“Evoking Eden” is a six-week biblical storytelling program designed as an interactive, arts-intensive Bible study for kids aged 10-13. It encourages deep exploration of the Bible's creation stories through storytelling, story discussion and visual art projects during six hour-long weekly Bible study sessions. The sessions alternate between a collaborative story-listening process and individual contemplation of the story through visual art.

The program was designed to reach one of the most difficult of all age groups: the “tweens.” Half-child and half-teen, tweens have rapidly advancing (but immature) cognitive ability and excitable hormonal emotion. I developed this workshop model in my creative writing residencies in the public school system, where I often work with this age group and am frequently paired with visual artists.

Tweens respond well to experiential and dynamic learning. A high level of both relaxation and interaction is key to preventing disruptive behavior while working with this age group. The combination of storytelling, discussion and exploration through visual art fuels their curiosity. This powerful combination encourages them to dig deep while remaining focused, which is a big challenge for this age group.

I utilize relaxation techniques before each class session to help the tweens with self-control. While they can be very active learners, this age group is notorious for disruptive behavior. The relaxation process improves their ability to remain focused.

They are equally notorious for being unafraid of asking and answering provocative questions. If you present a provoking question such as, “Did you hear anything in this story that surprised you or goes against what you might have heard in this passage before?” be ready for a deluge of interesting answers!

Plan to bring several different translations of the Bible to class (especially the King James, NRSV and an interpretive Bible like Peterson’s The Message), as well as tablets or smart phones (if there is access to the internet) so they can explore different translations.

Direct the tablets and other devices to www.textweek.com or www.biblestudytools.com. Exploratory learning is very stimulating for tweens.

FIRST, ENABLE SELF-CONTROL
I prefer to teach tweens after engaging them in a relaxation process to assist them with self-control. One I have found to be fast, easy to use and very effective is the 4-7-8 breath, originally designed to help heart patients relax. It improves concentration and helps them resist disruptive behavior. It resets the autonomic nervous system and lowers respiration and heart rates. I insist on full participation from everyone. Those with the poorest impulse control are usually the ones who resist the exercise.

THE 4-7-8 RELAXATION TECHNIQUE
With their eyes closed, have students breathe in through the nose as you count to 4, hold their breath as you count to 7 and exhale through their mouths as slowly as possible as you count to 8. Repeat this process 3 times.

If disruptive behaviors arise during class, have the students take in another deep breath, hold it and then slowly release it. This will reset their respiratory rate and enable impulse-control and concentration.
Week One: Story Process
Ask the class to close their eyes and visualize the story as you tell it. The relaxation breath prepares them for this process. At the end of the visualization, open the floor for interactive discussion. Use conversation starters like: “What kind of creatures did you see?” and “How does this story compare to the Big Bang Theory you’ve studied in school?”

Have each tween pick a Bible from the stack, or hop on the internet, and find Genesis 1 to compare the language of the translations. Stimulate their exploration with questions: “Does ‘face of the deep’ (NRSV) bring a different image to your mind than, ‘raging ocean’ (Good News Bible)? Why?”

Week Two: Contemplating with Art—Watercolor Paintings
Ask the class to be seated at tables that have been preset with a piece of watercolor paper and a basic watercolor paint set, cups of water and paper towels. Spritz each paper with water to enhance the flow of the pigment into the paper. Do the relaxation exercise.

Have the students look for images in their imaginations as you tell them the story, keeping their eyes closed. Before they open their eyes, ask them to create their painting quietly, without talking or interacting with their neighbor.

Now ask them to open their eyes and paint what they saw in the story. In the last 10-15 minutes of class provide an opportunity for each student to explain the images they saw and painted. This continues their exploration process.

Week Three: Story Process
Begin with the relaxation technique. Tell the story, but pause after verse 8 to ask a provoking question, “Did God make the people at the beginning of the story we heard last week?” When they point out that God made the people last in that story, encourage them to listen for other differences between the stories. When you have finished the storytelling, open a discussion about the differences between the first and second stories. Try to engage as many children as possible. Don’t let one student give the opinion for the group. Draw out the quiet students by asking, “Did you notice something else in the story?”

