

PREPARING A CHILD'S HEART

Some years ago I had a dream. And in this dream, I was invited to sing a solo in church. Now, I love to sing, but, believe me, I don't have the kind of voice you would want to listen to as a soloist. I knew that. But somehow, I knew the invitation had come from the Lord. So, even though the thought terrified me, I felt that if I could get myself in front of that congregation and open my mouth, I would be given gifts and talents beyond my own. So I accepted the invitation in that faith.

The moment came to sing. I opened my mouth, but all that came out was my own voice. I was mortified because I knew the song I had to sing was very long. Evidently I wasn't the only one in pain. As I looked over that very large congregation, I saw some members with their hands over their ears. Others were looking away from me or down in their laps out of embarrassment. I could hear whispering in front of me—"Who does she think she is? Does she really think she can sing? Why doesn't she just stop and sit down."

Believe me! No one wanted to stop and sit down more than me. I kept scanning the exit signs for the fastest escape route when it was over. But because I knew the Lord was the one who had asked me to sing, I knew I had to finish the song. And I did.

When I sat down, I buried my face in my hands and cried. Why had He asked me to do that? It surely hadn't benefitted those who had to listen to me and for me, it was embarrassing and humiliating.

Suddenly the scene changed and I found myself standing in the middle of a choir singing the most glorious music I had ever heard. And when I opened my mouth to sing, my voice was beautiful like theirs! How could this be, I wondered. I can't sing. As if someone had perceived my thoughts, a voice behind me whispered, "Remember when you were asked to sing? A messenger was in the congregation that day whose assignment it was to watch and see if you would finish the song. And you did! Because of that, the Lord has chosen you to sing in His choir and it is He who has given you your voice."

And now I cried again, but this time out of pure joy. I thought to myself what a small and insignificant price I had paid for this magnificent blessing. Truly, 'eye hath not seen nor ear heard neither hath entered into the hearts of men what great

things lie in store for those who love Him.”

And the dream ended.

I believe each of you is here today because you have felt the invitation to sing-- and your song is that of teaching your children. When you accepted the invitation, perhaps you expected, because you felt a divine call, that you would be gifted with talents and abilities beyond your own. But as you wake up every morning, and open your mouth, some of you feel your very ordinariness and all your inadequacies. Maybe you hear voices around you--Who does she think she is? Does she really think she can teach her children? She's going to ruin their lives. Why doesn't she just stop and let someone who knows what they're doing teach them.

And maybe you've been tempted to stop and sit down before the song is over. I hope I may be able to say a few things today that will help give you the courage to keep singing. Because I believe there are things you need to do that a mother is best equipped to do.

Like Martha, I know you are careful and troubled about many things. How can I get these multiplication facts to stick? My 9 year old still can't decode words. My 12 year old hates to read. My high schooler is unable to produce a coherent five paragraph essay. How can I make sure my children will score well on the tests and get into a good college? How can I teach the periodic table of elements, the timetables of history, the endless list of subjects I feel I am supposed to teach at a developmentally appropriate level to a houseful of kids of all different ages? And there is that endless stream of dishes and laundry to do.

I don't minimize your concerns. But I think of the Savior's response: One thing is needful and Mary hath chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her. And what was that one thing Mary was doing while Martha was so very busy taking care of things? She was listening to the spoken word of the Lord.

That phrase: the spoken word of the Lord is used in my patriarchal blessing. I know we hold our patriarchal blessings as sacred and private, but when that particular phrase is used, it is addressed to all those who love the Lord and I believe that is the audience I am addressing. So these words were spoken to you as well as me. The complete phrase is: The day will come that the spoken word of the Lord will be the mentor for you and your family day by day and at times, hour

by hour.

It's been nearly 50 years since I was given that blessing and I have often pondered its meaning. I noted that it was given for a day yet to come. Did it describe a time when we will actually hear an audible voice of the Lord guiding us? Did it mean that the day will come when we won't have access to written words and we will have to rely upon that which is spoken? Maybe it meant that the day will come that we will have to rely upon the words spoken through the mouths of His prophets, but I thought how could he direct the needs of individual circumstances worldwide, day by day and hour by hour? None of these possibilities satisfied me.

