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Taking an Untamed Lion to School: Sharing about C. S. Lewis and Aslan in an Elementary School Classroom

Richard James

Like many of you who have a great interest in the life and works of C. S. Lewis, I tried to do my part three years ago in promoting the celebration of the Lewis centenary back in November, 1998. It was my privilege to present a public lecture on his life, work, and influence at one of our nearby colleges as part of their Cultural Affairs program (see <http://www.crlamppost.org/LIFEWORk.HTM>). Later that same week I also was honored to present a two-evening multimedia program on Lewis for our county arts council (see <http://www.crlamppost.org/part1.htm> and <http://www.crlamppost.org/part2.htm>). But the third, and probably the most meaningful, presentation that I made that month on Lewis was given about two weeks later to our four fifth grade classes at the Cumberland County Elementary School in Burkesville, Kentucky.

As both an encouragement and example to other non-professional educators who might also be interested in making a similar presentation in their own local public schools, I want to share with you exactly how this program came about, what I presented (see <http://www.crlamppost.org/cslcces.htm>) and the response to it (see <http://www.crlamppost.org/projrecept.htm>). And just as C. S. Lewis would sometimes begin his essays by claiming that he had no expertise in theology, I want to make that same claim to lack of expertise in regard to curriculum and educational methodology, especially at the elementary school age level. And yet, I do hope that even those who are somewhat fearful about making such public presentations, even to children, will be encouraged by this article to prepare

and present a program on C. S. Lewis for their own local schools.

The actual one-hour presentation was given on Thursday and Friday, November 19-20, 1998, and was entitled, "C. S. Lewis and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*." On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of that same week, by agreement with the librarian/audio-visual coordinator and the four fifth grade classroom teachers, each of the four classes had seen the three-part BBC video version of the book which had been shown on public television a few years before. After my presentation the teachers and their students then invited me back for a reception to review and receive projects that they had done—such as posters, book covers, poems, letters, etc.—on the week following my presentation.

Before I actually go over the presentation itself with you, I am assuming a couple of other things that are very important, as well as foundational for a positive presentation and response, especially in a public school environment. First, you must some way have already established a positive and personal relationship with the teachers of the students to whom you are going to make the presentation. The best presentation will never even reach its intended audience if you do not first have the trust of their teachers. In my specific situation, my youngest son had had these same teachers some five years before, plus I had also been the president of the PTA that year. In the fall of 1998 I also sometimes was in the school as a substitute teacher, but had not yet taught the fifth grade. I had, though, been a substitute for the librarian just a few weeks before

the presentation. With this positive relationship I therefore felt free, in the early fall, to initiate the conversation with both the librarian and the teachers about the possibility of my presenting a program on Lewis at the school. (Incidentally, I also contacted our middle school and high school language arts/English teachers, but the program did not seem to fit into any of their plans.)

Second, you must also have demonstrated outside of the classroom that you were informed on the subject about which you were sharing; for me this meant showing that I was knowledgeable both about the life of C. S. Lewis and his book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Fortunately, the book, *The C. S. Lewis Readers' Encyclopedia*, had just been published, and I had been privileged to write a few of the articles in it. Some information about this had been published in our local newspaper in the late summer. Also, about a month before the presentation at the school, I had begun to promote both the centenary lecture and the local arts council program that I mentioned earlier. Furthermore, after speaking with the teachers about the appropriateness of the presentation for their classes and receiving a positive response from them, I then sent each of the teachers a letter and a packet of information basically sharing with them what I was going to do and suggesting to them some projects that the students might complete for class the week following my presentation. Working on these projects then allowed the teachers to add their own input to both the video and my presentation. You have the information packet that I gave to the teachers in your handout, but I have also put it on my internet web site (<http://crlamppost.org/teacherinfo.htm>).

