

# Making Time to Read Aloud

*January, 2001*

When was the last time you spent the evening reading aloud to your children? It could well be that you are able to say, "Last night – and the night before... we do this every night!" Many of my friends could answer my question that way. For years I envied these friends. I would hear them talk about all of the great books they were reading and I would think to myself, "How in the world do they manage that?!" I just couldn't see how it could work in my family. If you are in the group that has worked read-aloud time into your schedule, you probably don't need this article. But I felt compelled to write because I know there are many families who have struggled with this issue, just as I have. It is my desire to give them some reassurance and, hopefully, some practical advice.

Does this describe you – you've been listening to Sally Clarkson, Carole Joy Seid, and others who explain the living book approach to education? You think, "oh, yes, this sounds great!" – and you go home determined to throw out all those nasty workbooks and just read to your kids?! But after a couple of days you begin to feel that slow panic... no workbooks? no textbooks? just read??? So the wonderful living books you bought in your enthusiasm go on a bookshelf somewhere in your house and just gather dust. If that sounds familiar, then this article is for you!

I come to bring you hope! It is possible for even the staunchest workbook fiend to escape the prison of fill-in-the-blank pages and be set free to discover the incredible beauty of a well-written book! I know because I speak from personal experience. I'd like to share a little of my own journey with you, in the hope that it will give you some ideas that you can incorporate into your own life.

As I said, I have long envied my friends who had successfully adopted a lifestyle of reading aloud. For more than a year, I pondered how I might make this a reality in my own home. It was something I wanted desperately – and I'm not ashamed to admit that I was more than a little idealistic about it. I pictured myself sitting by a roaring fire, surrounded by attentive children drinking cocoa and listening to every word as I shared with them the beautiful imagery of Dickens and Austen. I honestly think this idealistic tendency was what kept me from attaining the success for which I hungered. My sporadic attempts to read aloud were disastrous, to say the least. Fidgety children fighting over who would sit next to Mommy... toddlers climbing over everyone, grabbing for books, squealing and screaming... and cocoa all over the carpet! Argh! Surely this is not what an evening is like at Sally Clarkson's house! What was I doing wrong?!

Well, I think I was doing several things wrong, and I didn't fix the situation overnight, but I am proud to say that evening read-aloud time is now a very fixed part of the James family

schedule. The children still fight over who will sit next to Mommy, but we've worked out something of a schedule for that. I still have toddlers everywhere but, praise God, we've moved into a larger house so they aren't always right on top of us. And they are being raised to respect this evening ritual that calls for softer speech and minimal movement. (And when all else fails, Daddy takes them to another room for a game or a storybook of their own.) Cocoa is not allowed in the living room of the new house, but we did actually spend a few nights last winter by a roaring fire, drinking cocoa (while sitting on a blanket to protect the carpet!), reading Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." Wow... dreams really do come true!

Here are a few of the things I figured out on the road from Point A to Point B....

### **It has to be a priority.**

When I used to wonder about my friends who were reading great books before bedtime, I would think, "When do they find time to read? Doesn't their calendar look like mine?!" Between church activities and homeschool activities, we were on the go as many as five nights a week. When we experienced the rare evening at home, we were getting caught up on everything we weren't doing on the nights we were running around. This had to stop! And I want to share a little secret with you – God was already doing a work in my heart over this issue and I think He was using the desire for reading time to bring it to my full attention. I began to covet time at home with my children and as my desire for this special reading time grew, I found the strength to say "no" to too many activities. Our summer is sometimes still very busy, but our goal during the school year is an average of no more than two nights a week away from home. Sometimes at least one of the nights we are at home is taken up by some type of activity like getting caught up on housework or having company over for dinner, but we usually seem to manage a solid four nights a week of reading. It is such a normal part of our life now that my children also covet the time and as soon as I call for reading time, the little girls race to the bookshelf to get a stack of books.

### **Choose the right books.**

Not that there are necessarily any wrong books, but you will quickly find that some books have more appeal than others. And some of your children will care for one book over another. I mentioned that my little girls get a stack of books when it is time to read – this is not because they are about to fight over which book to read. (I'll bet that's what you were thinking!) If I only had one child, I might only read one book at a time, but I have seven children ranging in age from 16 years to 7 months. We have actually found some wonderful books that appeal to all ages, but we usually break our reading down to offer something for everyone. We start with some simple stories from the terrific books by Uncle Arthur or from The Children's Book of Virtues or The Children's Book of Heroes. Or we might enjoy some of our special books during this part of the evening. I love the children's books by Max Lucado (my personal favorite is Because I Love You), or The Tale of Three Trees. At a

recent bookfair I found a wonderful story called *Easter Angels*. These hardbound books with beautiful illustrations will be part of our family for many years and will not only teach our children to enjoy great literature, but to treat books as special treasures.

