Fairy Tales In Our Waldorf Classrooms

~ Cindy Faught Sudan

A fairy tale can be like an old friend . . . one who is always there, dependable, full of advice, thought-provoking, stimulating, humorous, entertaining, and constant. It can give glimpses of life outside of our own world and provoke a wide range of emotions. Fairy Tales can portray love, anger, surprise, sadness, confusion, and joy, as well as show us acceptance, tolerance, and broadmindedness. They are filled with phantasmagorias that can provide imagination, inspiration, and intuition. But is this why we tell fairy tales in our early childhood classrooms?

"A world without fairy tales and myths would be as drab as life without music."

—Georg Trakl

Fairy, fairie, or faery, according to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, is defined as "a mythical being of folklore and romance usually having diminutive human form and magic powers." Fairy tales embody a wide range of literary works from around the world, including collected oral pieces and even newly discovered examples. It was interesting to learn that a collection of five hundred fairy tales, collected from the Upper Palatinate in eastern Bavaria by Franz Xaver von Schönwerth (1810–86), who was inspired by the Brothers Grimm, was found in 2009. Erika Eichenseer explains in *The Turnip Princess and Other Newly Discovered Fairy Tales* how she discovered the Schönwerth papers, which had been kept under lock and key in a municipal archive of Regensburg, Bavaria.

The study of fairy tales can be a lifelong work. Historians, researchers, philosophers, authors, and academics have produced a multitude of historical and deeper insightful resources about these stories, what they mean and how they were transformed from oral tradition to written language. One can get lost in all of the philosophy, psychology, oneirology (study of dreams), and symbology of the fairy tales and it is worth the time to research these. But reading and penetrating the fairy tale on a soul level can create a meaningful relationship to the story and provide the connection for sharing these stories with the children.

There seems to be much discussion among teachers and parents in Waldorf early childhood and kindergarten classes as to whether fairy tales, specifically Grimm's fairy tales, are relevant for the children of today. We meet parents and teachers who have concerns about the "violent nature" of these tales, or concerns relating to gender roles and how these might affect the developing life of an imitative young child. We also hear that the children are having a harder time being still long enough to even receive a story or fairy tale.

In his book *Once Upon a Fairy Tale,* Dr. Norbert Glas says: "In our times, it becomes more and more necessary, especially in the education of younger children, that they are given for their fantasy, images brought from a higher world. The soul of the unspoiled child is not interested in the intellectual tales and anecdotes it is so often fed with nowadays. The children become spiritually starved and dry in their thinking." He adds how important it is that parents and teachers ". . . offer the stories as they are, without speaking to the children, of course, about their meaning!" (p. 9). It remains as important now for the children to be able to access the healing images of archetypes and fairy tales as it was when Dr. Glas wrote his book back in 1976.

When we see how a child can take in a fairy tale, often with his mouth dropped open as if taking it in like food and digesting every word, something tells us that he is taking in much more than the words. When the child has heard the same story for a number of days or even weeks and we begin to see nuggets from the tales in his play and storytelling, something tells us that he is receiving nourishment all the way to his soul.

In "Fairy Tale Language," recently published in a new translation as "Fairy Tale Language and the Image of the Human Being," in *Waldorf Early Childhood Education, An Introductory Reader*, Helmut von Kügelgen describes this phenomenon: "A healthy three- or four-year-old will listen to the fairy tale of *Star Money* on a hundred evenings with only an ever increasing sympathy. There is no more penetrating proof than this: that the child experiences

an imagination, a painting for the soul in the fairy tale" (*Waldorf Early Childhood Education, An Introductory Reader* at 183).

Finding ways for these children to be able to sit through story time so that they can receive these gifts is crucial. It is also the challenge we face. Rhythm is the backbone of our work and will lend itself to preparing the children for this time of story sharing. Starting the year with very short fairy tales not only meets the needs of a mixed-age class, but also begins to help the children understand the expectations for this time of day. Stories with humor can sometimes help to engage the children, as can the use of table puppets or silk marionettes.

If behavioral challenges present during story time, there are many aspects to consider, such as the environment and seating arrangement, story content and length, our own voice, diction, volume, and gesture, and the activity or transition prior to story time. The environment can be changed by closing the curtains, enclosing the story circle with play stands, or dimming the lights. Changing the chair plan is also an option. Circular chair seating can be changed to rows or a "bunch of grapes" model.

