The Genius of Natural Childhood

Secrets of Thriving Children

Sally Goddard Blythe

Contributors

Jane Williams, Peter Blythe
and Arlette Overman

Illustrations by

Sharon Rentta
and
Tom Kerr

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For my grandchildren

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Introduction

With so much emphasis on getting children ready for reading, writing and numeracy in the early years, it is important to remember that the ability to understand and use written language and to fit in with others socially is built upon earlier physical foundations which are developed in the early (pre-school) years. Physical interaction with the environment and social engagement with parents and family are two of the vital ingredients for later social integration and educational achievement.

Forty years ago, the family was primarily responsible for the process of 'bringing up' children, or educating them in the general sense, with school providing specific instruction in literacy, numeracy and academic subjects. Today, by contrast, we are increasingly witnessing a growing dependence on school and state to provide and nurture all aspects of children's growth and education. For many families, shared time and activities are increasingly rare, and the state emphasizes getting mothers and fathers back to work. Rather than supporting childcare at home, it focuses increasingly on early years nursery provision.

Since the dawn of the new millennium, daily reports in the media have highlighted such problems as poor literacy standards in schools; children starting school unable to manage simple motor tasks (such as the ability to use a knife and fork); poor listening skills; poor attention; increase in childhood obesity; children of working mothers having unhealthier lifestyles; increase in autistic-type behaviours; and children entering school with immature speech and language. There have been several reports that around 40 per cent of parents admit they *never* read to their child; and that a new generation of parents across the social spectrum are, for a variety of reasons, unaware of the importance of physical development and the role of movement,

music and interactive play in the early years for building the foundations for later learning.

Since the 1950s, society has undergone a technological revolution, with sweeping changes to lifestyle as radical as the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. This technological revolution has also brought about an increase in the *speed* of change, which now occurs at such a rapid rate that we are frequently oblivious of what is being lost, as well as gained, in the relentless pursuit of progress. The real impact of rapid environmental change on human development will only be known in the future, but we are already witnessing the effects of sedentary lifestyles and changes in the working lives of parents on children's development. In a debate at Roehampton Institute of Education, author and professor of journalism Rosalind Coward said:

> Many would scoff at the suggestion that modern society is bad for children. Of course it isn't they say. Look at infant mortality figures. Look at general health and longevity. Look at our welfare system – a net to protect children from absolute poverty. Or the fact all children have the right to education. Modern society allows children not only to survive but to expect a reasonably fulfilled adult life. In comparison to the past, or less affluent societies, our children are remarkably privileged. Yet evidence is mounting that these privileges have not brought contentment. Ever younger children are exhibiting symptoms of mental illness: self-harming, eating disorders, and disturbed or aggressive behaviour. The adults they become are also more stressed and less happy than many apparently less privileged societies. Psychologist Oliver James calls it 'affluenza'.[1]

During the same debate, educationalist Richard House said:

> The medicalization of children's experience, and high-stakes testing and managerialist 'audit culture' values have swamped educational experience and deprived children of their birthright – the right to enjoy and be empowered by a developmentally appropriate learning environment. I believe that the various 'symptoms' of distress we have labelled 'toxic childhood' should

> be interpreted as children's insightful commentary on just how badly we adults are doing, rather than some 'psychopathology' that needs to be medicalized and 'treated'.[2]

Most people would accept that children thrive when they are nurtured by committed parents in the context of a close-knit family and community. Modern lifestyles have done much to destroy this primary nurturing environment.

These factors, combined with the loss of traditional rhymes, stories and games from children's experience, and parents' knowledge, mean that parents increasingly do not know what to do or *why* traditional games were important for children's development. Parents are asking such things as: What can we do to help our child's development? How can we prevent our child from having reading problems, or being labelled with a specific learning difficulty like attention deficit disorder (ADD)? Why are teachers complaining about our child's behaviour? Parents are often misled into believing that more cognitive stimulation in the form of the teaching of formal skills from an early age, extra-curricular activities or electronic games provide the answer. While each of these can help with specific problems, parents and early years educators need to be aware of the broader context of children's development and to know *why* physical development through play, in the context of involvement with close family members in the early years, is an essential precursor to later educational success and emotional wellbeing.

A plethora of advice is available for those who seek it on how to bring up children, how to get your child to sleep and to eat, how to deal with tantrums, etc, but much less on what *children* really need, or information on how long-held traditions supported healthy child development in the past. While social structures and lifestyles have changed at breakneck speed since the fifties, the developmental needs of children remain much the same. An increasing percentage of parents in the modern technological world have themselves had no experience of being parented by a full-time parent, and consequently may be unaware of the benefits of this. Many do not know how to provide materials and activities to keep their children amused or why the simpler lives of previous generations may have produced better educated and more socially sympathetic individuals. This book aims

to provide a 'starter pack' for such parents on both why and how everything a child needs can be drawn from the fundamentals of life available to everyone – beginning with the importance of movement and sensory experience in the early years.

