

Storytelling

*Reprinted with some changes from the Newsletter of the British Kindergarten Association
A report of a workshop given by Margarite van der Heidie at the York Steiner School.*

First we were introduced to a wondrous new approach to spindle spinning which we all enjoyed and found far more practical than the drop-spindle method. These simple spindles can easily be whittled from a “Y”-shaped section of a small branch. No two spindles are alike, some are quite curvy and others straight.

While we were familiarizing ourselves with this new approach, Margarite gave us a thumbnail sketch of her work in Holland especially with kindergarten teachers and how she herself developed her own storytelling skills. For many years she pondered over images such as the witch's bread house, and the episode surrounding the oven found in Hansel and Gretel and in similar stories in Russian and Romanian folk tales. She realized that just as Gretel exclaimed, “I do not know how I am to do it...” after she was told to see if the oven was hot enough, small children have to be *shown* how to do a particular activity - by imitating the presented “image,” they *can* do it. That is the way we are taught *before* we are born. The Angels present activities to us through images. Speaking of the daughter of Baba Yaga she came to realize that the daughter of the witch is not a human being. In Romania they call these beings “beings from the other bank.”

The folk tales are the history of the development of human consciousness. First you have to ask yourself, at which point of development is the main setting for the story; and, where are we at a particular point in the story? The beginning of each story is usually far back into pre-history and the end of the story culminates far into the future. The end is really the alchemical marriage: the marriage of substance and spirit.

In working on the images of spinning, weaving and sewing, Margarite discovered that she needed the activities of the crafts herself to balance the effect of working so intensively in the promoting of the art of storytelling, and so she became a spinner and weaver. This helped to counteract the “levitating” effect of working constantly with the stories.

In passing, Margarite observed that in England there is a tendency for the storyteller to be a performer - a tendency which many would-be storytellers find intimidating. This, however, is not the case in Holland, where storytelling is so much more informal.

After a short break we listened to Margarite demonstrate the telling of Grimm's story *Spindle, Shuttle and Needle*; truly beautifully told. We then reflected upon our own devices for preparing for storytelling. For most of us this appeared to consist in memorizing the story - “learning by heart,” which is more accurately called “learning by head” in Holland!* We spoke about the difficulty of creating mental pictures in a sequence: of experiencing unexpected “blanks” and so on, and Margarite lead us through a series of pointers and exercises which we might find helpful when we prepare a new story.

After reading through a story, such as *Spindle, Shuttle and Needle* several times, Margarite first ponders over the images, trying to “tease-out” the underlying significance to get a feel for the meaning of the story as a whole. Then, taking it section by section, she builds up mental pictures about the participants in this tale and of the setting itself. “How did this girl look?” What is the mood, the coloring and so on? What about the parents - this is not clear because they have died already. What kind of house was the Godmother's house and where was it located? “Inventing pictures when you do not see it.” Also, she suggested that it is important to be flexible enough to create a whole different picture of the same scenario

for that portion of the story. Once one has allowed oneself to deeply identify with the images, one must remove oneself and recreate them more objectively. It is important to be aware that certain story elements might have been reverberating with one's own childhood memories and that "element of identification" with the story has to be overcome prior to the story's presentation. "You have to know when to push and change and when you have to let be! Set undesired images aside and create a new image."

Moving on to the second exercise, Margarite had us mentally image a large green circle; then, notice a small red center which spreads slowly out to the perimeter of the green sphere. When it reaches the perimeter, make the green reappear at the center, and it, too, now spreads out over the red, reaching out to the perimeter again and keep repeating until it becomes easy to do so. The second part of the exercise consists in reversing the process so that the red rim moves inward to the green portion and when it reaches that point, the green reappears at the rim and moves likewise inward.

We each tackle the creating of mental images very differently, Margarite told us. This is because we are each in a different relationship with our ether and physical bodies; these interact with our brain in differing ways also. The ether body is the one which is making the mental picture. This is part of the ether body which is freed up around the seventh year.

In the third exercise, Margarite urged us to let go of the image - because these images become so strong they won't let go of us! We now have to extinguish them totally - even though we worked so hard to get them in the first place! Some people cannot make images at all, (sometimes because they had learned to read and write very early, or, are on the brink of depression or psychosis). In the case of difficulty in forming mental images, Margarite found some students able to make a breakthrough by "playing" with water while preparing a story. The water element being our image of old clairvoyance, and dream consciousness, whereas dry land, deserts, crystal and rock mountains are images of intellectual thinking.

The fourth exercise she called the Telegram Exercise. Let go of the "image" aspects and tackle the story as a whole. "Look at the bones - look for *connecting* lines." Where does it start out - where does it go? In three dimensions, literally! Where does it begin? Inside? Outside? How is the relationship? Where do you come from? Where are you to go?

For example: Red Riding Hood. When the wolf meets Red Riding Hood - Where are you going? There is a line of movement from the mother's house to the grandmother's house. Connecting lines: What have you got for your grandmother? Where does your grandmother live?