Have each student select a translation of the Bible. Ask them to look carefully at the story in their translation to see if it uses different words and phrases. Then have them share what they find, beginning with the name of the translation they are reading from, and encourage discussion about the differences after each one is shared. Again, if you have access to the internet, use the smart phones, computers or tablets. Tweens are digital natives.

Week Four: Contemplating with Art—Playdough or Modeling Clay
Ask the class to be seated at tables that have been preset with either playdough or modeling clay. With their eyes closed, lead them through the relaxation process and then ask them to keep their eyes closed as you tell the story so they can better see the images in the story.

Now have them form a creature from the clay without talking, explaining that they will share their thoughts when they’re done. As they finish their creature, ask them to blow the breath of life into their model like God did. Then ask a provoking question to encourage discussion, “If you gave your own breath to a creature, would that change how you felt about them?”

Week Five: Story Process
After the relaxation exercise, tell the story. Ask another evocative question, “Whose fault was it that Adam was kicked out of the garden? Why do you think that?” Then encourage them to explore the translations to see how they describe the snake. Continue the discussion about “original blame”—ask why it always has to be someone’s fault. Ask if they think God was fair in the punishments given to Eve, the snake and Adam. Continue the conversation by asking how this compares to our society’s ideas of justice.

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Week Six: Contemplating with Art—
Making Serpents
Make bean bag serpents using knee-high hose, small dried beans and black, white, red, yellow and blue craft paint. Cover the tables with newspaper. Preset each place with one knee-high hose pre-filled with beans and tied securely at the end. Each tween will have a paper plate with dollops of each color paint, a small water-color brush, water for rinsing the brush and a paper towel. You can purchase 4- and 8-packs of hose at a discount retailer.

“My daughter came home after the Bible study, asked where our Bible was, grabbed it and disappeared into her room. She loves the class. She wanted to discuss the story at dinner and that’s never happened before.”
Alison Banzoff, Tween Parent

Seat the students around the table and begin with the relaxation exercise. Ask them to visualize the snake as you tell the story. When you are finished, ask them to paint the bean snake as they saw it in the story. Remind them that they can use the primary colors to mix any color they might have seen.

As the snakes are drying, ask the students about times they have seen people mislead each other and end up in trouble. Let them explore how they think God feels about people who mislead others and what punishments they think might be fair. Tweens are rapidly gaining awareness about significant life issues like justice.

Keep them relaxed, encourage exploration and discussion and they’ll practically teach themselves.

Basic Certification
Through
The Academy for Biblical Storytelling Begins in 2016

Storytellers interested in applying for Basic Certification through the Academy for Biblical Storytelling will have the opportunity in 2016.

The purpose of the NBS Academy for Biblical Storytelling is to provide a process of support and training in both the performance and teaching of biblical stories that encourages individual styles as well as an appreciation for the stories in the form they’ve been “traditioned” to us. In helping students to achieve a significant degree of skill and experience in these two areas, the ultimate goal is to send qualified participants out into the world to function as certified biblical storytellers and, consequently, commended resource persons able to offer services on behalf of the Network of Biblical Storytellers in a way that aids the Network in fulfilling its mission: to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories.

The Academy is overseen by Dr. Tracy Radosevic, and staffed by a team of mentors from within the NBS community, each assigned to three or four students.

The program is rather rigorous, requiring the reading of a variety of books, the writing of several papers, and a multitude of recorded performances (including one 90-minute workshop). ABS is a “school without walls,” meaning that the majority of the work is done from home. The structure works best with students who are self-motivated, disciplined, committed and open to constructive criticism. Attendance at a previous Festival Gathering is required before applying to the program. For more information about other requirements and the course of study, visit our website:

www.nbsint.org/ABS