

The Dove and the Dragon: *Binding Adult Objectives and Children's Needs in Storytelling*

By Judith Black

When telling stories to children, it is important to remember that adult sensibilities and the needs of children rarely travel in the same orbit. In fact, the chasm between the two is so deep and wide that parents will often opt instead to pop in a DVD, a *shander* (a Yiddish expression meaning an act of debased dishonor) in storytelling circles! As adults, we habitually edit and even censor the stories we share with children. Making these choices solely to cater to our own sensibilities and aesthetics, rather than to address our children's needs, robs them of their greatest tool of transformation. Take, for example, this imaginary conversation between mother and child at bedtime:

Mother: "Now sweetie, why don't I tell you that nice story about the little girl who loves visiting the dentist?"

Child: "No mommy! I want the one about the little girl who goes into the wrong house in the forest and the wolf eats her up."

Mother: "How about the lovely fairy tale where the princess frees the imprisoned prince and opens a shelter for the kingdom's peasants?"

Child: "How about the one where the beautiful princess marries the prince and lives happily ever after in a big rich castle?"

Mother: "Let's tell the one about the kind dragon, who helps the

villagers find water.”

Child: “No, I want the one about the slimy green dragon who rips up all the people into itty bitty bits and gobbles them up.”

The mother is looking to tell her child a sweet, gentle story about nice, pleasant things that happen in the real world. The child, however, is on a completely different page: one with dragons and danger and happily ever after. The mother suggests tales of kindness and social justice, while the child is asking for stories of actions and consequences. This article addresses and explores the following questions: Is there a difference between editing and censorship in storytelling? Why do we, as adults, make the choices we do for children? What is truly in the best interest of our young listeners? And finally, is it possible to bind adult sensibilities and the needs of a child in the same tale?

Before we can determine exactly how we should shape our stories to best serve the needs of our children, we must delineate the differences between editing and censorship. To edit is simply to prepare a story for sharing. All storytellers, parents, educators, and professionals edit their material: the editing process helps us to create a consistent, sharp work of art that represents who we are and what we care about. For instance, many of us have told the story of “The Three Billy Goats Gruff.” If what you love about that particular tale is the trickster element in how the younger sibling handles a potentially dangerous situation, then that is what you will

emphasize (edit for) in your telling. If the physical power of the troll is what gets your heart going, that is what you will focus on. If the environmental plunder of the valley, and the goats' now present need to exploit yonder meadow for grass, is what speaks to you, you will edit to emphasize this point. If all details were equally explored and emphasized, a 5-minute story could turn into an epic the length of War and Peace, and neither the listeners nor the teller would be interested. Thusly, we as tellers edit for clarity and to bring home the message we was the listeners to care about.

To censor a story is to suppress its traditional details, themes, and characters. We usually do this with the intention of saving our children from discomfort, trauma or harm. The world that we inhabit as adults is full of inconsistencies, foibles, small servings of justice, and great spaces filled with darkness. As parents and educators, we want to protect children from the reality that we must juggle daily, and so we should. Children are not ready to understand the hard choices and realities that adults must deal with. Thus we censor stories that carry any harsh images, believing that we are protecting our children from them. You might feel that a troll beneath a bridge is too frightening an image for your child and therefore change it to a toll keeper. You believe that by making this change, you are sparing them from nightmares of frightening, lurking trolls. This might seem self evident, but: we are censoring their stories, not their reality. Do your children ever see the news on television? Do they hear you talking about devastation wrought from environmental degradation? Do they

hear you fight with other people they love? Do they experience inner turmoil originating in anything from starting school to coping with loss? We cannot censor the world our children live in, and yet we often feel a compulsion to censor the stories they hear based on what we feel is appropriate[i].

