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# Reimagining Story

— Stephen Spitalny

It is time for a serious look at the stories we tell young children and a sharpening of the focus of our lens for detecting embedded messages and images that don't meet our values. In this day and age it is especially important to consider how cultural dominance and racist stereotypes, as well as shaming, blaming and punishment have crept into stories. These messages do not resonate for me with intentions of creating a future world of compassion, love and harmony.

Once upon a time, when I was first traveling the road toward becoming a Waldorf kindergarten teacher, it was commonly advised not to mess with fairy tales, not to change them because they are ancient wisdom encapsulated in story form. I accepted that and later even at times admonished students in my adult courses not to change those fairy tale gems from the past.

The basis for that thinking is that so-called “fairy tales” are, in fact, symbolic representations of received spiritual wisdom that perhaps only an initiate had the credentials to modify. That wisdom had been received by various shamans, initiates and the like, from the imaginal sheath that surrounds the earth. These wisdom stories have been received by wise and spiritually opened people all over the world, and through them the spiritual archetypes incarnated into the flavors and tastes of the culture of which the initiate was a member. What the stories share is the truth of the striving to become a whole human being of body, soul and spirit. The stories are rich in symbology and can be decoded by recognizing the archetypes and extrapolating to the various aspects of the developing human being.

In the long-ago times, these stories were told around the fire, at the hearth. They were told to adults to give them tools for their own future development. First told by wandering bards, minstrels, or shamans the general public received these stories and began to pass them on, as well as to embellish and enhance the stories. Each story evolved based on the regions it travelled through, and on the style and culture of the tellers. The stories offered seeds for enlightenment, and possibilities for gathering strength and moral fiber to face the challenges of their own lives.

These wisdom stories are populated by ordinary seeming people who prevail against obstacles in their path, usually placed there by those with more power than they have. There are usually elements of cleverness, compassion, or courage that are required for the resolving of the obstacles. In the plot and characters of the story, one can discover many aspects of the human being. I think of the character and situations within a story as aspects and experiences of an individual human being. All the characters are inside all of us. These stories do not depict outer physical reality, rather they give pictures of inner development, images of the path of becoming truly human and uniting the various aspects of ourselves and pictures of the functioning of the human body.

Often the three sons or daughters can be thought of as representing three aspects of the human soul. Seven of something is likely in reference to the seven planets; twelve, to the zodiac and its influences on the human being. The elements are pointed to when there is four. Or perhaps five is related to the elements? Perhaps three is connected to thinking, feeling and willing? Sleeping and waking, cosmic/dreaming and grounded/awake to the earth—maybe this is what two of something can be referring to in a story? To go into stories through the door of archetype and number can be very useful, but it is a personal exploration. There are no recipes, there are no “correct” interpretations, there is no “one-and-only way” to understand a story. Once explored, a story may, next time, become something else for you. As Joan Almon once said, “Stories don't like to be pigeon-holed.”

At the dawn of the age of materialism, at the beginning of the era of the printing press, the ancient wisdom tales began to be collected and entombed in the printed word. What had been living, evolving story beings, now became codified. They became lifeless corpses of their former selves. Before being printed, these “fairy stories” were a “rolling literature” (as Marina Warner has put it) and they could and would be infinitely adapted and modified. The age of materialism could not accept these wisdom tales as having value, and in industrialized societies, the term “fairy” stories arose to belittle

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these powerful tales, and to announce that they were at best fit for children.

I have a great passion and a deep personal connection to so-called fairy tales, from many countries all around the world. I collect collections of stories and hungrily peruse the contents searching for ones that I connect with and that bring forth the images I want to offer the children. I think it is essential that a teacher offer stories that meet the diversity of the world around us. People from everywhere are everywhere. And, if one thinks that reincarnation is a possibility, or a reality, people from everywhere have been “otherwhere” before. There are five continents, innumerable islands, approximately 200 countries and uncountable, unique cultures. To help make this world a better place, let’s all learn some stories outside of our familiar story comfort zone! Often we can discover a connection to stories of our own family ancestors. What about stories that arose on the local land on which we stand?

While fairy tales do not depict physical reality, the images can perpetuate stereotypes of disempowerment and can create and perpetuate implicit biases. Many, not all, of the traditional European fairy tales have young, male heroes. What if we made sure to create a balance between male and female heroes, between young and old characters who become the one that succeeds? Does the wicked person always have to be an old woman or a step-parent? We need to explore the old stories and be sure for ourselves that the images do not perpetuate unhealthy stereotypes while at the same time making sure the stories message the values for which we stand. To do this, we have to do our own personal openminded exploring, and we have to be open to listening to the thoughts and experiences of others who may have different perspectives, including parents and colleagues. (For help, refer to Steiner’s Fifth of the Six Basic Exercises.)

