

Dancing with the Snowmaiden

— Christy Field

While attending a Waldorf Early Childhood Educational Conference in January of 2019, I spoke with a fellow educator who is working on her dissertation about the Boston Public School System. She is studying the use of dramatization of children's stories for advancing literacy in early childhood classrooms. This reminded me of a time in my life, years ago, when, as a teacher in a progressive private school, we put on class plays each year. The preparation for the plays took place over many weeks, involving set creation, costume design, memorization, and repetition. The final product was always breathtaking, but its biggest impact lay in the process of community building and learning that happened along the way. Particularly notable for me were those remarkable moments when some of the first or second graders, who had struggled to make sense of print, began to decipher their script as they acted out their lines.

Now, as a Waldorf early childhood educator, I use story dramatization in a different way, though it is equally transformative. In our classroom, the children watch the story being acted out by puppets over several days' time. Once they are very familiar with the story, we act it out during our storytelling time. The story is simply told and the children join in with the dialogue as they are able. Each day they play different characters, having opportunities to try on many roles in the story as well as to be audience members.

A recent experience with the Russian fairy tale, "The Snowmaiden," illustrated just how great an

impact this process can make on the children. The fairy tale is a complex story in which an old man and an old woman desperately wish for a child. They create a child out of snow, and the good god hears their desire and makes her alive. They love and care for the child to the best of their abilities, preparing ice porridge for her meals, allowing her to dance in the snowy yard all night and play with the village children during the day. As winter comes to an end, the Snowmaiden goes to the forest, still deep with snow, to play a game of hide and seek along with her friends. She does not want to return to the village with her friends when dusk arrives. During the night, she becomes sad and weeps bitterly for her dear little friends and longs to return home to her good mother and good father. The weeping child receives offers from three animals to take her home and she finally trusts and accepts the offer of the fox.

Once she returns home, she asks her mother and father (who are very pleased to have her back) to provide a meal for the fox, who asks for a fat hen. Here they do something "not very nice." They put a fat hen in the bag with a big black dog. As the fox goes to chase the hen, the dog chases the fox back to the forest. The old people are well-pleased with their trickery, for it enabled them to keep both their dear little Snowmaiden and their fat hen. But they find the Snowmaiden dancing very close to the fire and sadly singing, "Ah, you love me not I see; Love a chicken more than me; Back to heaven I will go; Little daughter

of the snow.” Then she floats up the chimney to the land of snow and ice. The old people grieve and wish for another chance to behave better. In our version, she does return to them next winter with her Snowmaiden friends. The children in the classroom always delight in her return.

Over many days, the children watched as I moved puppets to play out the story. After a few days, they began singing the Snowmaiden Song with me and eventually recited many of the story lines in unison. This story resonated in the hearts of everyone in the classroom. We have each desperately desired something, held on a bit too tightly, and eventually lost our treasures. The children asked for and looked forward to the story each day, expressing disappointment on days we did not share it. One day we headed out into the snowy day without telling the story in order to have more time to play in the forest. On our walk the children stopped to play, throwing clumps of snow into the rushing water below, gathering piles of snow and skating on the icy path. One child handed me a baby-sized chunk of snow. Whether he whispered it, I made it up, or the good god heard his desire and smiled down on us, I am not sure, but suddenly, this chunk of ice was our little Snowmaiden, our little white dove.

Right then and there the children brought her ice porridge and we all danced and sang her song, proceeding in a living experience right into the story. When we arrived at the part of the story where winter is coming to an end, we headed further down the path, with children singing her song along the way. We ducked into the forest near a big pine tree and began playing hide and seek just as the Sashas, Mashas, Petrushkas, and Mashutras in the story had done. Soon it was nighttime and the Snowmaiden found herself quite alone. One child held our Snowmaiden high on a rock and began to weep while a second child pretending to be a bear offered her a ride home. Only minimally prompted, the children used the exact words of dialogue from the story. A third child played the wolf. As the fox, I carried the child to her parents, who were also played by children from the class. The dog and the hen were also acted. The sad ending left us all a bit deflated until the little Snowmaiden returned with all of her friends. In the end we each held a small piece of ice and danced and sang her song, happy to be reunited.

This story can certainly be enjoyed in a single telling, but by taking our time with the story, sharing

it several times over three weeks, the children are able to absorb and integrate so much more than the basic images of the fairy tale. They have the opportunity to grasp the vocabulary and language, the order of events, the emotions of the characters, the environment in which the story takes place, and cause and effect. By dramatizing the story, they have the opportunity to take it into their very being in a holistic way. One mother shared that her daughter sang the Snowmaiden’s song to her parents at night as a bedtime song.

It is common to act our stories out within the classroom using silks and simple props to support the imaginative process. I find that this facilitates the children’s grasp of the story, and they enjoy the process. It supports their imaginative play as they are guided into the playful transformation of objects in the room, and they may surprise us with their ability to carry out a role. Acting the story out in an environment akin to that which the story takes place helps us to embrace our own environment. We notice the landscape, we see it anew through fairy-tale eyes. This lifts our gaze, helping us to notice the beauty and magic of our world. It whets our appetite for engaging in the nature around us. ♦

Resources:

- “The Snowmaiden” is included in the “Plays for Puppets and Marionettes,” by Bronja Zahlingen, available as a free ebook from the Waldorf Online Library. To download, visit waldorflibrary.org, click on “Ebooks” in the side menu, and do a title search. The story can also be found in *A Lifetime of Joy* (WECAN, 2005), an expanded version of this small booklet.

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