Rather than developing yet another 'new programme', the book offers examples of traditional lullabies, nursery rhymes, stories and games, and explains how they actually develop children's skills at different ages and stages of development. In this way parents can revive and enjoy with their children the songs, stories and games of past generations, and adapt them to modern needs.

As an example of how stories, for instance, can feed directly into enlivening play, Chapter 6 introduces a story, 'A Day in the Garden'. The story comprises a series of animal characters whose movement characteristics loosely mirror important periods of physical development from infancy to age five. Parents are encouraged to read the story to their children, familiarize them with the characters and then encourage children to 'act out' the story in physical play.

Chapter 7 discusses the issue of physical 'readiness' for school, providing suggestions for developing school readiness, what to look out for in a child who is not quite 'ready' for school, and which agencies may be able to help.

How to use this book

Chapters 1, 2 and 7 explain *why* certain activities support development, while chapters 3, 4 and 6 provide examples of activities which translate such theory into practice, showing *how* one can support children's development.

Chapter 5 explores the importance and significance of fairy tales, fables and bedtime stories in the modern world.

The reader is invited to go straight to chapters which seem of immediate interest first. Young parents for example may prefer to start with the more practical 'how' chapters, while professionals involved in child development may prefer to begin with 'why'. It is hoped that if you begin with 'how' chapters you will eventually want to return to explore 'why' many of the traditions, lullabies, nursery rhymes, games and stories of the past remain essential for children

today, to pass them on to your children so that when they become parents, they will instinctively pass them on to theirs. In this way, every parent becomes a custodian of the language, literature, music and general culture from which he* grew.

Notes

1 R. Coward: 'Is modern society bad for children?' debate at Roehampton University, available online at http://www.theinstituteofwellbeing.com/blog/?p=433&cpage=1. 2009
2 Ibid.

* To avoid the awkward use of both genders, I will alternate from chapter to chapter

Chapter 5

Poetry and Fairy Stories

Before the invention of the printing press, books were rare, valuable and treasured items, and only a relatively small percentage of the population was able to read and write. Knowledge, history, religious beliefs, cultural traditions, wisdom and folklore were largely handed down to the next generation through the medium of oral language. In earlier chapters we have already seen how much of this was done through song, poetry, ballads, pictures and, of course, the telling of stories.

As the digital age encourages increasing dependence on visual images as a primary information medium, it is easy to forget that visual information is processed differently from auditory information. One of the features of visual information processing is that it tends to be rapid and capable of absorbing large amounts of information quickly; but it can also be quickly erased when new information comes in, partly to prevent information overload.

Information received through the auditory channel tends to be processed more slowly but to go in more deeply. This is illustrated when typing something at speed onto a computer screen. When checking for errors on the screen, the brain often 'sees' what it thinks it should have typed, and it is easy to miss mistakes. If, on the other hand, you read the text aloud, the speed of processing is slower, more accurate in picking up details, and typing errors are detected. Similarly, it is often easier to remember the *details* of a story that has been read aloud, whereas in remembering a film you are more likely to recall the *gist* or specific *scenes*.

When information is absorbed through the aural channel, in order to 'make sense' of the sounds they must be translated into

visual images in the mind's eye. This process of forming mental pictures attaches new information to something already known, a way of embedding new information into old, something I referred to previously as 'layered learning'. It also involves both hemispheres of the brain. Matching auditory to visual mental images, and visual to auditory, is essential to processes of reading and writing. Listening also requires focused attention (receptive stillness). Those of us who are old enough to remember the regular afternoon radio programme 'Listen with Mother' will remember that the story part always began with: 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.'

In earlier chapters we saw how both the mother's and father's voice are important acoustic links between pre- and post-natal life, and how the music of the voice implies meaning and conveys emotions far beyond the child's understanding of vocabulary. In this way, stories and poems which use long words help introduce children to complex, nuanced language.

But there is far more to the telling of stories than the development of brain mechanisms. Stories admit children to a particular culture, set of values, and vernacular. Stereotypes of good and evil, rich and poor, vanity and valour, pride and greed help children to understand the strengths and weaknesses inherent in human nature. Children naturally tend to side with the 'goody' and enjoy the anticipation and struggle that takes place between 'once upon a time' and 'they all lived happily ever after'. But besides this 'moral' aspect of stories, old fairytales often speak intuitively and imaginatively to the child's experience, developmental stages, fears and concerns. They are also invariably patterned in a particular, rhythmic, repetitive and even ritualized way, for instance as embodied in the 'three sons' who each set out on a journey, or the 'good' and 'bad' daughter who meet the same sequence of trials and respond to them differently. Such repetition nurtures both security and expectancy in a child, giving her a sense of pattern, order and meaning in which she can participate.