Children, no matter how completely we try to protect them, will experience fears and dissonance that are the result of growing up. Their fears are as real to them as ours are to us. There will always be trolls, or some similar creature, in their world. If they don't live under the bridge, then they might appear under their beds, in the closet when the lights go out, or in a dank cloakroom at day care. Taking the troll out of the story will not make its presence disappear from their lives. Indeed, if a parent or educator wants to support a child in resolving a problem, denying its existence is the path to failure. You can't take anyone anywhere unless you begin leading away from where they are. Will your arachnophobia stop because I tell you a story about George the friendly tarantula? Doubtful. A story about someone you can identify with, who is terrified of spiders, and finds a way to conquer that fear will be much more effective. The ancient fairy and folk tales have resonated throughout human history because they accept the reality of the child's fear or his developmental dissonance and create a blueprint to conquer them safely. This blueprint begins with a child, just like the child in question, innocent and willing, who is thrust into an untenable and often life-threatening situation. The story then models ways to survive and even thrive throughout the

journey, which mirrors the child's own capabilities. Through the stories, children learn usable, authentic strategies for addressing their own problems.

As a parent or teacher, you have most likely stood at the door of the preschool or day care center during the first few days of the year and witnessed this scene: the 4-year-old is wrapped firmly around their parent or caretakers leg and screaming:

Child: I don't want to go in there. No! No! No!

Parent: Honey, it's a very nice place. Really, they have good toys and playdough and...

Child: (*screaming elevates*) No! No! No! Monsters! I'm not going!

Teacher: (Crouching low to look lovingly into the child's face) We are so happy you are here. Joey and Sally want you to join them in the block corner...

Child: No! No!! No!!! (*now gripping with nails*)

Mother: Honey, I'll be back to get you at noon, on the button. I promise. I'll be right back here...

The truth of the matter is that mommy will be back, but she's going to leave little Margaret here again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, and Margaret is scared. This place looks manageable enough to an adult's eye, but to a 3-, 4-, or 5-year old it looks large, unforgiving, chaotic, and frightening. On top of all that, the person who protects and loves them is leaving them there all alone! Of course they are frightened; some of them

even fear being abandoned. (The more chaotic the home environment, the more weighted this possibility.)

Recall George the friendly tarantula and think about how you feel when your fears are not addressed in an honest way. “Oh honey, this is a great place. You’ll love it.” The child in question probably will love it, eventually, but at this moment they are fearful and anxious. What if something bad happens to them while they are in there? What if mommy forgets to come and pick them up? What if a child is cruel to them, or they get hungry, or they don’t know how to ask about the bathroom, etc...? There are a million worries that may be running through their heads and hearts on these first days of separation. What might best help them?

1. *“Oh sweetie, now stop that. You’re going to have a great time.”* Denying their fears, which for them are very real, will not help them
2. *“Oh honey, you’re just suffering from abandonment anxiety. Once you experience my reappearance 6 or 7 times and are reassured, you will feel better.”* Literalizing the fear, which is amorphous in the child’s experience, will not help, and instead will often exacerbate the problem.

What you can give this child to successfully ease their anxiety is a story about a child just their age who is not enrolled in a tasteful childcare center or preschool, but left by a truly heartless parent in a witch-infested wood. Their every fear is acknowledged, taken seriously, blown up on the big screen of story, and played out in

full, leaving them with a role model for survival.

How will your child adapt to this new setting? The same way Hansel and Gretel survived and thrived throughout their ordeal. Adult sensibilities would have us soften this tale so that the stepmother doesn't press her husband into abandoning the children in the woods, but accidentally losing them. The witch wouldn't actually eat children, but press them into some unpleasant labor, and the witch would not be tossed into the oven by Gretel, but sent to a rehabilitation center. Adult sensibilities are for adult stories. These are all kind and humane choices, but they are not what the child needs. The ancient tales accept the reality of children's feelings, amplify them through imagery, and offer pathways for resolution that every child can ascend to. The stepmother, the woods, and the witch are all honest incarnations of their fears, which can be overcome: this brother and sister duo use their wits and their ability to create connection/relationship not only to survive and vanquish the witch, but also to find their way back to a safe and loving home. Far from denying the child their fears, you are acknowledging them and offering a canvas, upon which they can explore, embrace, and master those fears. Doesn't this better equip the child for thriving in this new setting than "mommy will be back at noon."?

