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.

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2005 Lectures

Reginald Blount

In Search of Living Waters: The Seven Spiritual Yearnings of Youth

Journeying with Youth toward Living Waters

Stephanie Paulsell

Indoor Exploration: Reading as a Spiritual Practice for Children and Youth

Tell Them Stories

Christian Smith

On "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith

Implications of National Study of Youth and Religion Findings for Religious Leaders

John W. Stewart

Leaders' Proven Practices: Don't Leave Home without Them

"Tell Them Stories" • *Stephanie Paulsell*

Like a lot of the practices we want to claim as Christian, reading seems so ordinary that thinking of it as a religious practice, a spiritually formative practice, might seem a bit of a stretch at first. But those of you who are reading with your youth in church and your children at home, snuggled up in bed, already have so much wisdom about it. Give yourself permission to think of this ordinary practice as a practice of your faith, and I predict that you will come up with more imaginative ways to engage it than I could have ever thought of.

In the first lecture, we talked about indoor exploration, the ways in which children in C. S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles and Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy develop and learn to sustain rich inner lives that connect them more deeply, not only to their developing selves but to the world around them, and we talked about how our children and youth might do their own indoor exploration through the practice of reading.

Now I'd like to talk about the practice of storytelling. Of course, the practices of reading and storytelling are very close to one another, dependent on each other in many ways. It's like in Psalm 49, when the psalmist writes, "I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will breathe out my riddle to the music of my harp." I love that image of the psalmist taking in the wisdom he finds in his reading, in the world, and breathing out his response in the form of a psalm. I love getting a glimpse of a writer and a musician working through life's most profound questions by inclining his ear to listen, and then exhaling what is in his heart by making choices about which word to set next to another word, which note to sing on which scale. Isn't this something we want for our youth? For them to breathe in what we and the church and God and creation have to give them, and then for them to breathe it out again, transformed through having traveled through *their* body, *their* lives. Don't we hope that they will cultivate a generous voice in which to breathe out what they have read and seen and heard and experienced, a voice in which to breathe out their deepest questions, their fiercest hopes? And don't we hope that we will

be able to tell the stories we have to tell in a way that leaves room for them to tell their own?

Lewis's and Pullman's books may be both fairly characterized as such a breathing out. They have breathed in a lot—the Bible, the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Jane Eyre*, *Treasure Island*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and countless fairy tales—just to name a few. The ways in which they've breathed it out again nearly takes *my* breath away.

Many of the characters in the Narnia books breathe out their reading as well, in their choices. They possess what we might call a fairy tale hermeneutic—a way of interpreting the world based on their reading. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory tells Uncle Andrew that he won't win in the end, because characters like him never do in stories. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Peter, Lucy, and Susan just *know* that they can trust a bird that clearly wants to lead them through a forest, because birds in fairy tales are always trustworthy. In *Prince Caspian*, Edmund knows how to survive in the woods because of the medieval tales of hermits and knights-errant he's read. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (my favorite of the Narnia tales), young Eustace Scrubb doesn't even know a dragon when he sees one, nor does he know how to tell a story straight, because, as Lewis says, he hasn't read any of the right books. And in *The Silver Chair*, when the witch of the underground kingdom tries to convince our heroes that there *is* no world above ground, no Narnia, no Aslan, no hope, one character responds,

> Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world…I'm going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia.[1]

Now, this is a conviction that Lewis and Pullman *share*: that learning to live *as if* the world were good at its core, *as if* love undergirds it all, *as if*, as Pullman has put it, "life were going to win" is one of the most important things we can teach our children to do.

But Lewis and Pullman have their differences, and readers have noticed them, with varying degrees of anxiety. Pullman's trilogy has been proclaimed "worthy of the bonfire"[2] by one Christian critic, and Pullman himself has been called "the most dangerous man in Britain."[3] "Pullman does for atheism," another critic concludes, "what C. S. Lewis did for God."[4]

Pullman's argument, as I've said, is *with* C. S. Lewis, the Narnia series which Pullman has described as "an invaluable guide to what is wrong and cruel and selfish."[5] He bases this strong assessment on the theology embraced by the books, which he argues are marked by a devaluing of the world and the body. The book that really bothers him is the last book in the series, *The Last Battle*. In this story, the world that Polly heard Aslan sing into being comes to an end. And, mysteriously, all the children from our world who have ever visited Narnia, except one, find themselves there, with Aslan, witnessing the end of that beloved world. But the lion Aslan invites them, as he says, "further up and further in" toward what seems to be another Narnia, more intensely real than the one they have known. This is the *real* Narnia, Aslan tells them, a world that will never end, where no good thing is ever destroyed.

