# Searching for the Golden Ball

— Nancy Mellon, presenter, remarks edited by Nancy Blanning

*Nancy Mellon—storyteller, researcher, Waldorf teacher, therapist, and humanist—addressed the 2019 Rocky Mountain area WECAN conference in March 2019 on the topic of "How can we find our relationship to traditional tales in our times of genderism, racism, sexism, and other biases?" Following are selected points from her presentation.*

*Nancy also spoke about the term "fairy tale" as it relates to the elemental world. A shorter article about traditional tales and elementals will appear in a future issue of* Gateways. *References mentioned during the workshop for deeper research on traditional tales are listed at the end of this article.*

Nancy Mellon opened the conference by drawing attention to a beautiful, black, embroidered jacket she was wearing. It was given as a gift to her by a wonderful friend, yet she was feeling self-conscious wearing it and thought she would give it away. She had the freedom to remove her beautiful jacket, yet what of our human skin, which cannot be removed? We are all captured in our own, indelible skins to live in for our lifetimes. This is a reality that cannot be changed.

Today Waldorf education lives and grows in many lands. In the Waldorf world we often tend to hunker within our own comfort zones of skin color and cultural identity. We may, thus, be floating in "airy castles," defending ourselves against unfamiliar aspects of others. Waldorf teachers strive to spiritually embody the full spectrum of humanity. One of our most profound goals is to embrace all children of all races and cultural loyalties, and to grow our hearts and minds along with the children's.

Nancy's storytelling mentors for many years were an African-American couple: Hugh Morgan Hill, better known as "Brother Blue," and his wife Ruth Hill, a curator of women's stories from around the world. Nancy heard Brother Blue say a thousand times: *We Human Beings are a Rainbow Race*. We can affirm this as a mantra as we uncover the shadows in our conscious and unconscious biases and pre-judgments toward race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual identification, and so on.

Nancy shared an experience of shock when she was the one being excluded and judged. She sat one cold, winter day, alone in a steam bath, enjoying her solitude. A feisty woman with golden brown skin burst through the door, sized her up, scoffed, "White weed!" and stomped triumphantly past her.

How do we feel in the presence of someone who surprises us with a different identity? Possible

responses may include: curious, shy, uncertain, awkward, humble, self-conscious, ashamed, overly-respectful, having a bad conscience, feeling the weight of history that has affirmed white supremacy and white privilege, muddled, and uncomfortable.

Some fairytales commonly shared in Waldorf school classrooms are questioned these days by teachers, parents, and other caretakers of children. Among these is "The Frog Prince," the keynote story of this conference. In this strange and wise old tale, the princess makes a profound commitment to accept the unfamiliar being who retrieved her golden ball and then crept into her life. She lives with "the frog" in her dreams. Finally, having gathered new wisdom and strength, maturing will-forces within her feel: "Enough of fear!" With more than visceral courage her eyes and heart open.

Thoroughly disenchanting fears is our task today. The golden ball eventually leads the princess to an astonished new realization of love. Is this not a very real picture for each of us? Within the solar plexus, a mysterious ball of warmth and light can hide in murky depths. Throughout the world, the human heart is associated with gold, a sublimely malleable element. Rudolf Steiner said the human heart is the youngest of our spiritual/physical organs and the one that possesses the most potential to grow. As storytellers, we can breathe the etheric golden warmth that circulates throughout the atmosphere of our whole earth. If we feel that our heart is lost at the bottom of the well for a while, we can remember that fairy tales are full of metaphors of wisdom. When the heart of the princess is awakened and her vision clears, a noble prince who was cruelly enchanted as "frog" is now released and joins her in joyous new celebration of human love; as his servant, too, bursts constricting bands of sorrow from around his heart.