I was thinking about it again not long ago, and the thought struck me, "Google it." Google It? Really? But I did. And I was astonished at what I instantly learned. The first article that pulled up said that when the New Testament was translated from the Greek, while the English translation used one expression—the word of the Lord, there were two very different Greek words from which it was translated. One was logos and the other was rhema. Now, people who are way smarter than me have been analyzing and discussing the difference between the two words for centuries. And not always agreeing with each other. But for the sake of having a word to use to describe an experience I believe you'll relate to, let me describe the difference as I see it.

All of you here today will hear the logos of my words. The words may pass in and out of you, with no distinct impressions. But for some of you, something I say will 'light up'—it will stir your heart and resonate in your soul. It may have a quickening effect where you will feel a call to action. That is rhema.

Rhema, according to the article I just referenced, means: divine illumination; a divinely inspired impression upon your soul; a flash of thought or a creative idea from God.

It is the still, small voice deep within our hearts. And this voice can act as a mentor or guide to us in all we do—surely day by day or even hour by hour. It is a voice spoken to individual hearts.

This explanation of the spoken word of the Lord is consistent with the 45th section of the D&C wherein we learn the five wise virgins had taken the Holy Spirit as their guide. It aligns with the Lord's promise to lead us by the hand; and Isaiah's vision of the day when all our children will be taught of the Lord—I believe that as

meaning taught by Him, not just about Him. And it makes me think of the phrase in Charlotte Mason's writings: True education is between a child's soul and God. Rhema is the one needful thing in education.

And there is one primary thing that blocks it—Hard heartedness; a very real condition wherein we are past feeling and cannot feel that divine illumination; those impressions or flashes of inspiration on the heart. As you study your scriptures, pay attention to how often the heart with its desires and feelings is referred to and especially the caution against hard-heartedness.

Late in life, Charles Darwin, the great scientist, wrote: “Formerly I was led to the firm conviction of God and the immortality of the soul. In my journal I wrote whilst standing in the midst of the grandeur of the Brazilian forest, “It is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration and devotion which fill and elevate the mind.’ “I well remember my conviction that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body. But now the grandest scene would not cause any such conviction and feelings to rise in my mind . . . Disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress.”

He was past feeling. His heart was hardened. What had caused that to happen? By his own account, he wrote: “If I had to live my life again I would have made it a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. . .”

We all know that music is made up rhythm, melody and harmonies. The beat or rhythm maintains a sense of order while the combination of melody and harmony stirs our feelings. We are seeing a trend in music and in society generally that is heavy on beat and light on melody and harmony and the effect is a shutting down of sensitive feelings. The rhythmic and repetitive counting of sheep shuts down our thoughts and puts us to sleep. The pounding of the war drums among savage tribes had the effect of dulling their feelings so they could go out on the warpath and kill. The Pharisee who lived by the perfect beat of the law lost the capacity to feel the awe and wonder of the healing of a withered hand. The letter killeth.

I would suggest to you that much of the hard-heartedness we are seeing in our generation comes from the steady beat of rigorous academic training in childhood – the endless stream of facts and information; all that can be tested and measured -

-without the stirring influences of the arts which provide the melody and harmony of learning. What little of the arts we still include are quickly turned into academic exercises that not only squeeze the joy out of them, but leave a distaste for them all together.

Children come to us with hearts that are open and impressionable, but instead of using their childhoods to tend to their finer and nobler faculties through the use of music, pictures, poetry and story, we see a focus on academic training at earlier and earlier ages. It has been said we are “in danger of organizing the soul out of education, of making it mechanical and therefore barren.” That which is not used atrophies from dis-use. Hearts that are past feeling is a real condition caused from neglect.

So how do we correct the situation?

Louisa May Alcott wrote:

A little kingdom I possess,
Where thoughts and feelings dwell

I believe our most important job as mothers is to tend to the inner kingdoms of hearts—where thoughts and feelings dwell— to keep them soft and open to divine impressions. All other learning will flow from this core.

