

Fairy Tales and Legends

The First Two Years at the Waldorf School

by

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Some questions are difficult to answer. And those questions that arise unbidden, after you have followed thirty children through their first two school years, belong to the especially difficult. Ideally I would tuck them away in a black box, carefully bolted and chained.

- What was my goal in these first two years of school?
- And what has happened to the children during these years?

The first two years were spent creating a solid relationship between the children and the teacher. An equally large role was strengthening the social relationships between the children. The relationships between people are determined by what they share in common—inside themselves. When children can share the same pictures, they can also have common feelings to think back upon. The best way to establish a good relationship with children is to focus on the most free and inward part of their lives.

True relationships follow the rule: What I hold onto, I lose. What I give away, I retain. The path to that inner point goes through reservation, not intrusion. The shortest path is not a direct line; it makes a bow around the point. Children create a relationship with their teacher when he captures their attention in something else. So paradoxical is human nature.

- What captures the attention of first graders?

“I do not like the well-behaved kids!” This message came from bottom of a young boy’s soul, whispered in my ear. It was hard not to admit that I also like the misbehaved children best. But that does not mean I feel sorry for the well-behaved children. For to the “naughty” belong all of the problematical natures.

When you look closer, that entails everyone in the class, for everyone has forces in their soul that are not well behaved. When we discover those forces, then we discover each other. In the darkness among the creeping plants sit our secrets. If the teacher moralizes directly into that jungle, using scythes and insecticides, he can be sure he will learn nothing about the secrets.

For some reason adults are always in a hurry. The part of the world they take seriously—taxes, income, repairing the kitchen sink, the mirror in the entrance and all of the thousands of other trivial aspects of life are precisely connected to what adults consider “time.” Their concept of time is a measured quantity. If you have a lot to do, there is too little time. For children it is different. If too much happens in a day, their day becomes a universal space of time, with no beginning and no end. Time opens up.

For children the kitchen sink also exists but it is not trivial. If it leaks, the drops create horses or trolls on the floor. And that is important, very important. Trolls are more important than floorboards and paint. But the most important thing is the plumber who brings an arsenal of wrenches, screws and other iron objects. These are heavy things and cold to hold in your hand. The plumber is a mythological figure, a fairy tale being as high as the church spire. He is terribly friendly, as strong as three bears, and much more exciting than the average uncle or aunt. The plumber does something. He does not come to eat dinner or drink coffee and talk about clothes, but he plays an uncanny game with the sink; he pulls weird and foul-smelling objects out of the pipes; he is the general who wins or loses. And while the battle is waged, the sun stands still and the birds stop singing. The afternoon in the kitchen is as long as a season; the kitchen becomes a magical landscape. For the adults the plumber is done in half an hour, and then he presents his shamefully high bill before leaving.

The mirror in the hall also exists for children. But it is a mystery that entails the whole world. Against an ocean of darkness, one has seen one’s own face, curiously small and pale, but recognizable. It is the real mirror, the intimate, and the only confidential mirror among all of the world’s mirrors.

Our lives are divided between two planes: one is tragic and the other is trivial. The tragic plane contains both good and evil; it contains the powers of hate and love and all of the struggles between light and darkness. In short, the tragic plane contains the riddles of life, the battles between good and evil in the human soul.

The trivial plane entails the endless ocean of meaningless activities that fill our time, that which makes us adults without strength and old without honor, that in which we drown and lose ourselves. The objects are never meaningless. Only our experience of the objects is meaningless. The trivial plane is just as much within us as it is in the world. It is a state of mind, and our adult state of mind moves between the tragic and the trivial.

Until the eleventh year our children live totally in the tragic world. It is important to consciously cultivate the deep and useless, the tragic and the outstanding aspects of our children's lives, the fruits of which will appear later in life. Fairy tales are the most important source of health in the souls of children before the ninth year.

For children fairy tales play the same role as Aristotle considered tragedy should play for adults. But while only a few adults care for the great tragic works, all healthy children live with fairy tales in their hearts. For fairy tales that truly represent the eternal goodness are the only source that offers children a world that relates to their own. All children have an abundance of what adults call education, culture, and the love of art. Therefore children are more fun to be with. Perhaps one adult in a thousand has the same depth to their life of feelings, the profound thoughts or as serious a relationship to good and evil as most children possess. We merely need to meet them with a language they understand. From an artistic point of view fairy tales are on the same level as Shakespeare's, Goethe's, Dante's or Homer's poetry. For adults they are not easily accessible. In *Poetics* Aristotle emphasizes the purifying effect tragedy has upon the soul. He gives it an antiseptic role; it cleans the soul of wounds, smallness, jealousy, hate and all other remains of everyday stress. The composition of tragedy aims at creating a catharsis. That is its mission. Aristotle was convinced that the most complete tragedy combines the play's content with a catastrophe that is avoided in the last minute: with a good ending. Fairy tales meet the same criteria. While tragedy must be violent and awaken fear and compassion, fairy tales must be deeply felt.