I have often heard a complaint from parents and adult students that the endings of the stories are too harsh, the retribution is excessive. And I have explained those complaints away, first, by mentioning that the story is a depiction of a spiritual reality, and is not meant to be thought of as a physical happenstance.

Second, I have often quoted British essayist and mystery writer G. K. Chesterton who wrote in *The Ethics of Fairyland* about the magnitude and violence of the retributions, *Children being innocent prefer justice, grown-ups being sinful prefer mercy.*

And still I have wondered. We are teaching the children *on many levels* when we tell a story. I have come to a place where I think it is important that we offer examples of compassion and non-violent resolution. If we continually offer violent retribution as the resolution or redemption in stories, then where goes hope for compassion and peace in the world? I think it is high time to find and tell stories that offer compassion without violence and punishment, stories that picture kindness and justice.

Somewhere along the way, perhaps one or two hundred years ago, the “rolling literature” of stories came upon an obstacle which hindered growth, development and enhancement. It is time to get the ball rolling again. I think stories are longing for their infinite updates. It is time to rewrite fairy tales, or better, allow them to live again.

In our time, it seems more important than ever that we offer teaching of compassion and hope, of love triumphing over evil without violent punishment for misdeeds. It is time to hear stories of different family constellations like children with two moms or two dads. There are evils of our time, perhaps different from those of the past. There is an unhealthy focus in culture on physical form and beauty and an idealized version of perfection. Can we help to counter that with images of inner strength and wisdom and integrity, and leave off description of outer physical form? Can we bring stories to encourage love and protection and creative solutions for our planet and the life on it which faces rising challenges and risks of extinction? Embedded in many stories are images of power structures and racial bias that we need to become aware of, and through our retelling undo the inherent racism.

- Penetrate through the imaginal language of the story to the underlying archetype and truths.
- Identify the elements of the story that do not serve your values.

- Make changes to serve your values while staying true to the spiritual messages conveyed by the story.

When I first heard the story of *Shingebiss* as a beginner kindergarten teacher, I was struck by the words describing how the North Wind was like a “squaw breeze” to the little duck. Those words troubled me and made me question the value of the story. I realized this Native American story had been written down by a non-tribal member and the author’s bias was embedded in the telling. But there was still something very special about that story, so I kept seeking a better version, coming from the culture out of which the story sprang. I eventually found a version truer to the traditions of the Ojibwe people, and I breathed a big sigh of relief. From that version, and some elements of the version I previously was familiar with, I created a version that felt good to be telling to young children, and to people of all ages.

I am not suggesting we go over each of the polished gems and old standbys and rework them for political correctness. I am not suggesting a free-for-all of redoing the classics to make them more palatable. The various media have done that and I think it didn’t go very well, and is generally not very satisfying. What I am suggesting is to consider if changing certain aspects could in fact enhance a story while keeping true to its underlying spiritual messages.

One classic story I tentatively approached with my editor’s red ink was the story of *Jorinda and Joringel* from the Grimms’ collection. It is a story that has always been both an attraction and a mystery for me. I shared one of my early rewrites with an elder colleague who spurred me on. She suggested that the wicked old woman could be a wicked old man. And she too appreciates that in this story about disenchantment, the blood red flower simply makes

it impossible for the woman to do magic any more, without further punishment. It is so important to offer images to all about the possibilities inherent in their humanness. Flexibility in relation to the old stories is particularly important in our current stage of human cultural development. In my changed version, the boy and girl have been renamed, the girl must free the boy from his enchantment, and the wicked old woman has become a man. [This story is available at [chamakanda.com/articles](http://chamakanda.com/articles)].

In the closing lecture of the foundational course for the first Waldorf teachers in 1919 (*Study of Man*), Rudolf Steiner pointed to the importance of filling ourselves with the power of imagination. Steiner said that it is equally important that the imaginations are true. If the imaginations the teachers are teaching from are true, then teacher must have the courage to rely on those imaginations, the courage to be free and independent in thinking and still to unite themselves with true imaginations instead of false. The teacher must therefore have courage for the truth. And this courage for the truth which the teacher develops must go hand in hand with a feeling of responsibility towards checking the truth of imaginations.

It is time to write new stories. And it is time to set the old stories free. ♦

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