Now, having proposed a program and had its presentation accepted and a date set, I now had to prepare it and a handout for the students. Having presented several

children's sermons over the years, I knew that I needed to have a lot of props and also needed to communicate with them at their level, trying not to cover too much—yet challenging them to share with me their thoughts about what they had seen in the video. Therefore, I brought with me a large map of Narnia (the Sylvia Smith version published by David C. Cook in 1978—other maps are now available, but this one is out of print), some pictures of Lewis and the Pevensie children, a couple of juvenile biographies of Lewis, several of Lewis's books (including the *Chronicles of Narnia*) and of course, a large picture of a lion to represent Aslan.

Before I started my talk, I also made sure that I had enough copies of the five-page student handout which I would distribute during the presentation and to which they could refer later to help them with their projects. On the front of the handout I had copied a somewhat "homey" caricature of Lewis that had him sitting in a chair in front of the wardrobe and beside his fireplace, as he was smoking his pipe and reading a book, surrounded by four cats – one of which is licking his shoe. As best as I can determine, this caricature was drawn by Robin Heller, the art director at *Christian History Magazine*, back in 1985, when their issue on C.S. Lewis was first published (Vol. IV, No. 3. p. 1). The second page has a listing of the chronological order of the Narnian Chronicles with a copy of the plot outline of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. On the third page I printed Lewis's response to a fifth grade student's question about Aslan, and since Lewis's answer itself referred to Jesus Christ and His incarnation, I also printed the texts of two possible biblical allusions in the story (Isaiah 53:4-12 and 2 Corinthians 5:21). On the handout's next page I printed a list of twelve suggested student projects. The last

page included portions of two of Lewis's letters to children giving them advice on how they could be better writers. Except for the drawing on the first page, all of this information is available on my web site. (<http://crlamppost.org/handout.htm>).

As we now consider the presentation itself, I have provided you with a facsimile of the script that I used, including in it in bold letters some directions that I made for myself. These directions are not on the already mentioned internet version. I began by introducing myself and welcoming them to my presentation on C.S. Lewis. I next tried to identify with them by asking them about nicknames, sharing mine and telling them how the "C" in Lewis name stood for Clive and the "S" stood Staples and that He did not like either of these himself, and so he asked his family and friends to call him "Jack." I then told them a little about his life, his occupation and his favorite hobby of spending time with his friends, quoting to them his own description of himself to some other 5th grade students who had written to him. Next I asked them to assist me by answering some questions about the video – about Aslan, the Pevensie children, and the wardrobe. I followed this by distributing the handout and requesting that they turn to the second sheet and help me by volunteering one at a time to read the plot outline on that sheet from numbers one through seventeen.

When we finished reviewing the plot, I took some time to discuss the meaning of the story with them, beginning with the following open-ended questions:

- 1) Who is your most favorite character? Why?
- 2) Who is your least favorite character? Why?
- 3) What was your most favorite part of the story? Why?
- 4) What is your least favorite part

of the story? Why?

- 5) What did Edmund do and do you think it was wrong or was it okay? and
- 6) What happened at the Great Stone Table?

I tried to draw out as many different answers from them as possible. Moving deeper into the meaning I remarked to them that in one sense the whole story, including what happened at the stone table, could be just a good adventure story with talking animals and battles, without looking for other meanings in it. But in 1960, a thirteen-year-old girl wrote Jack Lewis a letter, asking him to explain the meaning behind his story. I told them that Lewis explained to her that the stone table reminds us of the stone tablets on which God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, Edmund is like Judas, a greedy traitor, but unlike Judas he repents and is forgiven and that the death and resurrection of Aslan for Edmund are like the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for each of us in our world (*C.S. Lewis Letters to Children*. New York: Macmillan, 1985. p. 93). I then asked them to turn to their next sheet in their handout and read with me what Lewis wrote in 1954 to a 5th grade class in Maryland (*CSLLC*. 44-45). At this point I also felt it appropriate to refer them to the biblical allusions from Isaiah 53 and 2 Corinthians 5 that were also printed on that same page in their handout