Art provides healing. For children fairy tales are the closest art form in addition to other activities they enjoy at the Waldorf school; painting, drawing, singing and forming. It is important not to read fairy tales for children. Nor should they be retold the tales. Rather the tales should be performed and demonstrated. The speaker should be in constant movement, each word expressed with movement. If not the fairy tale will not have the all effect it can have. Only when children are carried away, when they forget everything else, will the fairy tale become a window into a greater reality.

One may ask: When you tell so dramatically, will not the cruelty be even stronger? Will the children be scared? Will they have a hard time sleeping? If the tale is told well, the children will be peaceful, content and happy. Children need to feel safe in order to unfold themselves because fear among children has no reasonable limit. Fear for children always becomes the fear that the good will not win. It lies deeply within the human being where it should neither be ignored nor awakened.

When a fairy tale is told properly, fear begins to move. It remains for awhile in the form of uneasiness, fright, and then the excitement intensifies, their mouths

open, their eyes become larger and then, then the troll is killed and the evil is once again removed from the surface of the earth. Until the next time the world is a safe home, a place where goodness always conquers. There is no reason to explain with which attitude such a fairy tale fills the soul of the children.

Just consider for a minute Lillekort's (a young hero in Norwegian folklore) immortal comment to the troll when he is asked if he knows how to fight with a sword: "If I cannot, I will learn." Lillekort's words explode into the mountainside. A man, who brings such words to his heart will always win over the trolls, no matter how many heads they have. Once you have told the fairy tale of Lillekort to the first or second graders, there no longer exists attitudes such as: "I cannot, I dare not, I do not know." The teacher, who represents the forward-moving, world-conquering principle, can at any time lead the class in: "If I cannot, I will learn." Not only the story of Lillekort but almost all fairy tales have a moral influence that is much more effective than a twenty-hour scolding.

Fairy tales must be used—that is why we have them. We have so many types of fairy tales that there are few human situations or moral problems that are not addressed in ideal form and solved by them. Yet many of the same motives are repeated in the European and Asiatic tales. Which motives are these?

One archetype appears in Askeladden (the Ash Lad), the main character in many Norwegian folktales, a character similar but different from Lillekort. It is easy to characterize these half brothers. Both have techniques for conquering evil—Askeladden by using kindness along with his own unconventional awareness and his ability to observe reality different than all others, and Lillekort with his unbending courage. Askeladden pauses and ask questions about it first, but Lillekort walks right over the mountain. Both are the youngest child and both are extremely poor. They both help kings, conquer evil, and free princesses. The archetypal motives are that power and strength lie where no one looks for them.

Both boys have good luck on their side. They have attributes, not power. Those who help them are friendly animals, enlightened trolls, the forces of nature and other beings. "The Helpers" are a very important aspect in the logic of fairy tales. But who are they?

In the story of the "Seven Ponies" the messages are so clear that they send chills down your spine. The King's seven sons are under a spell—they become ponies. Every morning they gallop away and are gone for the whole day. Not until late afternoon do they return. No one knows what they live on. Both the older brothers of both Askeladden and Lollekort want to know what is going on and so fall into the trap—their lack of genuine interest leads them to believe that the horses live from grass and water like other horses. But Askeladden and Lollekort, respectively, follow them over the river and see that the horses eat at

a table and drink wine in a church—they live from bread and wine. But what are do bread, wine and the river represent?

It is not merely theoretically interest to ask whether fairy tales contain objective truths. To the contrary, it is of great importance for those who tell fairy tales for children that "only a fairy tale" is not part of their vocabulary or attitude. If one does not believe in fairy tales, this will certainly come through in a tone that does not belong. If one tells children something that one does not believe in, it will always carry the nuance of a lie. Children will notice, and they will act accordingly.

If fairy tales teach us how to look into the world, what role do legends play? The term *fairy tale* lies deeper in a world of blue shadows and golden light; the heroes are pure pictures. But in legends the heroes are historical figures who lived there and then, but, due to their attitudes, have become larger than themselves. We look back at Catherine of Sienna, St. Francis and many more, the low-profile, secret leaders who have influenced history more than popes and emperors. They expressed themselves through their actions. Legends emphasize the human, free deeds: but beautiful deeds.