We need to consider whether the stories are meeting the children. Are we able to meet the needs of all children in our mixed-age classrooms? Observation is a critical skill for working with young children. By observing the children before, during, and following the story activity, we can begin to perceive the needs of the group and the needs of individual children. Stories can be considered more appropriate for certain ages. Joan Almon, former Waldorf early childhood educator, former WECAN co-chair, and co-founder of the Alliance for Childhood, created "Choosing Fairy Tales for Different Ages," a resource and helpful guide for teachers (see Resources, below).

In his book *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, Roy Wilkinson touches on the apparently "horrible" that occurs from time to time in the fairy stories. "One can sympathize," he says, "with this point of view and wish that everything in the world were roses and honey. Unfortunately there are negative forces (in the world) and the child who is prevented from experiencing these will grow up without a sense of reality. One should bear in mind that the child has different concepts than the adult" (p. 12).

This is so apparent when we observe children hearing stories that depict what adults might consider "violent" acts, such as Grimm's "The Wolf and the Seven Kids": "Then the kid had to run home and fetch scissors, and a needle and thread and the goat cut open the monster's stomach . . ." (see *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Number 5). Uncommon is the child who, hearing this told in the appropriate manner, becomes distraught. Instead, she takes in the joy of the goat family and delights in knowing that good has overcome evil. When the seven kids see the wolf fall into the well after their mother fills him with stones and sews him up, they cry, "The wolf is dead! The wolf is dead!" and dance for joy round about the well with their mother.

Pediatricians Michaela Glöckler and Wolfgang Goebel, in their book *A Guide to Child Health*, describe how children are much more perceptive than adults when listening to fairy tales. They show us how fairy tales appeal to the young child's fantasy

and imagination as she is learning how to think. "Fear arises only if the stories are told theatrically. If they are told calmly, the child will feel at home in the events described for they reflect realities of the life of the soul in which evil and the triumph over it play a considerable part. The soul's development is not helped either by ignoring or by overstating these realities, but it is helped by learning to face up to evil and master it" (p. 219).

Concerns regarding gender roles are increasing. For example, the prince commonly appears as the hero or the princess as a victim. Much has been written about this issue and one can understand the concerns of gender stereotyping, especially seeing how they are depicted in animation and movies. Perhaps if we consider looking at all of the roles in a fairy tale as each being a part of us, feminine and masculine, old and young, mischievous and well-behaved, humble and arrogant, and so on, then we are able to look at these fairy tales and attributes through different colored glasses. This is evident when watching the children as they portray their chosen characters when acting out the fairy tale. It is quite common for the children to select any character, regardless of gender. They will also choose not only to portray human, animal, or fairy characters, but also plants, trees, and even elements such as fire or water.

As Miriam Whitfield writes, "There are many more beautiful fairy tales from all parts of the world. Once you have found the golden key to unlock their secrets, you and your children will be immeasurably rich. Each story is like a map which shows you a new country in lovely picture form. If you study this map, then show it to your children, they will find their way in the turmoil of life much more easily and with much more courage and joy. So good story telling!" (Whitfield, *Fairy Stories*, p. 53).

Beloved kindergarten teacher Ronna McEldowney always began and ended her fairy tales with the following, which were indications from Rudolf Steiner: "Once upon a time, there was. Where was there? Where was there really not? There was once a queen …

"… and if they have not died, they are living still."

And the tradition carries on.

"Because fairy tales belong to our innermost feeling and emotional life and to everything connected with it, they are of all forms of literature the most appropriate for children's hearts and minds" (Steiner, *Poetry and Meaning*, p. 22). ◆

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Resources:

- Alliance for Childhood. ***www.allianceforchildhood.org***.
- Almon, Joan. "Choosing Fairy Tales for Different Ages," in Joan Almon, ed., *An Overview of the Waldorf Kindergarten, Vol. 1* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Waldorf Kindergarten Association of North America, 1993), pp. 55-59. http://www.waldorflibrary.org/articles/977-choosing-fairy-tales-for-different-ages. Accessed July 28, 2017. *Note: An updated version of this article appears in* Waldorf Early Childhood: An Introductory Reader, *edited by Shannon Honigblum (WECAN 2017).*
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1976.
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