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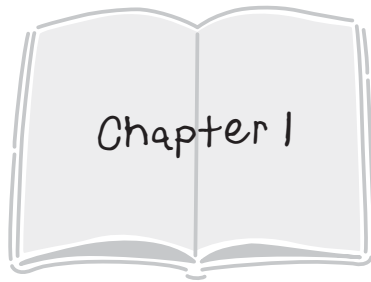
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## Bequest of Wings

I'm going to play in the Hundred Acre Wood," said the small boy who lived at our house.

I knew what he meant and where he was going, and so I said, "Fine. If you see Owl, be sure to ask him about Eeyore's tail."

We knew about Eeyore, Pooh, Piglet, Owl, and Christopher Robin. Together we had met them in a book written by A. A. Milne, and our life would always be richer because they had become our friends. To this day I feel sorry for anyone who hasn't made their acquaintance by reading the original book.

That is what a book does. It introduces us to people and places we wouldn't ordinarily know. A good book is a magic gateway into a wider world of wonder, beauty, delight, and adventure. Books are experiences that make us grow, that add something to our inner stature.

Children and books go together in a special way. I can't imagine any pleasure greater than bringing to the uncluttered, supple mind of a child the delight of knowing the many rich things God has given us to enjoy. Parents have this wonderful privilege, and books are their keenest tools. Children don't stumble onto good books by themselves; they must be introduced to the wonder of words put together in such a way that they spin out pure joy and magic.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Magic*: "Any extraordinary or irresistible influence." *The Random House Dictionary*.

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to know the pleasure  
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## Wonderful Words

I had an eloquent older journalism professor at the university who frequently got carried away in trying to convince his students about the marvel of words. He would exclaim rapturously, “Oh, the beauty and mystery of words! What richness can be conveyed by those who master them!” And while we youthfully mocked him as we recounted his dramatic incantations to our friends, we ourselves coveted the mastery of words, the symbols that convey ideas. We knew that what he said was true.

Take all the words available in the human vocabulary and read them from the dictionary, and you have only a list of words. But with the creativity and imagination God has given human beings, let these words flow together in the right order and they give wings to the spirit. Every child ought to know the pleasure of words so well chosen that they awaken sensibility, great emotions, and understanding of truth. This is the magic of words—a touch of the supernatural, communication that ministers to the spirit, a true gift.

We cannot underestimate the use of words in creative thought! Proverbs says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” The right word in the right place is a magnificent gift. Somehow a limited, poverty-stricken vocabulary works toward equally limited use of ideas and imagination. On the other hand, the provocative use of the right words, of a growing vocabulary, gives us adequate material with which to clothe our thoughts and leads to a richer world of expression.

What fun it is to encourage a personal awareness of words in a child—the delight of sound, the color and variety of words available to our use. What a difference there is between a vocabulary drill and feeling the beauty of words. Books, the right kind of books, can give us the experience of words. They have power to evoke emotion, a sense of spiritual conviction, an inner expansion that fills a child to the brim so that “the years ahead will never run dry.”

Listen to Barbara Cooney’s description of winter in *Island Boy*,

When the house had been banked with spruce boughs and the firewood cut for winter, the bitter cold came. Matthais would wake with the tip of his nose like ice. The windowpanes frosted over, and the wind whistled in the chimney. Sea smoke hung over the open water. Then the children would crowd into the steamy kitchen, learning to read and write under Ma’s fierce eye.

What wonderful feelings, smells, and scenery these words give to the reader, quite apart from Cooney's sensitive pictures. The words are ordinary, but well-chosen. From stories like these children learn how to use language.

## Capturing Experiences with Words

Words and experience go together. One enriches the other. I like to remember the night we stayed late after a family picnic along an isolated lake in the north woods—far past normal bedtime for children. We watched the rosy glow of the sunset color the sky on the far side of the lake and darken the silhouettes of the trees. We felt the sand shed its warmth and take on a damp coolness. And then darkness fell over our world. We sat around the campfire and listened to the night sounds. Young ears picked up things older ears hadn't heard. What we heard we tried to express in words.

