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Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

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## Ne Bena Maana Bɔ: A Story Will Come Out of Me

Emmanuelle Spronk

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*Ne Bena Maana Bɔ*: A Story Will Come Out of Me

Emmanuelle Spronk

Abstract:

Translated from Bambara, the title of this collection expresses the inevitability of stories in human life. These essays explore the origins and ubiquity of stories and the writer's own beginnings as a lover and sharer of them. Some of the questions explored are: Why do we love stories? How do stories help us in hardship? How are stories important to the Christian faith?

Contents:

Why Do We All Love Stories? .....	2
On Reading Aloud: How I Became a Story-Lover .....	11
On Telling Stories .....	21
Caterpillar Soup: Crossing Cultures with Story and Imagination .....	28
Telling Tales on the Trail: How Stories Help Us Through Hardship .....	32
Being a Part of Christ's Story: Reading as a Christian with the Orthodox Lectionary, Lewis, Tolkien, Boersma, and O'Connor .....	41

## Why Do We All Love Stories?

### 1.

The summer I turned 20, I visited France and stayed with two families who had young children. I was a nanny for two 5- and 3-year-old girls, Lucie and Emma, while their parents worked at a summer camp for teens. We were all staying at the summer camp, and my job was to watch the girls and make sure they had things to do so they wouldn't interrupt the camp session. Easier said than done. None of my ideas proved very appealing. They always wanted to do what the campers were doing, or to explore places of the camp that were off limits, like the old greenhouses and the craft supply room filled with alluring boxes, and the offices, where all the adults were hanging out.

They especially loved the dress up room, which was off limits for campers, and made it all the more appealing to the girls. Fortunately, we got a special pass to use the dress ups. We spent many good hours in there playing princesses. The dress up room was also where they stored the cleaning supplies, which were perhaps even more appealing than the dress ups.

“Don't play with that mop! That's the dirty toilet mop!”

“You're getting glitter all over the floor!”

“Yes I know those art supplies look so cool but please can't you use your own colored pencils?”

I tried to think of creative alternatives, but those soon got boring. Doing something off limits was always far more attractive. There were only so many fun things that I could think up, but there were almost unlimited off-limits closets and activities to explore. They were always trying to go places they weren't allowed and explore the boundaries of what was possible. I'm sure that's a characteristic that will get them far in life, but it nearly drove their babysitter crazy.

Lucie in particular was very adventurous, and I was constantly rushing after her, trying to pick up the clothes and cleaning supplies and glitter that was inevitably scattered in her wake. Sometimes I did literally have to run. “We’re not allowed to go back by the pond!” It was exhausting.

Finally, one particularly trying day, I decided to try a new tactic. I said, “I’m going to tell you a story.” As if by magic, they stopped fighting over the special headband and sat down with expectant faces. I told them about the Grumpy Leprechaun, and they sat there perfectly still, listening in silent rapture. Why hadn’t I thought telling stories before? Maybe because they hadn’t been terribly interested in the picture books they had in their room. They’d read all those books before, and the stories were boring. But a new story? So exciting. The problem was I wasn’t good at thinking up stories on the spot. So, I told them another story that I knew about a rabbit who outwitted a wild boar. They liked that one, so I told it to them again, since I was running out of ideas. Then I decided, why not retell a whole novel! That’ll keep us busy! So I started in with *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Stories were like nectar to Lucie and Emma. They craved the stories I told, and whenever I was not telling stories they were telling their own. For that was what their pretend princess play was, just another form of story. And every free moment of the day, they were imagining new narratives. Books got old for them, but imaginative play never did, because they were part of the story.

## 2.

As we age, our appetite for stories merely changes form. We no longer dress up or crawl around like horses, but we love sharing rumors and jokes watch each other or watching movies

and shows. From young to old, in every culture around the world, sharing stories is a central part of being human. Why can we not live without stories? Why do we love them so much?

There are many possible answers to this question. We love stories because they are entertaining. We need stories because they give us new information. We like stories because they allow us to live out a scenario in our imagination. We gain experience without having to be exposed to the danger of the situation (Guroian 26). Stories are how we learn about others, how we relate to each other. Telling, listening, and participating in stories allows us to form bonds with other human beings, and shows us the significance of our ordinary moments.

What is a story? Every language has a word for it. More than one word, because story is so essential to human civilization. Every culture needs it. In English we have several words: narrative, story, tale, legend, myth. All convey varying degrees of allure.

In Dutch, the word *verhaal* means a story, tale, narrative, redress, history, recovery. There is also the delightful word *sprookje*, a fairytale.

In French a story is *un récit*. Something recited, something told. Or *une histoire*. A history, because every story conveys truth waiting to be unearthed. Or *un conte*. The etymology of this word confuses me. It implies an old tale, a legend, but it comes from the Latin word *comptum*, to count, to reckon. The one who tells is a *conteuse* or *conteur*. But what does it mean and what does it have to do with counting? Perhaps the *conteur* is a collector of tales, who saves them in the vault of his memory. Or is the *conteuse* the one who travels the world, searching for tales as if she were a coin collector, weighing them in her palm, looking close to tell the genuine from the counterfeits. The other definition of *comptum* is to reckon. Yes, that applies. Storytellers do the reckoning for the world. And we are a force to be reckoned with.

In Bambara, a West African language, a tale is *ntalen*, which also means a proverb, a parable, or even a riddle. Another word is *tariki* – a story. Yet another is *maana*. A story, an explanation. *Ne bena maana bo*. I will tell a story. Or more literally translated, a story will come out of me. And then there is the word for the storyteller. In Bambara this is *jeli*. The bard, the griot, the praise-singer.

The sign for story in American Sign Language is intriguing. Many signs in ASL are iconic—they look like what they are. The sign for “story” baffled me though. Is it supposed to look like anything? The sign for “story” is done by moving your two hands together, slightly open, and then when they meet, closing and pulling them apart again. You do this movement twice, the hands moving in a circular motion (Lapiak, “ASL Sign for STORY”).

I don’t know what the idea of a story looks like, but I think the Deaf may have captured the essence of it. And they have a culture well-equipped to know. ASL storytelling is precious to Deaf culture, the vital method through which knowledge and humor and wisdom are passed down from one generation to the next (Sorenson 2015). The Deaf community should know what a story looks and feels like. Try imitating the sign yourself. It feels like I’m pulling at something, stretching some sort of vaporous matter. Primordial playdough, the air space waiting to be shaped by my hands. The Deaf storyteller’s hands are feeling the texture of the clay, mulling over how they will fashion it, what they will create.

The ASL sign for storytelling has a broader movement (Lapiak, “ASL Sign for STORYTELLING”). It is as if it encompasses not just one story, but all the possible words and tales that will ever be told. There are so many stories out there, just waiting to be created. Doesn’t that make you want to curl up with a blanket and listen?

The English words “story,” and “history,” as well as the various variations in Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, and Catalan all come from the same Latin root, *historia*, which means an investigation, or a historical narrative (“history, n.”). *Historia* in turn comes from the Greek *ἱστορία*, or *istoria*, meaning “inquiry.” A story is the result of an inquiry, the result of wanting to know. The Greek word itself has another Ancient Greek root: *ἱστωρ*, or *histor*, which is a noun, meaning a judge, witness, a learned person. *Histor* itself comes from the stem, *οἶδα* or “ida,” which means to know or to see (“history, n.”). *Οἶδα* is from an Indo-European root *woid-*, which means both to see and to know (“wit, v.1.”). This Indo-European word also is the root of the Sanskrit word *veda*, knowledge, Latin *videre*, see, and old English, *witan*, which evolved into the word *wit*—originally meaning knowledge. So a story in its essence is a way of seeing and knowing. It is fitting that word *story* has such a long story. Furthermore, it is an etymology that mirrors the nature of a story: how the word was passed from one generation to the next, changing as it traveled from culture to culture, while yet being remembered. At its core, the word *story* it means to see, to know. This is what stories let us do. The storyteller kindles in our mind’s eye a scene we wouldn’t otherwise encounter, and thus gives us a new experience, a chance to come to a new understanding, a chance to see truth from a new angle.

