

7 Romancing the Heart and Building the Kingdom Within

One of my little granddaughters, almost from the time she first learned to talk, always included this request in her every prayer: Please bless us that we will all have good imaginations. My daughter and I had no idea where that came from, but it lasted for several years. Given what I now know about the importance of the Imagination, all I can say is, “Out of the mouth of babes...” What a different world we would have if we all had good imaginations.

I had an old book randomly appear when I was searching for something else one day. It was written in 1885 by a Dr. Curry and it was called *Imagination and Dramatic Instinct: Some Practical Steps for Their Development*. I want to read to you several sections from this book to share some of his insights. It's pretty heavy thinking so stay with me. He opens with a quote from Professor Charles Eliot Norton: “In the curriculums of most of our ... institutions of learning...no place is given to that instruction which has for its end the cultivation of the imagination and the sentiments, through the refining of the perceptions and the quickening of the love of beauty.” He continued, “Education, say some of our legislators, must give a means of making a living; our public schools must train up practical citizens; boys and girls must be educated in the practical arts of life; the ornamental has no place in the school-room.”

But— he says, they utterly fail to grasp the nature of the imagination and its relation to daily life. And I love his definition of imagination: It's the ‘thinking of the heart’.

The ‘thinking of the heart’ is what Mr. Rogers taught: I want to be more concerned with a sense of wonder than with information. I want to place a higher value on those things that are not seen than those things that are seen. He taught that everything that really matters isn't found in the words on a page—they're found in the white spaces between the words; the white spaces between the lines. They are the ah-hah moments when the light goes on and we get flashes of pure inspiration.

This is the realm of the imagination. The heart with no imagination is a hard heart.

And then Dr. Curry goes on to list its benefits:

Work without imagination is drudgery, but with its humblest employment is lifted into the realm of beauty and art.

The imagination is the source of all inspiration and interest in life.

Imagination gives charm to the humblest home.

A neglected imagination is one of the leading causes of the degradation of character, while its right use is one of the highest characteristics of the human being.

It is vital for creativity. It gives man taste and refinement.

Without imagination, we cannot comprehend universal principles. We cannot comprehend all that Nature has to teach us.

Imagination not only creates all art, but it appreciates art. Without its presence there can be no genuine love of art; without it, the language of art is unintelligible, its voice unheard, its spirit unfelt.

Imagination makes the individual an heir to all the ages; By its power, we can become a Greek, and see as the Greeks saw, and feel as the Greeks felt.

The faculty which gives birth to ideals is imagination. Without it, there can be little improvement in the ideals of a man or a nation. And no age, no nation, no individual can be elevated except by elevating its ideals.

It is the part of the soul that gives hope because it enables us to see a new and better world in the midst of the old, a new life in the midst of death, a new character in the midst of degradation. Without imagination, there is no hope. Where there is no vision, the people perish.

Imagination enables us to enter into sympathy with our fellow-man. By its power alone can we appreciate the point of view of those different from ourselves. Without imagination, each of us would be alone; each of us would be cold and selfish.

Imagination gives us the power to penetrate to the heart of Nature; it is the faculty which sees beauty and loveliness;

Imagination alone enables man to realize eternity. The ordinary conceptions of the mind cannot embrace infinity, or God. Imagination alone enables men to transcend time and space, to see the eternal through the temporal, the spiritual beneath the physical, the soul underlying all.

This makes me think of the Beatitude: Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God, I believe not only in a life to come, but they will see Him everywhere now-- in nature, in art and music, literature and poetry, and in lives of men and women and the histories of nations. The hard heart-- the heart without imagination-- cannot see Him anywhere.

The imagination is the fountain-head of all noble feeling, and upon its discipline depends any true education of the emotions. It is needed to prevent isolation of ideas, and the hardening of truths into mere facts. It is needed to place ideas and facts in sympathetic relationship with one another; to give the spirit and not the letter, truth and not mere fact, the soul and not the mere body.

It sees truth from the heart, and not by the external. It creates, as Nature does, from the centre outward, [from within, out] Imagination does not perceive fragments; it sees the whole at once. It is always characterized by simplicity, by unity and truth. It is the soul of all inspiration. Imagination vitalizes all knowledge... and enables the soul to feel the life of the universe

permeating every object.