Deep-voiced bullfrogs far away, anxious peepers closer by, the gentle lap of the water on the shore, the loon crying in the distance, the crackle of the wood in the fire, the sparks going upward like brief fireflies. And then, as a special gift, a whippoorwill, a shy bird usually heard only from a distance, lit in the bush just behind us and startled us with his clarity of song. Later we watched the moon rise over the trees. We felt beauty; we heard and saw it. We tried to clothe the experience with the right words, so we could remember. Well-chosen words need only be few in number, but they help store away the pleasure of the adventure.

We have awakened a small boy at midnight to marvel at the colors in the northern lights. We have stood on hillsides and described the numerous shades of springtime greens across the landscape. It's a marvelous game of awareness and words.

It's a game that can be played anywhere at odd moments. *How do you think a barn in Nebraska looks?* One child may answer, "Red, with cows around it." Another may say, "Gray and lonely, with no trees near." A third older child may become poetic and say, "The barn looks gray and weathered, like it was tired from the summer's heat and weary from icy winter winds."

Each answer is a good one. Yet those who saw less will be pleased by the contributions of those who saw more in their minds. They will sense the living substance of a touch of imagination and try to increase their own use of language. You may be thinking at this point, *I handle*

*words so poorly myself. How can I help my children?* This kind of game teaches everyone and binds you to your children as you share what we call “imaginings.”

Try other questions: How does a summer night sound? How does a rainy day feel? What does a kindergarten child look like on her way home from school? I have done this in the classroom. Some children’s contributions were dull and uninspired, some were hopeful, others had the bright shine of originality. But each child saw the possibility of words. Natural gifts may differ and, like any other game, contributions should never be the only measure of a person’s success. This is only one way of animating the mind in creative effort. But it will help train the ear to listen and the heart to feel beauty and emotion as it comes out in stories that the children later read. The benefits work both ways.

Reading aloud with two teenage boys one summer, we discussed together the elements of writing that made the story so special. They went back through the chapter and found phrases that spelled out beauty like this: “I feel like spring after winter, and sun on the leaves, and like trumpets and harps and all the songs I have ever heard!” The words fairly ring with joy! I covet for both of these boys the ability to use language with even a little of the mastery of the author (J. R. R. Tolkien) whose book we were reading.

## The Importance of Words

Since words are the way we communicate experiences, truth, and situations, who should know how to use them more creatively than people who are aware of their Creator? The world cries out for imaginative people who can spell out truth in words that communicate meaningfully to people in their human situation.

Charles Morgan speaks of creative art as “that power to be for the moment a flash of communication between God and man.” That concept opens up our horizons to a glimpse of God-huge thoughts, of beauty, of substance beyond our cloddish earthiness, of the immensity of all there is to discover. Using words well is an art.

Yet, tragically, we can live our whole lives inhibited and poverty-stricken in human expression and creativity. We forget to notice, to see what is happening around us. We don’t ask questions; we fail to listen. We are afraid of what is different, and are uncertain about what is true and good. Truth and excellence have a way of springing up all over the world, and our role as parents is to teach our children how to find and enjoy the good and to reject what is mediocre and unworthy.

Children are the freest and most imaginative of creatures. They love the fun of words and have a spectacular ability to learn. We must respect their eagerness and competence by introducing them to good books. I am frankly excited by the potential of books to build a whole, healthy, spiritually alert child who has the capacity to enjoy all the possibilities of life.

Emily Dickinson has winsomely captured the spirit of this:

*He ate and drank the precious words,  
His spirit grew robust,  
He knew no more that he was poor,  
Or that his frame was dust.  
He danced along the dingy ways  
And this bequest of wings  
Was but a book. What liberty  
A loosened spirit brings!<sup>2</sup>*

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*Books are no  
substitute for life,  
but a keener  
pleasure comes  
to life because  
of books.*

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## What Good Books Do

Good books have genuine spiritual substance, not just intellectual enjoyment. Books help children know what to look for in life. Reading develops the taste buds of the mind as children learn to savor what is seen, heard, and experienced and fit these into some kind of worthwhile framework.

What is unfamiliar becomes close and real in books. What is ridiculous helps children see the humor in their own lives. Sympathetic understanding is a generous byproduct of sharing the emotions of stories and standing in someone else's shoes. Books are no substitute for life, but a keener pleasure comes to life because of books.

