

The Name of “John” and the Fairy Tales

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This is the second in a series of article looking into the depths of fairy tales and trying to shed light on some of what can be found within. The editor asks that others offer up their own thoughts, comments and questions on this theme as shared knowledge that there is not a “one and only way” to understand stories, or any other aspect of our work with young children.

There is nothing of greater blessing than for a child than to nourish it with everything that brings the roots of human life together with those of cosmic life. A child is still having to work creatively, forming itself, bringing about the growth of its body, unfolding its

inner tendencies; it needs the wonderful soul-nourishment it finds in fairy tale pictures, for in them the child’s roots are united with the life of the world. (Rudolf Steiner, *The Poetry and Meaning of Fairy Tales*)

As an underlying thought to give a context to the following, the perspective of the author is that a fairy tale, a true fairy tale, is a picture of the human being, of each one of us. The characters depict various aspects of the human organism and psyche and all the characters are contained within each of us. The stories offer guidance through life’s challenges and a path toward the reconnecting of one’s souls and spirit as carried by the physical body during life on

earth.

For many years I have thought about the following question: Why is the name John so common in fairy tales? Or any of the many variations of the name; Johannes, Hans, Hansel, Evan, Ivan, Vanya, Ian, Giovanni, Jean, Juan, Sean or Jack. In the Grimm's tales: The Griffin, Iron Hans, The Miller's Drudge and the Cat, Faithful John, Hansel and Gretel, Hans in Luck. Or the Russian tales: The Crystal Mountain, The Three Kingdoms and Ivan the Simpleton. "Jack" stories abound in English and American tales. The name John and its many variations are widespread in fairy tales from around the world.

The John character in the fairy tales is faithful, giving and honest. He is sincere, gentle and patient. Usually though, he is described as simple and lazy and unlikely to succeed in the world. Yet it is John, out of his purity and selflessness who meets success when others do not. John bears a natural, innocent wisdom that carries him where the old wisdom no longer holds true.

Often the third son, the simpleton, can be a picture of the working of the Consciousness Soul, the newest, youngest aspect of the human soul to develop and the part of the individual human being where soul and spirit meet. One could then think of the two older brothers as Sentient and Intellectual Soul members of the human being. The Consciousness Soul brings a new capacity into humanity, a capacity to discover one's own individuality and an inner freedom to create new community. These capacities can seem unimportant and impractical at first, even lowly qualities, to others. The youngest son has innocent wisdom and a pure heart, as opposed to his clever brothers. With a warm heart, the youngest son comes to truth and facilitates deep transformation of the human psyche. It is with this aspect of the human soul that spiritual reality is perceivable.

John is quite frequently the name of that third son in the stories.

Then she took her faithful John by the hand and led him to the carriage. They drove away together and went straight to the little house John had built with the silver tools. It was a big castle now, and everything in it was silver and gold. Then she married him, and he was rich,

so rich that he had enough to last him the rest of his life. (From Grimm's The Miller's Drudge and the Cat)

The deep knowledge and golden wisdom that is the fabric of true fairy tales is palpable. As one carries the fairy tale images inwardly, more and more the underlying spiritual truths can reveal themselves. In ancient times, initiates at the various mystery centers experienced true knowledge of the spiritual world. This information was embedded in images, as stories that could speak of these truths, not to the intellect but to the heart of the listener. In long ago times, the intellect was not as developed as it is today, and so for the average person to have access to that truth, it had to be woven into story. The stories spread from the mystery centers out into the diverse cultures of the earth. Troubadours, minstrels and storytellers carried the stories on their travels and shared them throughout the lands as they wandered and told the tales.

One can try to picture a sheath of spiritual knowledge surrounding the earth, and anyone who could access that sheath was privy to the spiritual wisdom available there. The initiates and shamans and various wisdom bearers throughout the world shared access to this etheric sheath. When they "received" information in this way, it was cloaked in the trappings of the culture familiar to the recipient. This is why there is an archetype behind the story, but the actual stories have differences in the details. Those archetypes live in the etheric sheath, and as they incarnate into culture, they take on details and trappings from that surrounding culture. The true fairy tale gives information of the path an individual can take to unite the various aspects, the bodies of the human being so a balanced path in life can be attained. Fairy tales are a guide to the uniting of souls and spirit and body in the individual, yet given as story. In our time this information would be offered as a book, perhaps *How to Marry Your Own Soul and Spirit*, or a lecture, *Overcoming the Sentient Soul by Allowing the Consciousness Soul Its Voice*. In olden times, when the intellect was in its infancy, the guide to becoming a more evolved human being was story. This fairy tale character was able to see the goddess that was hidden to others.

Said Thandiwe, "You may be clothed in torn

zebra skins and covered with ashes, but those cannot conceal your splendor. In your eyes I see the bright gleam of rivers, ponds, lakes and seas. In your eyes I see one who greens the earth and nourishes the crops. Such beauty far surpasses the charm of well oiled skin and the jingling of bracelets and cowry shells. You are my bride. You are the Rain Goddess.”

When the Rain Goddess heard these words, she knew she had chosen wisely. “Let the ceremonies begin,” she said. Soon the villagers were dancing and feasting, celebrating the marriage of Thandiwe and the Rain Goddess. When the sun dipped behind the hills and the stars sparkled silver beads in the night sky, the heavens shone their blessings on the marriage.

Thandiwe and the Rain Goddess rose up into the heavens, hand in hand. They journeyed to the Rainbow House, high up in the heavens. And there they live to this day and will always live. (From an African tale *The Marriage of the Rain Goddess*. Perhaps Thandiwe (tahn-dee-way) is another variant of John?)