But legends raise us into air that is too thin to breath. It is actually encouraging for the teacher to see the children act disorderly when they have heard too many gentle legends. As heroes they are useless. If one wants children to be nice and peaceful, one uses the opposite of legends—animal fables. For soul hygiene both parts are necessary, in the right dosage and the proper balance. While legends provide nourishment—eventually too much nourishment—to the highest human qualities in children, fables provide satisfaction for the natural, animalistic qualities within a light of good humor.

The true "animal" in a fable appears, surprisingly, as a close and human half-brother or relative. Not only archangels and saints but also snakes, wolves, turtles, mice and especially foxes belong to the picture. Children feel a close relation to fauns. This coincides with St. Francis' words: "brother swine," "brother crow," and "brother wolf." That he also acknowledged "brother sun" and "brother angel" makes the scene more complete. No one knew better than St. Francis the place animals take in the human soul.

In addition to the many fables and stories of the saints, we often introduce Reinike Fox. Everyone is born with both St. Francis and Reinike Fox in their heart. In the stories we meet them from the outside, as independent figures. I do not know whether or not Francis and Reinike experienced the same joy over the reunion as my class certainly did. No joy is greater than seeing a brother again.

One day Francis was walking in the woods together with his disciples. They came to a green glade, an open plain in the forest. Nearby they heard the noise of some dogs surrounding their prey. Between the trees they could barely glimpse a jumping bundle that came closer and closer. It was brother hare, alone and scared to death. He walked into the glade, looked around and sighted Francis. As quick as lightning he crossed the opening and with one great jump was in Francis' arms. Francis felt the hare's heart beat against his chest. When the hounds arrived they were forced to turn around and head home. Once the hare had rested, he sprang on the grass and hopped into the forest.

The children loved drawing Francis speaking with the birds and the fish, the same motives Giotto never tired of painting.

In the fox Reinike we meet a dreadful contrast to Francis. A more powerful concentration of disgracefulness and meanness has never stood on four legs. He is beyond description. Consider all sin, all falseness, all deception and all slyness that can fit in a fur, and you have a notion of the fox Reinike. But he is still a brother, a brother degraded and inadequate, with his ideals and hope for improvement and a painful understanding of his weaknesses. His understanding does not stretch very far. The arts of repentance and hypocrisy, plus his love for intrigues control him. He has climbed the Himalayan summits of guilt, and therefore no one appears more innocent than he.

In the final devastating crime he is always the last one suspected guilty. This is because he cries so much for previously proven crimes. (Tartuffe is a shepherd boy compared with Reinike.)

Here are some glimpses into his biography.

Under the leadership of the lion King Nobel, all of the animals are gathered for a trial. Reinike has degraded and tormented Mr. Brown the bear, Isegrim the wolf, Hinze the cat, the female wolf and others. The problem is how to prove the guilty one's participation at a trial and arrive at an appropriate punishment. The bear, the wolf and the cat try to convince Reinike to come to the trial to answer a couple of questions concerning a couple of dead chickens. Who will be next to try and get him? The group decides to send the beaver who unenthusiastically sets out, for everyone knows that Reinike is the incarnation of intelligence and pure reason. No one can face him. He tricks them into traps, sorrow and accidents. And he always answers them as if it is their own weaknesses that are their downfall.

An old history of tribal hate, antipathy and revenge is in the background, for everyone knows Reinike does not like Mr. Brown, Isegrim and Hinze. Does he also detest the beaver? We will see. Everyone waits at the trial, and, to everyone's surprise, Reinike appears with the beaver. He is accused, found guilty of everything a lying being can be guilty of, and is sentenced to death at the gallows. Though he would have preferred to be found innocent, this is just the moment Reinike has been waiting just for this moment though he had hoped to be found innocent.

Once the rope is around his neck, he is in his element: May he now speak, now that he will die? He wants to tell them that since he will be departing it is important to lighten his heart by admitting everything. King Nobel will not prevent him from admitting, but the bear and the wolf sense problems. Reinike looks too devastated.

His worse sin, says Reinike, was that he knew about the conspiracy without telling everyone. Now he may as well, since he is going to die anyway. . . .

Which conspiracy? King Nobel woke up.

Oh, Reinike's father, the old, peacefully sleepy Reinike had once been tempted by. . . .

Which conspiracy? The lion wants to know more.

Oh, it was the treasure that had tempted him. Mr. Brown and Isegrim had convinced the old and reliable fox to join them.

Treasure? Conspiracy? Will you immediately come down from that gallows!

And this is when the bear and wolf's path of pain begins. Reinike has them imprisoned in the deepest dungeon of King Nobel's castle.