### 3.

Nowhere is the universal reliance on stories more evident than in oral cultures. The Maori in New Zealand pass their tradition and lore through extravagant, emotional performances. The Icelandic people have treasured their Sagas from the thirteenth century and earlier. In the West African kingdoms of the Middle Ages, griots were essential to the throne and ruling of the nation. Griots were bards, historian storytellers who were leaders and advised the royalty. Through song they told the story of the tribe and reminded the younger generations of the doings of their

ancestors. Most villages had their own griot, who told the history of the village and helped people understand what their lives meant.

But oral storytellers are no longer the leaders they once were. All around the world, the golden age of the bard has dwindled. Griots still exist in West Africa today, their heritage of storytelling passed along their family line from parent to child. It's a difficult life now, they're no longer well-paid. They often struggle to scrape together a living, appearing at weddings and other large family events, asking you if you would like to hear of the inspirational deeds of your ancestors, for a small fee.

Oral cultures around the world are disappearing, as the decline of the griots demonstrates. We no longer have official bards like the West African griot or the travelling minstrel of Europe. We still have storytellers, because something in all humans, rural laborer or corporate millionaire, needs stories. Today we get our stories from novels and TV and podcasts and movies. One of the most influential bards of the US walks under the diminutive form of a mouse with large ears. The role of the storyteller has not been erased, it has been splintered into parts called by many different names—screenwriters, YouTubers, game designers, even marketing agents. There is no longer one single mantle for us, rather we've been fragmented into different subunits that are claimed by industries who want to use the power of stories to make money. I don't bear a grudge against people who use their storytelling bent to make a living by writing ads. However, I do lament that our culture no longer sees the act of oral storytelling as something to be valued in its own right. We no longer value the bond that is wrought by one generation passing down their stories to the next.

I'm not saying that television and internet storytelling doesn't have wonderful advantages and unique benefits. The bards of our age are still telling good stories, and in fact there are even



more forms of story and more ways to tell a story. Many of these changes are positive. I myself am an avid consumer of podcasts and YouTube sketches and blogs. But I still wonder how this type of storytelling affects us. Oral storytelling was central to human existence for so long. It was carried out by strikingly different cultures all over the globe. Is it wise to do away with something so central to what makes us human? What have we lost with the disappearance of the bard, the oral storyteller, who tells stories the old-fashioned way?

This question can be answered by asking what stories are supposed to be. Stories have several purposes. I think one of the central purposes of stories is obvious—just as griots told stories to pass down the customs of their tribe, we tell stories to inform. Another purpose of story is to entertain, to inspire joy and help us forget our troubles for a while. These objectives are still carried out in most storytelling today, written, digital, or otherwise.

Another and perhaps more important purpose of stories is relationship—griots passed down culture through their stories. Stories were a means of tying the life one generation to the next, and tying a culture together around shared experience. When listening to my Grandpa's stories, I learn more about my family and myself, I am entertained, but I also grow closer to him. When I listen to a friend tell an anecdote of why her family drove around picking up old Christmas trees, we laugh together. Stories are warm fires to sit around, an opportunity to open our hearts and draw near to each other. Listening to stories is one of the central ways to form a bond with another person.

This is one way in which written and digital stories fall short. Through movies and shows and books we are entertained and learn, but we are disconnected from the storyteller. This illustrates why some stories and types of storytelling are more important than others. It is easy and fun for me to watch movies and videos online, but listening to a friend share a story is far

more valuable, because it does what stories are meant to do, it links two souls with shared experience. I can post a story on YouTube or in a social media post, but if it is only responded to with views and likes, nothing really has been shared. Sharing a story implies two people, listening and responding to each other. Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes said, “Nothing is shared in the abstract. Like bread and love, language and ideas are shared with human beings” (444). The same is true for stories—they only live in the presence of another human. We tell them because we want to share our experiences with another person. We listen because we want to learn, be entertained, and share life with another human. In listening, we can look at our own lives through the lens of another of our kind. We all love stories, because stories are how we understand our relationships with each other. Stories are meant to be shared with human beings.

We will always have stories in one form or another, no culture can exist without them. But we will have better lives if we think carefully about the types of tales we tell and participate in. That might mean closing the browser and going back to what our ancestors had instead—the ordinary, everyday act of speaking or signing a story. Stories were not meant to be experienced on a screen, they were meant to be passed from person to person. Why did Emma and Lucie love my stories? It’s not that they were particularly thrilling plots, and I definitely am not the best storyteller. But they loved them because I was sharing with them, reacting, living the story with them. So why don’t you find someone older than you and ask them for a story. If you can, ask your grandparents and you’ll learn more about yourself while growing closer to them. Listening to a tale might be more inconvenient than indulging in a mass-produced digital story, but you’ll learn more, be better entertained, and best of all, enjoy the best of what it means to be human.

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### On Reading Aloud: How I Became a Story-Lover

At the end of a long day, sitting down and reading a story aloud might just feel like another tiring chore. Especially if your child insists on the same book that you've read ten times already in the past week. But reading aloud, though it takes time and tires your voice, is one of the most precious ways to spend time with kids. There are many reasons to read, beyond the very valid motive of getting kids to calm down so they can fall asleep. Reading aloud results in both cognitive and social development, but the benefits do not stop there (Duursma, 467). Books allow us to do many things. They let us enter new worlds, pursue adventure, and learn—all while enjoying ourselves. Reading books aloud creates a space where adult and child can experience the joy of books together, and through this experience, love each other. Learning is fun. Spending time together is fun. Reading aloud permits you to do both and makes the journey even more meaningful.

Some of my earliest memories are of learning to read. Mama and I sat on the futon next to the wide window in the living room, while I tried to sound out meaning from the big letters on the page. She had figured out early on, probably when teaching my older brother to read, that we young children would pretend to read while really guessing what the words said by looking at the picture. It wasn't that hard—when the stick man was sitting on the couch, the words were usually “I sat.” There were also a lot of cats and mats. So, perceptive Mama covered up the picture with a piece of paper, making me actually read the words before she would let me see it. It was hard, frustrating work to sound out those shapes that were never what you wanted them to be. And as we went along through the lessons, there were more and more letters to keep track of, and the block of text to read got longer. But it was worth it because the pictures got more interesting. I

had peeked at the back of the book and seen a picture of a tiger! That was far more fascinating than Sam who sat on a mat.

Finally, we got to the story about the tiger, and turned the last page in the thick book. I now was an official reader! I was definitely grown up now. As a celebratory prize, my parents gave me a big book with exciting stories about a girl named Madeline, with colorful pictures on every page that I could look at whenever I wanted. Since knowing how to read was also the requirement for getting a library card, we went to the library and I carefully etched my name on my very own card. Just as good as being able to check out any books I wanted was the notability of having one of those important plastic cards that adults had all sorts of. I soon discovered *Henry and Mudge* and haven't stopped reading since. Once I learned to read, the entire library, and thus the world, was cracked open for me to encounter and learn about.