We convey greater depth and symbolic meaning in the stories we tell to the children in our care whenever we experience great old fairy tales as paths for our own self-development. We can look for new ways to present stories, perhaps adjusting some of the images and language, as did the Brothers Grimm, exercising an editorial license, so we do not confuse or denigrate others. When traditional tales present stark polarities in "full spectrum," we are moving between radiant light and what Dylan Thomas named "the close and holy darkness." We realize the "black pitch" punishment image in the tale of "Mother Holle" can be offensive, especially to dark-skinned peoples. Even if the teller of the tale has worked deeply to penetrate the wisdom of this image, we can understand that our own intellectual understanding does not change gut-level feelings. Perhaps "pitch" becomes more real and acceptable as "mud" in the re-telling of this tale to children today, without losing any of the moral, pictorial significance.

The children in our early childhood programs today are members of diverse families that have migrated throughout the world. Everyone is everywhere today! Can we find and tell stories from other cultures that carry the same morality and archetypes that are accessible and vivid to children, as well as include the deeply wise stories collected by the Brothers Grimm in early nineteenth-century Germany?

As we find our way into the deeper meaning of the stories, we may be surprised to discover that the Grimm's tales have a long prior evolution. There are up to a thousand catalogued versions of "Cinderella." In classrooms today, we are tasked to find the universality in stories from cultures that are living in the souls and daily lives of the children in our classrooms, cultures other than European, white and Christian. To meet today's children (and their parents) with appropriate wisdom and care, every teacher is obliged to exercise sensitive judgment about troubling, unhelpful concepts and words for their listeners. Can other descriptive words be found that convey the intent but honor the diversity of our audiences? What language can include and honor all human peoples, irrespective of race, gender identity, ethnicity, or religion?

"The golden ball of wisdom" is an image of an all-inclusive love we can share as storytellers. As a Waldorf teacher in the 1980s, Nancy was inspired to delve deeply with other storytellers into fairytale wisdom. At the same time a storytelling renaissance was burgeoning in the Boston area where she was teaching, a counterbalance to the computers that were beginning to become so readily available at that time. She knew Waldorf wisdom had much to offer others who were committed to sharing stories without screens and recording devices. These storyteller-researchers often turned to Rudolf Meyer's *The Wisdom of Fairy Tales*, to more fully commune with the spiritual depth that lives in the fairy tales. They also looked at other books with widely contrasting perspectives,

such as Bruno Bettleheim's psychoanalytic *The Uses of Enchantment*. Many original stories inspired by fundamental fairy tale archetypes were created in these story circles and are included in Nancy Mellon's *Storytelling and the Art of Imagination*, (now revised and published as *Healing Storytelling*).

If we choose a Grimm's story to tell, we are customarily asked to tell it as it was written down. Yet we must always work to penetrate to the essence of each story as it evolves in our inner life, not just speak the precise words. Taking "The Frog Prince" as an example, we can look up previous versions of the story, as in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* by Maria Tatar, which is full of fascinating historical information. We can realize that "the golden ball" is a personal sun, which wants to shine as our moral compass. As teachers we use our own "golden ball" to discern what images are right and true for our groups.

As we are looking for stories in other traditions that echo our familiar Grimm's tales, we can make a story map of a tale with its essential pictures and storyline leading to the amazing moment of transformation and resolution. For example, if we look at a "Snow White and Rose Red"-type story to tell in Africa, we can look for African stories about two devoted, loving sisters and an enchanted bear (or other appropriate animal) that convey the same archetype in more culturally familiar language and images. We can do this wherever we live.

Princes and princesses are other images that are frequently questioned today. Research, however, points to the existence of thousands of stories which portray a prince or princess who has been enchanted into some animal form and then disenchanted through the love of others. This is what folklorists call a *motif*, meaning pattern of commonly held images, characters, actions, and events that appear in many stories and many cultures. These *motifs* seen in the Grimm's tales were in the world long before the brothers collected them. Many of the stories the Grimm brothers collected migrated into Germany and Europe through the trade routes. Jack Zipes is a brilliantly reliable resource to learn how many of these tales migrated into Germany from other cultures.