The littlest guys are usually around for these stories and will take a break from playing with cars or puzzles to peek over my shoulder at the pictures. Their focus is gone after about 15 minutes, but the quieter activity has helped get them ready for their bedtime. As they toddle off, we move on to the next book in the stack. My daughters (ages 10, 7, and 6) and I have gone through several books together. Two of our recent favorites are *What Would Jesus Do?* and the children's version of *Hind's Feet on High Places*. We laugh and cry (okay, I cry and that makes them laugh) and have some surprisingly deep discussions. We have also enjoyed books of a different nature, such as the wonderful *Come Look With Me* series that helps children to appreciate great works of art – but on their own level. We recently acquired several books by Emilie Barnes (*A Little Book of Manners*, *A Little Book of Manners for Boys*, and *The Very Best Christmas Ever: A Season of Fun for Girls* which promises to inspire us for this holiday season). These are fun every-now-and-then books that give us a break from straight stories, but they really enrich our lives. This summer we also read a few just-for-fun chapter books that I had enjoyed as a girl. We shared a lot of giggles – especially over the way the world was "back then."

### **Let the book come alive.**

After about half an hour of reading, my two younger girls head for bed. My oldest daughter has been waiting for this moment! She absolutely loves being read to and relishes every single moment. If she doesn't have her own copy of the book (her preference), she positions herself so as to read along with me. This child is my "thinker," so our reading time has become an opportunity to challenge her. Early this summer we read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, a book that I would certainly have considered too far above her reading level for her to read on her own, even though she is a very strong reader. But as a read-aloud, we were able to work through it together. This was one occasion where she had her own copy of the book, so she followed along as I read. What a great exercise! We discussed the story in depth and really explored the situation it presented. I can not express to you the experience of sharing this book with my child! It is the story of a black family in Mississippi in the 1930's. There is not space in this article to list for you all of the topics we considered while reading this intense story. I had the chance to help my young daughter understand – or at least ponder – many deep issues. Would we have found these issues in a textbook? Perhaps, but they would not have been presented as a scenario that my daughter could imagine so vividly. She identified with the characters in this book... she understood their doubts and fears because, for the time that we spent with them, she shared those doubts and fears. She asked the same questions as the children in the book. For that brief time, she was one of the children in the book. How could a textbook possibly give her that depth of experience?

## **Be patient.**

Depending on the ages of your children and how new this concept is to them, it might take you as long as a year to develop a reading habit. But don't give up! Keep working at it, beginning with short periods once or twice a week, increasing your time gradually. Even if your children are resistant to the idea at first, with time you will surely see that resistance melt away until, one day, you will hear those sweet words you have longed to hear, "Mom, are you going to read to us tonight?" And, dear friend, at this point you, too, will begin to covet your family time together. You, too, will fight like a Mama Bear against anything that tries to rob you of this precious time – whether it be outside activities or the monster box that lives in your living room and tries to suck out your children's brains every evening.

## **Be persistent.**

You may have noticed that in my earlier description of our reading time, I did not mention my 16-year-old son. Since he spends a large part of his day helping with housework and watching small children while I teach older children, not to mention doing his own schoolwork, the reading time I mentioned earlier is the time of evening I allow him to be alone in his room. This gives him a little peace and quiet and some personal time to enjoy his own hobbies and interests. And, yes, quite often this time is spent reading books that he has chosen on his own. But I also insist on some read-aloud time with him. I know that he needs some time by himself, but I strongly believe that too much time alone in his room can be unhealthy for a teenager. This seems to be borne out by the attitude he displays when I first attempt to extract him from his room. His initial reaction is often sullen, withdrawn... implying "I don't want to be here." But I have learned that giving in to that attitude, allowing him to go back into his own little world, will only deepen that separation from family. So, while my other children clamor for another book, I must force my oldest son to listen to me read. But, again, I encourage you in this endeavor. You will be nothing short of amazed at the result! Oh, you may never see your child jump up and down like a 5-year-old, saying, "Another chapter, Mommy! Please?" But with time and patience, you will begin to develop a new level of relationship with this child. In the beginning, when you ask probing questions about the material you will likely be met with, "I don't know..." Don't give up. By starting with a subject you know interests this child, you can build a rapport that is difficult to reach over textbook material. How does my son react to reading time now? He usually starts by rolling his eyes and giving a little groan. But he finds a nice comfy spot on the sofa and settles in quickly. He listens intently and at any given point in the reading can usually repeat, almost verbatim, what I have covered. And here's the bonus prize – many times he has mentioned something we read when he finds it to be relevant to something he experiences. "Hey, Mom... it's just like the thing we read in that book..." And that is the payoff. That is the reason. That is the proof that this method works, because I can probably count on one hand the times he has done that with textbook material! Not only that, but he has actually been known to retain the name of a battle or an important date! I find this