Before I ever could read, I had the great fortune of being read to. It takes a lot of patience and vocal strength to read aloud to a child for an extended time, but our babysitter Emily had discovered the quieting spell that only an exciting read-aloud can cast. I and my siblings were happily oblivious of any ulterior motives for the stories, sitting on the futon and feeling regal in the array of varied books to choose from. Even more exciting was the power to choose and command the reading of any book. Emily always brought her own books with her, which was very exciting because they were new. She would come about once a week, and by then the books she had read to us last week were just as fresh and appealing as the week before, so we would ask for them over again. One I distinctly remember was *Silly Sally*. "Silly Sally went to town, walking backward upside down. On the way she met a pig, a silly pig who danced a jig!" My babysitter liked the book, and I could tell. She told the story of Sally with great verve and drama, pausing before turning the pages. Who would Silly Sally encounter next? Emily was a wonderful

reader of stories because she understood the value of participation. So I got to ask many important questions. “Why is the pig dancing? Can pigs really dance? Why is Sally copying the pig? Won’t all the blood go to her head?” I didn’t always wait for the answers, but I did have some great questions. By allowing us to choose the books and letting us make her read them over and over, Emily was already showing us the joy that comes from deep involvement in books.

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This early exposure to books as a source of pleasure helped motivate me to learn. Without the sense that there was excitement to be had in reading books, the struggle of figuring out the letters on the page would have been much more frustrating. Children learn through play, and reading often prompts play (Toub et al., 13). I remember a picture book about the silk train that my parents read to us, and how afterward we made trains out of living room chairs. *Little House on the Prairie* also sparked hours of imaginative work, wearing bonnets and riding around the neighborhood in our yellow wagon. Imaginative play based on stories not only develops language skills, vocabulary, and knowledge, (Douceff & Greenhalgh) but I saw firsthand how it encourages literacy—I wanted to read more of those wonderful books.

Papa read *The Hobbit* to my older brother Pascal, and Pascal loved it so much that he read *The Lord of the Rings* on his own. Pascal was so enraptured with the story that I wanted to know what happened. The only problem was I couldn’t read yet. So he would describe it to me, creating in my mind pictures of small hairy-footed hobbits who walked up mountains, dark forests, tall gleaming cities, brave maidens, and trees that could move. Our friends the McCullums also loved Tolkien’s Middle-Earth and so when we were together, we would act out elaborate dramas. We pretended to travel through the depths of the mysterious Fangorn Forest and run away from marauding orcs. But first, we needed to gather supplies. Mrs. McCullum

wanted to know why we were asking to empty one of her perfume bottles, and wasn't convinced by the argument that we really needed a glass vial for a healing potion. But Olivia scrounged up a small bottle from her own room and Mrs. McCullum let us use some food coloring to make the potion a magical blue. Once we had obtained such a cool prop, we had to use it, so Dan got wounded by an arrow and so we had to quickly tend to him in the playhouse. But the orcs surrounded us and we weren't sure we could get away. One of Olivia's brothers pointed out that I was shooting my pretend bow wrong, so he taught me how, and then we were able to narrowly escape.

These make-believe dramas made us practice teamwork, communication, and collaboration, but it was also sheer fun. No other type of entertainment could compare. Imaginative play can spark a desire to read, and this may be of interest to teachers for literacy development. Literacy development for the sake of academic and professional advancement is clearly important, but in the end what is the goal of reading? The end of reading must be something close to what we did with the McCullums. Entering a new world or perspective, encountering the thrill of adventure, finding joy in learning—this must be the point of books. And we can all experience this, including children who don't yet read.

Even after I and my siblings learned to read on our own, my parents still read aloud to us. Lots of my schoolwork was done sprawled on the carpet or couch, listening to Mama read. If there were pictures, we would lean on her shoulders to be able to see them. It was very soothing to be read to, a nice way to spend the afternoon. Sometimes Mama found it soothing as well. Her voice would get oddly distant, and slow down, like a spinning coin gradually succumbing to gravity. We'd be in the middle of a chapter of our history book and Mama would be reading:

“And then Eric the Red... had a son... named Lief... and...and...”

I'd look up and her eyelids would be drooping, but still open enough to keep reflexively reading the words on the page.

I'd say, "Mama!" and she'd blink and yawn, and say, "Was I falling asleep? Where were we?"

"We were at Lief."

"Leaf? What?"

"Leif!"

"Oh! Leif! Ok, yes. Eric the Red had a son named Lief, and they called him Lief Erickson. And he..."

would be back off into the fabled world of the Vikings.

History especially came alive through read-alouds. Mama would read about Athens and Sparta, and then we would cut out the paper dolls dressed like Athenians and Spartans, and wage paper wars well into the evening. Pascal's Spartan man wanted the Athenian woman, but my Athenian joined his Athenian's side, but then all of Andre's people joined the Spartan's side. Eventually, the Greeks were joined by a Roman centurion paper doll who beat some sense into them. Even later on Joan of Arc came along, but she was somewhat of a misfit because she was printed lengthwise on the paper so she towered over the rest of them. So then we just made our own paper dolls (the right size) and created an entire army and village, complete with a town blacksmith (he had a paper anvil), (paper)club-wielding bandits, and lots of paper horses with paper hooves (my contribution). And all this drawing and coloring and cutting was done, of course, while listening to Mama read aloud.

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Audiobooks were also a large part of my family's reading adventures and education. On long family car trips, it didn't take long for us to get bored and crabby. Around a half-hour into the ride, Andre would get start leaning his head on Hosanna's shoulder.

"Stop leaning on me!"

"I'm not!"

"Yes you are!"

"No, this is my part of the seat!"

Then Mama pushed a button and all went silent as the familiar strains of Lamplighter Theatre's intro reverberated through the speakers. We quoted along in our British accents: "You've been invited on an adventure...one you are about to experience." Long stretches of forest rolled by outside the window while we listened to the story of a girl trapped by snow in a Swiss Chalet.

Audiobooks transported us to many places. Not only figuratively, but literally. One summer, we listened to all seventeen CDs of *Living Principles of America*. Several CDs dealt with the story of independence. Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson all came alive through the voice actors. In fact, we were so enthralled with the story that we begged to listen to it whenever we were in the car, even if we were only going five minutes down the road to Kinney Drugs. It got to the point where we brought the CDs inside and listened to them on the living room stereo. Soon the story left the CDs and we became part of it, we began having our own Continental Congresses at the dinner table. There were loud cries of "Mister Speaker! Mister Speaker!" and pounding on tables and hearty "aye-ayes!" Pascal was often the Speaker of the House and would demand a vote on what bedtime should be.

"Motion that bedtime shall be postponed to 10:30 pm. Do I have a second?"

With grins we would say, “I second it!”

“I third it!”

“I fourth!”

Pascal would bellow, “The motion has been seconded. All who are in favor, say aye!”

Ayes would resound through the dining room.

“All who are opposed say nay!”

Very brief pause.

“The ayes have it!” Then cheers and jumping and rattling of the floorboards.

About then Papa came over from the kitchen and said, “I’d like to remind you that this household is not a democracy,” but he said it with a smile.

This is just one example of how learning was something that happened through the joy of experiencing stories. What otherwise might have been a boring history lesson that I never would have remembered now became an exciting family adventure. We learned how the Continental Congress debated and decided on crucial decisions by living it out in our own voices and bodies. Just as Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* made history come alive for millions of Americans through music, *Living Principles of America* did so for us—but we had it one better because we got to act it out ourselves.

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Mama would also read aloud for our bedtime story. One favorite series was about Mr. Pipes, a British organist who traveled through Europe with two American siblings, visiting ancient churches and retelling the stories of how famous hymns were written. Mama pulled out a spectacular Received Pronunciation accent for Mr. Pipes, and even better was Dr. Dudley, the Welsh physician. Sometimes there were so many rolled r's and Welsh interjections that we had

no idea what Mama was saying. At the end of each book were copies of the hymns mentioned in the stories. Mama would sing them to us so we could hear them. She knew most of them, and the others she would try to sight-read. Some of them we would learn and sing around the table after dinner.

