



The 2005 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

With Imagination and Love: Leadership in Youth Ministry

Introduction

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

The theme for the 2005 lectures is “With Energy, Intelligence, Imagination, and Love: Leadership in Youth Ministry.” The final question asked of elders and ministers at their ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is “Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?” It is a question that would well be asked of any persons called to work in youth ministry, be they volunteer leaders, parents, pastors, or youth directors. Ministry with young people certainly requires energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Energy for all night lock-ins, keeping up with middle school youth, and dealing with conflict; intelligence for theological reflection, education, and addressing complex issues raised by ministry; imagination for envisioning a future and helping young people to discern God’s call in their lives; and plenty of love to enfold youth and their families in God’s care. These four qualities are the marks of faithful leadership. The 2005 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture explore these qualities and offer Christian perspectives on leadership for youth ministry. What is the proper response to the question “Will you seek to serve the young people in your community with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” I will, with God’s help.

May these lectures feed your mind and renew your passion for ministry.

Amy Scott Vaughn
Director of Leadership Development
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2005 Lectures

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Indoor Exploration: Reading as a Spiritual Practice for Children and Youth • *Stephanie Paulsell*

I come to questions of religious education through the work on Christian practices that has been gaining strength over the last decade or so. As you know, this renewed emphasis on practice has focused less on Christian faith as a set of propositions to which one might or might not give one's assent and more on Christian faith as a way of life made up of practices that can be passed from hand to hand, practices with the potential to both form and deform, practices that have long histories and require our narration, interpretation, and critique in every age. As many of you have demonstrated in the thousand creative ways you have taken up this approach in your work, Christian practices throw open countless doors and windows through which youth might encounter Christian faith for the first time or to live more deeply into it. Trying out a practice allows all of us—youth and adults alike—to take the one small step that makes the next step possible. In *Miriam's Kitchen*, Elizabeth Ehrlich writes about her experience of learning to keep kosher: "I took my little step, and eventually the world quivered."¹

Isn't this what we all hope for in our work with youth? That when we invite them through the doorway of a single practice—hospitality, forgiveness, friendship—they will find the whole world quivering with the presence of God? So certainly the more practices we have to offer our children and youth the better. A Jewish student of mine once described for me how her preschool teacher invited her and her classmates into the practice of reading Hebrew: she smeared honey on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and invited her students to lick it off. Imagine being invited into one of the most intellectual practices

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of your faith as a very young child and finding it delicious. Think of all the difference that might make.

In this lecture, I want to invite you to consider a practice that I think has been neglected in the work on Christian practices. In our zeal to invite youth into the *social* practices of our faith—the things Christian people do with and for one another in response to deeply human concerns—we’ve tended to neglect practices that don’t immediately look social on the face of it. Reading is a practice that many of our youth are already engaged in—through choice, because they love to read, or simply through the demands of their schooling. But even though reading has a long history in Christianity as a practice that can make us more vulnerable to God and to one another, I don’t know many youth who think of the pleasures and challenges of reading as connected to church or their religious lives. Not many know it in the way that the young woman I described a moment ago understands the practice of reading Hebrew as deeply enmeshed in her life with God. And that seems a shame to me, because the capacity for attention and interiority that the practice of reading can cultivate is the same capacity for attention and interiority we need to be fully present to ourselves, to others, to the world, and to God.

I have planned these lectures around C. S. Lewis’s Narnia Chronicles and Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials series, books that many of our youth are reading, especially the Pullman series. I’ve been teaching the Lewis and the Pullman series together in a class on children’s literature and religious education. Because Pullman intended his books as a critique of the theology and the notions of childhood and sexuality he believes ground the Narnia series—indeed, he has called the Narnia books “an invaluable guide to what is wrong and cruel and selfish”²—reading them together makes for rich, and challenging, conversation. In my classroom, we are mainline and evangelical, Roman Catholic and Jewish, Unitarian-Universalist, Buddhist, and atheist. Many of us—no matter our religious background—read (and loved) Narnia as a child, so the arguments in Pullman’s critique of that beloved world can be fierce. And the question of whether or not religious educators, particularly Christian ones, should share the Pullman books with young people in their care can turn into quite a discussion. I’ll summarize the story of the Pullman series in my second lecture; for now, maybe it will be enough to say that Pullman at one point described his trilogy as “Paradise Lost for teenagers.” (Pullman has been accused of many things but lack of ambition isn’t one of them.)