When you've walked across a field with an eight-year-old who comments on the "smell of sweet grass in a sunny pasture," then you'll understand what I mean. Or, a child remembers, "Dandelion stems are full of milk, clover heads are loaded with nectar, and the refrigerator is full of ice-cold drinks. Summer is very nice." Then you hear the words you read from *Charlotte's Web* come back to your own daily experience and agree, "Yes, summer is very nice."

This savoring of life is no small thing. The element of wonder is almost lost today with the onslaught of the media and gadgets of our noisy world. To let a child lose it is to make him blind and deaf to the best of life.

Children have marvelous elasticity of mind. Fancy a child who hasn't met a dragon or a unicorn! Imagine a child who doesn't

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<sup>2</sup>*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1964), p. 20.

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and tragedies with  
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---

speculate about what small creatures live in a hollow tree or rocky crevice! That's the stuff a sense of wonder may feed on, but when the child is older he will respond with the same sensitivity to a lovely sentence from Monica Shannon's *Dobry*: "Snow is the most beautiful silence in the world."

I have never been able to resist the appeal of a child who asks, "Read to me, please?" The warm security of a little person cuddled close, loving the pictures which help tell the story, listening to the rhythm of the words, laughing in all the right places as the policeman stops Boston traffic for the mother duck and her family in Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings*. Or the safe, soothing feeling of Margaret Wise Brown's *Good Night Moon*, or the wonder of Alvin Tresselt's *White Snow, Bright Snow*.

But the pleasure doesn't end with small children who like to sit on your lap. Growing-up children are just as much fun. Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's books of pioneer adventure on the prairie, our family could feel the warm cabin, smell the freshly baked bread, hear the blizzard raging outside, and experience with Laura the close family feeling of Pa's singing and fiddling by the fireside. The love and gaiety of the Ingalls' home were shared in our home, and we had a quiet confidence in a family's ability to surmount dangers and hardships.

Books *do* impart a sense of security. Children meet others whose backgrounds, religions, and cultural ways are unlike their own. They come to accept the feeling of being different, and fear, which is the result of not understanding, is removed. Geography invades our living rooms as children visit families from other countries, and the world seems quite friendly.

Facing failures and tragedies with the characters of a story may vicariously give children the experience of courage and loyalty. Weeping with some and rejoicing with others—this is the beginning of a compassionate heart.

Courage is transmitted by heroes like *Johnny Tremain* and even the comical Reepicheep in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Valor does not belong to an exclusive race of supermen. It is within the hearts of those who are committed to truth and honor, the kind of heroes with whom one can identify. Children have loved the biblical Daniel, David, and Joseph for these same reasons and have gained deeper understanding of the relationship of courage to faith.

One of my young friends read *Call It Courage* at least four times the year he was nine. In transition between being a *child* and being a *boy*, he needed a model for his new manhood. This book fed his heart

with ideals and integrity in such practical ways that it is difficult to measure its influence. He said, “It made me feel brave and strong!”

## Reading Aloud

Every parent who reads with children and every teacher who shares books knows the wistful sigh that accompanies the request for “one more chapter.” The teachers I remember best are those who read to us each day from some wonderful book. I remember with special fondness the English teacher in my high school as she sat on the corner of her desk, enchanting us with the music of Sir Walter Scott’s *Lady of the Lake*:

*The stag at eve had drunk its fill,  
Where danced the moon on Monan’s rill,  
And deep his midnight lair had made  
In lone Glenartney’s hazel shade.*

Later, in other classrooms I knew the delight of taking children into a great adventure with a story—the utter silence of the room, the intent look on the children’s faces, and the involuntary sigh that escaped our lips at the conclusion of the episode. We had been together in the presence of good writing, and we felt bound together by the experience.

Books matter to children. It pleases me that when I meet former students unexpectedly they tell me what they are reading. They could pay me no greater compliment; they know I would want to know. Great literature has a way of building people. Books continue to be an influence far beyond my own words to these children.

What I am saying is simply this: As parents we are concerned about building whole people—people who are alive emotionally, spiritually, intellectually. The instruction to *train up a child in the way he should go* has enormous dimensions. It is to teach a child to think, to influence character, to give high ideals, and to encourage integrity. It is to provide largeness of thought, creative thinking, imaginative wondering. How large are your goals for your children? Why have a small world when you can walk with God into the larger place that is his domain?

Young children, fresh uncluttered minds, the world before them—to what treasures will you lead them? With what will you furnish their spirit?