Mama did most of the reading aloud in our family, but Papa sometimes read bedtime stories too. He would often read from the Dr. Seuss treasury. Our (and his) favorite was the masterful and moving piece of timeless literature titled, “Too Many Daves.” This is how the typical reading went:

Papa: “Did I ever tell you that Mrs. McCave...”

Then we chanted along by memory: “had twenty-three sons and she named them all Dave?”

Papa: “Well, she did. And that wasn’t a smart thing to do.

You see, when she wants one and calls out, ‘Yoo-Hoo!

Come into the house, Dave!’ she doesn’t get one.”

In unison: “All twenty-three Daves of hers come on the run!...”

Then Papa would get to ‘And often she wishes that when they were born, she had named one of them Bodkin Van Horn...’ and then the long list of names, and we could never keep up. It was a strange thing, but every time he read it, the names were just as funny. If I was really tired that night, it was even funnier, and I’d be rolling on the carpet by “Soggy Muff.” Andre would break into howls of glee at “Sir Michael Carmichael Zutt.” Then by the time Papa got to the grand finale and enunciated in portentous tones of solemnity, “Zanzibar Buck-Buck McFate,” the crowd would be wild with laughter and there was obviously no hope of sleep for at least another half hour. But “McFate” always got him as well and his face would break into a broad smile,

mostly because of how much we were laughing. We really could not think of anything funnier in the world than the name “Zanzibar Buck-Buck McFate.” For the rest of the week, he would only have to say those words and all his children would collapse to the floor in laughter. It must have been quite fun.

These times of reading aloud and sharing stories together are some of my fondest memories. Reading aloud to us was one of the best gifts our parents gave us. It encouraged me to read on my own, allowed me to encounter uncounted new ideas, people, and places, and offered me the joys of reading and imagination. Reading to kids helps them enormously later in life, with language development, cognition, academics, professional opportunities, and relationships. But those are not the only reasons to read. It is also one of the simplest, greatest pleasures you can offer. Reading is a chance to learn, to imagine, to find joy.

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## On Telling Stories

From the earliest age, humans love to tell stories. In the fall semester of 2020, I visited my cousin and her two-year-old daughter, Julia, for a class project where I was supposed to measure Julia's language development. Her mom was trying to get her to speak in past tense, but Julia had more pressing matters to deal with. She was busy making sure we and her doll Big Baby were well fed. She had a big plastic box full of different fake food and took great joy in serving us our dinners.

"You want some more crackers? There's your crackers. You want some other crackers? Oh ok, You can use this cracker. Here you go!" At only 27 months, she had the mother act down perfectly. She attended to all Big Baby's needs. "She wants some tomatoes. She wants to go in high chair. Is that too big for her? There's a tomato. OK, Big Baby. She wants a bottle but I don't have a bottle." She also did a good job of mothering me and my cousin. "Don't eat it yet because it's too hot. There's some ketchup ok? Where's your pretzel? Eat your lemon and then you can have a snack, ok?"

Julia, like many young children, loves to imagine. Many children like to dress up and draw pictures, and they often can spin elaborate stories to go along with their play. But what is the value in it? Why do we have this urge to tell stories? For Julia, the appeal of telling stories was to be able to enter an imaginary world where she got to be a mother. She got to take on a new role and find pleasure in pretending to take care of her doll and us. Imaginative play, according to research, is valuable in supporting a child's cognitive development (Hoffman & Russ 122). I find it remarkable that telling stories, something so educational for children, is also something that they do for fun. But the benefits of this imaginative work are also applicable to adults. One reason that stories are valuable is that they enable us to picture ourselves in a new

situation and practice being a different kind of person. This kind of imaginative work can help us develop new skills, conquer anxiety, and pursue growth.

I and my siblings were the same as Julia throughout our entire childhoods. Almost all our play had an imaginative element. My sister and I loved dress-ups. Our most-used costume pieces were not the fancy dresses, although we did love those, but the random scraps of fabric that could become anything: a grandmother's headscarf, a slave's skirt, a wounded soldier's bandage. We made up elaborate stories, which sometimes evolved into actual dramas which we performed for our parents.

When I was fourteen years old, I created a two-person musical for my sister and me to perform together, called *Sir Gyron and Antonius*. The story followed an evil medieval baron (Sir Gyron, played by myself) who was cruel to his serfs, especially one named Antonius (played by Hosanna). Antonius is imprisoned by Gyron but then breaks free. Gyron goes looking for him, but gets lost in the woods and stumbles across a hut owned by an old woman (Hosanna). Desperately hungry, he begs for food, and the old woman goes out and picks him a salad. After eating the salad, Gyron's throat becomes very itchy and he starts coughing uncontrollably. The old lady reveals that she fed him a salad made of nothing other than poison ivy! (I'd never tried eating poison ivy and didn't know what happened if you did, but at the time it seemed a brilliant idea for a plot twist.) The old woman makes a deal with Gyron to give him medicine to cure his itch if he will free his slaves, lower his taxes, and pay back money that he stole from his serfs. Gyron begrudgingly agrees. At that point, Hosanna's bonnet was supposed to casually fall off and reveal that she was actually Antonius in disguise. We always had trouble with that happening at the right time, so there was always this awkward pause where I nudged Hosanna and she would shake her head vigorously for a few seconds to try to get the bonnet to fall. Once

the bonnet was finally off and Antonius revealed, he skipped off the stage whistling a merry tune, while Gyron pouted.

We had a fabulous time practicing the musical and performing it for my family, and other than the bonnet scene it went pretty smoothly. There were several songs scattered throughout, which I had proudly composed for the performance. Hosanna and I tried to sing in our deepest, manliest voices. But since the longest song I composed was only 4 lines long, at least we didn't have to strain our voices too much. Hosanna and I wrote the lyrics together. Our favorite song was the one that Antonius sings as the old woman in the forest:

*I have a deal to make with you,*

*Here's medicine made out of bamboo!*

*It'll cure your itch,*

*and cure your cough, too,*

*But this is what you gotta do:*

*You have to free your slaves, you have to lower the taxes,*

*You have to pay back the money you stole before...*

The song actually didn't make it into the final performance because I thought "medicine made out of bamboo" didn't fit the medieval European setting for the play, and we couldn't think of a better rhyme.

Hosanna and I still sing this song and the others from *Gyron and Antonius* whenever something resurrects them from our memory. More than just a goofy drama we did together, this play has become a story that unites us, a creative act that we shared together and now cherish together. Imagining ourselves as Antonius and Gyron taught us valuable lessons about working as a team, communicating our desires to others, and pursuing shared goals. Telling stories



together allowed us to learn to work with others. In sharing this story with each other and with our family, we grew closer and now have delightful, shared memories. Stories allow us to participate more fully in life with others.