In this lecture, I want to talk about the practice of reading as a practice of the Christian life we should be offering our youth, along with friendship and hospitality, honoring the body and testimony. In my second lecture, I'll engage more directly the content of the two sets of books and the arguments between them, in particular Pullman's critique of what he understands to be Lewis's theological perspective on embodiment and sexuality. Now, I want to highlight a preoccupation that Lewis and Pullman share—the development of the inner lives of children and youth.

In *The Magician's Nephew*, C. S. Lewis tells the story of the creation of Narnia, a world sung into being by the great lion, Aslan, and the first two children from our world, who cross over into it. Just as in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the most popular and widely read of all the Narnia books, the children—Polly and Digory—discover a way between the worlds on a day when the weather prevents them from playing outside.

Their adventures began chiefly because it was one of the wettest and coldest summers there had been for years. That drove them to do indoor things; you might say, indoor exploration. It is wonderful how much exploring you can do with a stump of candle in a big house, or in a row of houses. Polly had discovered long ago that if you opened a certain little door in the box-room attic of her house you would find the cistern and a dark place behind it which you could get into by a little careful climbing.... Polly had used the bit of the tunnel just beside the cistern as a smugglers' cave. She had brought up bits of old packing cases and the seats of broken kitchen chairs, and things of that sort, and spread them across from rafter to rafter so as to make a bit of floor. Here she kept a cash-box containing various treasures, and a story she was writing and usually a few apples. She had often drunk a quiet bottle of ginger-beer in there: the old bottles made it look more like a smugglers' cave.³

Images of “indoor exploration” appear throughout every book in Lewis's series, scenes of young people developing and learning to sustain their inner lives. Lewis tries to draw on children's everyday embodied experience of the world to point to moments of interiority that children might recognize: a smugglers' cave in the attic, the quietness that comes after you've cried and cried and can't cry anymore,⁴ or “that deep shiver of gladness [as Lewis puts it]

which you only get if you are being solemn and still.”⁵ Lewis’s scenes of indoor exploration also describe the ways in which children’s inner lives connect them more deeply to the world around them, as when he describes Polly growing more and more attuned to Aslan’s song of creation. Lewis shows Polly’s growing interest in the music keeping her focused even in the midst of the frenetic distractions of the witch and the banally evil Uncle Andrew. By gathering her attention, Polly learns to feel the connection between the changing timbre of Aslan’s voice and the creation unfurling in splendid variety.

Pullman also fills his books with images of the cultivation of interiority, but more didactically than Lewis. Pullman’s descriptions of the disciplines of the inner life are so carefully drawn, they offer something close to instruction in the meditative practices that construct the self. My students delight in pointing out that these practices seem, in spite of Pullman’s avowed atheism, very much like practices of prayer.

Consider this description of the main character, Lyra Silvertongue, learning to read the alethiometer, a truth-telling instrument inscribed with images that represent thousands and thousands of meanings. The alethiometer is set with clock-hands that swing this way and that, touching lightly on image after image, gathering meaning as they go.

...she tried to focus her mind on three symbols taken at random [Pullman writes], and clicked the hands round to point at them, and found that if she held the alethiometer just so in her palms and gazed at it in a particular lazy way, as she thought of it, the long needle would begin to move more purposefully. Instead of its wayward divagations around the dial it swung smoothly from one picture to another. Sometimes it would pause at three, sometimes two, sometimes five or more, and although she understood nothing of it, she gained a deep calm enjoyment from it, unlike anything she’d ever known...and once or twice [she caught] a glimpse of meaning that felt as if a shaft of sunlight had struck through clouds to light up a majestic line of great hills in the distance—something far beyond, and never suspected.⁶

The one who reads the alethiometer has to be able to compose her mind and relax into a state of profound concentration that allows her to hold several levels of meaning in her mind at once, without anxiety. Pullman quotes

the poet John Keats as his source for describing this kind of attention: one must be “capable,” wrote Keats, “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”⁷ It reminds me also of the philosopher Simone Weil, who once wrote of her desire to make her mind a still pond in which various ideas, theories, literatures, and languages drop, while she waits to see what will float back up to the surface, what will persist and nourish.