From this discussion of the meaning of the story, I then asked the class to look at the next page on their handout where they could see a list of projects that they might do based on their own personal interests. The teachers, of course, had already seen these suggestions, but the students had not; so, I took some time to read over the list with them. I believe that these projects and sharing the next sheet of the handout with

the students is one of the primary reasons that helped make this whole presentation a positive one for both the students and the teachers. We all know that Lewis was an excellent writer himself and this last page of the handout allowed to me share some of his advice on writing with them - advice that he had already given to young people their own age. After sharing these suggestions on good writing, I thanked them for letting me come to share with them about Lewis and his book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, expressed my hope that they had learned something about him and his story, and encouraged them to read some of his other books as well. I closed by allowing them to ask any other questions and then turned them back now over to their teachers.

Following the presentation several came up to look at the books, map and the other items that I had brought with me. Several asked me questions. I also found out later from the librarian that all of the Lewis books had been checked immediately following my presentation. But even more positive feedback was to come. For, just a few days later, I was contacted by one of the teachers and asked if I would come visit the 5th graders and let them share with me some of the projects that they had completed following my program. We set a date that would fit everyone's schedule; plus I decided to take a camera with me to take their pictures and have their picture taken with me as well. (see <http://www.crlamppost.org/projrecept.htm>) I did not realize that it was also to be a special surprise cookies and punch reception for me. Anyway, before the reception each of the classes invited me to come in to hear and see the projects that they had completed. Many did posters and book covers, a few also wrote original poems and letters. I was very impressed by both their talent and their

understanding of what Lewis was trying to communicate to them. Plus, I was also blessed to be the recipient of several of these projects and am privileged to share some of them with you here and at my web site.

Looking back at this project I am encouraged to do it over again, and, in fact, was invited to do so this past spring by one of the teachers, but our schedules just did not mesh together at that time. I hope the readers, and especially those who are not professional educators, have also been encouraged to step out and do something similar. I trust that it has also been obvious that only an age-appropriate presentation which includes both a handout for the students and suggested post-presentation projects will meet the needs of the both the students and their teacher's educational goals. But even more important I remind you to see the necessity to develop in the specific situation a positive relationship with the teachers, so that your ultimate goal of presenting Lewis can be achieved and you will be welcomed back again. Please contact me for both your questions and suggestions at rvjames@kih.net.

I want to close by sharing with you one of my most precious Lewis treasures - a poem project written by Coleman Hurt, one of those fifth graders, on November 23, 1998 and simply entitled,

"a poem of ...*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*"

By Coleman Hurt

When two sons of Adam and two daughters of Eve,
Pass through the wardrobe, their world they [will] leave.

When Lucy enters Narnia, she first sees a lamp post.
Then after that, she meets sort of a host.
He was kind and humble, not one bit mean,
Though he felt guilty for he had worked for the queen.

He let Lucy go though, and did not turn her in.

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If you asked the White Witch, she'd have called it a sin.

The host's name was Mr. Tumnus, and yes, he is a faun.

Though when the witch heard what he'd done,
She turned him into stone.

Edmond betrayed the other three,

For he was addicted to Turkish Delight.

But later he realized what he'd done was wrong,

And against the White Witch he did fight.

Through the whole story, violence never did cease,

But it slackened a little when Peter killed Morgan,
Chief of secret police.

Through many of these events, [a Lion] drew close
[as] a man,

A man who would save them, whose name was
Aslan.

Aslan, King of all Narnia reigns.

To defeat the White Witch he barely strains.

He's strong and humble,

All who go against him practically crumble.

If you ever knew him, his loyalty was clear.

When the White Witch raised a knife above him, he
showed no fear.

He enjoyed having fun, but to his work he was sin-
cere,

Those creatures in which the White Witch turned to
stone,

He could change back with no more than a breath of
his own.

He gave the glory to the foursome for he could not
deceive,

Two sons of Adam and two daughters of Eve.

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