Children are not the only ones who love telling stories. My Opa (grandfather) is a quiet man, but in recent years he has started telling more stories when we visit him. I'm not sure if it's because his hearing is getting worse and he can't hear enough to have a conversation so he just decides that he will do the talking, or if he knows how thirsty I am for his stories, but either way, I always appreciate it. One story that I've heard multiple times is the story of his immigration to Canada. He grew up in the Netherlands in the 1930's and 40's, and as a young man was drafted to serve in the Dutch military in Indonesia. When he came back from the war, all of the jobs had been taken by men who hadn't had to leave. He had no work experience to recommend him for a job. At this time, Canada was opening wide its arms to Dutch immigrants, and hearing of others who had traveled there, he packed up his bags and left his small ancestral farm. On arriving in Canada, he got hired by a farmer who would feed and house him in exchange for working on his farm for one year. Opa took the train to Manitoba. But the mild Dutch winters hadn't prepared him for the windswept chill of the prairies. He only had a thin coat with no hood. He told us that at some points he was so cold that all he wanted to do was lie down in the snow and sleep. But he knew that if he did so, he would never get back up. By the grace of God, he made it through the winter, and as soon as he could he moved to southern Ontario, where he lives to this day. Opa has recounted this story several times, and in a way, it has become an origin story for me. This is how I come to know my family and myself. In sharing the story of his hardships with his children and grandchildren, Opa allows us to learn more about his, and thus our own, past.

My paternal grandparents are also great storytellers. Usually, it is my Grandpa who does most of the storytelling. My grandparents had a cuckoo clock and whenever we visited we would sit around, waiting for the cuckoo to come out. But it was even better to spend time with my Grandpa because he had a myriad of humorous anecdotes that would pop out at any moment. You never knew what phrase or fact would trigger his memory and then he would start in with, "There was one time back in the '60s..." The stories usually had some punch line that made us laugh and made them memorable, but they also dealt with some serious stuff. I learned a lot from Grandpa through his reminiscences.

Grandma didn't tell as many stories as Grandpa, but when she did, they were worth the wait, and we all listened closer. I remember one afternoon, sitting around the fire pit in my uncle's yard, looking out at the cornfields and smelling the ever-present odor of pigs that wafted over from the hog house. We had gathered to celebrate my grandparents' 65<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Someone happened to ask them about their wedding. Grandma told about how they met in grade school but didn't like each other till high school. After high school, she went to teacher's college and got a job as a teacher. They started dating, but then things were hurried up because my grandfather was drafted into the military. Grandma decided to drop her teaching job and get married to Grandpa so she could go with him wherever he was stationed. Grandma talked about the preparations for their wedding. She decided to serve fried chicken for the reception. So, the day before the wedding, Grandma was busy butchering and plucking all the chickens. She hung their bodies from a clothesline for the blood to drip out. Then she and her sisters chopped them up and baked them. For dessert, they decided to have Jello, made in fancy gelatin molds.

My parents, aunts, uncles, and I were all amazed by the fact that Grandma butchered her own chickens. It was hard to picture this quiet elderly woman nonchalantly hanging chicken carcasses from a clothesline. It made me respect her for her hard work and made me wonder what other skills she has that I do not know about. I was also amused by the idea of serving Jello as a fancy dessert at a wedding.

Through listening to stories from my grandparents, I was able to grow in relationship with them. I better understand their viewpoints and have learned about my own history. My grandparents love telling stories because they are a means of connection from one generation to the next. Sharing stories is an act of love in which you share a part of your life with another. Therefore, listening to stories is also an act of love. In the act of telling and listening, then swapping roles and telling and listening again, we find ourselves in each other.

Stories are vital to what it means to be human. From age two to ninety-two, we all love to tell stories. As seen above, are many reasons why as humans we love telling stories. They allow us to imagine ourselves in a new reality. They allow us to create something beautiful with others. They allow us to form mutual understanding. But most of all, what runs through these three examples, is that telling stories brings us joy. Julia found pleasure in imagining herself as a mother. My sister and I made a musical because it was great fun. My grandparents love telling stories because they found delight in sharing them. That is why we tell stories over and over. We love it because sharing our experiences with others brings us comfort and delight. There is pleasure in weaving a suspenseful or funny story. There is comfort in having someone commiserate with your sufferings. We tell stories because doing so is a vital way to understand and be understood, to show love, in a way that brings us joy.

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### Caterpillar Soup: Crossing Cultures with Story and Imagination

Creating stories together is a way to form a friendship. It is, in fact, such a powerful way to bond that it works even in the face of language and cultural barriers. As a child, I experienced this. When I was seven years old, my family lived in the west equatorial African country of Gabon. Our house was on the missionaries' compound and isolated from the rest of the village. The kids that lived in our neighborhood were the twelve children of the maintenance man who lived on the hospital compound. They spoke French and the local Gabonese language Nzebi. I and my siblings spoke only English and some basic French. It wasn't evident that we would become friends, but my mom got the relationship going by inviting them over for ice pops. Yolène, Gaël, and Nicholas were the closest to our ages, and they continued to visit from time to time to play Legos and climb the frangipani tree with us.

Down the hill from the hospital compound were the church and the pastors' houses, where the next closest neighbors our age lived. Naomi was one of the pastor's daughters, who I met one day after church. She was curious about the fairies I had been making out of the different types of flowers that grew on bushes around the church. Naomi was eleven years old, and I was only seven. We became friends, again through the influence of our parents. Our family visited Naomi's house, a concrete brick structure with a tin roof and paved concrete porch. There was a hill of sand outside that we climbed on. Naomi had an older brother, Nathan, which was perfect because he could be friends with my older brother. We often invited Naomi and Nathan up the hill to our house to go swimming in the pool or eat ice pops. It was hard to communicate with each other. I was shy and didn't know much French, and she didn't know much English. We couldn't really share jokes, or have extended conversations, so we had to do with less verbal

activities like tree climbing and splashing. Whenever we did try to communicate it involved a lot of gesturing.

My favorite activity to do with Naomi was to pretend cook. At the front door of our old brick house, unused because the back door was more convenient, were two porches and a half-circle stoop. The porches became our favorite play area. Growing next to these two small porches were tall fronds on bird of paradise plants, leafy hibiscus bushes with large-petaled red flowers, and a low-branching frangipani tree that produced fragrant, silky-petaled blossoms. Because these flowers were right there and there were enough blooms that my mom wouldn't mind if we picked some, we often used flowers and leaves as the raw material for our imaginations. I had a miniature tea set from my dad that I would bring outside and use for preparing meals with my little brother and with Naomi. Pink flowers became bacon, yellow flowers became eggs, and leaves became bread, plates, pots, baking sheets, or anything else that was needed. I think it was Naomi's idea to scavenge a tin can lid from the garbage burn pit and use it as a kitchen knife. We would roll up a bunch of leaves, and then slice them into shreds with the sharp edge of the can lid. It was very satisfying to see the little rolls of shredded leaves falling away in neat slices. We reveled in our competency as amateur housekeepers. Cooking was something we were both familiar with.

Going on a walk one day and noticing tall grasses that looked like wheat, I became enamored with the idea of making bread. I tried to explain to Naomi how we could collect the heads of grain from the grass, grind them into flour... and from there my understanding of how to make bread was a bit confused. Mix it with water? Since my French also failed me at that point and since there wasn't any tall grass near our porch, we stuck to our flower dinners and never

tried out the grass bread recipe. However, we were fortunate enough to learn other recipes from a Master Chef.

The Master Chef was a missionary kid who had grown up in our house, and then returned as an adult to visit. She had also engaged in the delights of pretend cooking and divulged to us her secret recipe for making Orange Soda. The process was simple: smash a piece of broken brick with another brick and grind it until you had a handful of fine brick dust. Then quickly stir it into a cup of water. The result was an orange liquid that looked like Fanta. The best part was that the brick dust and water caused some sort of reaction that made it fizz. I and my brothers were amazed by this trick, and we went into high production of Orange Soda. One of the bricks on the brick railing had a chink in the middle, and so it became our mortar for grinding brick powder. For a while we made dozens of cups of fake Fanta per day, mixing it in my miniature teacups and plastic juice cups that we borrowed from the kitchen. My siblings and I were excited to show it to Naomi and the other neighborhood kids, who were sufficiently impressed as well. We were able to share our excitement because “C’est Fanta!” was something we knew how to say in French. Although we came from very different cultures, we all knew what Fanta was, and could appreciate the fun of making something that looked like it.

