

Making Meaning through NARRATIVE, WONDER, PLAY, and RHYTHM

Narrative

Research insight from neurobiology confirms this ancient value of repeating stories over time through an emerging understanding of a concept called the compression effect (Lillywhite et al., 2010). Using functional MRI (fMRI) technology, researchers can visualize the expansion of the brain's engagement upon hearing simple stories repeated (Lillywhite et al., 2010). It follows that story repetition is one of the ways we expand our ability to access foundational stories key to moral and ethical decision-making. One does not need to memorize the entire Bible to grow with and into its profound truths. In a society that values "new!" and "quick and easy!" Foundational faith stories coupled with unique family stories, told with simple materials, in-home or school or church, and repeated over time, are the bedrock of faith formation.

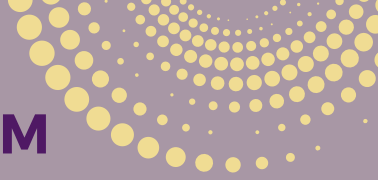
Wonder

Wonder is innate to children and that it is what makes learning meaningful (L'Ecuyer, 2014). Without wonder, learning is primarily rote or done for transactional reasons instead of centered on a sense of awe and curiosity. Recent research with parents regarding the impact of Godly Play delivered to homes during the pandemic indicated that parents and caregivers particularly valued the wondering that happened after a story (Minor, Sutton-Adams, ND). One mother described how helpful it was to learn that it was unnecessary to have all the answers and realize that wondering was sometimes enough. She said that before the pandemic if her children asked her a difficult question about God or the Bible, she always thought she needed to have a good answer. She claimed that the experience of Godly Play freed her to tell her daughter, "Yeah...I wonder about that too, and someday maybe we'll find out, or maybe we don't ever need to know."

Play

Multiple studies indicate the value of play in securing parent-child relationships and faith development (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Using play-based interviews in a case study of five children, Holmes (2017) observed Christian parents who utilized different styles of nurturing their children's faith to discover elements of Christian nurture most helpful to a child. Her findings indicate that openness and relationality positively impact a child's faith development (Holmes, 2017). Furthermore, Agate, Zabriskie, and Eggett (2007) found that regular family home-based leisure activities positively related to family religiosity and supported positive family functioning (Agate et al., 2007, p. 68). Abundant research acknowledges the importance of play in wholistic childhood development, including how play bonds parents and children (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Hughes 2021).

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Rhythm

With shifts in the modern social fabric, there are abundant examples of the degradation and loss of predictable rhythms and rituals that previously underpinned family life (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Friesen's (1990) research determined that rituals excite both brain hemispheres, which results in "deep emotional experiences ...facilitating personal integration and the feeling of well-being" (pp. 46-7). Practical theologians Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, in their seminal text, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (2001), underscore the importance of balancing liturgy with the repetition and dependability of ongoing rituals.

Equally important are the rhythms required to cultivate the tensile strength within a family ecosystem. Anderson and Foley's (2001) book testifies to the rhythm and reliability of ritual as a trust-building and formative experience for all, including families with children. Steiner-Adair and Barker (2014) describe the attributes of a sustainable family as having "the ability of an ecosystem to hold, endure, or bear the weight of a wide variety of social and natural forces which could compromise its healthy operation" (p. 261). Dependable rhythms in the life of families, like faith communities, 'set the table' for fostering a sense of well-being, strengthening interpersonal connections, and cultivating a family's tensile strength that anticipates life's joys, sorrows, and stressors.

Read More...

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