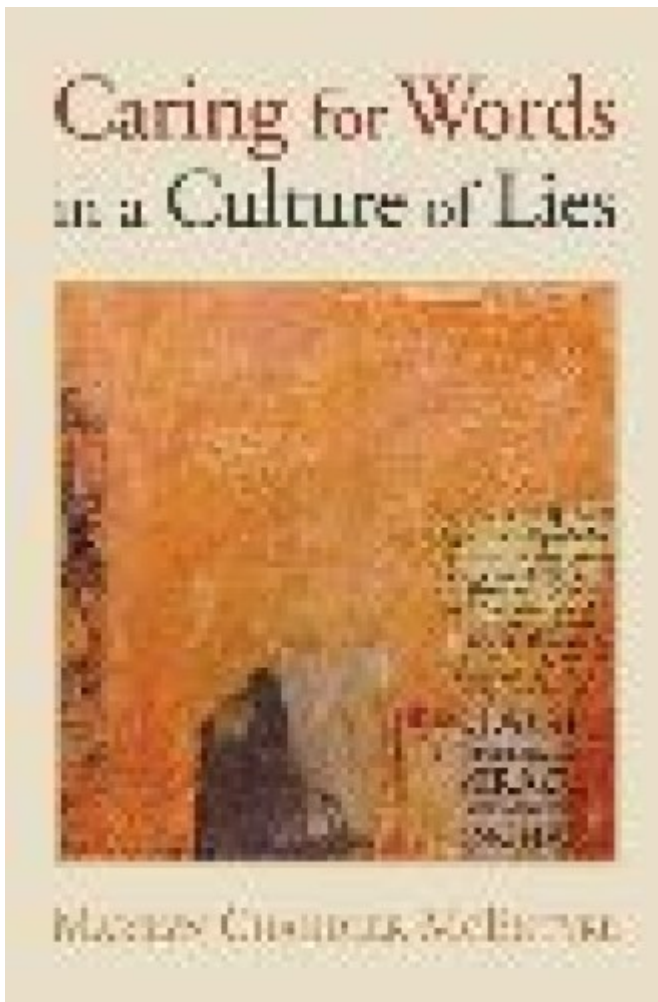


Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies

reviewed by [Julie Lane-Gay](#) in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre
Eerdmans

Watching my 13-year-old sit on the couch and text-message his pals, I intuitively know that our language—our use of words for communicating with one another—is

at risk. Speed has become paramount. Using words accurately or thoughtfully seems about to become extinct. The computer, the Internet and text messages are increasing communication, but they are potentially destroying language.

Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre's book on the stewardship of language, is a wonderfully composed treatise. She says at the outset that she means to reflect on "what it might mean to retrieve words from . . . misuse, abuse and distortion . . . and to reinvigorate them for use as bearers of truth and as instruments of love." A worthy goal if ever there was one. An essayist and poet and a professor of English at Westmont College, McEntyre puts her skills and wisdom to good use.

If you wonder whether caring for words is worth the effort, consider McEntyre's reasoning to a young student: "Language is the basic tool for preserving civilization. It seems useful to understand as much as we can about how it works since it's arguably one of the most potent forms of power that society has produced—that and the atom-splitter."

McEntyre's goal is lofty, but her means are not. My favorite of her 12 strategies for stewardship is Strategy #2: telling the truth. "Truth-telling is difficult because the varieties of untruth are so many and so well disguised. . . . Forms of falsehood are so common, and even so normal, in media-saturated, corporately controlled culture that truth often looks pale, understated, alarmist, rude, or indecisive by comparison." But without truth we lose our credibility. Her most prominent remedy: become precise. Being truthful and precise is one of best gifts Christians can offer a noisy world.

In the chapter on Strategy #5, staying in conversation, McEntyre begins with an incisive denunciation of television, noting that no matter how strong the dialogue, television still curtails our own imaginative and reflective interaction. "One way to minister to busy and harried people is to . . . offer time for conversation—not the quick news update—but the exploratory, reflective, expansive kind."

Other worthwhile strategies include reading well, sharing stories, practicing poetry, cherishing silence, playing and praying. McEntyre is one of those writers (and, I would guess, teachers) who could get you dancing even if you hate parties. I don't like poetry—it's usually over my head—but I was inspired and nourished by the chapter on poetry.

Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies isn't a distinctly Christian book, though the author's thinking is rooted in scripture and some of her examples are biblical. McEntyre is writing for a wider audience, and she voices what many of us instinctively feel but couldn't say nearly as well. Unfortunately, she'll need to write a Twitter version to capture the audience that needs her message the most.