

Fairy Tales

These Kallinikos

Fairy tales are like classical music. The more we listen to them and the better we understand them, the more we can appreciate their beauty and grasp the profound truths they carry. Fairy tales are nourishment for the soul, both for children and for adults. They set the soul in motion. Good psychologists know this and use stories therapeutically for people whose inner life is frozen. Fairy tales communicated basic truths about human life and about how the world is. They are archetypal stories present in virtually every cultural tradition and a source of deep wisdom about the world and about the human condition.

There was a time when reading or telling fairy tales was disapproved of because of their apparent lack of realism. Bruno Bettelheim, a twentieth-century psychiatrist and author, courageously wrote of the value of fairy tales and gave us permission to read and tell them again. Most recently, Robert Bly, in his book *Iron John*, and Clarissa Pinkola Estes, in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, have used fairy tales and myths to illuminate hidden longings deep within the soul of the 'wild' archetypal, man and woman.

Fairy tales stimulate the imagination, awaken the powers of listening, feeling and understanding, and nourish the inner person to unfathomable depths. These stories originate in a distant past when the consciousness of the human being was different than it is today. Before reading, writing, science, and history, the human consciousness was similar to what today we call dream consciousness. Elders and leaders whose power of intuition was developed had access to cosmic wisdom and embodied this in stories.

These tales were transmitted orally over centuries and millennia, at the fireside, in the hut and castle, in the spinning room, in the open field. Peoples in different cultures tapped into the same store of cosmic wisdom. Hence certain themes, characters, and situations are found in the stories of widely separated cultures. Fairy tales are in part allegory, in that the characters and situations stand for something larger than themselves. But they also portray the mundane aspects of life and the possibilities for the future.

Fairy tales shine on the path of human development and prepare youngsters for the coming of particular stages in journey of their own lives. A child at six or seven begins to leave the safety of home and to meet the world. Little Red Riding Hood leaves her home and goes into the forest where she is faced with distractions and dangers.

Between the ages of twelve and sixteen, the 'no-longer-a-child-not-yet-an-adult' adolescent begins to develop the capacity for abstract thinking. Sleeping Beauty at age fifteen goes into the tower, in other words, into her head, and there finds the spinning wheel of thinking.

What an evocative image! The spinning of thoughts that follow one after the other is like the spinning of thread on a spinning wheel. And just as the adolescent can become confused and lost and can fall asleep to his or her inner voice, Sleeping Beauty becomes lost in sleep. She is awakened only by the kiss of the prince. This tells us that love and the noble ideals can help us through such a time.

There are many fairy tales that portray inner struggle and initiation, among them the twelve labours of Hercules, the stories of Odysseus, of Iron John, and Vasilisa the Beautiful. Such stories depict the evolution of humankind. In 'the Little Tailor and the Giant,' for example, the giant cannot think for himself. He is in a dream state, and thoughts and images pour into him. Deeply intuitive, yet intellectually dull, he meets the little tailor, who embodies a new awakened consciousness. The tailor is thin, sharp, small and pointy, as are the tools of his trade. He uses his analytical intellect to cut and piece material together and then to stitch together his suit. The tailor has what the giant has not, the capacity for abstract thought, and in the end triumphs.

As parents, grandparents, and teachers, we can pass on the wisdom contained in fairy tales to our children for their benefit and our own. In doing so, we can keep several things in mind.

To tell a story 'by heart,' rather than read it, brings the storyteller into a deeper relationship to the story and helps him bring it more to life. Memory, feeling and imagination, all aspects of the soul activity of the heart, are brought into play. A fairy tale, when told with a reverence and earnestness, bespeaks the deep truths embodied in it and conveys images and meanings that penetrate to the depths of the listener's being.

Such opening phrases as 'Once upon a time,' 'Long, long ago in another time,' and 'When was it, when was it not,' remove the story from the present time and make clear that the story has no direct relationship to the listener. The listener can thus relax and enter unencumbered into the world of the story. Also, this, 'out of time' beginning tells the listener that he is about to enter a subtle and obscure realm.

The storyteller always keeps in mind that all the characters in a fairy tale are in fact different facets of each individual human being. Each character reflects an aspect of our own human personality. The story is really about us as human beings, each archetypal character reflecting an aspect of ourselves. I know a little girl who, when she first heard the story of Hansel and Gretel, began to eat, drink and speak like a witch. That powerful character in the story had resonated with and aroused part of her personality. Fortunately, the phase passed in a month.

Because each character is really part of us, the storyteller presents all, even the not-so-nice ones, as old and familiar friends. We know we have reached a proper connection with the characters when children ask to hear the same story over and over again. It means the characters have been given life by the children's imaginative power and have become their companions.

A wise storyteller will accentuate the good in a story. 'How good was the mother goat? She was good, good, good, good, good!' Not much needs to be made of the evil or the lower nature of the characters in a story, because the children grasp those very readily. One need only say, and in a monotone voice, 'The wolf was waiting behind the tree to see the good mother leave.'

The teller of a fairy tale must be able to enter fully into the tale and to accept and affirm it in its entirety. Thus if a story frightens you or repels you, it is better not to tell it. If you think the central image contained in a story is not a truth, it is better not to tell it. In the world of the fairy tale, the good and the divine always triumph. Greed, cruelty and death are of course present and are manifested in the characters, but in the end, the good prevails. If the teller of the tale is to convey the truths and beauty contained in it, he needs to believe that in life ultimately the good prevails, because, in truth, it does. Children know this. They have a natural understanding that in the end, through the operations of spiritual laws, good and justice win out. And they have an innate, intense love for the good, the true and the beautiful. They sigh with relief at the death of the villain, and rejoice when the good triumphs.

Regardless of how well we tell the tales, sooner or later the child will ask: Is the story true? Are the characters real? And we can answer that there is in fact truth in these stories. They use fantasy and magic to communicate the reality that, next to and behind the material world of strict natural law, there is an invisible spiritual world, which is our true home. This is a world where goodness triumphs. The prince and the princess who live happily ever after are within us, and their story is our own story of finding inner balance and of awakening our higher self. Even in our everyday world, there are kings and queens who wear invisible crowns and whom we recognise because they bless us with their love, generosity and wisdom.

To tell fairy tales is to show children the heavenly kernel of our human nature and the way to live in the world. It brings these delicate young souls the richness of the inner life, the images and eternal truths of cosmic memory, the preparation for life's journey, and the opportunity for betterment, both personal and universal. We do well to keep the stories and their characters alive since as the tales in closing say of their heroes and heroines, 'If they are not gone, they're living there still!'

THESA KALLINIKOS is a Greek and South African and did her Waldorf teacher training at Emerson College in England. She has been a class teacher for twenty-five years, in Honolulu and in Colorado. Thesa is now a class teacher at the Denver Waldorf School and has just graduated an eighth grade, a group of students acclaimed for their vitality and creativity.