Let me just interject here— If you have a difficult time comprehending and capturing the vision of educating the heart, I wouldn't be too hard on yourself. Most of us grew up in a mind-based system that never developed the imagination or the thinking of the heart. But as you engage in the languages of the heart that you will learn more about, you will find new neural pathways opening up and your vision will enlarge and expand as you go along.

Dr. Curry goes on to explain that the dramatic instinct is closely tied with the imagination; drama in the sense that it is about acting; acting upon the impulses of the imagination. The little child who is imaginative always shows it by dramatic actions in his play. The man who has killed his dramatic instinct has become unsympathetic, and can never appreciate any one's point of view but his own. The dramatic instinct trains us to a deep insight into the motives of man.

Together, they redeem the mind from narrowness and selfishness; they enable the individual to appreciate the point of view, the feelings, motives and characters of his fellow-men; they open his eyes to read the various languages of human art; they enable him to commune on a higher plane and lift him into communion with the art and spirit of every age and nation.

Where the imagination is inactive, all expression is mechanical and cold. A lack of sympathy is a lack of imagination.

Can you begin to see why that simple prayer: Bless us all that we will have good imaginations would change the world?

And then he goes on to teach how to train and develop the imagination. And the answer is simple as all Truth is. Basically, it's to do the opposite of what we are doing in the education of our children right now. Our focus on academics in childhood—the mechanics of learning—is hardening the hearts and killing the imagination of our children. The act of decoding a word does not make a child a reader. The act of constructing a sentence does not make a child a writer. Only an active imagination can do that. But where do we place our attention?

Dr Curry taught the method of studying and training these powers that he recommends is essentially the same as that adopted in the schools of the early Greeks—the Greeks of the Golden age—whose development of the artistic nature is universally considered to have been the highest ever known.

He says the best method of developing the imagination is by the study of Nature and poetic expression. So sending your kids out to play in nature and the rhymes you share is one of the best things you can do in childhood! He continues: A sympathetic love of the beautiful in Nature is characteristic of noble imagination. The influence of Nature in the education of the human mind cannot be over-estimated. Wordsworth has taught us to realize the power of Nature to stimulate and unfold the energies of the soul. All art proceeds from wonder.

Nature alone, however, is inadequate to secure the full power of imagination. Thousands have

grown up in the midst of the greatest beauty of Nature with low and sensuous ideals, and without having their sense of beauty awakened. Art is therefore needed to awaken us to her gifts. That is the role of art- to awaken feeling within us.

What form of art should be studied? Every form as far as possible; for each art is a distinct language, which expresses some aspect of the human soul and reveals some truth which can be apprehended in no other way. Music, poetry, paintings—all are needed.

Every great art is a special language of the human spirit, and he who desires to awaken his artistic nature will learn to read all these languages. Let me read that again. Every great art is a special language of the human spirit, and he who desires to awaken his artistic nature will learn to read all these languages. That is the course of study of the Mother's University—to learn to read all these languages.

At the present time, a majority of the studies in all grades of schools concern themselves chiefly with the acquisition of knowledge.

[That hasn't changed, has it?]

The too exclusive study of science is slowly leading to the realization of the inadequacy of facts to develop the whole man harmoniously and completely.

There it is again--Mind is only half of what is needed!

Charles Darwin has said, "Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds—such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley—gave me great pleasure; and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry; I have tried to lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost my taste for pictures or music. ... My mind seems to have become a machine for grinding out general laws out of large collections of facts; ... If I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once a week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature."

That which we don't use, atrophies from dis-use. By neglecting the Arts in the educating of our children, we are hardening their hearts. And what little attention we give the Arts is through mechanical and scientific means—analyzing its parts. Art can only be studied as art and by means of art. Which is a lot of what you will be learning as you go through the writings in the Mother's University.

I know I've spent a lot of time reading Dr. Curry's words, but I think they are powerful. But now let me turn your attention to the most important part of what he suggests in the education of the

imagination. Hold on—don't leave me.

Here is what he said: "The most adequate method of ...developing the imagination and artistic nature is by means of the spoken word—the simplest and most natural form of Art. It was the attention given by the Greeks to the spoken word that caused them to be the most artistic of peoples. By far the most of the work of their schools was the study and recitation of the works of their poets. While they may have slighted the written word, and exaggerated too much the importance of speech, we in our day have gone to the other extreme, and are exaggerating the importance of writing as an agent of education, to the exclusion of the earlier and more simple and natural method of the human voice.

