

The Healing Power of Shelter Stories for Our Times

— Suzanne Down

When a young child listens to a story well told, full of warmth and wonder in the storyteller's voice and heart, something quite amazing happens. The child is taken on wings of imagination to the landscape of the story, where archetypal characters are encountered, and where both great challenges are found and resolutions can be experienced through grace and care. The child is carried to a world where the essential good resides, and receives an experience akin to the loving embrace of the "Mother." This is the power of a meaningful story, and even more so when it is a shelter story.

For a young child, the story image of a little house where a character can find refuge in a cozy, warm, sturdy, place makes the child feel safe within their own "little house," their physical body.

Our body gives us a boundary to the outer world, and is our metaphoric life shelter. In story, when we come upon a little hut in the woods, a cottage, even a hollow tree, there is resonance with the holiness of our own body. These images are always of significance in purposeful stories.

When a child hears this kind of story or views the imagination in puppet play form, they feel as though sheaths of Goodness surround them too. They also nestle in a story's hollow stump, old grandfather's boot, deep in the tulip's well, within the upside-down wheelbarrow. You may find yourselves thinking of other "shelters" as you read this, and what character may find a peaceful home there. Perhaps it is a ladybug inside a lost thimble, a spider in the welcoming knot of the wood ceiling, a mouse in the pocket of a harvest apron. As you walk in a woodland or meadow, you will notice these shelters everywhere, in the curved root of a tree, in holes made by woodpeckers, tiny caves in rock piles, under a willow's branches. Gently allow your stories to arise, for they are everywhere and within you as well!

In our world today, when a child experiences a trauma, such as the displacement of children from the Ukraine, or gun violence in a school, or high stress of the adults in their lives, what can we as educators and parents do? One of the first things is to provide them with a safe shelter; we tend to their physical safety. A

story can also be a valuable source of healing for them.

Consider the story picture of cold winds and snow blowing and a little, shivering bunny character searching for a place to keep warm. It sees up ahead a hollow log which can provide a place to get out of the cold winds and snow. When Bunny decides to make this her winter home, she is solving her first need, physical safety... a shelter. Perhaps then, she gathers leaves and moss to make it warmer, to add comfort, to make a cozy nest to sleep in. Then as the snow and wind settle down, a full moon rises in the sky and shines down a warm light. In a while another bunny comes along and asks if he can shelter there too. Yes, a friend as soul comfort!

You see how the story pictures can grow, layer by layer, and will support the listening child's sense of well-being. Below is an example of a Shelter Story. Look for five images that bring added grace in this tale. Can you think of five more new images that could be added? (Note that this is a spring story imagination to tuck away for nest-building time.)

The Tale of Niddle, Noodle, and Noddle

Down in the green meadow where the wildflowers bloom golden, red, and white, deer came often to drink from the bubbling stream. Three friends were busy working there, filling baskets with soft summer grasses. Niddle, Noodle, and Noddle were three industrious little fairies of the grasslands.

They were known far and wide as the fairy weavers, for they helped all the birds weave their nests. They sang as they worked:

Our nests are sturdy and strong

Woven from grasses so long,

We weave together in and out,

Round and around and all about,

Soft and warm for birdies so new,

Keeping them dry from rain and dew.

Every morning they rose early and gathered the greenest grasses that bent easily for their weaving. Every evening, when no one was looking they patched up the nests that were not strong enough or were too hard for the baby birds.

All went well for a long time, but one year the rains never came and the land was dry and brittle.

The winds blew hard and a fire spread through the grasses. The deer ran away into the forest, and the stream dried up.

Niddle, Noodle, and Noddle did not know what to do. Their baskets were empty and they had to seek far from the meadow to find supplies for nest building. They journeyed across the meadow, through the forest, and beyond the damage of the fire. After a time, they found a sheep farm where long ropes of colorful wool hung on a clothesline. The farmer's wife was a weaver. She sheared the sheep, dyed the wool and hung it up to dry in long woolly ropes.

The fairy weavers were not often seen by human kind. They tiptoed into the farm yard and touched the wool. It was long like grasses, and much softer and warm. "This would be perfect for our nest building," they shouted with joy!

They had an idea of what to do and set to work. That night when the farmer and his wife went to bed, the three fairies went to her weaver's loom and, *lickity split*, finished the blanket she was weaving. Three fairy weavers are much faster than one human! Then they took some wool in exchange to use in their nest making.

In the morning when the farmer's wife went to work on her weaving, she saw to her surprise that the blanket was finished and with the finest, tightest weaving she had ever seen.

"Hmmm," she thought to herself, "only the fairy weavers can weave so perfectly! How can this be?"

She went outside to check on her colorful wool lengths and saw some of it was missing. "I will hide in my weavery and stay up tonight and see what happens." She started weaving another blanket on her loom. When night came she hid and waited.

It was quiet for a long time, but all at once the three little fairy weavers, Niddle, Noodle, and Noddle hopped and skipped into the room and set to work. Never before had she seen such fast weaving. Back and forth the shuttle went, the fairy hands so nimble and quick. The blanket was finished in no time with even, neat, and strong rows!

Out the fairies went to gather more nest making supplies from the hanging colorful wool. Then in the blink of an eye, hop and skip, the fairies were gone.

This happened every night until the grasses grew tall and strong again.

The farmer's wife grew rich from selling the finest blankets. One morning when the wife went to check on her weaving, she found a beautiful bird's nest woven

from her wool. It was every color of the rainbow and so soft and warm. Mixed with it were feathers and mosses and twigs. It was beautiful.

The farmer's wife now understood why the fairy weavers needed her wool. She never saw Niddle, Noodle, and Noddle ever again. She placed the wooly nest in the tree outside her weavery where she could see it. A robin found it and laid her eggs in it. What happy, warm and safe baby birds grew up there each and every year. The farmer's wife often left seeds out for the robins to eat, and made sure there was fresh water nearby to drink. She loved to listen to the happy song of Mama Robin, and the sweet sounds of baby birds.

As for Niddle, Noodle, and Noddle, they were content in their meadow that was again lush with grasses, where deer came to drink from the bubbling stream. Listen, you can hear them sing as they work...

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Woven from grasses so long,

We weave together in and out,

Round and around and all about,

Soft and warm for birdies so new,

Keeping them dry from rain and dew. ♦

Suzanne Down is founder and longtime director of *Juniper Tree School of Story and Puppetry Arts*, which offers classes for writing shelter stories with images of safe spaces for story characters, along with other training and mentoring opportunities. Visit her website at junipertreepuppets.com.