When I was teaching adults in Germany a number of years ago I asked a member of the group whether traditional fairy stories were being abandoned because they were thought too scary for children, or out of fear of demonizing minority groups. He was shocked at the suggestion, saying that in Germany fairy stories were a treasured part of childhood, *one* of whose benefits being that, through imaginative

empathy, they taught children the difference between right and wrong, and nurtured moral behaviour. These are the hallmarks of a civilized society.

Fairy tales appeal directly to the imagination, invoking imaginative archetypes that may only indirectly find their way into our moral actions. 'Moral fables' on the other hand directly aim at what we may regard as a more superficial kind of moral instruction, through warning of possible consequences, and as such are more suited to somewhat older children. Such 'cautionary tales' thus provide more direct commentary on behaviour. *Struwwelpeter* ('Shock-headed Peter') provides one example of this; it was written by Heinrich Hoffmann, a German psychiatrist. In 1844 Hoffman had wanted to buy a picture book for his son for Christmas. Unimpressed by what he saw, he purchased a notebook and wrote his own stories with pictures instead. Each story has a clear moral, which demonstrates the extreme consequences of misbehaviour.

As a small child who was addicted to sucking my fingers at the time, the picture of Struwwelpeter on the front cover of the book with his thumbs cut off *did* frighten me, but the other stories made me aware of the dangers of silly behaviour without fear and without the need for a health and safety policy to cover every eventuality. While parents are often alarmed at these tales, children are generally enthralled by them, and rather than taking them too literally can generalize their wider relevance.

The Story of Fidgety Philip
from Heinrich Hoffman's Struwwelpeter[1]

Let me see if Philip can
Be a little gentleman;
Let me see, if he is able
To sit still for once at table:
Thus papa bade Philip behave;
And Mamma looked very grave.
But fidgety Phil,
He won't sit still:
He wriggles
And giggles,

And then I declare,
Swings backwards and forwards
And tilts his chair,
Just like any rocking horse:
'Philip! I am getting cross!'

See the naughty, restless child
Growing still more rude and wild.
Till his chair falls over quite.
Philip screams with all his might.
Catches at the cloth, but then
That makes matters worse again.
Down upon the ground they fall.
Glasses, plates, knives, forks and all.
How Mama did fret and frown.
When she saw them tumbling down!
And Papa made such a face!
Philip is in sad disgrace.

Where is Philip, where is he?
Fairly cover'd up you see!
Cloth and all are lying on him;
What a terrible to-do!
Dishes, glasses, snapt in two!
Here a knife and there a fork!
Philip, this is cruel work.
Table all so bare, and ah!
Poor Papa, and poor Mama
Look quite cross, and wonder how
They shall make their dinner now.

Each of the stories focuses on an aspect of child behaviour that has vexed adults for generations: thumb-sucking, fidgeting, fussy eating, inattention, and playing with fire. While the language appeals to adult humour, the exaggerated features of the behaviour and the reaction of adults in the stories appeals to children. Even quite young children are able to recognize the element of wilful disobedience in Fidgety Phil's behaviour. While there can be many other reasons for

fidgeting, thumbsucking and inattention which can be resolved by understanding the underlying causes, the moral of *this* tale is the child's disregard for the needs of others. One hundred and sixty years after it was written, this child might receive a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), whereas the stories acknowledge that some obnoxious behaviour is a normal part of children's development, and that teaching old-fashioned values such as consideration for others still has an important place in children's upbringing.

Why bedtime stories matter

The tradition of reading a bedtime story is in decline in the United Kingdom. A survey carried out for Granada TV in the north-west of England in 2006 revealed that, by their own admission, forty per cent of parents never read to their child. I see this increasingly when discussing children's reading problems with parents. Part of the remedial developmental movement programme we offer them often involves reading their child a bedtime story every night. One family, stunned by the suggestion, remarked, 'But that means I will have to read to *all* my children. We have never done that.'