Pullman has many more descriptions of the disciplines of the inner life that open deeper and deeper paths into the mysteries of existence and light up the multiple relations between one’s own singular life and the life of the world. Another young character, Will Parry, becomes the bearer of a knife that can slice its way between worlds (in Pullman’s universe, there are millions of worlds, lying flat against each other). The knife will cut only when Will allows his consciousness to flow down to the tip of the blade, in much the same way that Lyrá’s mind lowers itself down along the chain of multiple meanings inscribed in the images of the alethiometer until the meaning she seeks comes into focus. With his “consciousness nestled among the atoms [of the knife]...Will [can feel] every tiny snag and ripple in the air.”⁸

What my students and I and countless other readers of these books are drawn to, of course, is the notion of other worlds, hidden, yet as close as our breath. But rereading Narnia and reading Pullman for the first time, I find that the interior worlds of the young characters are as mysterious and compelling as the wood between the worlds or Lyrá’s Oxford. Lewis once wrote that “[in order] to construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, [the world] of the spirit.”⁹

I think if I had encountered Pullman’s book as a youth, this is what I would have loved, this indoor exploration of the hidden world of the spirit. I would have been deeply drawn to stories of young people going inside themselves, settling into a concentrated attention that allowed them to live with many meanings at once, waiting for something true to unfold. I would have been attracted to the notion of a capacity for attention that is stronger than the boundaries between worlds. I remember that’s what I loved about *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as a child. And looking back, I see that it is what I was pursuing as I swung higher and higher in my backyard swing chanting Nar-ni-a, Nar-ni-a, thinking if I could only go deep enough into my trance, I’d finally break through.

There is so much in our culture that works against indoor exploration, the slow cultivation of interior life that Lewis and Pullman, for all their differences, so clearly prize. And so the young person holding one of Lewis or Pullman's books between her palms like Lyra with her alethiometer is fortunate indeed. She is being invited into an indoor exploration—not only by reading *about* it but by the practice of reading itself. But what if she is too distracted or too tired to hear this invitation? What if her day is so relentlessly scheduled that she doesn't have long dreamy hours in which to lower herself hand over hand down the chain of meanings that make up the story? What if her experience of time is so fragmented that she doesn't have the patience for the slow accumulation of resonances that might build to a revelation? Slip in a DVD, and, instantly, a story flashes up before our eyes. We are shown what the landscape looks like and what the characters are wearing. The soundtrack urges us to feel what the director wants us to feel, and the camera focuses our gaze where the director wants it focused. Entering a book is a more complex task. It takes imagination, and it takes time—like worship, like prayer, like friendship, like love.

Can the church help our young reader? Can her youth group, her pastor, or her Sunday school teacher open a space in which she can be held as she makes her first foray into the indoor exploration a book offers? After all, one critic has argued that churches and therapists' offices are two of the only remaining places in our culture that protect and cherish experiences of resonance, duration, and interiority. And, truly, where else can we go in our culture to sit together in silence, or to tell strange and ancient stories over and over again, polishing them in the pebbly river of worship and service, of singing and study, of shared meals and shared prayers until they shine? Church should be a place where youth are invited into the practice of reading over and over again.

But is it? In his lecture at this forum two years ago, Robert Dykstra spoke about the tendency of youth ministry to herd young people into groups and, in so doing, to diminish the capacity for solitude that might make one available to God's call. He talked about the adult fears driving this emphasis on belonging to the group: the fear that if large groups of youth aren't gathering, we're not being effective in our ministry. He discussed the fear of kids on the margins, the ones who don't fit in. Dykstra asks provocatively, "what if the church could strengthen its attraction for those singular young people...with the capacity to be alone, those who can sustain solitude, those who have

learned to lose themselves in a generous kind of negligence, those who actually seem to have a shot at becoming a self before God? What if we were to concentrate our efforts as youth ministers on them?”¹⁰

Making church a place where the practice of reading is celebrated and nourished is one way for the church, in Dykstra’s nice phrase, “to strengthen its attraction” to the kids he likens to young Samuel being called by God in the night, or the child Jesus in the temple. I’ve got a kid like that in my Sunday school class this year, a tall fourth-grader with a skinny braid down his back who told me a few weeks ago that books are the “light of his life.” In order to lift up reading as one of the practices into which we invite our youth, however, we will, as Dykstra says, have to get over some fears.