When the children, mostly grown up now, start to worry that Aslan will send them back to their world, as he always has at the end of past adventures, Aslan asks in surprise: "Have you not guessed?" You're dead, he tells them, you and your mother and your father have all perished in a train accident. "The term is over," he tells them, "the holidays have begun"; this is the beginning of the real story. Lewis concludes: "they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."[6]

Pullman cannot stand this. How can the death of a family in a train accident be a cause for celebration? he asks. What kind of religion understands life in the world as discardable, as a dream, as a long semester in a miserable school? I'll tell you what kind, he answers: a religion that utterly disdains embodied life.

Pullman finds more evidence for his reading of Lewis's Christianity in the way Susan, the sister of Lucy, Peter, and Edmund, does *not* die in the train accident and, consequently, does not return to Narnia. Susan, says Pullman, is damned. He is particularly troubled by Peter's explanation of Susan's absence at the scene of redemption and salvation. "My sister Susan," announces her brother Peter to Narnia's last king, as they stand together at the threshold of heaven, "is no longer a friend of Narnia." "Oh Susan!" adds another character.

"She's interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She was always a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up."[7]

Lewis, of course, is probably thinking here of Jesus' words that whoever does not enter the kingdom as a child will never enter it, and he portrays Susan as one of the children who seems most eager to leave childhood behind. We've been discussing, in my class, about what marks childhood, here, for Lewis. Some of my students think that Lewis was critiquing a lack of attention in Susan, a lack of the quality formed in indoor exploration that allows one to distinguish between the essential and the trivial. Others point to Lewis's words in an essay on science fiction "the thing I can't bear in literature, the thing that makes me profoundly uncomfortable, is the representation of anything like a quasi love affair between two children. It embarrasses and nauseates me." These students tend to agree with Pullman that Lewis is arguing that a developing awareness of one's adolescent body (especially if it is a female body) and a growing erotic consciousness disqualifies one from admittance to the Kingdom of Heaven. For Pullman, this is the Christian view of the body and sexuality.

Now, one may want to argue with Pullman's reading of Lewis. Or one may wish that Pullman would put down his Lewis and read a little more widely in Christian theology. But it's hard to deny that Christianity is marked, throughout its history, by an anxiety about the transition from what we've called "innocence" to what we've called "experience," to say nothing of the fear of women and women's sexuality and the worry over the power of erotic desire.

Pullman offers a tale that is meant to contrast with the Narnia stories on precisely this point. As promised, I'm going to try to summarize this "Paradise Lost for teenagers," as he has called it. Those of you who have read it will know that I am not doing it justice. And I hope those of you who haven't read it will find that it piques your interest. We will then get to the question of the relationship between storytelling and talking to our youth about sex.

Pullman's trilogy is made up of three books: *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*. In the story, two children on the cusp of puberty, Lyra and Will, save the living and the dead from the authoritarian powers of what Pullman calls "the kingdom of Heaven" and from God, who turns out to be not the creator of all that is, but an ancient, demented angel, creator of nothing, who had long ago seized power and is now, at the time of the story, propped up by powers and principalities for authoritarian ends. What *really* animates the universe and all its worlds in Pullman's story is a sub-

stance called Dust, which as an angel in the story explains is "what happens when matter begins to understand itself." "Conscious beings make Dust," another angel says. "They renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on."

In Pullman's story, the universe is, as one critic has put it, a palimpsest of worlds, all lying flat against each other. Will is from Oxford, England, in our world. Lyra is from another Oxford, where every human has what Pullman calls a "daemon": D-A-E-M-O-N, a nod, no doubt, to Socrates' reference to the internal daemon that regulates his behavior, his conscience, in a way. Human's daemons are animals, almost always of the opposite gender—so Lyra's daemon, Pantalaimon, is male. The daemons are both separate from their humans and part of them as well; they are the embodied soul of the person, with whom a person can talk and argue and explore the world. Daemons and humans have a friendship that is, as Pullman puts it, heart-deep, life-deep. Humans and their daemons cannot be separated without great pain; even out of sight of one another, they begin to feel that their hearts are being torn from them.