I would like to offer 5 decorating tips for this kingdom. In so doing, we will heed the admonition of Paul and seek for that which is virtuous and lovely, of good report and praiseworthy. Before we go there, though, I need to place credit where credit is due. A hundred years ago or so, there was a group of educators I call the heart educators who understood all about tending to the inner kingdom of the heart. I have been so immersed in their writings over the last several years, their thoughts and words have completely intertwined with my own so that I can often no longer tell where their words leave off and mine begin. I’m afraid it would be a huge distraction if I were to credit their unfamiliar names every time I quote or use their words to teach you as we go forward. So please know, if something beautiful or profound comes out of my mouth, it likely came from one of my heart educator friends and if there is a particular quote you’d like me to give proper credit to, just write to me.

Decorating tip#1: Fill the air with worthy music.

A young woman was dying. Her baby had died at birth a few weeks previously, and since that time the mother had steadily failed. The doctor had just left her room saying emphatically that there was no hope and to give her anything she wanted.

She looked up at her agonized husband and said: "Music. I want music. I know that will cure me." The nurse thought it to be a foolhardy and useless errand, but the husband went in search of it.

The first day old familiar tunes and some of the Chopin that she had always loved, were played softly to her. Her body relaxed under the soothing influence, her nerves became less tense, her breathing deeper and more rhythmical, increasing the circulation. That night she slept. With the shutting out of the senses to the outside world the harmonic reaction brought about by the music continued its work of healing all through the night. The next day she was visibly stronger.

Halfway through World War I, music began to be used on a large scale 'to help organize victory'. How the men craved music. A victrola was carried lovingly from front lines to hospital. Music was used in every conceivable form as a comfort, as a relaxation from the horrors of war, and as a stimulus to the morale of the men. Music acquired all the sacredness of a ministering angel.

Florence Nightingale requested music for hospitals in the Crimean War. The mind blurred by contact with unspeakable horrors was quieted and made normal again.

"There is something very wonderful in music. Words are wonderful enough, but music is more wonderful. It speaks not to our thoughts as words do; it speaks straight to our hearts and spirits, to the very core and root of our souls. Music soothes us, stirs us up, it puts noble feelings into us; it melts us to tears, we know not how."

This 'heavenly Maid' is a chief restorer, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. Music has the power to solve many of our problems for us.

Sadly, it is being mis-used. Music has become a performing art. Ask someone if he or she is musical, and if that person does not play a musical instrument or sing, the answer will be no. Yet, every one of us is deeply and profoundly musical. If you don't believe me, try walking to your next class out of rhythm. Try speaking out of rhythm –it's practically impossible. Let's try an experiment. I'm going to

sing a series of notes and when I stop, you fill in the last one. Here we go: Wow! You all knew what that last note was. Look how musical you are! You brought us home. That last note you sang was the key note and you knew it instinctively. Had I stopped on any other note, you would have felt incomplete or unsatisfied. Worthy music always leads us home.

God is its author, and not man; he laid
 The keynote of all harmonies; he planned
 All perfect combinations, and he made
Us so that we could hear and understand.

Certain combinations of notes make us feel sad, others hopeful, others give us longing. Through music, the mind is stilled to outside influences and becomes a reflector for the inner light which comes only through stillness. Faith comes when the chaotic thoughts of the outside world are stilled.

Some music is chaotic in itself or relies so heavily on the beat, that while it may get our toes tapping and our heels dancing, it does not have the power to stir our souls and in its coarseness, causes us to dull those refined sensitivities that bridge heaven and earth. The intention of many of the great music masters was to reveal the very glory of God to the human heart, but many of our youth--and adults-- have lost the capacity to feel it.

We have worked for a very long time to squeeze all the joy out of listening to music by making the means of enjoyment more and more complex, until now, we find ourselves starving in spite of the abundance about us . . . Not only have we starved our music sense, our wrong methods of instruction frequently transform our reaction to music into a lifeless, analytical and empty thing, instead of the warm, glowing healthful reaction it should be. Isn't it time we start working to put it all back again into its rightful place as a joygiver?

