

# My Approach to Storytelling

by Brent Bertsch

A fairytale usually starts with "once upon a time", to indicate that we are leaving the concrete world of logic and are entering the world of the psyche or imagination - a world in which different laws of the universe apply. The psyche, defined as soul, is thought by some to bridge the invisible world with the physical world of the senses. Joseph Campbell discovered stories that were common to cultures that had no connection to each other for thousands of years leading him to the conclusion that all humans face similar issues in the process of growing and developing. He suggested we find the story we are living and learn from it. Earlier, Carl Jung gave the name "archetype" to the characters in the psyche that are common to all humans. Marie Louise Von Franz said, "fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes". Stories can help us explore who we are.

Personal storytelling has become popular in recent years. Telling personal stories can help break the spell of old patterns, act as a tool during recovery from abuse, addiction or PTSD (for example) by sharing the experience outwardly with others. Fairytales that have withstood the test of time can bring images of wisdom inwardly as guides or roadmaps, or perhaps to enliven unbeknownst parts of ourselves that may provide the energy needed to come to terms with a life issue we face.

Some types of stories offer a straightforward lesson through a direct interpretation. In Sunday school, Violet Chapman told us a story that went like this. Jack was playing down by the railroad tracks with his friends. A train rolled slowly through town and one of the boys got an idea to jump on a railroad car, ride it through town and then jump off. Now Jack didn't really think he should do it, but he went ahead and did it anyway. As he tried to jump on the moving train, he slipped and fell and in the accident his arm was severed from his body by a wheel of the train car. And for the rest of his life he was called one-armed Jack. So the moral of that story was, if you don't want to lose your arm and be called one-armed Jack for the rest of your life, don't try to jump onto moving trains; if you don't want this, don't do that. It must have worked because I have yet to jump onto a moving train car.

Direct interpretation falls apart if we apply it to fairy tales because through them we enter a world of imagination or magic. Interpreting a fairy tale literally could mean kissing a frog, chopping off the head of your teacher, throwing a witch into the fire, going on a magic carpet ride, gorging out the eye of a giant, shoving your babysitter into a furnace, or sitting around waiting for a handsome prince to come to the rescue.

Interpretation of fairy tales can be a very personalized thing, representing something quite different in my life than in yours. It can manifest as a metaphor to a unique situation in life. There may be issues that won't get resolved at this point in my life. Rather, I revisit them, spiral back to see them from a different perspective, experience new aspects of them, explore more deeply. Stories work much the same way for me; a new story visits the issue from a different angle, stirs up new information, shows more vulnerability of the issue. Telling a fairytale from the perspective of a secondary or minor character can be very illuminating. What part of me is like this character? Have I ever found myself in the same situation as this character? What does that monster represent in my life? Fairytales give me ideas about how to deal with issues in my life. They make it easy to see a situation from another point of view.

Fairy tales are often about restoring balance to some aspect of the human psyche; feminine and masculine, the new taking over for the old, turning this direction at the crossroads or continuing straight, etc. Restoring balance may require a willingness to look at an issue through the eyes of another.

Often the masculine and feminine work together to restore the balance or bring wholeness. Gender identification is a forefront issue today. For me, the term "gender" indicates whether I was born into a female or male body, and the terms "masculine" and "feminine" are about energetic aspects of the psyche. Through stories I can see more of my humanness.

Fairytales have stood the test of time, many are hundreds or thousands of years old and have been told countless times. The story has a life and a wisdom of it's own. As a storyteller, I am interested in the voice of the story for I am a merely a conduit for the story. For thousands of years - and still in some cultures today - stories are roadmaps and guides for internal growth. They were also for entertainment and social interaction. Although children were not excluded, it is only in the relatively recent past that fairytales were sanitized and given to children as distraction and entertainment. Before the written word, stories were the history books of a culture. Traditionally stories were handed down from generation to generation - usually remembered and told by the women of the culture.

Sometimes powerful figures come up from the subconscious to help us grow and change. It is easy to be corrupted by the power of an archetype such as the witch or the warrior - it is easy to be seduced into abusing that power. Once such a power has done its work in our life it needs to be released, like returning the ring of power to its source in The Lord of the Rings. That story suggests what a nearly impossible task that is. Revenge can turn into nothing less than trading places with the perpetrator and more or less becoming him or her.

Why are fairytales violent? Life is violent, ripping up the soil to plant seeds for food is violent, nature is violent, weather is violent, playing sports is violent, dreams and the psyche are violent, growth and change inside us can be a violent process. Violence can teach us about boundaries. Is it better to deal with anger and violence internally or to project it on to someone in the physical world?

In a fairytale, a monster can represent anything that gets in our way. In Lord of the Rings, a fire-eating dragon chases Gandalf and company. The monster can be an addiction, a worn-out belief, a fear, etc. The monster can tear us apart or eat us up inside. Gandalf says "no" to the monster and is pulled into the abyss by him, and ultimately emerges reborn. A death in a dream or fairytale can be interpreted as energy pushed back into the subconscious.

A fairytale is like a poem, using metaphor to deliver its message. It takes some thought and poking around to unearth the wisdom it contains. Changing a perspective or a worn out belief that no longer serves us can have an almost magical effect on our life.

Fairytales give examples of how to live with the many energies that are part of being human. Fairy tales give us a tool for exploration into parts of ourselves that can be hard to access or acknowledge. The wise old woman or the wise old man are characters who help us hone the rough edges and make useful what we discover during our walk of life. Although more dangerous than the wise old woman, the witch energy often does the heavy lifting and helps to turn our boat in a completely new direction.

## Influenced by the work of:

Robert Bly  
Michael Mead  
Roi Galor  
Karmit Even-Zur  
Geoia Timpanelli  
Marian Woodman  
Marie-Louise VanFranz  
Ashley Ramsden  
Nancy Mellon  
Will Hornyak  
Allison Cox

## Previous Studies:

- Fairytale Interpretation – Friends of Carl Jung, Seattle
- International School of Storytelling, Stories Beyond Words – Emerson College, Roi Galor and Karmit Even-Zur
- International School of Storytelling, Begin It Now – Emerson College, Ashley Ramsden
- HANDLE screening course – Cathy Stingley
- Waldorf Teacher Training, Foundation Year – Sound Circle, Seattle WA
- Piano tuning and rebuilding
- Cranio Sacral workshops – Nancy Solivan
- Basic Shamanism Workshop – Michael Harner
- Toastmaster Club
- 1987, The Evergreen State College, TV/Video Production and Critical Reasoning
- Theater workshops with Tony Pasquilini & Robin Smith and with Mark Jenkins in the mid 80s in Seattle
- Mythology/fairytales – Robert Bly & Michael Mead
- 1976-77, Sioux Falls College, music and theater