The daemon can change its form until the human to which it is attached comes into sexual awareness in puberty. Then the daemon settles into its final form. We see Lyra's daemon in many forms: as a moth fluttering about her, as an ermine that sleeps curled around her neck, as a mouse that hides in her pocket, as a wildcat crouched to defend her.

In the first book, *The Golden Compass*, a story that takes place completely in Lyra's world, children are being abducted by an organization with the church, the General Oblation Board, and taken north. If you remember your Narnia Chronicles, you'll remember that the north is valorized in those books—"the North, the North!" is a cry of longing and desire, especially in the third Narnia novel, *The Horse and His Boy*. In Pullman's north, by contrast, terrible things are happening to these abducted children. They are being severed from their daemons by a team of experimental theologians—we would call them scientists—working for the church. Those children who are severed from their daemons live a sort of semiconscious half-life, never reaching puberty, never coming to full sexual awareness, and so not creating more Dust, which the universe needs to flourish and survive but which the church, in Pullman's story, fears.

In the book of Genesis read in Lyra's world, the tempter says this to Adam and Eve: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes

shall be opened, and your daemons shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."[8] The Dust that is produced when a young person comes to sexual consciousness and when his or her daemon assumes its final form is understood by the church in these books as the material evidence for original sin. By severing children from their daemons, the church tries to find out whether it is possible to live free from original sin, believing that if they destroy Dust, they will destroy death itself.

Lyra's adventures between the worlds begin when she travels north to rescue a friend who has been abducted. She succeeds, only to have her friend perish at the hand of Lyra's own father, who is also looking for the origin of Dust. He severs the child from his daemon in order to generate the energy needed to blast his way into another universe. Brokenhearted, Lyra and her daemon cross the threshold of the other world opened in the blast. There they meet Will, who comes from our world, and together they discover a knife with which they can slice open windows in the air and cross into any world at all.

After many adventures involving warrior bears clad in armor; witches who prophesy that Lyra is the new Eve, destined to save the world; and a pair of gay male angels who save Lyra and Will from the assassin the church has dispatched to kill them, Lyra and Will eventually come to the world of the dead, a sort of prison camp presided over by screeching harpies hungry for stories of the world above ground. It's not hell; it's just where all the dead go; heaven and hell turn out to have been a lie all along. At the end of the third volume, in an excruciating scene, Lyra and Will leave their daemons on the bank of the world of the living and cross over into the world of the dead. Attacked by the harpies, Lyra tries to placate them by spinning tales of adventure above ground, but the harpies fly at her, screaming "Liar! Liar!" It is only when she tells *true* stories that they fall silent and still. Lyra and Will negotiate with the harpies to allow the dead safe passage out in exchange for more true stories, by which the harpies are nourished and fed. And in Pullman's version of the harrowing of hell, they use their knife to open a window in the underworld through which the dead will forever be able to escape.

As the dead drift out into the open air, "becoming part of the earth and the dew and the night breeze,"[9] as Pullman puts it, one of them speaks to Dr. Mary Malone, a former nun turned physicist who will play the tempter in Pullman's retelling of the fall. Mary is from our world but has found her way into this parallel world, where living things are dying because the Dust that sustains their life has been flooding into the sky and out of their world. "Tell

them stories," the ghost says to her. "They need the truth. You must tell them true stories, and everything will be well. Just tell them stories."[10]

The stories that Mary tells Lyra and Will are stories of sexual desire and of the potential deep relationship between sexual experience and self-knowledge. The first story she tells is the story of her first kiss as a young girl herself on the edge of adolescence, a story of how she met a boy at a birthday party, and how they talked and talked and talked, and how he touched her lips with a bit of marzipan from the birthday cake, and how she loved him for his gentleness, and how her body began to ache, and how they were each too shy to move, and then suddenly they were kissing each other, and oh, she says, it was paradise.