As the stories incarnated into the cultures of humanity, various esoteric groups adapted the details to help refine the process of individual development. One of the last groups to adapt these ancient spiritual stories were the Rosicrucians. As early as the seventh century, they brought in the element of esoteric Christianity to widespread fairy tales. One can look to Rudolf Steiner for more background about the Rosicrucians (see references at end of article). The true Rosicrucians have worked outside the main stream of the Church, yet they are connected to the deepest truths of the working of the Christ Being on earth. Their inner teachings were about the possibility of awakening the higher ego in each individual, by which one is connected with the guiding spirit of humanity. In historical Christianity, there have been two widely known streams. Peter began the Catholic stream, and we can see Paul as connected to the various Protestant churches. One could name a third stream the John stream to which the Rosicrucians belong. This could also be called Johannine Christianity, the streaming of the future. This youngest stream has yet to come to

maturity and be recognized for the deep truth and conscience which it represents. So from this angle, we can see John as the youngest brother to Peter and Paul, not yet valued for the capacities he brings.

Says the fairy to Jack at the end of Jack and the Beanstalk “If you had looked at the gigantic beanstalk and only stupidly wondered about it, I should have left you where your misfortune had placed you, only restoring her cow to your mother. But you showed an inquiring mind, and great courage and enterprise, therefore you deserve to rise; and when you mounted the beanstalk you climbed the ladder of fortune.”

And thus Jack was able to rise into and see the spiritual world.

What does the name John offer about the role of this character in the human being? Who is John?

Two famous beings named John immediately come to mind, both play major roles in the biblical stories of Jesus Christ. Rudolf Steiner has offered profound insight on the subject of the two biblical Johns and their connection with each other. Further, Steiner explained that John was evolved to a level that allowed him in full consciousness to experience his own connection to the Christ Spirit and become the representative for all humanity in that connecting. John showed the path that is possible for any one of us to undertake, the path of true awakening and connection. Through initiation, John became the bearer of cosmic wisdom, the Divine Sophia, and his task was to tell the truth to those who had ears to hear. (That in itself harkens to the essential role of story, to bring the truth to those who are ready to receive it.) Thus the name John grows from a proper name to a symbol which characterizes him who has become or is to become the herald of the Ego. (Karl Konig, “The Two Disciples John”).

John is one who is able to cross the threshold to the spiritual world consciously, to truly awaken and see and recognize the spiritual within the material world. He has developed a spiritual organ, and its name is conscience.

Ivan found the water of life and sprinkled it on his brothers. They rubbed their eyes. “How long have we slept?” they asked. “Without me

you would have slept forever,” said Ivan Goroh, pressing them to his heart.
(From the Russian tale Ivan Goroh and Vasilisa Golden Tress)

The more ancient name for John offers some interesting insight into the name itself. In Greek, IOANNES, and phonetically in Hebrew, Jehohannen, and also in the German Johannes, we hear a particular order of vowel sounds contained in the name; the sounds ee, oh and then ah. In the last lecture in a series entitled The Easter Festival and its Relation to the Mysteries (Dornach, April 1924), Steiner described how the pupils and initiates of the Ephesus Mysteries experienced the cosmos as a form of light, and within the light of the sun, the sounds J O A (ee, oh, ah), which had effects on the pupil.

And in this feeling of the [sounds] J O A one felt oneself as the very sound J O A within the light. Then one was truly HUMAN - resounding ‘I,’ resounding astral body, clothed in the light-radiant etheric body. One was sound within the light. And so indeed one is as cosmic Human Being and as such one is able to perceive what is seen in the surrounding Cosmos, just as here on Earth one is able to perceive through the eye what takes place within the physical horizon of the Earth.

So one can see the ancient power which still lives in the very sounding of the name John whether or not we are even aware of its possible effects on the children we work with.

From other perspectives, Rudolf Steiner spoke about the relation of cosmic activity and the formative quality of spoken sounds. Steiner articulated that certain sounds are connected to particular planets. In reference to the vowel sounds in the more original forms of the name for John, ee is connected to Mercury, oh to Jupiter and ah, Venus. Our Earth phase of evolution began under the rule of Mars. At the turning point of time, the Mercury phase began. That is where our earth is at present. Next will be Jupiter, and then Venus phases. Ioannes is a name sounding us from the present moment toward the future, when deep spiritual mysteries will be awake in the consciousness of all human beings, and humanity

as a whole will become the tenth hierarchy. So we can consider the name John as a picture of the archetypal human being after spiritual awakening by the highest spiritual beings. He has the possibility of healing the earth and transforming it into the star of love.

John lives within all of us as a potential, and it is our birthright in this time. Yet it can only be awakened individually out of our own freedom and will-engaged activity. Fairy tales offer a roadmap to our own awakening and hence to the transformation of our world.

Steiner quotes Ludwig Laistner (1848-1896) in his lecture “The Poetry and Meaning of Fairy Tales.

The fairy tale is like a good angel, given us at birth to go with us from our home to our earthly path through life, to be our trusted comrade throughout the journey and to give us angelic companionship, so that our life itself can become a truly heart-and-soul enlivened fairy tale.

Suggested reading:

Grosse, Rudolf. The Living Being Anthroposophia.

Konig, Karl. “The Two Disciples John.”

Prokofieff, Sergei O. The Cycle of the Year as a Path of Initiation

Ibid. The Mystery of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist at the Turning Point in Time.

Spitalny, Stephen. Who is John and Why Are Fairy Tales So Often Named After Him?

Steiner, Rudolf. The Poetry and Meaning of Fairy Tales.

Ibid. “The Last Address”

Ibid. Turning Points in Spiritual History

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