The voice is the little child's first conscious agent of expression; it is man's chief means of communication; it is the fullest of the life and energy of the human soul; it is the simplest and most natural agent of the faculties of the mind. Some may consider the Greeks to have been the greatest masters of writing in the world, and this is true; but their writing was great because it was founded upon and developed by their speech.

The voice connects thought and emotion. The action of the mind in writing is not the same as that in reading and speaking. Vocal expression is the direct result of the free, spontaneous impulses of mind and heart.

So let me leave Dr. Curry for a minute and share what I see. From the moment a child can hold a pencil, we are intent on making him write and to read words on a page. But developmentally, is that the best place to start? He can express himself far more naturally in speech. If we allow and encourage the vocal expression of story and poetry and thought and conversation, written language will flow quite naturally in its proper time and place. .

The child who hears the music in the voice of the mother reading aloud to him will have much greater comprehension when he begins to read. I think it's interesting that Abraham Lincoln had the habit of reading great literature aloud, even to himself. It was that connection to emotion through the voice.

So let me pull together these lessons for educating hearts.

If we want to build strong imaginations, we must learn the languages of all the Arts—Music, Pictures, Poetry and Story. That is the focus of the next section—to begin to paint a picture of what that looks like. Childhood is the best time to do that because their hearts are open and impressionable and not yet cluttered with all the activities of the mind.

And always look to the voice as the greatest teacher of all. Pay attention to the music in your voice as you read to your children and teach them. Allow them ample opportunity to use their voices in expression, in recitation of poetry, in expressing thoughts and ideas in conversation. Encourage them to read aloud. Engage in dramatic experiences like the plays you'll find in the Enrichment section. The more you focus on writing skills in childhood, the more you will shut

down this gateway to the heart and to the imagination.

I thought it was strange when I kept coming across titles in the older children's books like Romance of the Civil War or Revolutionary War or Romance of Scotland. Was it all about the love affairs going on because that's what I think of when I hear the word romance. The modern definition is all about courting and wooing and the relationship between two people who love each other. But when I checked Webster's 1828 dictionary, I found it had to do with interesting the sensibilities of the heart, or the passion of wonder and curiosity.

With that definition, isn't that what we are trying to do -either within our own hearts, but especially in the hearts of our children--to interest the feelings of the heart and awaken the passion of wonder and curiosity? Your job as a mother is to romance their hearts. I like that. And I tell you what--if my husband had introduced himself and immediately invited me over to do his laundry and scrub his toilet, the relationship would not have gone very far. It was the flowers and the chocolate and the sweet nothings whispered in my ear that romanced my heart and has kept him my best friend for nearly 44 years now.

The Arts are what make it possible for you to Romance your children's hearts. Sometimes I hear a mom say that she feels like she is neglecting her children's education because all they are doing is reading aloud lots of stories and her kids just want to engage in imaginative play all day or go outside and play in nature. Well, guess what. That's exactly what they should be doing if you want to tend to their imaginations. You have been called to be an artist, not a technician.

Remember the story of Sleeping Beauty? In the story, Beauty had gone to sleep, and when she fell asleep, the entire kingdom became lifeless and colorless. Soon noxious briars and thorns and tangled vines grew around the sleeping kingdom. Prince Philip valiantly drew his sword of truth and protected himself with his shield of righteousness to make his way through the tangled mess and fight the evil Malificent. But that isn't what brought the kingdom back to life--the thing that brought the kingdom back to life was his love of Beauty. When Beauty received true love's first kiss, Beauty awoke and the kingdom gloriously sprang to life.

We're romancing hearts to awaken beauty.

Louisa May Alcott wrote a little poem that begins: I have a little kingdom where thoughts and feelings dwell.

It is to that little kingdom within the hearts of your children--and your own heart-- that you want to tend and cultivate. And here are the decorating tips: Fill the air with worthy music. Line the walls with masterpieces of fine art. Furnish the rooms with poetry. Invite great souls to dine with you and listen to their stories. And beautify the grounds with fields of flowers and canopies of trees.

For as Luke said, "A good man ... or a good woman...out of the good treasures of his or her heart bringeth forth that which is good."

Bless us all to have good imaginations.