that he couldn't yet get on his own. Even if he's a good reader, freeing him up to feel the music in your voice and create all the pictures in his heart without being bogged down in the mechanics of reading will make for long lasting impressions.

By age 7, you can start familiarizing your children with some of the great names of history by telling them stories of their childhoods, which provides the link of familiarity. They also like to hear stories of what it looked like to be a child living in a far away land. These stories begin to make impressions of different cultures that is preparatory work to the study of nations that lies ahead. And around this time, the heart says to the brain, Brain, I have stories in here that I want to remember. I need you to get working on and figure out all that writing and spelling stuff so that I can write them down. And the brain says, but I don't know how to do that. And the heart says, "Well, maybe you just better go ask mom." And the brain gets to work.

Around the age of 8, the child is now prepared and ready to enter the Heroic years. He has strong image-ing capabilities. He has the beginnings of discernment between right and wrong. He has lots of familiar connection points. He's at home with stories. And he now, quite naturally, wants to hear about real people. At no other time in life will heroes make a deeper impression on the heart than between the ages of 8 to around 11. He wants his first heroes to be action heroes which make introductory stories to the great epic and legendary heroes a perfect choice. They provide a bridge between the Imaginative Years and the Heroic years because they're partly grounded in fiction and partly in fact. These are the stories of King Arthur and Robin Hood, Roland and Siegfried, Beowulf and Hiawatha.

By age 9, children are interested in short, picturesque stories of the great men and women of history. This is the Plutarch approach to history which looks nothing like the school approach of facts and information. When Plutarch wrote his lives of great Greeks and Romans, he admitted that already the facts of their lives had been obscured. That didn't concern him and he covered himself by using a simple device, "So the story goes..." And he wrote, by 'lodging these men one after the other in my house . . . I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life. Through daily living and associating with them I perceive all their qualities and select all those that are noblest and worthiest." And his bible for heroes is one of the most influential books of all time. Help your children to now start doing the same thing– to lodge the great men and women of history one after another in their homes so they can see how to adjust and adorn their own lives. Nothing is more interesting to us than Life. Stories of people are what children's hearts are interested in. And while how we dress and what we eat may have changed throughout history, human nature has not. The ancient Greek has as much to teach your child's heart as the Knight in shining armor. Children care little for the dates and facts of history. Long ago is far more meaningful at this age than 600 BC. You can peak their interest in historical stories by looking for familiar elements. Does your child own a dog? Here's a good story:

Did you ever hear the story of Newton and his little dog, Diamond? One day, when Newton was fifty years old, and had been hard at work more than twenty years studying the theory of light, he went out of his room, leaving his little dog asleep before the fire. On the table lay a heap of papers, containing all the discoveries which Newton had made during those twenty years. When his master was gone, up rose little Diamond, jumped upon the table, and overthrew the lighted candle. The papers immediately caught fire.

Just as the destruction was completed, Newton opened the door, and saw that the labors of twenty years were reduced to a heap of ashes. There stood little Diamond, the author of all mischief. Almost any other man would have flown into a rage, some even hurting their little dog. But Newton patted him on the head with his usual kindness, although grief was in his heart.

"O Diamond, Diamond," said he, "thou little knowest the mischief thou hast done!"

This incident affected his health and spirits for some time afterwards, but from the way he treated his little dog, you may judge what was the sweetness of his personality.

If you can find an illustration, paste it on a page like I did for Isaac Newton. Or a child can illustrate it.

Historical fiction can increase familiarity with these men and women they're getting to know and familiarize the places and times in which they lived. As your children's reading skills improve, they'll do more independent reading to keep up with the desire to learn more.

By age 10 or 11, their hearts don't need to be fed as much with make believe and they want

history delivered more directly. The Landmark Series from the 50s and 60s is an example of a good read for that age and they'll continue to meet new people through biographies and stories.

You can use fine art to bring stories of history to life and deepen impressions, like this:

In the proud days when Rome ruled the world, and the emperor lived in a palace of white marble, or in a house of pure gold, the Colosseum was the greatest theater ever known to be set up on the earth.

There to this day it stands, shattered and broken, but still, perhaps, the most impressive ruin in all the world. In its dark and shameful days, the great white Colosseum, rising story after story from the ground, with great galleries inside to hold forty thousand people, was a wondrous sight to see. Here came the gladiators, strong men trained to fight each other until one of them was killed. Here the Christians were thrown alive to the lions to make a Roman holiday. No place in the world has seen more cruel sights than this.

But slowly Christianity made its way, until the very emperor became a Christian. Then these shameful things ceased, and the Colosseum became only a circus. The Christians had been growing stronger and stronger for four hundred years, when there came a terrible day for Rome. Alaric, leader of the Goths came thundering outside Rome but a brave general set the Goths to flight.

Such rejoicing there was in Rome that day that the people flocked to the Colosseum, cheering their brave general. There was a wonderful performance, when suddenly came out of one of the narrow passages leading into the arena, a gladiator, with spears and swords. The rejoicing of the people knew no bounds.

Then happened a strange thing. Into the middle of the arena came an old man, bareheaded and barefooted, calling upon the people to prevent the shedding of blood. The crowd shrieked back at him to stop his preaching and to go away. The gladiators came forward and forced him aside, but still the old man came between them. A storm of stones fell upon him from the angry people. The gladiator struck him down, and the old man perished before the eyes of Rome.

He was a hermit, named Telemachus, one of those holy men who, tired of the wickedness of the world, had gone to live in the hills. Coming to Rome to visit the sacred shrines, he had seen the people flocking to the Colosseum, and, pitying them for their cruelty, had gone to stop it or to die.