One of the most difficult to overcome, I think, is what the historian of reading, Alberto Manguel, has called “the fear that opposes reading to active life.”¹¹ It’s a fear with a long history, going back at least to Socrates, whose mistrust of reading (and writing) is captured in the story he tells of a king’s refusal of the gift of writing. If we know we can find information in a book, the king worries, we will not bother to inscribe it on our hearts. Books offer a mere semblance of wisdom, convincing us we are wise when we are not. Books allow readers to read without a teacher’s instruction; they can fall into anyone’s hands; they are dangerously democratic. And worst of all, books offer only a ghost of “living animate discourse.” Books can’t respond to the reader; books can’t defend themselves against incorrect interpretations. Writing, the king fears, will undermine the art of living conversation, grounded in relationship, in the unscripted exchange of ideas between particular persons in a particular context. Reading a book, he worries, is something quite different from active life.¹²

If you’re a seminary student, or ever have been one, you know another version of this fear, the fear that you are reading while Rome burns. As a student said to me a few days after the attacks of September 11, “Well, I’m going home to read now, as if *reading’s* going to do any good.” One of my own most vivid memories of graduate school is of sitting in a yellow chair, reading for my qualifying exams, while my sister lived as a human rights worker in El Salvador. One of the texts I read was a sermon by the thirteenth-century theologian Meister Eckhart about Mary and Martha, the two sisters who love Jesus but who receive him in different ways. Eckhart had an interesting take on the story, different from anything I’d ever read. He explains that when Jesus says Martha’s name twice—“Martha, Martha you are worried about

many things”—he is showing his approval of her hard work in the kitchen. Martha is not complaining, Eckhart insists, when she asks Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her in the kitchen. Rather, she is worried about Mary, worried that her sister will be content to sit at Jesus’ feet, bathed in pleasant feeling, and never enter into the soul-making work of active service. Mary needs to get up and learn life, says Eckhart. It is only by getting up and joining Martha, Eckhart believes, that the saints become the saints.¹³ And even though reading had been a way into deeper relationship with God and the world my whole life long, I sat in my yellow chair with Eckhart’s sermon between my palms and shuddered with shame that I was sitting in a chair with a book in my hands while my sister did the real work of the world. The fear that opposes reading to active life is a strong and persistent fear.

Now, of course, Eckhart is right: we are called to join Martha in active service. But if we portray the practice of reading to youth as Mary’s choice over Martha’s, or as the embrace of pleasure over self-sacrifice, escape over engagement, we will do our youth a terrible disservice. Certainly, reading can be used to anesthetize us to the pain of the world. But it can also, as I have learned from my sister, lead us into service. It is the tyrants, after all, who urge us to put down our books, by censoring them, by putting them on lists, by removing them from school libraries, by tossing them into piles and burning them.

Youth who are immersed in the practice of reading know how subversive a practice it is, of course. The critic Sven Birkerts remembers how, as a teenager, reading so intensified his experience of the world that he knew; as he put it, reading “was in some way a betrayal of the dominant order of things, an excitement slightly suspect at its core.”¹⁴

Annie Dillard concurs. “It was clear,” she writes of her own childhood as a reader, “that adults, including our parents, approved of children who read books, but it was not at all clear why this was so. Our reading was subversive, and we knew it. Did they think we read to improve our vocabularies? Did they want us to read and not pay the least bit of heed to what we read, as they wanted us to go to Sunday school and ignore what we heard?...Those of us who read carried around with us like martyrs a secret knowledge, a secret joy, and a secret hope: There is a life worth living where history is still taking place; there are ideas worth dying for, and circumstances where courage is still prized. This life could be found and joined, like the Resistance.”¹⁵

Part of the subversive power of reading for youth lies in the way a book can be a portable solitude, the “secret hope” about which Dillard writes. The prac-

tice of reading can be a way to shelter one's developing inner life from the pressure to join, to belong, even to resist what Dykstra has called "the conspiracy of Christian community."¹⁶

But another dimension of the subversive power of this practice lies in the way it can thin the boundaries between ourselves and others. Birkerts describes what it's like to become absorbed in a book on a train and then look up and feel newly receptive to the hidden connections between human beings.

Not until I feel the train decelerating do I close the book and look up...I look around at the other passengers...and I feel irradiated with a benign detachment. The inner and the outer are, briefly, in balance. [The world of the book] is a present to me as these people. And that specious equivalence brings me closer to them, though I'm not sure why. Their boundaries seem porous; I have the illusion that I could enter and understand their lives.¹⁷

The feeling of connection Birkerts describes passes, as it should. He doesn't really know what his fellow passengers' lives are like, and it would be arrogant for him to assume that he does. I think Socrates is right: one way the practice of reading can become deformed is when it makes us believe that we know things we do not really know.

