

The Importance of Imagination for C.S. Lewis and for us

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In 2000, *Christianity Today* [polled](#) its contributors on the top ten books of the twentieth century, and *Mere Christianity* came in first place by a significant margin. C.S. Lewis's popularity has shown no sign of waning since then and, if anything, it is increasing. What is the key to Lewis's continuing impact? Lewis had a precision with words, the empathy to understand people's deepest struggles, a rhetorical skill to order his ideas clearly and persuasively, a breadth of learning, an amazing memory, and an ability to tell stories. If I had to pick one ability to account for Lewis's ongoing popularity, however, it would be his ability to combine reason and imagination.

This ability was powered in part by Lewis' wide reading habits and prodigious memory. With regard to his memory, Lewis said that he was "cursed" with not being able to forget anything he read. There are a few stories that illustrate this capacity. Stephen Schonfield, in his book, *In Search of C.S. Lewis*, cites the story of how at a farewell dinner when Lewis left Oxford for Cambridge, he commented to Richard Selig, an American Rhodes Scholar, that he was having a problem with writing poetry:

"The difficulty is that I remember everything I've ever read and bits pop up uninvited."

'Surely not everything you've ever read Mr. Lewis?'

'Yes everything, Selig, even the most boring texts.'

Selig proceeded to go to the college library and "took out a volume of a long and little read poem. He read a few lines."

"Stop," said Lewis, who lifted his eyes toward the ceiling and began to recite the poem. He stopped after ten lines or so and looked at Selig, now very silent. Conversation was slow to resume at that end of the table."

Other accounts of his amazing memory are sprinkled throughout the stories of his friends. This capacity to remember clearly philosophical literature as well as fiction and poetry gave him vast resources to draw on in his writing.

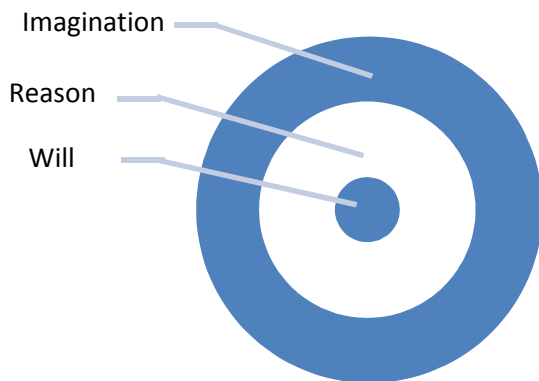
The combination of imagination and reason was incredibly important to Lewis. At the end of his chapter, "Bluspels and Flalansferes," in *Selected Literary Essays*, he enunciates the principle: "Reason is the natural organ of truth, imagination is the organ of meaning." In the context of that essay he argued that we do not really grasp the meaning of any word or concept until we have a clear picture or image we can connect with it. The practical effect of this belief in Lewis's writing was that even in the midst of an apologetic argument, he provided just the right picture, image, or metaphor to help the reader grasp the meaning of an argument. For instance, note the use of image or analogy in this quote from *The Weight of Glory*:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

The “mud pies” and the “holiday at the sea” help us glimpse what it means to be “far too easily pleased.” Most of Lewis’s major ideas are also developed in his fiction. Alan Jacobs, in his biography of Lewis, argues that every significant theme in Lewis’s philosophical or apologetic writing is also expressed in the *Narnia* chronicles. This parallel could be illustrated in other writings. For instance, C.S. Lewis could give an argument against relativism in *Abolition of Man* or effectively counter it in his novel *That Hideous Strength*.

Imagination and Faith

Imagination played a key role in Lewis’s conversion, and he thought it might also help others in their journey. Through the reading of George MacDonald’s Christian fantasy *Phantastes*, Lewis reported that a new quality, “a bright shadow,” leapt off the page and “baptized” his imagination. Later he described the new quality as “holiness.” This was only the beginning of his journey, but it led to everything looking differently for Lewis. He said it took a while for the rest of him to catch up. He still needed to confront certain rational objections to the faith and finally to submit his will, but the process had begun. You could portray the process visually this way:



An important issue in Lewis’ conversion was the emerging contradiction between his reason and his imagination. Referring to his youthful retreat into fantasy and myth, he says in *Surprised by Joy*:

Such, then, was the state of my imaginative life; over against it stood the life of my intellect. The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast.

Later, of course, through a combination of many factors, the tension was resolved. Reason and imagination were united. First Lewis’s imagination was baptized, then his reason satisfied, then his will submitted. He thought that his own writing might be helpful in that same process in others’ lives. Certainly Lewis’s *Narnia* chronicles have baptized the imaginations of many of its readers. Lewis isn’t alone when it comes to authors whose fiction has had this same impact on audiences. Chris Mitchell, who for many years was the head of the Wade Center at Wheaton College, said it was Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy that baptized his imagination. It is important to also note that other worldviews are out to capture imagination as well. George Lucas told Joseph Campbell that he wanted *Star Wars* to prepare a generation for the New Age or Eastern perspective. Atheist Phillip Pullman is consciously anti-Lewis and anti-Narnia. He is trying to use his *Dark Materials* trilogy to capture the imagination of a new generation for atheism. The first book of his series *The Golden Compass* has been made into a film. Certainly the imagination is crucial. Jean Paul Sartre’s popularity was due to the fact that he could write philosophy such as *Being and Nothingness* and also plays such as *No Exit*.

In any case, Lewis thought his own writings could get past the “watchful dragons” of our religiosity and help us see a fresh aspect of our own faith that we may have neglected.

Learning to Use Reason and Imagination

What can we learn from Lewis? Although we might not have his amazing memory, we can learn from his use of reason and imagination.

1. Reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning. People will never fully grasp the meaning of our words unless we can use images, metaphors, analogies, or stories to bring it home.

2. In evangelism, it is possible to neglect, to our detriment, the “baptism of imagination.” It is possible to appeal directly to the reason or the will, but we may need to address a preliminary step – the imagination. This might be a kind of pre-evangelism, important to Lewis and many after him. Lewis’s books might be this vehicle, and so could Tolkien’s. So could a movie, a novel, or a biography.



3. People are on a spectrum from being very open to discussing issues of faith to being very closed. A rule of thumb might be that the more open a person is to discussing these issues, the more direct forms of communication can be used (reason, apologetics, appeals to believe); the more closed a person is, the more indirect forms of communication need to be used (questions, parables, stories). Jesus was a master of this second approach. He often responded to a question with a question when he spoke with closed people. He also told parables so that closed people might see themselves, as in a mirror (i.e. the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan). This indirect form of communication is most often in the realm of the imagination.

It would be worth reflecting on Lewis’s quote – “Reason is the natural organ of truth, imagination is the organ of meaning” – and ask a few questions. How could this insight help me in teaching or preaching? Have I incorporated this insight into my evangelism? How much more do I need to grasp the meaning of my own faith and what resources might be helpful to do this? Hint: A good place to start (but not stop) is with C.S. Lewis’s writings.

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