Children want stories that acknowledge and help them play out fears, anxieties, insecurities, or to nurture fantasies. Stories that do not take people from where they are cannot lead them to any other

place. A number of years ago I wrote a story for a little boy in my nursery school class. His mother would come to pick him up each day with the new baby sister cradled in one arm and the other filled with baby accoutrements. His mother would ritually crow: “Hi Gabie! Come and kiss your baby sister.” Gabe would obediently sidle over, kiss the baby, and promptly bang the next child he saw on the top of the head. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him,” the mother would exclaim apologetically. After a few years of experience teaching older siblings, I had a good idea, and created the story “Dumb Baby” for my little friend. The story, about a mom, a big brother, and a new baby sister, begins:

“Hi, my names Jamil and I am this many (*holds up 5 fingers*) years old. I like sunny days, and ice cream that stays on the cone and my pet stuffed mouse Frederick. I don’t like rainy days, ice cream that falls off the cone, and I’ll tell you guys a secret. I don’t like my dumb baby sister. When I get real, real mad at her I sing this song:

Dumb little baby
Dumb, dumb, dumb
Doesn’t know know her finger
From her bum!”

Jamil goes on to tell about how he’s woken every morning by the baby’s cries, and how he now has to do everything for himself because his mother is so busy with the infant. We see him getting dressed, proudly mismatching socks, maneuvering his head

through turtlenecks, and tricking his OshKosh overall straps into clicking into place. We feel his anger and sadness as his mother feeds the baby, ignoring his attempts to get her attention. He's left to fend for himself, making his own breakfast. We experience his pride as he masters tasks he never had to negotiate prior to the birth of the 'dumb baby,' and finally we see the mother acknowledge his new skills and ally him as a helper in caring for and raising his baby sister. The story is enormously popular with young children because it takes them from where they are (feeling rejected and angry), and leads them carefully to where they can be (identifying with the parenting role).

Many years ago I was banned by the Western Suburban Arts Council of Greater Boston from performing at 124 schools because of this story. The reviewer said that the language, "bum" to be specific, was inappropriate and foul, and that the story was simply not nice. "Nice" is not a feeling this child was having, and judging from this parent's full review of the story, the child's authentic emotion was not something she wanted to touch with a ten foot pole. Alas, you can't lead anyone to sunshine unless you meet them in the rain where they stand. Adult sensibilities too often negate children's emotional needs.

Children yearn for justice. My son would come home, not just from elementary school, but middle school as well, incensed by a teacher's inconsistent handling of management issues: "Mom, she said that if you yell out before she calls on you that you lose a

point. That is unless you are her pet, Melissa!” Any of us who have been preschool or elementary teachers have experienced this. If a child disobeys the rules of the classroom, especially those designed by their peers, do you think their classmates would:

- A. Offer a mild reprimand and encouragement the malcontent to try harder next time
- B. Add a little minus next to their name on the class chart as a symbol of wrongdoing
- C. Offer to model and coach them in good team behavior
- D. Pin this child to the wall

If you guessed ‘D’ then you’ve worked with young children. It may appear that they do not experience compassion, but this is not the case. Rather, before there is room to exercise this human trait they need to know they are safely ensconced in a world of justice. Perpetrators must be punished and the doers of good deeds are always rewarded. While adult sensibilities favor flexibility, young children need to know that the world is a morally ordered place before venturing out for subtler shades of justice. Children like an ordered universe that resonates with ‘fairness’ as they know it. If you disobey the rules, you pay the price. The longer we function in the world, the broader our experience and the more we stretch and accommodate. In order to grow in this way, children need to be supplied with a strong moral base.

