

Feeding the God-Hungry Imagination: The Role of Narrative in Youth Spiritual Formation & Worship

*Since all the world is but a story, it were well for thee to buy the more enduring story,
rather than the story that is less enduring.*

- Attributed to St. Columba of Iona, sixth century

I. Opening thoughts

- *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005) = Talks about “pervasive teen inarticulacy” in matters of faith (131) and of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” as the “de facto religion” of American teenagers, no matter what historical faith they may claim (162).
- “In our in-depth interviews with U.S. teenagers, we also found the vast majority of them to be *incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives” (*Soul Searching*, 131).
- “Philosophers like Charles Taylor argue that inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality. So, for instance, religious faith, practice, and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them. **Articulacy fosters reality.**” (*Soul Searching*, 267-8).
- *The Godbearing Life* = “Believing in God is not the issue; believing God *matters* is the issue” (15).

II. Defining “Imagination”:

- “We make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”
- J. R. R. Tolkien, from “On Fairy Stories,” from *The Tolkien Reader*, 75
- “The imagination is that faculty which gives form to thought.” - George MacDonald, from “The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture,” from *The Heart of George MacDonald*, 416
- Imagination is ‘the Mind’s Eye’
- “For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”
- C. S. Lewis, from *Selected Literary Essays*, 265
- The imagination is how we put things together.



IV. Defining “story”

A. Story is made up of four basic elements:

Character

Plot

Setting

Tone

Story also follows a basic thematic structure or pattern: This is what we call *form*. Plot is a pattern of events; form is a pattern of themes. It's similar to *genre*.

- Flannery O'Connor: "In the act of writing, one sees that the way a thing is made controls and is inseparable from the whole meaning of it. The form of a story gives it meaning which any other form would change..." (*Mystery & Manners*). To ignore a story's form is to risk missing what the story *means*, and this goes for both hearer and teller.

V. Worship as Story

	Story elements in worship
Character	
Plot	
Setting	
Tone	
Form	

► Q: What story is your church telling?

IV. Closing Thoughts

As the church, we are not just offering facts. We're not just offering truth. We're offering *meaning*. We're offer a world that is patterned and formed in a particular way, in a particular setting, with a particular cast of characters, and with a beginning, middle, and end. The church is a "narratable world." It does more than merely inform or merely entertain. It *enchants*. It nurtures the God-hungry imagination, immersing young people in a lived story and a communal identity, helping them to embrace the grammar and narrative that shapes their way of life.

For more information:

- *The God-Hungry Imagination: The Art of Storytelling for Postmodern Youth Ministry*, by Sarah Arthur (Upper Room Books, 2007).
- *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, by James K. A. Smith
- *The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing*, edited by Leland Ryken. Revised edition. (Shaw Books/WaterBrook Press, 2002).
- *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry*, by Fred Edie (Pilgrim Press, 2007). Edie directs the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation, a two-week camp for rising juniors and seniors. The heart and focus of the camp is worship and the sacraments: by week two the youth are planning and leading evening worship.
- *Patterned by Grace: How Liturgy Shapes Us*, by Daniel T. Benedict, Jr. (Upper Room, 2007) *Worship Feast* resources, by Cokesbury
- Langston Hughes' play "Black Nativity" (1961) contains one of the best fictional depictions of worship-as-story that I've ever seen. The audience becomes the congregation.
- <http://godhungryimagination.blogspot.com>