nothing short of miraculous!

In concluding, I want to go back to the early paragraph where I promised to help you get rid of some of your workbooks in favor of the living book approach. You stuck with this lengthy article wondering if I was ever going to get off the subject of nighttime reading and get on to the business of school work! Well, here you go. What I have experienced with my children during our evening reading has made a real believer out of me! Well, that's not exactly true – I was a believer already. It sure made sense to me that my children would learn more from a book they enjoyed than from a dry textbook. But it took experiencing it first hand before I could really incorporate the idea in my day-to-day school work. I started by supplementing the textbook with living books. My son and I were studying the Jacobite uprising in Scotland in the 1700's. This is a period I find fascinating and I wanted so much to make it interesting to my son. I worked hard to find items on the Internet that I could read and then turn into a lecture format for him. He listened politely, but most of the time I could see the glaze in his eyes that tells me his mind is somewhere else. In desperation, I looked for and found a couple of short novels about the time period. I read those to him in the evening, ignoring his protests. Now he knows about the battle of Culloden and the slaughter of the Scots by the English. He heard two different fictionalized first-hand accounts of the battle – one from the perspective of a young man his own age and one from the perspective of a young girl. He didn't hear the dry telling of army against army, facts and dates. He lived the long march across the Highlands, felt the hunger, the cold, the wet. He stood in battle and watched characters he had come to know fall to their death beside him. He huddled in a small building and watched the victors pass by, killing those they found alive. He held his breath as they walked by him. He rose to the realization that the Highland way of life had changed forever – and this had meaning to him because he now understood a little about that way of life. And as he learned about the immigration of many of those surviving Highlanders to the new world of America, he learned a little bit more about the melting pot that is this country. Just like my daughter's experience with *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, my son had learned something important about his world, his culture. I do not believe any textbook could ever have taught him what he learned from the books we read together.

And so it is that I have come to the full realization that those textbooks were more or less a waste of my time. Oh, they make suitable reference material – something I can read during my study time. But this year has seen the greatest change to our overall approach to school in many years. I still have quite a bit of book work, but I now choose workbooks that are simple and direct, requiring no more than about 10 minutes for each subject. This satisfies my need to use a red pen and to mark things right or wrong. It also gives me sheets of paper to file away at the end of the year so I can reassure myself that my children did accomplish something. It is our goal to be through with our book work by lunch time, so we can spend our afternoons reading. I have lined up for my daughter the Thinker a list of wonderful books that, I hope, will both entertain and educate her. (And, for those of you who, like

me, simply can't leave it alone, I've purchased study guides from Progeny Press and Total Language Plus to give me questions and activities to accompany the reading material.) For my highschooler, I have purchased a curriculum that is based on the living book approach. It arrived about a week ago and I tore open the box with excitement, forcing my son to share the experience. I pulled out book after wonderful book - biographies, historical fiction, great novels. We sat in the living room, surrounded by no less than fifty books and I was in heaven! My son? He picked up several books, thumbed through them, glanced at the description on the back cover. He gave a big sigh and said, "Okay, which one do we read first?" Those of you who speak Sixteen-year-old Son will recognize this as a definite show of enthusiasm and will agree with the translation, "When do we start?!"

### **Get help.**

My last bit of advice to you is to seek out others who have had success with the living book approach. If you are a little panicky about the whole idea, you will gain reassurance and courage from talking with real people who have experienced real success. Spend time around their children. And I heartily encourage you to make an effort to listen to people who will help you see the merit of reading a good book over spending time in a dry textbook. Investigate the curricula available that offers a combination of living books and lesson plans, And check back with me in May to find out how our year went!