In the hundreds of versions of “Little Red Riding Hood” that stem from as many lands, Little Red (or her cultural counterpart) and her

beloved grandmother are eaten by Mr. Wolf. They did not deserve to die and thus they made their way out of that nasty belly, but they were eaten nonetheless. When we decide that this image is too frightening for a child we censor it, creating a gentler, kinder version of the tale in which the child and her grandmother simply hide from the wolf. Have we made this change for the child or for the adult? It is the sophisticated adult sensibility that prefers mercy to justice. Indeed, adults abhor what we perceive to be senseless violence. To the child, however, this story proves simple justice. Little Red did not listen to her mother's warning and she suffered the very fate she had been warned of. That child got a dose of justice. As they age, they will begin to understand gradations and special situations that call for flexibility. When young, they want to see evil punished and good vindicated. It is these ancient tales that let them know all is right in the world and the punishment will fit the crime.

It is in this constancy of crime and punishment, good behavior and reward, which separates story from television programming. Old Wile E. Coyote can get infinitely blown up, chopped up, buried, and dropped off cliffs by the Road Runner and yet, he always comes back for more. That is gratuitous violence. On the other side of the scale, a great deal of modern children's programming has had all of the violence of childhood edited out in an attempt to pacify the ranks of parents who do not believe that their little ones should be exposed to any negative behavior whatsoever. The ever-popular 'Arthur' series is a fine example of contemporary middle

class mush: tales of lovable characters who all manage to learn important lessons about things like sharing, manners, and kindness by the end of the episode.

Arthur and friends can easily hold the attention of young children, and are generally approved of by adults. Their themes are noble and well executed. There is only one important question you might choose to ask: have your children improved morally after hearing these stories? (Are they more willing to share? Do they listen better? Are they kinder to one another?) If the answer is “no,” or more politely, “not really,” or “I’m not quite sure, but they like them,” then it is time to evaluate if your ‘good taste’ or middle class sensibilities are a substitute for your children's more primal needs. Arthur is sweet and entertaining, but does he have the power to transform your children’s lives? We can remain in the realm of Arthur, or parent-proofed fairy and folk tales, and no harm will be done. However, these stories do not hold the power to move a child from a place of anxiety to one where they feel safe, empowered and loved. This potential can only be mined if you meet the child at their current emotional level, rather than where you’d like them to be.

In the old stories, Cinderella’s stepmother had one eye pecked out by birds on her way to the girl’s wedding, and the other similarly dealt with on the return visit. She could not perceive the beauty of her stepdaughter and thus did not deserve to use her eyes. Snow White’s mother, so enamored by her own beauty and jealous of her

daughter's, was forced to dance herself to death in beautiful red-hot slippers. She lived by vanity and so she died by it. Baba Yaga, the famous Russian witch, ultimately helps the good and punishes the wicked with unique miseries that quite suit their bad temperaments. An impatient, greedy girl who does not follow instructions gets tricked by the steps she skipped. A stepparent who hoards the warmth of fire is ultimately consumed by it. Unlike our world, in fairy tales, the punishment fits the crime, leaving children with a sense of justice fulfilled.

Adult sensibilities, in their desire to not offend anyone and to make all material accessible, have diluted story content from a spicy fricassee to a cream of wheat mush. From the trading of words like 'death' to 'passing on' and softening of an evil action's results, they have created a road map of behavioral expectations that draws children in a circle rather than to an elevated plane. Their sanitized folklore and fairy tales leave Little Red Riding Hood undigested, evil brothers with all their limbs intact, and conniving stepmothers with in-law apartments in the castle. They leave us with a world that has no hard and fast moral order because mature adults usually prefer the mercy of Shakespeare's Portia to the Old Testament's blazing justice. This is a perfectly legitimate preference for adult stories, but if we want to move children towards this moral plane we must begin our journey at their level. The consciousness of a child is fraught with all the demons that can be conjured from the life of a small and powerless being struggling to gain experience, love, and affirmation in this big world.