An unexpected quirk of nature brought extra interest to my cooking adventures with Naomi. One day, dead caterpillars started to show up on the cooking porch. I don’t know why they chose that spot to die, but their fuzzy carcasses increased in number daily till it was hard to walk without stepping on one. Naomi and I borrowed brooms from the house and swept out the dead caterpillars. But the next day when we came back, there were even more. It turns out that being grossed out at dead bugs is also something universal. Naomi and I and Naomi’s little sister cleaned out the cooking porch again.

Later, when we returned and found more caterpillars, we decided that since they were all coming to the kitchen, we might as well use them for cooking. But the dead caterpillar soup wasn't particularly appealing. Compared to our usual fare of flower salad, it was not haute cuisine. So what would we do with all the caterpillar dishes that we had made? The caterpillars looked like they were probably poisonous. Obviously, the caterpillar soup could not be fed to respectable people. Suddenly, I had an idea for a story we could act out and wanted to express it to Naomi. I knew the word *géant* in French because it was similar to the English "giant," and I fortunately had learned the word for "mean." I told her, what if there were *géants méchants* (evil giants) attacking us? Giants are always hungry. Making use of other easy-to-remember French words, I said that the giants might stop by our *restaurant*, and we could feed them *la soupe*. Naomi and I developed our plan. We were brave resistance fighters, using our skills as chefs to beat the evil giants. We wrapped the poisonous caterpillars up in sandwiches of perfectly delectable green banana leaves, to trick the giants into eating them. We hid caterpillars in the colorful flower salad and devised all sorts of new recipes to lure the giants into eating the caterpillars. By the time Naomi and her sister had to go home, we had defeated the giants, and also cleaned the porch of caterpillar bodies. It was a glorious day. Through telling a story together, Naomi and I had been able to bond despite the language barriers.

Later that summer I invited Naomi and Nathan to my birthday party. They brought a gift for me—3 yards of green and yellow patterned cotton and a red plastic bowl. I enjoyed the matching pants and shirt from the cloth, but always wondered why they gave me a plastic bowl. I had assumed it was because they did not have anything else on hand to give me. Thinking back on it, it was probably a bowl for making caterpillar soup to kill any evil giants in my way.



## Telling Tales on the Trail: How Stories Help Us Through Hardship

When we talk about stories, often what first comes to mind is reading picture books to children. But what does it mean to participate in the imaginative reality of storytelling as an adult? What benefits can adults gain from using their imaginations in telling and listening to stories?

In January of 2020, I took a unique college class called "Wilderness Encounter." For this class, we went on a wilderness canoeing and backpacking trip in Texas, read books about spiritual development, and practiced living in community with others. We drove to Big Bend National Park and paddled the Rio Grande and hiked the desert mesas. It was amazing to see this landscape, totally different from any I had experienced before. The plants were so different that they seemed like something out of a science-fiction book: the thin spindly arms of the ocotillo that reached up to 9 feet tall, the geometrical "living rock" succulent impossible to find among the limestone gravel, the sotol with sharp-toothed leaves and a 10-foot stalk, the hundreds of short cacti scattered on the ground, some with so many spines they looked like white fluff balls. There were all sorts of prickly pears—green prickly pears, purple prickly pears, blind prickly pears with microscopic spines that were the hardest to remove if you had the misfortune to brush against them. There were also the tall yuccas that reminded us of Truffula trees, and the curved clusters of agave with leaves ending in stiff points, fittingly nicknamed the "shin dagger." Our instructor warned us that everything in the desert was trying to kill us, and it definitely felt like it sometimes.

On the first day of our hike, the dry air was thrumming with the promise of adventure. We had just come from a week and a half of canoe camping and I was excited to go backpacking for the first time. We drove to the trailhead in high spirits, belting out songs from *Mulan* and

Tarzan while the 15-passenger van rattled over the dusty roads. As the outlines of the mesas rose from the horizon, our excitement rose as well. At the trailhead, we tumbled out of the vans and unloaded our packs from the trailer. We put on sunscreen, and help each other lift on our packs, and took a group photo. Our instructor went around adjusting straps and offering advice. My pack felt like it wasn't fitting right. It must have been a common complaint that our packs didn't feel right because several people mentioned it. Our group leader and instructor finally addressed us all, and said,

“Your backpack will not feel comfortable. While backpacking you can't walk like you normally walk—you lean over a lot more. Also, if you trip and fall, your instinct will be to catch yourself with your hands. But since you have so much weight on your back, that can break both bones in your wrist. So if you find yourself falling, try to turtle—twist so that you land on your pack.”

I was starting to feel a bit discouraged. I knew the packs were going to be heavy, but I didn't know it would feel like this. It was awkward to walk. Was there any way I could lighten my pack? We had already packed the bare minimum of supplies, food, clothing, and water, so there was nothing to do but suffer it. One of the most significant weights in our packs was the water. Since we were in the desert, there were only a few places where we could get water, and had to bring enough along to sustain us until then. In addition to our two liters of personal water, each of us carried four 2-liter soda bottles. These repurposed soda bottles, with strings duct-taped onto them to make them easier to tie onto our packs, were used to carry the extra water we would need for drinking and cooking and washing hands. In addition to the water and the tent parts, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, food, stoves, pots, and clothes, we were also each carrying a helmet

and harness for rappelling. Our packs were easily sixty pounds each. But with nothing we could do to lighten them, we set off in the fresh morning air.

Whenever we took water breaks, I tried doing all the tricks to take some of the weight off my back. I rested my pack against a rock. I leaned forward and rested the top of the pack on my poles. I lifted the top frame of the pack with my hands so that it rested on my upper back and stopped digging into my hips. When we stopped for lunch in the shade of a sandy hill, we were all so relieved to unstrap our packs and drop into the dirt. We dragged out our lunch as long as we could, knowing that afterward, we would have to put those awful things on our backs again. I drank water from my bottle to lighten my load. I encouraged my cook group partners to eat lots of honey and cheese on their tortillas, since those were some of our heaviest food items, and I was carrying the lunch food.

“Anyone need more water? Take some of mine!” I offered the group.

Soon we had to put our packs on again. The terrain was fairly smooth—we wound around and over countless undulating mounds of sand and gravel, dotted with sotol, prickly pear, and sagebrush. We kept to the washes—seasonal stream beds—as much as we could because they provided relatively smooth paths. We trudged in single file up the winding stream beds, our heavy boots sinking in the soft sand. Below our feet, we could see the ripples left by the water that was now long gone. The banks of the washes were sometimes high enough that they formed a ledge that we could rest our packs on. The temperature was fairly pleasant as well—the sun was bright, but since it was January, not oppressively hot. But still, I felt miserable. The pack’s weight rested on my hipbones and shoulders. I had followed another hiker’s advice and tied a fleece around my waist for more padding, but I could still feel bruises forming on my hips. I

reapplied sunscreen because I wanted to avoid any additional pain. *Why did I sign up for this?* I started to wonder.

Our instructor must have felt the mood of the group going down, so he started a trail game similar to “20 Questions.” What was “4 W on a C” ( Four Wheels on a Car) or “13 C in B-D” (13 Cookies in a Baker’s Dozen)? It was good to distract ourselves, and we guessed for about half an hour, but it was hard to hear all the guesses down the line of seventeen hikers. Eventually, the game fizzled out.

The sun started to dip into the west and I became more miserable. I was desperate to get to camp. All I wanted was to take the pack off my back. The group’s pace had slowed considerably. Our feet dragged through the dust. How many more gravelly mounds would we have to circumvent before we could drop our packs and camp for the night? Time felt stretched and endless as the desert hills.