Children coming to the earth today carry a worldly soul that is less captured in one gender or nationality. What motifs are most nourishing for the very present children we find in our classrooms? Nancy recommends we read many, many traditional tales to discover the wide-ranging gender archetypes found in them. "The Twelve Huntsmen" in the Grimm's fairy tales tells of twelve feisty young women who band together for true love. Kathleen Regan's *Fearless Girls, Wise Women and Beloved Sisters: Heroines in Folktales from around the World*; and Jack Zipes' *Don't Bet on the Prince* deal refreshingly with gender stereotypes. Especially recommended is reading Isabel Wyatt stories aloud (i.e. *The Seven-Year-Old Wonder Book, The Book of Fairy Princes*) to see how this creative storyteller created new fairy tales out of old—with skillfully compassionate spiritual perception in each word.

We are all invited to collaborate together with the souls of children to create the stories they need today to meet future times. Nancy has often created special stories with parents for birthday celebrations. A parent asked for her help because she was concerned about her daughter, who was turning six years old and was longing to be a prince. Nancy suggested that they seek an imagination of the prince. This imagining, as always when a child is held with great love, became a meditative, spiritual activity. The mother, who was a skillful seamstress, pictured a fine prince wearing a rainbow cape, each color accentuated as it came to a point at the hem. With the child's need at heart, this cape became the seed of a story which they wrote up together. In the story the magical cape was given by a gnarly old beggar. Whenever the prince put it on, he was able to fly and do beautiful, powerful deeds. The cape was presented to the girl after the story was told during the party. She wore the cape for months, even when she was sleeping, and became a more integrated and contented six-year-old child.

When we have questions about gender roles in stories, might we sometimes shift the gender roles in a story to see how it feels? What if Goldilocks were a little boy? What if feminine and masculine pigs build three houses? Let us keep the old classics intact, yet learn from them to create new stories that contain similar patterns and rhythms. As we play and work with the freeing of gender roles today, we can open to the cosmic gestures of masculine and feminine that live in all of us all the time. Our logical, more linear, left-brain thinking tends to attach neatly to one gender; it likes tidy, materialistic logic. Yet gender is spiritually alive. The masculine is very alive within the feminine life body and can resonate with masculine qualities and vise versa. How does the masculine accompany me in my feminine life? How does the feminine accompany the masculine? These are always part of one another. Do our storytelling and puppet plays move fluently between gender roles?

Many possibilities are open to our creativity and spiritually-inspired insight. Every child, teacher, parent and grandparent today needs wise stories. Classic treasures from the past with archetypal wisdom serve us as a foundation. We must enter the future with moral and creative courage to listen attentively to our wise inner voices for new stories for the future. ◆

**Nancy Mellon** *is a counselor, mentor, and former Waldorf teacher whose courses and workshops brim with creativity! She has taught therapeutic writing and storytelling worldwide for many years. More information about her numerous creativity-inspiring books and offerings, as well as several podcasts, are available at www.healingstory.com. Nancy is now living in Harlemville, New York.*

**Resources:**

A workshop attendee working actively with issues of racism recommended a workbook which can be downloaded at: meandwhitesupremacybook.com. Part education, part activation, the *Me and White Supremacy Workbook* is a tool to examine and dismantle unconscious white-supremacy biases.

The historical background of the traditional European tales is explored in Jack Zipes' *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, a social history of the fairy tale, and in Maria Tatar's *The Hard Facts of the Brothers Grimm*. These researchers and many others show how writers adapted oral folk tales in the eighteenth century to the mores, values, and manners of their time.

*The Master and His Emissary*, a book by Iain McGilchrist, is highly recommended to Waldorf teachers. This study describes the right hemisphere of the brain as the flexible part that seeks to deeply nourish imagination, inspiration, and intuition. This book is grounded in over 20 years of mainstream research.

Multitudes of folk and fairy tale motifs were systematized by Stith Thompson, who devoted much of his life to creating the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. A condensed version of this index is available in paperback with the title *The Folktale*. Stith Thompson included stories from around the world to revise the research of Antti Aarne, who in 1910 first published a systematic index of European tale-types.