At the beginning of *Spindle, Shuttle and Needle*, after her parents die, the girl is in between; she hasn't the possibility to be at home in the body *with* the soul and spirit. She can't be in the house of the past anymore, she has to go to another house so she comes to the new house and she is "educated" by the Godmother. Then the Godmother dies also and the girl has to do without the "spiritual" mother as well. (Corresponding with the onset of puberty.) There are four things which the girl needs: protection against the weather, and the three tools with which to work. She lives alone in her house (her body) although she has connections with the villagers and she receives what she needs to live from them. She has the means to make the connections with them.

"This" and "this" and "this" occurred... This is the "telegram" aspect of this exercise.

The Prince lives in contradiction and compromise, "richest and poorest." What are the various meanings of "rich" and "poor?" Look at the examples in the Gospels, e.g., the camel passing through the eye of the needle. Richness here means all talents inherited from past cultures. In Christ's time, the old clairvoyance - memories, riches in wisdom - all had to be left behind. It was necessary to meet the Christ with nothing from the past! The girl in the story has gone through the eye of the needle, having nothing but the tools to

survive, and use. With these she can enrich her loneliness. The poor girl is so rich because she has *learned* to spin a “*golden thread*.” This is of the greatest importance. Spinning - thinking - making the connection - failing - trying once more - striving to will back part of ourselves. The activity has to be ours. Young birds want always to be fed, but in the time of the consciousness soul the hierarchies don't do that for us anymore. Now it all depends upon how industrious we are!

Spinning is more than the image of thinking. The spinning also quiets the thinking and smooths it out. The girl in the story has exercised her thinking so much that in the end she is able to produce the golden thread with which to make a connection with the invisible world.

Weaving - Spinning comes first, but weaving makes a “plane” of the line (the spun thread.) Balance is the keyword in weaving. The whole loom has to be in balance - equal tension in the warp - as strong as our destiny, but the weft has to be loose by contrast. Weaving is the healing of the relation of breath and heartbeat. It calms the astral body. Clothing is the protection we have created; it is synonymous with our auras. Needle sewing - Before you sew you have to cut! This can be like cutting into your own being. In times past clothes were cut so exactly that they only fit the person they were made for! The body is the expression of the total individual.

The girl in the story works through her etheric, astral and ego alone, and when the Prince comes she can draw him to her with her “gold” thoughts, the Prince being the evolved ego-force. The beauty of the interior of the house at the end of the story describes a time very far into the future. We cannot fully come into our soul unless there be such cleanliness as existed in Paradise. The old crafts are now the image of this development of the human soul.

As the workshop drew to its end, we discussed difficulties like shyness, or too much breath with too little form in the storytelling. Margarite noted a law which operates: in working with mental images, you only “see” the image when you breathe in, you cannot “see” the image when you are speaking. The feminine aspect operates in the breathing in and the masculine in the speaking.

A second law is that you are only in your ego in the moment just before you speak.

We finished with practicing an exercise for imagining (breathing in), and one for pacing our delivery.

1) Following the opening phrase, turn away from the audience, (either real or imagined) in silence pick up a flower or “prepared” object and, while doing so, image the specific segment (maybe only one sentence) and speak it as you move towards the person. Return to the prepared objects (flowers or whatever), breathing in and imagining the next passage and repeat the second delivery, and so on.

2.) While working on pacing, take a fairly large silk scarf and, let it flow through one hand while being held by the other. Pace each sentence to match the speed with which the scarf passes through one hand. Actually, the speed of the scarf's movement should match the delivery of the chosen sentence or half-sentence, depending upon how you want to pace your delivery. Breathe in and visualize mentally while returning the hand to the near-end scarf in preparation for the next sentence, and so on.

Regretfully, further exercises could not be explored because we ran out of time, but we came away knowing that even in one day we had been given much upon which we could work! Thank you very much Margarite!

**Editorial Note: We realize this article is written in a rather cryptic style. and we hope it is not too confusing. We felt its insights and exercises were very rich and hoped they would stimulate many teachers to go forward with their own inner research about story telling and fun tales. We also would like to*

include a comment about “learning by head” in contrast to “learning by heart’ Main’ teachers feel they, must learn a fairy tale word for word as it is written, and they are able to do this in a very beautiful and living way. For others, however, this approach feels very stilted and too heady. Their path is to learn a story by heart. This requires learning the story very well, knowing every image and every important word and phrase. Yet not every word and phrase has to be committed to such strict memory. Many can be said more freely in ways that vary slightly from one telling to the next. Although it is generally true that children will remark on the changes in any significant words or phrase, they do not “wake up” to these slight changes in phrasing, provided one has really learned the story well and is being true to its contents, its images and its sequence of events. Teachers need to feel free to find their own way to learn and tell stories and should not be intimidated by thinking they, must be learned in word perfect order. At the same time one must be true to the spirit of the story and tell it in ways that are healthy and healing for the children. As a final comment, one should not be confused by Margarite van der Heide’s exercises on imaging the story. These are for the adult, and add greatly to one’s experience of the story, but the intention is not to help kindergarten children “see” the story. One sometimes hears that one needs to picture the story, as it is told so that the child can also picture it. This is good advice to the grade teachers, but kindergarten children are generally not able to form consciously held inner pictures. Such a development comes with first grade readiness, as imagination blossoms out of the experience of fantasy. One could say, however, that the more clearly the teacher sees the pictures, the richer the story experience is for the kindergarten child.