Then the hiker behind me said, “Emma, tell me a story.”

I was surprised and a bit taken off guard. “What kind of story?” I asked.

“Um, I don’t know. Maybe an interesting family vacation?” she said.

I thought for a second. Usually, I wasn’t that good at thinking up stories on the spot. In another situation, I would have balked and declined the suggestion. But in this situation, I knew that I needed to tell a story, even if I was struggling for breath. I needed something, anything to distract me from the pain and self-pity swarming around me. Suddenly I thought of a story I could tell. It wasn’t anything stunning, just more of an anecdote, but anything would do at this point.

“Well, one time my family went on a car trip. I was about four or five. We were driving down to Florida to visit friends. On the way, we stopped to visit friends in Georgia. When we got

to their house, they were both still at work. So we waited in the car for a bit, but some of us needed to use the bathroom. We checked the front door, but it was locked. This was before cellphones were widespread, so we couldn't contact them. We walked around to the backdoor, but all the doors were locked. Then we saw the doggie door. I was small enough to fit through it. I crawled through, and then with the direction of my parents on the other side of the door, figured out how to unlock it and let them in. When our friends came home, they were surprised and a little unhappy that we had broken into their house. I became good friends with their dog Bruce, who I felt a connection to since we used the same door."

My fellow hiker chuckled a bit (not much, she was out of breath too).

"Now it's your turn," I said. "Do you have a family vacation story?"

We swapped stories for a while, talking about car trips, and pets, and siblings.

Eventually, we ran out of ideas or got too tired to talk anymore. But I was shocked when the next time the scouts gave us the report of how far we had left that we had traveled a mile in what felt like ten minutes. Trading stories had made the time go four times as fast as before.

Finally, we made it to camp. It was such relief to drop the sweaty pack to the ground. We spent the rest of the evening setting up camp, cooking, and learning about backcountry living. It was nice to spend time around the stove and eat food that tasted so good because we were so hungry. But then after dinner, the hikers who were going to be student "leaders of the day" for the next day told us what we had to do. Today had been mostly flat terrain, no elevation gain, but tomorrow we were going up the mesa. We were also going to stop and filter water, which would take at least an hour from our schedule. Total we were going to have to hike 6 miles—not far, unless you are carrying sixty pounds and gaining significant elevation. I was miserable again the

rest of the night. That was two miles further than we had hiked today. If I had been that miserable on the first day, how much worse was it going to be tomorrow?

The next day was the most physically demanding day of my life. We awoke far before dawn, cooked and ate and packed up camp. We hoisted our backpacks onto our bodies, which immediately groaned for release. *Why did I decide to do this?* I kept asking myself. We left our camping site just after sunrise and meandered around the bottom of the mesa, the scouts of the day trying to find the trail up. Finally, we found the path, if you could call it that. We started our ascent as the sun got warmer. One girl started developing blisters. By the time we stopped for lunch, they were already bleeding. She wrapped a bandage of gauze and tape around them, and we divided up some of her load; her pots and tent fly. She was obviously the most miserable so we felt sorry for her, but we were also in so much pain that we couldn't fully care or attend to her.

We took frequent breaks, to drink and give our backs rest, but constantly haunted by the knowledge that every second we took now would be another second that we had to like later into the evening, another second later before we made it to camp, another second before we could crawl into our sleeping bags. We never felt rested from our brief breaks.

I decided to use the tactic that had proved so useful the day before. I asked the hiker in front of me to tell me a story, any story. I gave her suggestions for topics. We traded stories like I had yesterday. I retold some of the same stories because I couldn't think of anything new. I enjoyed hearing about her pet dogs and how they got into mischief. After a break, when our hiking order changed, I recommenced with another person. But when the sun reached a certain point and the trail got even steeper, we had to drop the storytelling and focus all our energy on slowly inching our way up the slope. Toothed sotol leaves cut red lines into our arms and legs as

we brushed past them. I felt my face growing red and sweaty, and ahead and behind me all the hikers were panting heavily.

Near the top of the mesa, we stopped for water from the tinaja—a place where a waterfall had carved out a natural reservoir that stays filled with water throughout the year, even when all streams are dried up. The water of the shallow, shaded pool was quite green before we pumped it through our filters. Back-flushing our filters created a little jet of green goo—“concentrated giardia” our instructor warned. It was hard work pumping water, but we enjoyed sitting in the shade, with our packs happily left on the dirt. We took more time than we should have, and our instructor became frustrated with us for dawdling. Eventually, we put our packs back on and continued. My legs felt heavy, and my feet were swollen inside my boots. The afternoon dragged on. The desert was beautiful in its untouched glory around us, but I could not appreciate it. My hip and knees were aching. “This can’t be good for my joints,” I told myself.

We were on top of the mesa now, but whoever had named it a “mesa” or “table” obviously had never been up here, because the top was anything but flat. We went up and down, winding along the edges of slopes, scrambling over rocks. Suddenly the girl in front of me stopped. She was the one with blisters, the one with tears running down her cheeks from the pain, but who had to keep hiking. Each of us had an assigned plant we were supposed to look out for and educate the others about, and she had been having trouble. Hers was the “living rock” and as you might guess from its name, it was a very well camouflaged plant. She had told us to keep our eyes out for a small, flat succulent that looked like a rock. All throughout the canoeing portion whenever we saw a type of lichen or fungus that looked flat, we asked, “is this living rock?” She would look at it carefully and deliberate. “Maybe, not sure.” Later someone would see something else and say, “This one must be it!” She’d say, “Well, maybe, but that doesn’t look

quite right." We are all wondering if we would ever find it. Maybe it was too rare to find after all. Then suddenly, in the middle of that withering afternoon on top of the mesa, she stopped. She pointed with her trekking pole: "That's living rock!" She was emphatic. We were elated. We all gathered around and goggled at the small plant on the ground. We admired its thick, silver-green leaves. We marveled at its sly camouflage and how perceptive she had been to notice it. It was a brief moment of celebration in an otherwise grueling day.

After the excitement of finding the living rock, the mood of the group returned to misery. Our instructor had told us that we kept taking too long on our breaks and if we slowed any more, we would be hiking in the dark. On our breaks, the leaders of the day would say "packs off!" and we'd hurriedly drop our packs to the ground. Then we'd slowly sit, our muscles protesting. I didn't want to move, but I knew I had to drink water so I'd get up again and get my water bottle from my pack. By the time I put it back, the leaders would be saying "packs on!" We had to ask two others to help lift our heavy packs so we could wrangle our arms back into the shoulder straps and re-cinch the waist straps. Then help lift another person's pack, and we would be back on the trail. The scouts told us "almost there!" but after fifteen minutes turned into half an hour and then an hour, we became angry at them for giving us false hope. The sun drifted down towards the hills.

Then some of my fellow hikers started singing camp songs. The dumb obnoxious ones that get stuck in your head. In any other situation, I would have been annoyed, but now it was blissful relief. Anything to distract my brain from the pain of each step was an undeniable blessing. As the sunlight faded, we cycled through all the campfire songs we could think of. We racked our memories for nursery rhymes to sing to the tune of "If you don't know your nursery rhymes," and came up with all the verses we could think of for "Down By the Bay."



Telling stories and singing songs together relieved our misery and pain, if only in our minds. Knowing and sharing them together is what made it possible to suffer and be relieved together. We wouldn't have made it to camp that night if we hadn't had our imaginations.