Now that might strike you as a bit oversweet, like marzipan itself. What's more interesting than the story, though, is the way Pullman describes Lyra's reaction to it. He writes,

> As Mary spoke, Lyra felt something strange happen to her body. She felt as if she had been handed the key to a great house she hadn't known was there, a house that was somehow inside her, and as she turned the key, she felt other doors opening deep in the darkness, and lights coming on. She sat trembling as Mary went on… It was the strangest thing: Lyra knew exactly what [Mary] meant, and half an hour earlier she would have had no idea at all. And inside her, that rich house with all its doors open and all its rooms lit stood waiting, quiet, expectant.[11]

It's not unlike the scenes of Lyra reading the alethiometer: a deepening of an inner life that will have real consequences for how she will act in the world. The next day, Mary packs a lunch for Lyra and Will of bread and cheese and—you guessed it—fruit, and they go out to explore a world that is new to them. After all of their adventures, they are unexpectedly shy and awkward with one another and finally, in an imitation of the marzipan story, Lyra lifts a piece of ripe red fruit to Will's lips, and they are both undone. Brimming with happiness and love, they cover each other in kisses of utter adoration. And as these young people come into a consciousness of their bodies and of their bodies in loving, mutual relation to another's body, the Dust that had been flooding into the sky, leaving the world parched and dying, begins to reverse its direction. Lyra and Will have become a new Eve and Adam, who

save the world instead of losing it, whose movement from innocence to experience brings life, not death. When Mary sees them returning, hand in hand, talking quietly with their heads close to touching, they seem to her "the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance."[12]

All of this happens toward the end of the story, but it is not itself the end. Before we turn the last page, stories of erotic desire are matched by stories of the pleasures of solitude. And the embrace of sexual knowledge is matched by the refusal of sexual pleasure for a greater good. It's not possible for Lyra and Will to live long term in each other's worlds; their daemons couldn't survive it. The angels tell Will that only one window between the worlds can be left open; otherwise the risk that Dust will again start flooding out of the world is too great. Lyra and Will face the choice of leaving a window open so they can move back and forth between each other's worlds and nurture their newfound love, or leaving a window open in the land of the dead so that no one will be trapped in that unchanging misery ever again. In the end, they choose the way of self-sacrifice, of holding the greater good above the satisfaction of their own desires.

You are probably asking yourselves: is this a story to share with our youth? Read the books yourself. Ask your youth who've read them to tell you what they make of them. See what you think. In many ways it is a deeply Christian story: the world is saved through self-sacrifice and love. At the same time, it is deeply atheological and portrays a church built on lies and violence. (There's also a question of whether or not the books are anti-Catholic, as one of my friends maintains. Presbyterians will be especially interested to know that Pullman tries to avoid this charge by locating the seat of the papacy in Lyra's world in Geneva and naming the Pope John Calvin.)

After I read the first book in the series, *The Golden Compass*, the best of the three to my mind, I got very excited and sent the whole set to my nine-year-old goddaughter, a precocious reader and a devout Roman Catholic Christian like the rest of her family. I started reading the second book and came to a terrifyingly violent scene of the torture of a witch. And then I read the next book and came to the death of God. And then I called my goddaughter's parents and said, "Um, you know those books I gave Nora?" As it turned out, her father had been reading them along with her, and they both loved them. "I didn't think that was *my* church," my goddaughter told me. "That's not *my* faith. It's a *story*." What disturbed her was the scene where Lyra had to leave

her daemon, Pantalaimon, on the shore of the land of the living in order to enter the world of the dead. That made my goddaughter furious. She slammed the book shut and didn't open it again for nearly a year.

This question of whether these are appropriate books for youth, especially in Christian settings, is a big debate in my class. "Sure, your goddaughter's formed in Christian faith," one of my students told me. "What about kids who aren't? Will they think it's a choice, Pullman's story of Christianity or nothing at all?"

It's a fair question. And it points to the importance of our accompaniment of youth as they read and question and wonder. Blair Bertrand has some great ideas about what he calls an "adolescent hermeneutic," by which he means helping adolescents to formulate their own questions about books they read—especially the Bible, not an unproblematic text itself—and then helping them be led by those questions to the work of interpretation.