Can we create a happy medium where stories will not violate adult sensibilities and still address children's deep needs? This is where the broad and excellent library of children's stories and parenting and teaching skills come to the fore. If fairy tales address a child's internal world, then we are called upon to find other tales to model interpersonal and social skills, and still others to teach important curricular topics. Hansel and Gretel might help them through their fears, but a story about Andi, the friendly policewoman who always helps lost children find their way home, is a perfect balance for modeling other contemporary strategies. Folk tales, such as Stone Soup, teach about community and cooperation. The Berenstain Bears find logical, contemporary ways to solve contemporary problems. By partnering the ancient with the contemporary you can balance your personal, contemporary sensibilities with the deeper needs of children. As a parent or educator, keep your eye and ear on a child you feel is vulnerable, and know that as the teller of any of these ancient tales, you have the power and obligation to gently shape them to best fit the needs of the children before you. If a child is deeply afraid of being abandoned or lost in the woods, Hansel and Gretel is a perfect story for helping them address their strengths and to overcome that fear. If, on the other hand, a child is so vulnerable that he begins to shake and cry when the pair has only just begun their journey, then he won't be able to hear the rest of the story. When you see this, ease up on the details that are affecting him, allowing him to be engaged in the story. It is the great joy of

this art form that it remains a folk art: the folk can shape and reshape with each telling, molding it to best speak to individual audiences.

Most folklore and fairy tales (because they emerge from the human psyche in its attempt to both understand itself and its world) have motifs that resonate throughout world cultures. These tales echo one another though their general plot structures and characters, while representing the culture that bore them and offering wonderful, insightful details about those cultures. If you don't feel comfortable with the way one story deals with a character or action, you can usually find another version that offers a different slant. As an authentic member of the folk, you can make changes that will better address your listeners. Children need their issues acknowledged and played out on the big screen of 'story.' From fear of abandonment to Oedipal jealousy, the ancient tales accept the legitimacy of these issues; they create a scenario based on their reality and work through them towards a conclusion that leaves the young person identifying with a hero or heroine who has slain their particular emotional dragon. And when you tell these kinds of tales, you will notice how deeply attached a child can become to certain stories. They will ask for them again and again until one day when you offer the tale, they will look at you querulously and say: "Nah, I don't want to hear that old story any more." Whatever issue it was helping them with has been resolved and the tool is no longer needed; this is a storyteller's greatest victory.

[i] Sometimes, we censor because we feel that certain images and actions are too extreme for impressionable minds and hearts. Other times, we do it to edit their understandings of this world and inculcate them with specific beliefs. If you are shaping and telling stories to inculcate specific values and ideas then censorship of traditional fairy and folk tales will become second nature to you. For instance, if you were a member of the Old Norwegian Folklore Church (an original creation) and your one true god was a troll, you might find the troll depicted in “Three Billy Goats Gruff” abhorrent. To pass on an image of a violent, greedy, troll would be a terrible transgression against your faith. Indeed, you would censor the tale, not only for the children in your religious community, but for all children. Can you see where this is a slippery slope? You might think my example absurd, and of course it is, but there are religious groups that refuse to allow their children to hear many of the stories in the traditional folk lexicon because they believe that tales about witches or ghosts will lead the children toward demonology. Many adults seem to think that children will embrace the literal behaviors they see in stories. Unlike adults, children understand that these ancient fairy tales are metaphors for internal journeys. For example, the witch Baba Yaga habitually eats the bad Russian children, yet cannibalism has never experienced a stronghold in that part of the world. Bruno Bettelheim explores this understanding of the metaphoric and magical beautifully in The Uses of Enchantment and Sheldon Cashdon addresses it successfully in The Witch Must Die.