



Between Worlds

The Fairytale as a Threshold Experience¹

Holly Koteen-Soulé

During the past three years, we early childhood educators have had to open our arms wider than ever and reach even deeper for the inner strength to meet all of the seemingly endless challenges. What has kept us going? How do human beings face the little bumps in the road and the huge gaping chasms? Not surprisingly, this is the stuff of the fairytale world.

For thousands of years the cultural wisdom of previous generations was passed down through stories. In our current times, stories are seen less as guides for our development, and more as entertainment, especially when they come to us through technology. Because of this, I wonder if modern human beings understand or even grasp the inherent power of stories and storytelling, not only for children, but for all of us.

At a recent conference where I was asked to speak about fairytales, I asked listeners to participate in a short experiment in order to explore this question. I asked each person to find a partner and for both partners to share a favorite fairytale, story, or book that they treasured as a child, as well as any thoughts they might have about how they felt connected to that story.

The participants offered a variety of comments: they were transported back to their childhood; the memories still felt real in every detail; the partners experienced finding a common ground. Participants were then asked to describe what happened to the space between the partners and how it changed during their conversation. A few more comments were offered.

What happened is an occurrence that we can easily take for granted. In sharing our biographical experiences—our stories—something arose between us that did not previously exist. From what was it created? It arose out of our imaginations! Together, our imaginations created something that did not previously exist; it brought to life something that was only potential or seed-like in our souls.

When I started thinking about how early childhood teachers could deepen our capacities in relation to fairytales and storytelling, a particular phrase kept coming to mind, “between worlds.” Between worlds is where stories live. They live between my world and

your world, between the visible world and the invisible world, between the physical world and the soul world, between cultures, between generations, between individuals and humanity.

Stories live in the space between! They mediate between our physical-bodily nature and our soul-spiritual nature, between the worlds within us and the worlds outside of us. They form a bridge between different realms of life and bring us to the threshold where we can experience the concurrent reality of more than one world.

The Oral Story as Guide, Teacher, and Healer

A 1979 issue of the magazine *Parabola* focused on Storytelling in Education. Among the articles was a short piece by depth psychologist, James Hillman, titled “A Note on Story,” that moved me deeply. In this piece Hillman wrote about “story-awareness” as an indicator of soul resilience in his clients:

To have had stories in childhood, oral stories, rather than watching them on a screen, puts a person into a basic recognition and familiarity with the legitimate reality of story. It is something given with life, with speech and communication, not something that comes later with literature. Coming early in life, it is already a perspective on life. One integrates life as a story because one has stories in the back of the mind (unconsciously) as containers for organizing events into meaningful experiences.²

It is my firm conviction that unless we Waldorf teachers have a sincere grasp of the power and wisdom inherent in the images that live in myths, folk and fairytales, we cannot embrace or embody these universal truths in such a way as to keep that bridge between worlds open for the children. In actuality, the bridge exists for them when they are very young, and the real danger is that we inadvertently destroy it or teach them not to trust it.

Joseph Campbell was a collector of stories who spoke about how the picture language of fairytales encompasses both the path of the individual soul and universal

¹ This essay is based on a presentation given by the author at the Northern California/Nevada WECAN Early Childhood Regional Conference, November 2022.

² James Hillman, *A Note on Story* (Society for the Study of Myth and Tradition: *Parabola*, Volume IV, No 4, November 1979), 43.

human experience. While the motifs of folk and fairytales are “plucked from the tree of myth,” the stories themselves are artistic revelations of eternal principles through earthly, mortal things. Fairytale descriptions, he explains, while not being naturalistic, are nonetheless, precise expressions of spiritual realities. If there was ever an art that the whole human community worked on, it is the folk and fairytale. Campbell wrote: “The folktale is a primer of the picture-language of the soul.”³ Campbell calls these stories instruments of “instructive wonder.”

These wonder tales have arisen and evolved in every culture. While certain symbols may be unique to a specific culture, researchers, more often than not, have found common elements, themes, and types of characters among the fairytales from a variety of cultures.

Sacred Stories

Not all stories speak to us in our deepest soul. Anne and Charles Simpkinson gathered together and published talks by a variety of individuals who presented at a conference on Sacred Stories. In their introduction to their book, they quoted Jane Yolen, a well-known author of children’s books. For Yolen, sacred stories are those that tell us who we are and how we are related to the world and the gods. The Simpkinsons highlight two essential aspects of sacred stories. The first is that they allow for a transformation in the self. The second is that they connect us to our fellow human beings. It seems to me that social life in our current times is longing for both of these elements. In their view, the content of sacred stories is less important than the process it ignites within the listener. Even if we do not understand the message intellectually, we are still aware of the profundity of the lesson.⁴ This is always the case for children.

For Joseph Bruchac, a storyteller from the Abenaki Nation, the story “is a living presence.” This is a particularly notable quality of storytelling in indigenous cultures. For Bruchac, telling a story is like calling on the gods. At times, the storyteller can feel as if the story is telling itself.⁵

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For me, the essential characteristics of a true fairytale are transformation and healing. In a fairytale, the outer experiences bring the main character to a crisis that can only be met by reaching into the depths of the soul life. There are, however, always helpers in the crisis. The helpers may be nature elements, enchanted beings, animals endowed with magical powers, or wise men or women, often disguised as beggars or ordinary people. Through the successful navigation of the crisis, the soul is transformed and healing occurs. Clarissa Pinkola Estes (author of *Women Who Run with Wolves*) refers to the flow of images in a story as “medicine.”⁶

Waldorf educators know that the fairytale proper is deep soul nourishment for the kindergarten child and the first grader. We offer simpler stories to younger children that are appropriate to their stage of development. Each kind of story builds a foundation for the growing story-awareness within the child.