May I offer a simple suggestion for opening ears as illustrated in an article that appeared in the Reader's Digest over 50 years ago. It was written by a young journalist who had been invited to the home of a wealthy philanthropist. After dinner, the guests retired to a large room for an evening of chamber music. This young man said he was tone deaf and music meant nothing to him. It was almost painful. So, as the music started to play, he closed his ears and thought about other things.

After the first number, the man next to him asked, “You are fond of Bach?” He hadn’t noticed that he was sitting next to Albert Einstein himself. He admitted he knew nothing of Bach upon which Einstein took him by the arm, led him out of the room, upstairs to a study. “Now then,” he said. “Tell me a song you love.” He named a Bing Crosby song and Einstein found the song on a record which he played and when it was done, said, “Now. Sing it back to me,” which he did to the best of his ability and Einstein’s warm eyes lit up. He continued doing the same with song after song until Einstein played a record of music without words and told his young friend to hum it back, which he did. Einstein smiled and said, “Now we’re ready for Bach.” He led him back down to the hall and whispered, ‘Just allow yourself to listen.. That’s all.’”

The writer said Bach’s Sheep May Safely Graze became one of his favorite pieces of music as he heard it for the first time that night, and which became the gateway to a great love of music.

After the concert, the hostess apologized that Einstein had missed so much of the evening’s performance. Einstein replied, “My young friend and I were engaged in the greatest activity of which man is capable. We were opening up yet another fragment of the frontier of beauty.”

So here is the simple suggestion: If the realm of music is to be entered through hearing one must begin by being able to focus on the melody. The harmonies will begin to play in the background quite naturally. As you practice paying attention to the melody, drawing a pitch picture with your hand may help-- it will be etched in the memory and can be recalled and reimagined at will, and can protect us from feelings and thoughts that are destructive.

One writer suggested: “It seems extravagant to claim that, if everyone could be shown how to follow a tune and remember it, the world’s unrest would be ameliorated, but this would seem to be a fact nevertheless. Because, by doing so, each individual would become conscious of the harmony within himself.” And that harmony would spread outward.

Music should decorate the atmosphere of our inner kingdoms continually.

Tip #2: Line the walls with fine art.

I was talking with my son recently and he told me about a visit to the National Art Gallery. As he walked from room to room, people were always gathered around

the familiar, famous paintings. But as he entered one room, he was drawn to a very small painting by an artist he had never heard of. It was a sunset over Paris and he was so captivated by it, he couldn't move. He said he stood there staring at it for probably half an hour. There are no words to express what it was saying to him. But just by remembering it as we talked, all the feelings of that painting came rushing back to him.

“When we see ordinary things, we see only with our eyes, but, when we see works of art, we see with our hearts.” Great paintings are a source of rest, delight and inspiration. The heart that is open to ‘feel’ art is possessed of one of the purest, loftiest and most ennobling pleasures that the civilized world can offer. Enjoyment is the first and final purpose of art in the lives of children. “Let pictures be, like the stories we tell, among our children’s dearest delights. Above all things else we must avoid mechanical methods of instruction as the most deadly blight to the imagination.” And that is of no small consequence for it through the imagination we unlock the doors of beauty.

We say ‘in one ear and out the other’ but we don’t say ‘in one eye and out the other’. The images we take in are long lasting and difficult to erase. So we need to be careful and mindful of the images we allow into our inner kingdom.

Take the time to peruse great masterpieces of art, especially those paintings created by great souls, and when one speaks to your heart; when you find one that uplifts you, ennobles you, stirs your heart with all that is good and beautiful, find a print if you can and hang it somewhere where you can look at it frequently. Trace it, sketch its parts over and over until every detail is ingrained on the wall of your memory. Love these personally selected paintings until they are a part of you for then this art gallery in the kingdom of your heart will be yours to visit anytime you want. And this ideal that is enthroned in your heart, this you will become.

Tip #3: Furnish the rooms with poetry.