He died, but his work was done. All that was best in Rome was stirred by the sight of the hermit slain in the midst of the arena, and there was no more slaughter in the great theater. It was the last fight at the Colosseum.

I found a picture of this by googling it and I glued it on a page with Telemachus written on the top

along with when he lived in the right hand corner. When I look at these pictures, my heart starts carrying on a conversation within itself like this: Can you imagine a people who are entertained by watching others being tortured and murdered? Well, take a look at the kind of movies people are flocking to these days. But what can I do about it? What can one person do? My heart asks. And then it reminds me of Telemachus... One man of virtue making a stand. And then my heart stops talking and leaves me to ponder.

By age 12 or 13, a student is ready to start putting pieces together. Find introductory stories of France, of Greece, of Germany, one nation at a time, so that his heart can begin to get a sense of the sweep of history and can begin to pick up patterns because the heart is always looking for patterns. He'll also be able to start fitting familiar names into their proper place in history. A student who has no understanding of the history of nations will be clueless as to what's going on in the world. It's like walking into the movie two hours late where you have no idea what's going on because you missed out on everything that happened before. As our world shrinks, our children need to be very aware of the underlying causes of world conflicts.

By age 14, the student's heart may have found topics that it wants to understand at a deeper level and he may choose to study a thread of art or music, architecture, religion or science through those nations.

By age 15, because he's comfortable with words and imagery and has a rich cultural background, he will gain much from the great works of classic literature like *Les Miserables* and *Tale of Two Cities* that will further deepen his understanding of historical events and from which he will continue to underline and extract gems of wisdom for his literature notebook.

By age 16, his heart hungry for deeper understanding, may tackle books like Durant's *Story of Civilization* or other works of history. There are so many gaps to fill. He'll continue to read Dickens, Tolstoy, Austen and is well prepared to enter the ongoing conversation of the world's greats. This is not the end of his learning. This is only the beginning.

John Senior who wrote *The End of Christian Culture*, said, "In order to read the 'great' books of Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine and St. Thomas, we need to replenish the cultural soil that has been depleted and create a place where those works can thrive by cultivating an imaginative ground saturated with fable, fairy tale, stories, rhymes, and adventure—the thousand books of Grimm, Andersen, Stevenson, Dickens, Scott, Dumas and the rest. . .

This you will have done.

The one thing a great books education will not do is create a moral imagination where there is none."

And now maybe your child has gone off to college and he's away from home for the first time.

And he's homesick. His heart reminds him of a story he heard in childhood told by an Ancient Greek—Homer— a story of the longing for home. And now, because he's very comfortable in the music of poetry and imagery, his heart wants to feel the story at a deeper level and pulls it out in its poetic form. And, when he's done, maybe his heart will say, Ah. I really love that. But, Brain, we want to feel it on a deeper level. We need you to learn us some Greek. And the brain, ever the obedient servant, says, I'll get right on it. It's amazing how quickly and efficiently the brain learns hard things when the heart is in the driver's seat and how slow and painful and inefficient the process is when the heart is nowhere to be found.

As I have lodged the great men and women one at a time in my home, this progression of learning- the familiar to the imaginative to the heroic— is the pattern of learning I see in their lives. I see childhoods rich in story and experience, vivid imaginations and hearts that are always hungry to go deeper as they apply what they are learning to their own lives. As I have gone back, even with my older brain, and replenished the cultural soil of my own heart by reading more fairy tales, reciting more poetry aloud, listening to more classical music, looking at beautiful works of art and picking up works of great literature, especially the children's classics, my life has been enriched tremendously. When I see a sunset, I am sitting on the hillside beside the great French painter, Millet, and I hear his father whisper in my ear, too, "Son, that is God." When I see the daffodils, Wordsworth reminds me I can carry their beauty in my heart always. And my capacity for joy grows larger every day.

As to the formal study of history, I remember reading a well respected historical scholar's opinion that a student isn't ready for a true study of history until he's 26. I just finished an article where a neuroscientist explained how a brain isn't fully developed until around age 24. Why do teenagers do stupid things? He said it's because the brain is not yet connected to where he can clearly see the consequences of his own actions. Yet, we expect that same teenager to analyze political and economic policies and their effects on historical events? The best he can do is parrot back what he hears. He is not yet ready to make such judgments. There are better ways to use his time.

We often make the study of history so dry and distasteful, that our children put aside their history books long before the age of 26 when they can actually begin a true study of history, which has enough interesting topics to fill a lifetime. As Marguerite Dickson wrote a hundred years ago, "A taste for historical reading is, after all, the valuable gift we can bestow upon our youthful student of history. Having given him that, we may safely leave the rest to him."

I also often hear moms and educators say that they will only give their students original source documents because they want to be sure they only have the facts. I believe that is a flawed approach. How is it that two highly trained scholars can read the identical source document of Christopher Columbus, and one will conclude Columbus is one of the most despicable men on the planet, and the other will conclude he is one of the bravest and noblest? The answer is, we all filter what we read through our own hearts and only a well-seasoned and mature heart can make proper judgments of history. That only comes with age and experience.

This developmental chart will help you further zero in on choices of what to read with your children. If you have a six year old, look for fairy tales. If you have a three year old, look for stories from nature or homes. If you haven't followed these levels, you haven't ruined your child! I'm creating new neural pathways every single day. Just look for familiar things to connect to, don't neglect imaginative readings and start feeding a desire to read more about great lives and history by offering short, high interest stories in the beginning that have a connection to something in your child's world.

This is a general guideline. Don't try and make a curriculum out of it. Take in the whole picture of what it is trying to teach you.