
A Tale Transformed

~ Aaron Joseph

We created the following Mother Holle circle at the end of the Bay Area Center for Waldorf Teacher Training (BACWTT) Early Childhood Teacher Rejuvenation Week in June 2024. The week was led by Anna Rainville, Diane David, and Lynn Turner and the theme was “Reimagining the Archetypes in our Stories and Circles.” Among the many deepening and enlivening activities of the week, we undertook a study of the story of “Mother Holle” over a period of days, during which we delved into some of the characters and words that could make it difficult for an aware Waldorf teacher to tell any of the extant English translations of the original Grimms’ tale to children in our increasingly diverse schools.

Our discussions touched on notions of gender, social norms of “beauty,” value judgments about work and productivity, and stereotypes and unconscious biases that we could potentially be perpetuating when telling stories to children of color or to those whose family cultures are not primarily influenced by Anglo societies and traditions. However, we also contemplated and discussed the underlying esoteric themes as seen by Rudolf Steiner; the story can be read as an allegory for the processes of karma and reincarnation. We then went on to connect deeply with some of the archetypal imagery, and importantly, to our own universal core values, which transcend time, place, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender, and which can be brought to children within the Mother Holle story. As we grappled with these interweaving, disparate conversations and meditations—at times passionate, emotional, and even uncomfortable, given the array of perspectives and personal biographies that participants were bringing into the dialogue—something unexpected occurred: the Mother Holle tale transformed.

It might have at first appeared to some (myself included) to be a familiar but antiquated, or even offensive, narrative that was not worth saving, easier to dismiss and replace than to edit or reimagine as a potentially contrived, proscribed exercise in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. However, the story slowly began to draw me deeper into its home, like the mysterious, slightly frightening, but ultimately loving and wise crone that is the story’s namesake, and I felt almost magically compelled to follow the path to its conclusion. As we “did the work,” our instructors suggested some of us take on the task of writing a Mother Holle circle, and like

the first child in the story, who dreamily but willingly shakes the bedclothes until the feathers fly and float to the ground like snow, my colleague Ms. Justine and I suddenly found ourselves in a flurry of inspirations and images.

It was the evening of the Summer Solstice and the night before the full moon. We giddily took armfuls of these creative “feathers” and “snowflakes” back to our rental home, which was situated on a lagoon of the San Pablo Bay. As the moonlight shimmering on the water reflected a similar snowy-downy image, we furiously worked late into the night to compose a Mother Holle circle, with our third colleague, Ms. Tina, by our side for suggestions and encouragement. To our increasing entertainment and occasional hysterical laughter, we threw into the circle a bit of everything we had learned and discussed during the week: eurythmy gestures, little tunes, a more sensitive depiction of the two children, a redemption of the rooster from an ominous judge to a lively and wondering figure, even our music teacher’s assignment to compose a song in the mood of the fifth. Just about the only thing we didn’t include in the circle was a single pronoun, which we didn’t think could be done without sounding awkward! The joy of the process and the product seemed to redeem the challenges of the week and in the story itself.

The next morning, our last of the training, we had the pleasure of bringing the entire group of participants and instructors into the circle and “piloting” it with all of them. It was deeply gratifying to hear our colleagues “awww” during the tender moments in the circle, and the loud peals of laughter at the sillier parts or recognition of “inside jokes” from the week. Some commented that the circle has both playfulness and reverence, and while we were careful to maintain the integrity of the original story and imagery, many of our friends felt that the circle universalizes its themes and dissolves the judgments that could make the original Mother Holle uninviting or inaccessible to some children, parents and teachers. We hope that many of you will be inspired to include Mother Holle in your circle repertoire, and to ask deep questions about whether and how you might be able to reimagine—and not simply abandon—the archetypes, values, and images that appear in your stories and circles. ♦