Some years ago, my husband and I were called to serve in a branch at a Senior Center and we became friends with Grant and Edna, both in their 90s. Grant was the primary caregiver of Edna who suffered from Alzheimers and hadn't recognized him for years, yet they lived in the Independent Living side of the facility. Their only child had died years earlier.

Grant looked old and frail, but over a lifetime, he had furnished his inner kingdom with hundreds of poems committed to memory and when we would ask him to

recite one, his eyes would light up and his voice would become strong as he shared a poem he loved by heart. We visited him in his apartment one night and I asked him if he had a poem for us. He smiled, and off he went: “Wynken, Blynken and Nod, one night sailed off in a wooden shoe; Sailed on a river of crystal light, into a sea of dew.” When he was finished, I asked if this was a poem from childhood and he said, no, this is what he had been working on the last few weeks. Poetry is how he kept loneliness and discouragement at bay and how he kept his heart from failing. He passed away just a few days later and Edna followed shortly thereafter, but whenever I think of the gift of poetry in our lives, I think of Grant.

David O. McKay was said to have stored over 1000 poems in his heart.

When Lincoln’s much loved young son died while living in the White House, with the Civil War bearing down hard on his shoulders, a Senator found Lincoln alone, one day, a book opened on his lap. It was Shakespeare’s King John—the part where a mother, Constance, was grieving over the loss of her young son, Arthur.

My Lord, my boy, my young son,
My life, my joy, my food, My all the world,
My sorrow’s cure.

Grief fills up the room of my absent son
Lies in his bed;
Walks up and down with me.

Oh, Father Cardinal,
I have heard you say
I shall see and know my friends in heaven
If that be true,
I shall see my boy again.

It was a poet’s words that brought Lincoln comfort in his own grief.

Longfellow’s dearest love, Fanny, mother to his 5 living children, was sealing packets of her children’s curls one day when Longfellow heard screams. He rushed from his office to find her dress on fire. He frantically tried to put the flames out with his own body, but she was too badly burned and she died. This great poet turned to another poet for comfort and immersed himself in the task of translating Dante’s Divine Comedy. A few years later, he penned the words to our

familiar Christmas carol: I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day and could declare, in spite of the sorrows,: “God is not dead, nor doth he sleep.”

Victor Frankl observed a small group of prisoners in those horrible death camps of Nazi Germany who would secretly gather together to recite poetry and sing songs even though it was forbidden and punishable by death. Poetry was their soul’s means for self-preservation.

Keats wrote that poetry should be a friend to soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man. “Among earth’s wisest teachers, we give the first place to the poets. These are the men of vision, the interpreters of the beautiful ...when the clouds stand upon the horizon, they pierce through the darkness, and show us the sweet fields that lie beyond.” Poets present the deepest and most vital truths in the most beautiful and lasting forms.

Our first aim with poetry must be to feel, not to know.

Andrew Lang cautions us: “Nothing, perhaps, crushes the love of poetry more surely and swiftly than the use of poems as schoolbooks. They are at once associated in the mind with lessons, with long, with endless hours in school, with puzzling questions and the agony of an imperfect memory, with grammar and etymology, and everything that is the enemy of joy.” Rather, associate poetry with joy, and beauty and freedom to choose, with the mystery of faery, the wonderful things of life, and the beauty of nature, if it to them is always a thing of beauty, it may remain a joy forever.” Longfellow gives us simple instructions for poetry appreciation:

“...read from some treasured volume
The poem of thy choice,
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.”

Poetry was written for the ear and not the eye.

If you haven’t already, begin, today, to create your own anthology of poems that you love. Copy them. Decorate the pages if you’d like. Always have a poem you are memorizing. Use the ‘beauty of thy voice’ to share them with your family. And then encourage them to do the same. And soon your palace will be filled with rich furnishings upon which you can find refreshment and rest.

Tip #4: Invite great souls to dine with you.

Gather around your dining room table prophets, statesmen, poets, philosophers, kings and queens, saints, musicians, artists, inventors, scientists, martyrs, writers, holy men and women, humanitarians, brave soldiers, philanthropists, explorers, adventurers. Let them tell their stories. Laugh with them. Cry with them. Rejoice with them. Share their heart-ache and their victories. Pay attention to their wisdom and life lessons. And before they leave, have them sign your guest book so that you can remember what they shared with you.