As a reward for exposing the treason, Reinike is pardoned and set free. The innocent Mr. Brown and Isegrim are chained to the walls, but Reinike is satisfied. He would have to atone his sins, Reinike tells the king and therefore he must wander as a pilgrim to Rome. King Nobel gives him permission. For his way he needs a backpack and shoes. He thinks he could make a backpack out of bear skin and if the pack was not too big the traitor, Mr. Brown, would survive, since bears have such fast-growing meat, as Mr. Brown had demonstrated previously. And the shoes can be taken from Isegrim's paws. If he cut them off, they would be big enough to pull over like socks around his own paws.

Go ahead! He could help himself, said the King. And Mr. Brown and Isegrim almost died from the operation.

But Reinike needs spiritual communion for the way, since he still has some small things of very intimate nature to repent. He could imagine that the goat Pastor Bellyn and the pious hare Lampe could follow him for a couple of miles south, and so both men of God followed him. And this is when Bellyn's and Lampe's tragedy begins.

For the first part of the journey Reinike entertained them with godly conversation, focusing on the cleansing pain of regret. But along the way they came to Reinike's castle and he needed to visit Mrs. Reinike before the long trip to Rome. Lampe wanted to join him in the castle while Bellyn waited impatiently outside.

Bellyn heard Lampe's voice outside. It was not happy. When he knocked on the castle door, Reinike answered that Lampe cried out because he was so happy to see Mrs. Reinike again, a distant relative he had not seen for quite a while. Now they hugged each other. Would Bellyn do them all a favor?

Yes, that he will.

Reinike said he had used this time to write a long letter to King Nobel. If Bellyn would bring it to the castle, he would be allowed to say that he co-wrote it and helped Reinike deliver it.

Writing was Bellyn's weak point. He had often tried to learn to write but it had never worked out. His greatest wish was to write, and now the temptation was too great. Reinike put the letter in the backpack, sealed it and made Bellyn promise not to open it on the way.

The devoted Bellyn took the unopened backpack to the king. He did not hide the fact that he had written it together with Reinike. From the backpack the king pulled the bloody fur of Lampe. Since many witnesses had heard Bellyn brag about his participation in the "letter," everyone knew that Reinike and Bellyn had murdered and eaten the innocent and pious hare.

Reinike's wiliness was proven once again. Mr. Braun and Isegrim were set free and in redress they were served Pastor Bellyn on a platter, fresh from the royal kitchen, executed as punishment for the disgusting deed of eating Lampe. No one got hold of Reinike, but they were happy to punish his accomplice.

And so Reinike traveled on in the dark, the pure, absolute intellect in the figure of an animal.

This is just a small part of the one hundred-page story. When the children have heard enough of Reinike they no longer want to hear more. They are tired

of the cowardice, lies, and cruelty. The children become gentle, but that is not the most important effect. The most important thing after three weeks with Reinike fox is that they are no longer the same children. They know more; they have received a lesson in hypocrisy and irony. It is more difficult to be a teacher after this block. The children have laughed a lot, but they also feel badly for Reinike's victims. The fox would have been impossible to present without Francis. The children have seen two extreme possibilities among animals and saints.

Selma Lagerlof presents a synthesis of the animal and saint in her legend of Raniero de Raniero, a weaponsmith in Florence, later a warrior and a very tough guy. He became a crusader and one of the first to climb the wall of Jerusalem. He is the most courageous, strongest and brutal warrior in the crusader army.

During his bloody career he sent his greatest trophies to a certain Madonna picture in his hometown to make his successes known. He was just as arrogant when he lost. After the conquest of Jerusalem he received a special reward for his bravery, to be the first to light a candle from the eternal flame on the altar of the Holy City. But that same evening, during a feast the jester dares him to carry the candle to Florence without letting the flame go out.

"You think I can not do so!" replies Raniero.

And so the bet was on. The next morning the crusader rode off alone on his horse in his armor with weapons and a unlit candles on his belt, carrying the holy, burning light in his hand. The dangers he encounters bringing the candle to Florence are much larger than the usual pains and dangers of a soldier. The flame shall not go out! He withstands insults, pain and grief. He cannot defend himself because the flame must be protected. He cannot flee. He cannot sleep. He cannot rest or his armor, weapons and horse could be stolen. Raniero becomes sick, weak, thin and grungy. They call him *pazzo*, the idiot. But that does not matter to one who protects the flame. He soon learns his lesson: he who carries a flame can only succeed if he forgets all other thoughts, if he, in the morning, at midday, in the evening and in the night thinks only of the flame.

When Raniero returned to Florence the flame burned brightly, but he was a changed man. He still had the powerful forces but his goals were different. This legend includes one thousand years of history. The road from Jerusalem to Florence is very long. The story of Raniero is the story of humankind.

These stories give children a lively, direct and very exciting drama. They provide nourishment, from which the children can live and grow. Every glance, every handshake, every drawing and every question exposes relationships with "birds," "boats," the "hare," the "witch," or the "saint." The children meet themselves.