

The Healing Art of Nursery Rhymes

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Here is an introductory peek into the vast and wonderful world of the healing power of nursery rhymes and puppetry. The hope is that this research will grow and eventually be made available in book form.

As the soul descends from spiritual worlds to be born on earth, there is a sacrifice of the cosmic rhythms of planets and stars to enter earthly chaos. The newborn arrives with no rhythm; the first breathing is chaotic. The baby needs this inner rhythm restored from the outside life by the parents, especially the mother. The mother begins to establish a daily earth rhythm of feeding, sleeping, rocking, and soft lullabies. All through the early years, parents and first teachers work to bring this spiritual support on earth-rhythm. A rhythmic life from this new beginning helps build the forces of inner strength which later form the moral forces for the soul's future. This is essential today in a world that lacks rhythm and lacks morality.

The prime gift of the nursery rhyme is in this power of rhythm. Rudolf Steiner states that, "rhythmic processes are nothing physical whether in nature or in Man. They might be called semi-spiritual. The physical as a "tang" disappears in the rhythmic process. . . rhythm replaces strength." We can see the incredible spiritual support to the young child when we work with rhythm.

The meaning of the words in the nursery rhymes takes a back seat to the possibilities of rhythm and repetition to help establish a clear healthy breathing, circulation, and immune system throughout the body, right down to the toes! The nursery rhymes work right into the heartbeat and circulation, not into head thinking. They mirror the cosmic rhythms for the young child finding his way on earth.

As timeless world rhymes, their language has become lifted and alive rhythmically in the world ether. This means they have an added etheric quality to them. We can say when we speak or sing them, we do so with a more etheric breath. This nourishes the physical and emotional breath, bringing order and balance to the etheric/physical/emotional circulation.

Nursery rhymes take the power of rhyme, repetition and rhythm that together heal inner chaos and make order within the cellular level. These

qualities go right into the body, right into the circulation, releasing the child from chaos. Nancy Mellon, therapist and therapeutic storyteller, emphasizes that, "Seventy to seventy-five percent of the power of the nursery rhyme is in the rhythm and repetition. The picture and images provide the other thirty percent. The real work is the etheric rhythmic element helping the clear breathing and circulation go through the body. We don't want to dwell on their meaning. It is the delicious rhythmic that strengthens and helps the physical and emotional circulation. All comes into order and balance."

We can think of speaking the nursery rhymes with a "lifted language" parallel to singing in the mood of the fifth. In this way the speaking is truly the rhythm of the heart and pulse, not a beat that has more the hard physical quality of a hammering. This differentiation between bringing the nursery rhymes rhythmically instead of with a beat is key to it developing a healing potential. If we begin to look at the rhythm "long – short" as in to following:

Cobbler, cobbler mend my shoe,
Have it done by half past two.

* * *

Humpty dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty dumpty had a great fall

* * *

Rock a bye baby
In the tree top
When the wind blows
The cradle will rock.

We see in this long/short a gentle incarnating rhythm. The long/short rhythm is not spoken in a syllabic way, but with a flow in the words. Imagine a mother rocking her baby or young child, and crooning "rock a bye baby." She is creating an etheric rhythmic substance within and around the child, which is working deeply on the inner life of the child, bringing order with right rhythm.

One way a teacher can support the healing rhythmic work of the young child is to bring the nursery rhymes with puppetry. When we imbue our puppets with an etheric substance, making the nursery rhymes visible in this refined semi-physical way, we deepen the healing quality we offer the child.

Here is an example of using puppetry with the nursery rhymes. I have developed a mother rod puppet that holds a puppet baby—the archetypal mother, a model imperative for the child. The puppet sings “rock a bye baby” lovingly holding and rocking the baby in a gentle lemniscate. The lemniscate as a form is the doorway to the etheric realm, a potent choreography for puppetry. The observing child inwardly mirrors the rhythmic quality and movement/gestures of the puppet, all created with intention and consciousness to offer a healing experience. The child breathes rhythmically and deeply when watching, inner order is being established. This lullaby can be repeated three times (or more!). Then the mother puppet puts the baby in her cradle for a nice sleep. Teachers can greet the day like this, or use it at rest time. Parents can do this for a peaceful bedtime ritual. Children are

desperate for these healthy rhythms. Nursery rhymes and puppetry are one of the joyful rhythmic and etheric supports available to us. The visual pictures of the puppetry holds the child in the imaginative space while the nursery rhyme rhythms do their deep and wise work.

Suzanne Down is the director of Juniper Tree School of Story and Puppetry Arts, now based out of Vancouver Island in Canada. She offers puppetry trainings and workshops which are described in the Calendar section on page 35.