My guest book is a 3-ring binder. I create guest pages for each one with their names at the top, a brief reminder of their contribution to the world, where they lived, the year they were born and the year they died. I then arrange the pages chronologically by year of birth.

When I hear a name, I want a face to come up in my memory. So I do a google image search, print the picture out if I can find one and glue it on their page. And I look for a few other images that trigger remembrances of the stories they shared. Also, I make a short description of stories I want to remember from their lives and make reference to where I can find the full story again. And I copy those priceless gems of life lessons and make note of character traits with which I want to adorn my own life.

If possible, use cursive handwriting to copy the words. Neuroscientists have been able to observe the brain while people have keyboarded, printed and written cursive. Only the cursive lights up the whole brain. Writing in cursive will leave a deeper and more long lasting impression.

Sterling W. Sill created similar guest books of thoughts and ideas. He said, “When in my reading I come to some little nugget of an idea that sends a chill up and down my backbone—I take that out and put it in my [book.]” Some of those words he memorized and thus they became a part of him. Over a lifetime, he filled 25 notebooks with over 300 pages each—That’s over 7500 guest pages filled with ennobling thoughts and ideas!

One guest taught me that as I immerse myself in the thoughts and feelings, the joys, hopes and aspirations of some of the great men and women who have looked at the world, I can gradually learn to look with their clearer eyes and see the beauty which delighted their more appreciative souls and my own world becomes

larger and lovelier through the experience.

In very real ways, these guests become my dear and influential friends. Many friends are found only on the pages of literature and I keep separate guest books for them. Jean Valjean or the Good Bishop, creations of someone's imagination, have no less impact on my life than someone who has actually walked on the earth.

A fifteen year old boy was hugging his guest notebook one day and he said to his mom, "If people knew what was inside of this notebook, they would know it is a treasure of great worth."

Who will you invite to dinner today?

Tip #5 Beautify the surrounding grounds with gardens of flowers and canopies of trees.

Nowhere can we feel closer to our Creator—and feel that rhema, that spoken word of the Lord, that divine illumination, than among His Creations. The Sioux Indians knew that a man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard. Nature is loaded with music, pictures, poetry and story to stir our souls and heal our hearts. The problem is we look but do not see; we listen, but do not hear. In many ways we walk in darkness at noonday sun.

Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, thought it would be a good idea for people to experience her world for a brief time. She wrote, "Darkness would make him more appreciative of sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound." She remembered asking a friend what she had seen after a walk through the forest, to which the friend replied, "Nothing in particular." Helen exclaimed, "I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that the seeing see little."

She continued: "...it is a great pity that in the world of light the gift of sight is used only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fulness to life."

The remedy to this sightlessness can be as simple as starting a nature journal and sketching what you see. "Why do we wish to learn to draw? ... In order to develop in us those nobler faculties which God has given for the appreciation of His works in nature. Drawing produces an exactness in thought."

A mother told me of a girl she knew who never took a formal science class in high school, but she diligently kept a nature journal. When she decided she wanted to pursue nursing, she panicked a bit about the college level science courses she would have to pass. She called home in her first semester of Biology, excited to tell her mother she was at the top of her class. She said it was because, as her teacher described things, because of her drawing, she could see exactly what he was talking about and it all came together for her while her classmates struggled.

I love the work of John Muir Laws and there are dozens of his free training workshops you can access online to help you learn to draw from nature. He writes, “We live in a world of beauty and wonder. Train your mind to see deeply and with intentional curiosity, and the world will open before you. The goal of nature journaling is not to create a portfolio of pretty pictures but to develop a tool to help you see, wonder, and remember your experiences.”

A nature journal develops gratitude and reverence.

If the trees and flowers, the clouds and the wind, all tell wonderful stories to us, we have sources of happiness which no power can deprive us of.