Being a Part of Christ's Story: Reading as a Christian with the Orthodox Lectionary, Lewis,  
Tolkien, Boersma, and O'Connor

Two of my most memorable experiences at college happened in a British Literature class on the Inklings. In class, we were discussing Lewis's essay "Myth Became Fact," in which Lewis describes the importance of concrete reality, or sensory experiences, to our understanding. Lewis then argues the remarkable claim that "the heart of Christianity is a myth which is also fact" (58). The Christian story has all the mystery and depth and magic of the most ancient myths which speak to the core desires of humanity, and yet it also took place in history. In class, we asked the question: why is it significant that at its heart, the Christian religion is a story?

As part of this discussion of our faith as a story, we visited Christ the Savior Orthodox Church in Harrisburg. The priest welcomed us into the bright church where late afternoon sunlight streamed through the side windows. Above us and all around the walls were the warm and vibrant hues of icons, bringing to life scenes from the Bible. The priest walked us through the church, pointing out different icons, asking us if we could recognize the story being told, and explaining the details we missed. One of the most stunning aspects of the icons, aside from their beautiful colors and rich imagery, was the way they were arranged on the walls. The scenes and layout had been carefully chosen so that one was led to see the parallels between seemingly unrelated stories of the Scriptures. The Tower of Babel and Pentecost were painted opposite to each other, creating a story arc between them from creation to ascension. Jesus on the cross was surrounded by images from the Old Testament: Moses with his arms outstretched, the sacrifice of Isaac, and Isaiah's vision of the suffering servant. The priest pointed out that all these Old Testament stories in some way foreshadow the crucifixion of Christ. He explained that these connections are brought to light by the Orthodox liturgies, which place different sections of the

Scriptures in conversation with each other. The Orthodox lectionary reveals the hidden connections between different parts of the story (Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia). The icon depicting Christ's resurrection was also framed by images from the Old Testament. It was surrounded by Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fire, and Jonah coming out of the fish after three days. The priest explained to us that each of these stories is a miniature of Christ's resurrection. It was amazing to be in the church, surrounded by the beautiful icons, and seeing lines of connection appear between the many biblical scenes and characters I'd never thought of as related before. Through these parallels, the whole of the Bible was woven together into one continuous story, complete with foreshadowing and echoes and one enormous arc that consummated in redemption and rebirth.

Another exciting experience in our Inklings class was our weekly recitations. Each member of the class would pick a favorite passage from one of the readings and on their assigned day would share it out loud for the rest of the class to enjoy basking in the beauty of the words. I signed up for the earliest possible date because I just wanted to get my recitation over with. I recited a quote from Tolkien's poem "Mythopoeia" that I loved. The quote was from a section where Tolkien explains why we love to tell stories. It went like this:

Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build  
gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right  
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.

We make still by the law in which we're made (Tolkien, 87).

I loved this section because it tells how as humans we are made to tell stories because of our nature as created beings. But in my anxiety almost forgot my recitation halfway through. Most other members of the class were equally nervous, with one exception.

The day of Aeowyn's recitation, she strode to the front of her class with a walking stick, a long cloak, and bare feet. She proceeded to launch into Bilbo's farewell speech from the opening of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. She was a spectacular orator, had the speech perfectly memorized, and paused at all the right moments. Inspired by her excitement, we embraced our role as the audience, the partygoers. As if by a magic spell, the classroom transformed into Hobbiton's party field and the rest of us in our seats became the hobbits, clapping and cheering and shouting out "Hear, hear!" We applauded and made merry and yelled out "Proudfeet!" right on cue. It was great fun, partly because we were a bunch of Tolkien nerds in a room together, and partly because we were unexpectedly catapulted into the lived experience of one of our favorite stories.

Stories naturally invite participation. We enjoy reading about fictional characters because we can live life vicariously through them. The Christian story provides the ultimate experience of participating. We are invited into the story of redemption. We have a role to play, not merely as an audience, but as members of a fellowship, set out on a journey. Our faith is a story, and we are invited to be a part of the narrative.

But many episodes in the Christian cosmic narrative are dark—God sending a flood to wipe out humankind? Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac? Tyrants throwing young men into furnaces and lion's dens? To think we tell these stories to children! It makes us ask if we really want to be a part of this story. But perhaps there is a hidden benefit in the fact that so many stories of the Bible are horrifying. They reflect true life. Senseless death and pain surround us in

this world. But the Christian stories teach us to look for the overarching truth—that God loves us. The Old Testament is a story of God’s love in forgiving and rescuing his people over and over.

We can be a part of these stories because not only are they literal, but they are also analogical and allegorical. They are firmly grounded in the milk, honey, and vinegar of Ancient Near East culture, but they also can apply to our own lives. A Medieval way of reading the Scriptures is called the four-horsed chariot, or Quadriga (Soulén, 97). It says that the Bible can be interpreted in four ways: literal, typological, tropological, and anagogical (Soulén, 97). The literal sense is important and foundational—it involves knowing what is going on in the scene and understanding the words of the text. Problems often arise from not paying attention to the literal meaning. The typological reading looks for symbols and ways in which the text’s characters mirror other characters in the Bible or in life (Soulén, 98). For example, many figures in the Old Testament are mirrors of Christ. Typological reading is how we find the connection between Moses and Jesus, between Babel and Pentecost. Thirdly, the anagogical reading asks what this passage says about God’s plan for the future. Finally, the tropological is the moral interpretation—the practical question of how this passage informs how we should act.

Through these allegorical ways of reading the stories of Scripture, we understand the whole story more completely. Through typological reading, we can see the full story in conversation with itself. In anagogical reading, we see what the story tells us about the future. Through tropological or moral reading we can also find how the story speaks to our present moment. As theologian Hans Boersma points out, we need these spiritual interpretations of scripture to see scripture as relevant and to achieve Christ and the Church’s goal of “drawing people into the life of the triune God” (139). There is Biblical precedent for reading scriptures

this way. The New Testament writers and Jesus himself often go back to Old Testament texts and explain them typologically and morally. For example, in Acts 8 when Philip is talking to the Ethiopian official, he explains Isaiah 53 in a typological way that points to Christ (Boersma, 140). Jesus himself does this with the Old Testament on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. By making use of these methods of reading, we can see how our lives connect to the stories of the Bible. This type of theological interpretation of the Bible, focused on Christ, allows Christians to see how their lives are part of the story (Boersma, 149). The stories are Fact, in that they literally happened in a specific historical context, but are also Myth, in how they are transcendent and reach into all parts of life.

Why is it significant that the Christian faith is ultimately a story? God created us as embodied souls, who have thinking minds but ultimately best experience things through our senses. Because of that, God decided to incarnate truth in something we can experience. Stories make abstract truth tactile and observable to our imaginations. As Flannery O'Connor argued, we can only experience the world through our senses. "Every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses" (176). And therefore, the details of Christ's story are important, because it is through the depiction of the details of place and time and weather and character that the stories come alive in our imaginations. Our understanding of ultimate, transcendent truth is mediated by our imaginative and sensory reaction to stories of people: Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Mary and Joseph and Jesus. We can only understand through the specifics, through the senses. Knowing this limitation of our human bodies and minds, God chooses to speak to us in ways that we can experience. O'Connor continues: "Christ didn't redeem us by a direct intellectual act, but became incarnate in human form, and he speaks to us now through the mediation of a visible church"

(176). The Christian faith is unique because it is not merely a set of doctrines, but rather embraces a physical, personal, and sensory manifestation of the invisible, through its use of story. The fact that these characters were real people, who we can hear stories about, is marvelous. The fact that the stories also convey layers and layers of deeper meaning that allow us to think allegorically and apply the story to our lives makes it even more marvelous. The Christian story is not merely a myth and not merely fact. It is both.

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