What Birkerts describes is a fleeting moment of connection, which, like any ecstatic religious experience, does not last. But the memory of it does last. And sometimes the memory of apprehending the deep connections between strangers—of believing that it is at least *possible* to understand what others are going through—is what is needed to resist judgment or exclusion or violence.

The suspicion that reading means turning away from the world may be particularly Christian fear, and probably a particularly Protestant one. But we do have resources in Christian traditions to resist it. One such resource, of course, is the practice of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of Scripture.

I was lucky to learn this practice from my father, who learned to love the psalms from the monks of the abbey of Gethsemani when he was a young man. Every day he reads six psalms and writes one verse from each in a notebook, short verses upon which to meditate as he goes about his work. When I was a child, the notebooks all had pictures of a fierce-looking bulldog on the cover, the mascot of the sports team of the college where my dad taught. Beneath the bulldog, in block letters, my dad wrote the words *LECTIO DIVINA*.

Very occasionally, as an eleven- or twelve-year-old, I would read my dad's psalms out loud to him, sometimes in the porch swing he set up in our backyard, in a corner under the pine trees. We would talk about which verses struck us, which ones he should write in the notebook and why. Sometimes a line spoke to a particular situation in our lives. Sometimes a line was simply so beautiful it shone out of the psalm like a star. And sometimes, the way one word had been placed next to another word turned us inside out.

This is one answer to the fear that opposes reading to active life. For this way of reading is an integral part of an active life. It is not an escape from it, or even really a pause in the midst of it. Here, reading is an activity itself that might transform—although slowly, slowly—the many ways we act in the world.

One of the richest, loveliest descriptions of *lectio divina* comes from a twelfth-century monk named Guigo II. In a letter to his spiritual director, he describes the reading of Scripture as the first rung of a “ladder of monks” that stretches from earth to heaven. Reading, he says, is like putting a delicious grape in one's mouth, and meditation, the second rung of the ladder, is the chewing of that grape through bringing all the resources of our reason to bear upon it. Prayer, the third rung, extracts its flavor. And contemplation, the fourth rung, is the sweetness that gladdens and refreshes. Meeting God in contemplation is a gift, Guigo says; none of us can make it happen through our own efforts. But through our reading, Guigo suggests, we are made vulnerable to it, available.¹⁸

I didn't know all this history when I was a child, reading psalms with my father in the backyard. I just knew this was something he did, something he felt it was important to do. Over time, I came to understand why this was so, why my father has made *lectio divina* such a central practice in his life. I know he wants to be available to, and guided by, the sweet presence of God of which Guigo speaks. I know he wants his life and his imagination to be permeated with the language and images of the psalms. I know he wants to pray with all who have ever prayed the psalms—with Israel in exile, with Jesus on the cross, with the monks of Gethsemani, with his students and the members of the churches he has served, and with the many others around the world whose names he will never know but who also open their Bibles to the middle each day and breathe out those ancient words. I think my dad would say that his practice of reading six psalms a day undergirds every aspect of his vocation—as a minister, a teacher, a scholar, a father, a husband, a friend. It is a method

of reading that is deliberately slow and meditative, an attempt to write ancient precious words deeply into the heart and the mind. Far from being opposed to active life, such reading transforms active life—slowly, to be sure, but also daily. Over time, such daily, repetitive reading has the potential to effect what the theologian David Tracy has called “a slow shift of our attachments, a painstaking education of desire.”¹⁹

The practice of reading is not a special practice for an educated Christian elite. It is a practice like any other, a practice that belongs to all of us, everywhere, no matter our level of literacy or education. The monk Guigo, writing in a world in which a book was a rare thing, the long labor of many hands, insisted that listening is a kind of reading. And base communities of impoverished, oppressed, and often illiterate people who gather around Scripture have taught us that even people who can’t read can, in fact, read deeply, can interpret, can teach.

St. Augustine offers an image of the Christian as reader when he interprets the story of creation in his autobiography. The firmament stretched out between earth and heaven in the first chapter of Genesis, he says, refers to Scripture. This firmament helps us draw near to God, but it also stands in between us and God. We—its human readers—are like the stars in the firmament, clinging to the strange, old words of Scripture with both our hands, trying to catch a glimpse of God through its veil. To be a Christian, for Augustine, is to be a reader.