Whatever else we get in Pullman's story, we do get what I think is a powerful description of adult accompaniment of youth, a generous-spirited and gentle nudging toward self-knowledge. I'm talking about the description of the effect on Lyra of a story about sexual desire and pleasure told by a trusted adult who loves and respects her, somebody who desires her safety and well-being and who wants her first erotic experience to be joyful and full of love.

Pullman describes the effect of Mary's story on Lyra as an experience of opening. Lyra feels as if she has been given a key to a house hidden inside her, a house that lights up, room by room, as she takes her first steps inside. Pullman's image reminds me of Catherine of Siena's "cell of self-knowledge" or Teresa of Avila's "interior castle," images of the indoor exploration of interior life that can lead us to God. Pullman's image doesn't evoke God, but he does offer an image of the freedom and knowledge that I associate with God, of having doors open and lights come on, of entering more deeply into the mystery of one's inner life without impediment. Could we ask much more of a story?

Our faith is a faith of stories, stories that have opened those spaces of freedom and knowledge inside of us. We know how stories work. Stories have transformed our lives. When we're anxious, though, we often lose our faith in the shaping power of stories. We rush along instead to the story's moral, grinding our narratives down into propositions and rules. We all know how hard it is *not* to do this when we're talking to youth about sex. How quickly we move to define the boundaries, how quickly we move to the do's and don'ts, how

easily we communicate our fear. When it comes to sex, we'd much rather legislate than tell a story. Stories take too much time to do their shaping work. They are imprecise. They wander. We can't guarantee how they will be received or interpreted. We can't predict their effect.

But I wonder if there are ways in which the imprecision and multilayeredness of stories might work in our favor. One of the reasons it's so hard to talk about sex—in church or at home—is that often there's no context for it, no nest of stories to cushion our speech, no garden of stories for it to grow organically from. And so talk about sex seems to come out of the blue—for the teenagers who suddenly have it thrust at them in Sunday school or youth group or for the couple struggling in their relationship who comes to the pastor for counseling. The body that experiences sexual desire does not exist apart from the body that eats and drinks, bathes and dresses, rests and exercises and works. And talk about sex doesn't flourish in isolation. It flourishes when our conversation and our practices make all dimensions of our embodiment visible. It flourishes when we are constantly exploring—in our everyday meals and in the Lord's Supper, in bathing and in baptism, in caring for others and in caring for ourselves, in our reading and in our storytelling—what it means to be made in the image of God. And maybe it would flourish if we could find ways of telling the stories we have to tell about the sexual dimension of human life, both the shared stories of our faith and the particular stories of our lives.

Pullman wanted to tell a story about sexual awakening, and so he began at the beginning, with Adam and Eve. Christians often start there, too. I wonder what would happen, though, if we just leapt right over Genesis to the Song of Songs. We don't read that enough; we hardly ever preach on it or lead a Bible study on it. The only places I ever hear the Song of Songs read out loud are at weddings and in monasteries! We need to make this poem more known in our communities; we need to be able to draw on it.

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" Bernard of Clairvaux preached several sermons on this opening verse alone, and so can we. Right in the middle of our Bibles, between the pragmatic Ecclesiastes and the sublime Isaiah, a woman, "black and beautiful" (Song of Songs 1:5), and a man, "radiant and ruddy" (Song of Songs 5:10), speak the language of desire, cataloging every inch of each other's body, every smell and taste. "Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine" (Song of Songs 7:2), he says to her. "His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies, distilling

liquid myrrh" (Song of Songs 5:13), she tells her friends. "Your two breasts," he sings, "are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (Song of Songs 4:5). "I am my beloved's," she exults, "and his desire is for me" (Song of Songs 7:10).

Probably, like me, you have been to a wedding where the readers could not get through their reading without bursting into hysterical laughter. But that's OK, because when we're in love we say things that sound silly to any ears other than ours or our beloved's. If we're going to talk about sex with our youth, it will help if we can all laugh.