The poet William Wordsworth captures this gift of nature perfectly in this poem:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake; beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

I gazed and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

“Never lose an opportunity to see something beautiful. Beauty is God’s

handwriting.”

As you tend to this little kingdom within by filling the air with worthy music, hanging fine art on the walls, furnishing the rooms with poetry, inviting great souls to visit, and walking among the beautiful gardens, you have created a sanctuary in your heart where the Spirit of the Lord will feel at home and where it will seek to dwell and converse with you day by day and even hour by hour. Beauty is a quality of divinity, and to live much with the beautiful is to live close to the divine. The rich music, art, poetry and story treasures of the ages are our heritage, free for the taking through today’s technology. Only we can keep ourselves poor in the matters of heart and spirit.

The last-day prophecies describe scenes of great destruction, sorrow and misery, yet in the midst of these horrible conditions, there is seen a people making their way to Zion singing songs of ever lasting joy. Surely they carry their kingdom within that stands independent from outward circumstances and which keeps their hearts from failing. When the scourges have past, the earthly kingdom they will build will be but an outward expression of that inner kingdom of beauty and joy they brought with them.

You may feel the invitation today to sing such a song, but when you get home and open your mouth to sing, perhaps you may feel too inadequate to finish it. The cares and demands of life weigh heavily upon us and you may feel the resistance of your children in our electronic media saturated world. Well, let me share some advice from a guest who dined at my table—see—he has a page in my guest book.

I met him not long ago when I visited the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC. In one of the rooms, I happened upon a sculpture of a little girl—La Petite Pensee—that so captured my heart, I couldn’t stop looking at her. What she was telling me, I have no words to describe. But I didn’t want to leave her. When I got home, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I wondered who the artist was who could have created such an exquisite work of art. I learned his name was Thomas Ball and I found an autobiography of him online. At the end of his book was advice that he gave to young artist friends and as I read it, I thought, these words are for you, too, because I see you as artists—creators of children’s hearts, caregivers of their inner kingdoms. And sometimes the work is discouraging. We feel ordinary and lacking in the necessary gifts and talents. Sometimes we feel like we aren’t doing a very good job. The work isn’t turning out the way we hoped it would. So let me repeat his advice:

“My most bitter tears have been shed at the completion of some work, when I felt that I had done all I could do, and yet found it so far from what I had hoped to make it, and that it must go out to the world with all its imperfections. Falling upon my knees in agony, praying for comfort and faith to believe the present disappointment to be for my ultimate good, I have arisen comforted and strengthened in the hope that perhaps I had worked better than I knew, .. Imperfect and unsatisfactory as all my work seems to me, I shudder when I think of what they might have been, and what I might have been, without that firm belief that He was ever at my right hand as long as I was true to myself—to bear me up when I would have fainted; to help me when my strength left me.

“I write this for the encouragement of my young brothers in art; not those arrogant and proud ones who believe in nothing but their own strength and will, jealous at even a hint of any assistance from a higher power . . .—But to that sensitive, retiring one who shrinks from the sound of approbation, . . . to him I would say Coraggio! You are stronger than you imagine; be but sincere and conscientious in your efforts; work away with all your might. Strive to live a pure and clean life, and to improve the talents God has given you, and leave the rest to him. He will not let you fail. Keep up a good heart; cultivate a cheery disposition.”

The gift of a great choir director is that he can take seemingly ordinary voices and combine and blend them with other voices to create glorious music. The great day of gathering and harmonizing voices is upon us. Your little alto part that may seem so monotonous and uninteresting, is a vital part of that great choir of the Lord’s chosen singers.

So, in closing, I echo the words of Thomas Ball: “You are stronger than you imagine . . .keep a good heart. He will not let you fail. Corragio!: Courage!” Finish the song you have been given to sing and one day you, with your family, will be chosen to sing this new song in His choir:

The Lord hath brought again Zion,
And the heavens have smiled upon her;
And she is clothed with the glory of her God;
For he stands in the midst of his people.
Glory, and honor, and power, and might,
Ascribed to our God; for he is full of mercy,
Justice, grace and truth, and peace,
Forever and ever, Amen