The angels are also readers, he says, but they read the very face of God. Their reading, unlike ours, “is perpetual, and what they read never passes away.”²⁰ For Augustine, words, both spoken and written, are reminders of our distance from God because they are temporal and will not last. They strike the air, and then are gone. But they also hold open a place in time in which the eternal can break in; they are reminders of our life in time, a life sustained by God, a life in which we can change, be converted, and turn toward God. As temporal and imperfect as words are, there is something holy about attending to them. They are somehow grounded in the Word spoken by God at the beginning and reverberating still at the heart of all life. It is part of our work as ministers to help our youth try out the practice of reading as a form of indoor exploration that might lead them ever more deeply into the life of God.

How to do this? Well, there are as many possibilities. I’ll tell you something I have tried this year.

I hope you have had more positive experiences of church libraries than I have. In the churches I have been apart of as an adult, church libraries are neglected places, filled with furniture nobody wants to sit on and stocked with dusty old books nobody wants to read. In my church in Cambridge, the “library” has become such a multipurpose room that I have no hope of reclaiming it as a space for indoor exploration. But I have an idea for starting a new library at my church, a library on wheels that we could roll into church to allow children to pick from when they get bored, roll into Sunday school classrooms, and roll into coffee hour so people can browse.

I’m teaching second- through fourth-grade Sunday school this year, and we’ve been experimenting with the idea of a church library. We’re starting small, with our own class. As you can imagine, I’ve got a range of readers—from second graders who have only recently cracked the code of words to fourth graders who show up with enormous fantasy novels under their arms. The grandmother of one of our students endowed us with \$100 seed money for our library, and others joined in, so we’ve built a collection of twenty-five or so books—picture books mostly, but some novels as well. Some of these books are explicitly religious, like Brian Wildsmith’s wonderful retelling of the story of the Exodus; others are only implicitly so, like Barbara Cooney’s story about vocation, *Miss Rumphius*. The first book we bought for our library was a new book by Jeannette Winter called *The Librarian of Basra*, a true story about Alia Muhammad Baker, a librarian of the Central Library of Basra, who saved tens of thousands of volumes, including a seven-hundred-year-old biography of Muhammad, before the library burned to the ground during the invasion by American and British troops. She smuggled the books out of the library at night, handing them over the library wall to her waiting friend who owned a restaurant next door. He hid those precious books in pantries and cupboards and ovens and closets, and there they stayed until they could be safely moved. The epigram to the book is a quote from the librarian herself: The first word God says to Muhammad in the Koran, she says, is “Read.”

I found a little library kit in a stationery store, complete with cards and pockets, and best of all, a due date stamp. My kids and I filled out the cards and pasted the pockets into the back of the books—the materiality of it attracts them, just as my dad’s notebook and pen and dog-eared copy of the psalter attracted me as a child. My students take turns each week being the librarian. Some weeks, nobody checked out a book, and I’d worry that I was doing something wrong, that I haven’t made our library attractive enough

somehow. But lately I've been thinking it's OK if books go unchecked out some weeks. Reading is not the only practice of indoor exploration we have to offer our children, and it's not going to be the first door into the self for every child. But reading is a practice I want to offer to all of them, without exception, every week. I want them to know that no matter which reading group they've been sorted into in school, they are on equal footing in church, that we are, all of us, readers, all of us stars clinging to the firmament, trying to catch a glimpse of God through words that are both window and veil.

There are gymnastic mats in the hall outside my Sunday school classroom, and every week, I go out and beg my students: "Come inside, come inside, I've got a great book for you." And every week, they say, "Aw, one more somersault, one more bounce, one more flip." Finally they come in, and after we've greeted one another and talked about the week we've had, I'd read them a book. And every week, I am amazed by what a miracle a good book can work. When I read to my kids, they all, even the most restless and resistant, lean forward and fall still. I can see them gathering and focusing their attention like Lyra reading the alethiometer, or Will searching for the way in to a new world with the tip of his knife, or Polly tuning her ears to the nuances of Aslan's song. When I see them bringing their whole selves to a story, I rejoice for them, and for us, because this capacity for attention will bear fruit throughout their lives, in their ability to be present both to themselves and to what is not themselves: to be present to their suffering neighbor in service, and to God in prayer.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Ehrlich, *Miriam's Kitchen* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 128.
2. Philip Pullman, "The Republic of Heaven," *The Horn Book* (November/December 2001): 661.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (San Francisco: HarperTrophy, 1994), 5–6.
4. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 158.
5. *Ibid.*, 107.
6. Philip Pullman, *Golden Compass* (New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 1996), 132–33.
7. John Keats, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 41.
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