I've also seen readers cry while reading the Song of Songs at a wedding. It is a song, after all, about desire, and so it is inevitably a song about the pain of separation, of missed meetings, of absence. "O that his left hand were under my head," the woman sings, "and that his right hand embraced me" (Song of Songs 2:6). Describing a moment when her lover knocked on her door and she hesitated for a moment to open, the woman speaks some of the sexiest lines in any literature.

> My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,
>   and my inmost being yearned for him.
> I arose to open to my beloved,
>   and my hands dripped with myrrh,
> my fingers with liquid myrhh,
>   upon the handles of the bolt.
> Song of Songs 5:4–5

When she opens the door, however, he is gone, and she heads out into the city to search for him.

> I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
>   if you find my beloved,
> tell him this:
>   I am faint with love.
> Song of Songs 5:8

How did this erotic poem make it into the Bible? No one knows for sure. But scores of interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, have found in it the song of the human yearning for God and God's desire to be in relationship with humanity. The Song of Songs is read at the festival of the Passover as a reminder that God delivered Israel from slavery not only because God was

contractually bound to do so through the covenant but also because God loved them and desired their good. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in the twelfth century, wrote more than eighty sermons on the Song and never got past the third chapter, finding in the poem a means to come into intimate relationship with God. St. John of the Cross, in the sixteenth century, discovered in the Song the inspiration for his own poetry, a poetry of absence and longing and desire for God. Like all great poetry, the Song of Songs can easily sustain such a range of interpretations. But it also resists being read *only* as a spiritual text about human beings and God. Even Bernard of Clairvaux with his eighty sermons on the first three chapters knew this. He counseled that young monks and nuns should not be allowed to read it until their faith had matured, because of the sexual feelings it was able to inspire. As many interpretations as the Song of Songs has received, it remains a testimony to mutuality in love, to the beauty of the human body, to the goodness of sexual desire and the power of love. "Love is as strong as death," the Song proclaims, "passion fierce as the grave" (Song of Songs 8:6).

> Many waters cannot quench love,
> neither can floods drown it.
> If one offered for love
> all the wealth of his house,
> it would be utterly scorned.
> Song of Songs 8:7

In the Song of Songs, desire is portrayed as the poet Mark Doty described it in *Heaven's Coast*, Doty's meditation on the death of his lover, Wally Roberts. There, he described desire as "the ineradicable force that binds us to the world."[13] The relationship described in the Song is one of mutuality; the lovers are evenly matched in the force of their desire. They are equally vulnerable in their desire to *be* desired by the other; they are as determined to give pleasure as they are to receive it. In the Song, desire leads not to exploitation but rather, as Doty says, to "participation, the will to involve oneself in the body of the world."[14]

Through desire, Doty writes, "we are implicated in another being, which is always the beginning of wisdom, isn't it?"[15] That, I think, is a great way to account for the presence of the Song of Songs in the wisdom literature of the Bible—and why it ought to matter to us as we try to create a context for real

conversation about sex for our youth in relation to Christian life. It shows them, and us, a path, through desire, outside the boundaries of our individual selves. It offers a way of receiving the world that is motivated by love. It teaches that in seeking the pleasure of another we may find our own deepest pleasure, and in the commitment to another we may come to know ecstasy. This is a story we need to hear more often; it is a story we need to learn to tell.

Of course, many of the stories of our faith that have to do with sexuality are not about sexual pleasure. Many of them are about the refusal of sexual relationships, and those are ones that often give us trouble. The Song of Songs celebrates the exquisite flame of sexual desire; Paul says it is better to marry than to burn. St. Augustine, who is often cited as the cause of all our troubles with sexuality, famously refused to become a Christian until he was sure he could live without sex. Are these stories we should listen to? Stories we should tell?

Like any story, these require our analysis and our critique, but they also beckon us to listen in them for a story that might be worth telling. I think it is possible to hear in the words of early Christians like Paul and Augustine not only a suspicion of human sexuality but also an honest acknowledgment of the power of sexual desire, a struggle to understand their vulnerability to it, and a real desire for freedom. Our youth need to hear this, too. It is possible, as Augustine knew, to be imprisoned by one's desires and to become locked in patterns of satisfying them that make use of others as a means of one's satisfaction only. It is possible to be led by one's desires away from one's most profound aspirations, away from the life one hopes to lead.