For example, stories for the one- and two-year-old are typically concrete, because at that age, young children are discovering the world. Stories of everyday things and events help preserve their inborn capacity for *wonder*. Rhythmic stories, in which concrete and magical elements exist side by side, support the development and understanding of *relationships* for the three- and four-year-old. Folk and fairytales, as culminating story experiences for the first seven-year period, build the capacity for creative *imagination* in the five- to seven-year-old child.

Archetypes and Stereotypes

In exploring fairytales in our current times, we need to acknowledge concerns about cultural stereotypes that appear to be at odds with our desire not to perpetrate harmful biases. Understanding the important difference between a stereotype and an archetype can be enormously helpful.

The word “archetype” is derived from the Greek, meaning original pattern or model. In Plato’s philosophical treatises, archetype meant ideal form. Carl Jung, the psychologist, studied both dreams and mythology from many cultures. Out of his research he formed a theory of a collective unconscious within which can be found universal symbols and images that he called

3 Joseph Campbell, Folkloristic Commentary in *The Complete Grimm’s Fairytales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1944 / 1972), 864.

4 Anne and Charles H. Simpkinson, *Sacred Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1.

5 Ibid, 2.

6 Ibid, 6.

archetypes. It was primarily his work that brought the word “archetype” into common usage in literature as well as psychology.

One of C. G. Jung’s gifts to psychology was the notion that we are all of the characters in our dreams. Like the dreamer, the listener is, in the same way, related to all of the characters in a fairy tale. In a fairytale, each and every aspect of the soul is in conversation with all of the other aspects.

There are several authors that offer interpretations of the images and symbols in well-known fairytales. While these resources can be helpful, the beauty of a symbol is that it can have more than one, and sometimes many layers of meaning. It is a good practice to think about all of the various meanings of a fairytale image, such as an apple, a shoe, a wall, a key, a gate, a dark forest, a desert, a sea monster.

If the images in folk and fairytales are truly connected to our universal human consciousness, then, in time, we can learn to trust our own capacity to discover what is being revealed through the pictures being presented. This, of course, requires dedicating time and effort to contemplating and living with the images, characters, and themes of the story that we are preparing to tell. However, it is also important to do research on the meanings of symbols in cultures with which we are less familiar. In studying African fairytales, for example, I learned that the frog often serves the role of a messenger.

While an archetype is an image in which many people can see themselves reflected, stereotypes are over-generalizations that are limiting and not open to new information. We can all think of many racial, cultural, and gender stereotypes that exist in popular culture. We can also find stereotypes in some traditional stories. We can also find modern themes in traditional stories, for example, stories about non-binary gender characters or that contain role reversals. Our task is to choose stories that speak livingly to us and meet the soul needs of the children in our classes.

Timeless Treasures

If we allow ourselves to be educated by the deep wisdom of the truly universal folk and fairytales that have been passed down through the ages, then we can also become genuine story creators. We can engage in all aspects of the story process with greater confidence, including reshaping a traditional tale, fashioning a nature story, or developing a therapeutic story for a class or an individual child.

The gifts to children from humanity’s storytelling heritage are many, but three gifts stand out to me as especially critical in our times.

1. Through the oral story and fairytale, children experience the radical power of the *imagination*.
2. They receive an education in *trust*, trust in oneself, in our helpers and in the web of our relationships.
3. They take in the *goodness* that is contained in the great basket of sacred world stories.

Stories also help us learn how to compose a life, according to Mary Catherine Bateson. From the visual arts, she says, we learn about balance of elements. From the musical arts, we learn how to work with transitions in time. In stories, we find lenses for interpreting our experiences. This process is not a matter of establishing a true or false narrative, but rather a recognition that we have freedom to choose how to frame our lives.⁷

The oral stories of childhood are like seeds nestled in the soul that remain until they are needed as “picture medicine” to help us solve our life’s riddles. A seed is built up from the forces of earth, water, air, and, finally, the sacrifice of fire. Once formed, it remains suspended outside of time, eternal, until the conditions for regeneration are met. In the first stage of growth, the inner physical substance of the seed dissolves itself entirely, as it gives rise to the new seedling. In the soul, the renewed spiritual pattern or archetype flames up and shines like a light on what might otherwise be an unpredictable and perilous path!

Holly Koteen-Soulé received her BA and MA from Antioch University in Seattle and studied Waldorf education at Emerson College. She was a Waldorf Early Childhood teacher for 25 years, first at the Seattle Waldorf School and then at the Bright Water School, where she taught Kindergarten and also pioneered the first Parent and Child classes in the Seattle area. She was a founding member of Sound Circle Center for Arts and Anthroposophy and is currently serving as its Director of Early Childhood Education. She is a member of the WECAN Board and served as the WECAN Coordinator of Teacher Education for five years. She is also member of the Pedagogical Section Council of the Anthroposophical Society.

⁷ Mary Catherine Bateson, *Sacred Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 41.