

The Worker Puppet: A Healing Archetype

— Suzanne Down

This is an excerpt from the forthcoming A Renewal of Puppetry: An early childhood curriculum on story and puppetry by Suzanne Down/Juniper Tree School of Story and Puppetry Arts. For information, contact Suzanne at suzanne@junipertreepuppets.com or visit junipertreepuppets.com.

I believe in a renewal of puppetry so that it can open the heart and soul and bring, through the visible story, a picture of the potential for humanness. The movements and gestures of the puppets, along with the colors, quality of voice, music, staging, choreography, and story content, together lift the veil of the everyday and connect us all with the world of archetype and to spiritual truths. For this to be developed as a healing gift, we have the blessings of archetypal wisdom and our own research and experience to guide us. How we approach puppetry for different ages must follow the inner development of the child.

Around the age of five, the child withdraws a little from the free flow of fantasy play. There is an inner change developing. Soon the child will begin to direct his play through an inner mental picture, an inner imagination, which sparks the imagination on the outside. So there is a transformation from play being sparked by outside stimulation to play arising from inner images.

One thing that can deeply support this metamorphosis in the child is the adult's inward calm and devotion. When engaged in an adult work activity, such as sewing a puppet, planting a garden, carving wood, or kneading dough, the adult's inner attitude should be one of real interest in the task. We can exude a kind of loving dedication to our tasks, so that the inner mood will be experienced by the child, as well as the attentiveness to a practical activity. We want to pay attention to the cadence and gesture we use in the doing.

The puppetry you bring can reinforce this mood. Look for opportunities in puppet story to bring "workers," the characters that are the doers, into archetypal gesture. All stories have the "doing" characters; they are often in the middle-age range, the adults that hold the thread of daily life in balance. The mother sweeps

the floor, bakes the bread, and rocks the cradle. The shoemaker stitches the leather together to make a shoe. The woodcutter chops the wood that will warm the hearth. The fisherman casts out his net and pulls in the fish that will become a family's sustenance.

The meaningful, purposeful work of these "doing" characters can have a huge strengthening effect on the developing moral will of the children. The rhythmical gesture of these activities is a cosmic mirror. As a puppeteer, you may live into the imagination of the fisherman as an archetype. As he throws out the net, every bit of the fisherman's soul and heritage is immersed in the activity. He is totally attentive to it. He imbues the movement with timeless grace. "Fisherman," the archetype, surrounds the rhythmic flow of his actions. Then he pulls in the net, and again throws it out, the repetition and rhythm of the heartbeat is connected to this gesture. These cosmic "doing" scenes speak far beyond the individual character and story.

What does this consciousness within the puppeteer bring to the children watching the puppet play? The children watch, and deeply absorb the morality of the will activities of the puppet characters into their own subconscious. They even absorb the puppet's gestures right into their own movement body, like a cosmic echo. When we ensoul the puppet's activities with our interest, our care and attentiveness, they become living actions through the puppet gesture and movement. We penetrate the entire puppet with meaningful will. Surrounding these characters' actions are invisible rhythms and "movement-wisdom" streaming in through our inner story imaginations. You can see that the primary work of the puppeteer is developing inner wisdom. We, the puppeteers, make this wisdom visible through the puppets.

The shoemaker is engaged inwardly and outwardly

in his task. His outer movements of stitching and cutting are filled with his inner attention. He is one with the rhythm of his activity. His eyes, heart, and soul are connecting to his life work. It is not just his hands stitching; his whole being is a part of the gesture. In and out the needle goes, precise, and with loving care.

The mother's movements when tending the baby are welcoming, open, softly rounded. They are the classic embrace. They are also filled with warmth and love. There are many layers to a gesture. The physical manipulation of the arms and body is one layer. But enlivening the heart in the gesture gives the child a true experience of the archetypal mother. How do we achieve this? We create our inner imagination so clearly that it sings through us into the puppets. We awaken the Mother as cosmic model within us. We engage the whole mother puppet in the gesture, not just her arms!

Gift the children of this age with puppet characters that embody the best of the adult work. Of course, your puppets need to be constructed so that the arms and bodies have fluid movement possibilities. Even the small finger puppets and table puppets can indicate the right gesture. Remember, the gesture is in the attentiveness of the whole of the puppet, as well as in the ensouled arm movements. We do not want a puppet engaging with just the arms moving and an otherwise empty, stiff, un-ensouled puppet.

Pelle's New Suit, by Elsa Beskow, is a perfect story to bring the beauty and dignity of the worker's enlivened "doing" to the children. Here a child is also one of the workers, one who has taken in the quality and skill of his community of kind and good adult workers. Even more profound is to present the puppet play over time, and then find real people doing these same tasks to experience directly. Seek out the sheep shearers, the dyer, the spinner, the weaver, the farmer with hay to rake and cows to tend. How exciting this would be! Follow up with you and the children doing some of these tasks. Dye the wool, spin the yarn, felt and sew! Imagine how this helps children form an inner knowledge of how we can approach life work, life activities. We give them the story gift of inner connection to the outer task.

Here is a little story where the main character is engaged in a practical activity. You can lead the children into a felting project after seeing this tale. Be sure to move the shepherd with real, believable whole-body movements—pat pat, rub rub; join in the grand rhythm of felting wool.

The Shepherd and the Hedgehog

Once upon a time in the high mountains lived a shepherd called Hansi. He loved the still warm days of late summer, looking after the sheep in the high green pastures. All around the meadows grew wildflowers. The shepherd loved to look at the green grass dotted with his white sheep and a rainbow of flowers.

One day he had an idea. Hansi gathered the tufts of sheep's wool that got caught on twigs and low branches. He picked some grasses and dried flower petals of orange and red and golden yellow. He put the fluffs of wool in his cooking pan. He then added warm water from his teakettle and a bit of soap he always had with him to wash his hands. Hansi gently patted the wool down into the pan until it was wet. He then got his hands all soapy and started to rub the wool so gently. The wool started to grow together. He rubbed a little harder and the wool grew together more strongly. He looked at the grasses and dried flower petals, and sprinkled some on top of the wet wool. Hansi then took a few dry wool fibers and opened them like a spider web. He put this over the grass and petals on the wet wool and rubbed it all together. The petals and grass made a beautiful design on his wool felt. . . a nature picture.

Hansi liked looking at this picture. What fun it was to make it! When it was time to move the sheep to another meadow, Hansi left the felt picture tucked on the branch of a low bush.

What Hansi did not know was, as he worked on his wool felt, a little hedgehog had been watching. When Hansi left the meadow with his sheep, the little hedgehog trundled over to the colorful felt, sniffed it, crawled over it and under it, and knew this would make a fine blanket for his winter house! Hedgehog brought it over the meadow to his little hollow in a fallen log. How happy the hedgehog was to have this warm treasure! "Thank you, dear shepherd," thought the hedgehog deep in his heart. He was ready for the cold days ahead. ♦

Suzanne Down is the founder and director of the *Juniper Tree School of Story and Puppetry Arts*, now based in Colorado. The focus of the school is the three-year part-time summer certificate puppetry training, weaving together of pedagogical, artistic, and therapeutic aspects of puppetry.