There have been times in Christian history when the refusal of sexual relationships meant the refusal to believe in the goodness of the body. But there have also been times when Christians have refused sexual relationships in order to preserve their freedom. As the great historian, Peter Brown, teaches us, when some early Christians, men and women alike, decided to live outside of the institutions of marriage and family, they declared that their bodies belonged to God, instead of to the Roman Empire, for whom the body and its desires were tools for empire building.[16] When these early Christians chose sexual abstinence in order to preserve their life's energies for prayer and service, they generated no new citizens, no new soldiers, no new cities. They shocked their contemporaries by becoming so "useless." By claiming their bodies and their desires for God, they claimed the freedom to make their own

choices about the currents in which their sexual energies would run, the uses to which their bodies would be put.

For women especially, sexual abstinence has sometimes been one of the few roads leading to freedom. The history of Christianity is full of stories about women who run to the monastery or the hermitage or the anchorhold to escape the marriages arranged for them by their parents and to embrace a life of study, prayer, and service. In an age when women married young to men not of their choosing, whose bodies were worn out early by the hard work of frequent childbearing, the celibacy practiced in women's religious communities meant not the end of freedom but the beginning of it—freedom to seek God, to become educated, to read and write, to preach and teach. And it is clear from some of their writings, which describe their life with God in deeply erotic terms, that the celibate life by no means required an end to an engagement with the sexual dimension of the self.

These stories are worth telling, too, for all of us, but maybe especially for young people awakening to sexual desire for the first time. Like Mary in Pullman's story, we want our young people to experience that awakening as the unlocking of a door inside of them, not as the door that locks them in. Bad early sexual experience is so wounding, and so hard to come back from, sexually. In our time, when memoirs of extreme and dangerous sexual experience crowd bookstore shelves and receive admiring reviews, it's good to remember and tell stories about how postponing or refusing sexual relationships can also be a gesture toward freedom. It is good for young people, whose sexual selves are still unfolding, to know that delaying full sexual expression might preserve for them the freedom to live into a deeply satisfying sexual life as adults. Just as it is good for couples practicing the discipline of sexual fidelity to remember the freedom that deepens over time when two people remain committed to one another's pleasure in a context of trust and faithfulness. Just as it's good for those living with or without a sexual relationship to remember that the erotic dimension of life is not dependent on sexual intercourse. Now, none of these goods is going to sound very attractive when expressed as a commandment or a proposition. But a story—a story is complex enough to allow all of these goods to unfold.

The sharing of stories takes time, but it is worth the wait, worth the meandering, worth the stuttering and stumbling and the struggle to find the right words. "Thou shalt not is soon forgotten," Pullman has written, "but once upon a time lasts forever."[17] I think he is right about that. But he is wrong that

Lewis's story of Susan's exclusion from Narnia is in any way a definitive Christian story about embodied sexual life. A Christian story about awakening to our sexuality would not be a story of exclusion or disgust. It would be a story of desire and mutuality, of passion and commitment, of fidelity and freedom. It would be a story very much like the story of Jesus—a deeply human story of reaching across boundaries, of risking ourselves in relationship with others. It would be, in the words of Paul in the letter to the Romans, a story about "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). And it would not be one story, but many stories—stories lying very near to one another, like the worlds in Pullman's universe, a palimpsest of stories in which stories do not block each other out but allow each other to shine through.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (San Francisco: HarperTrophy, 1994).

2. Leonie Caldecott, "Phillip Pulman: The Big Read and the Big Lie," *The Catholic Herald* (December 26, 2003). © The Catholic Herald 2003. Updated Version of article: March 15, 2004.

3. Peter Hitchens, "This Is the Most Dangerous Author in Britain," *The Mail on Sunday* (January 27, 2002): 63.

4. "What C. S. Lewis Did for God," *The Daily Telegraph*. It was posted on 01/24/2002 in the opinion section. It is not attributed to an author. The Web site is www.telegraph.co.uk.

5. Philip Pullman, "The Republic of Heaven," *The Horn Book* (November/December 2001): 661.

6. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956).

7. Ibid., 154.

8. Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2000).

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 17.

14. Ibid., 20.

15. Ibid.

16. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

17. Quoted in Squires, 63.