Rachel Williams in *The Guardian* in April 2010 reported that:

> More than half of primary teachers say they have seen at least one child with no experience of being told stories at home […] One literacy expert branded the findings a 'national disaster', warning that such children were at risk of being left behind at school and failing to develop the creative talents needed to lead happy and productive lives. Pie Corbett, who acts as an educational adviser to the government, said too many children were left to watch TV instead of being read a bedtime story, often by busy middle-class parents. Corbett said: 'This isn't just an economic thing – it's not just people who come from poor backgrounds, it's across the whole of society. You get a lot of children coming from very privileged backgrounds who've spent a lot of time in front of the TV and not enough time snuggled up with a good book. The TV does the imagining for you – and it doesn't care whether you're

> listening or not.' Research shows that children who are read to on a regular basis before they start school are most likely to succeed. 'It's a key predictor in terms of educational success,' said Corbett. Being told stories boosts language and, by feeding the child's imagination, develops abstract thought. 'Children who are told stories are the ones who first form abstract concepts across the curriculum – in other words, being read to makes you brainy,' Corbett said. 'The best writers in the class are always those who are avid readers.' He said parents needed to get the message that reading really matters. 'It may be parents have lost faith with this idea, but education is a way out of poverty.' Reading levels have improved in recent years, but attainment in writing has not kept up. Nearly two-thirds of the 300 teachers questioned by Oxford University Press said children were less able to tell stories in writing than ten years ago. One teacher responding to the survey said: 'Where are all the parents who sing and recite nursery rhymes to their children? We have created a generation who are failing to give their children the phonological start they need to become a capable reader.'Another said: 'There are children who have had very few stories read to them and I notice that now many do not know the traditional fairy tales – beyond Walt Disney cartoons that is.'[2]

Simple stories told over and over again help children establish a bedtime routine and wind down at the end of the day, and create space for parent and child to spend a few treasured minutes together every day sharing an activity and language which goes beyond more mundane, daily conversation. Some of the best bedtime stories, that have stood the test of time, tend to draw on musical language, imagination and repetition. The American children's book *Goodnight Moon*[3] by Margaret Wise Brown is a good example of the genre, and is a much-loved favourite with children.

Extract from *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown

> In the great green room
> There was a telephone
> And a red balloon

And a picture of –
The cow jumping over the moon
And there were three little bears sitting on chairs
And a comb and a brush, a bowl of mush
And a quiet old lady who was whispering 'hush'
Goodnight room.

The story continues by saying 'good night' to all the familiar objects in the room: the light, the red balloon, the clocks, the socks, the brush, the comb, the stars, the air and 'the noises everywhere'. This story becomes a part of bedtime routine, the ritual of saying good night to all the familiar things is a calming process in the drift towards sleep. The child also plays an active role, remembering the rhyme, the objects and the sequence, while repetition of rhyming words improves auditory discrimination and vocabulary.

Other stories help to develop children's observation and creative imagination. In *A Little House of Your Own,*[4] Beatrice Schenk de Regners introduces children to the idea that:

Everyone has to have a little house of his own.
Every boy has to have his own little house.
Every girl should have a little house
All to herself …
There are many kinds of
secret houses. There are
many places where you can have your own little house.
This is what I mean …
Behind a chair in a corner
can be a good house.
A big hat is like
A little house …
Your papa is in *his*
Own little house when
He is behind his newspaper.
He wants everyone to leave him
alone. He doesn't want
anyone to bother him.

No children.
No grown ups.
When your mama takes
a nap it is just as though
she has gone into
her own little house and
shut the windows and doors.

These simple stories help children to see the outside world in different ways, to recognize the different needs of other people – such as the need for personal time and space – while also safely exploring and developing the inner world of the imagination.

Many children's stories are told in poetic form. In earlier chapters we discussed the importance of the music of language, something poems naturally do with sound; but poems also paint pictures with words and explore complex ideas. The poems written by William Blake in the eighteenth century still have resonance today, even though Blake was rejected as a madman by eighteenth-century society. Much of his writing focuses on opposing ideas such as heaven and hell, innocence and experience, spirit and reason, and the classic struggle of good and evil. Blake infused his writing not only with visionary imagination but also passion and detailed observation of the natural world. The visionary and child share a number of things in common – belief in things that cannot be scientifically explained in the physical world and the ability to see and hear things that are either beyond or simply by-pass others' conscious awareness. Whilst visions and mystical* experiences can be explained away by sceptics, the ability to form pictures and connections in the mind are essential elements of creativity and mental growth. Children may often respond naturally and intuitively to poems that share their fresh or visionary perception, such as this one – which is perhaps suitable for a very young child.

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* Mysticism can be defined as an altered state of consciousness. But it is not merely a psychological state. If we trust the reports, the mystic state is filled with real, though not physical knowledge. The core of the mystic experience consistently reported is the sense of an identity between the deepest part of the self, and the creative force in all that exists, which one might term 'the divine'.

The Lamb
by William Blake[5]

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, & bid thee feed
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
He is callèd by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb.
He is meek, & he is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, & thou a lamb,
We are callèd by his name.
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

Other poems may be written from a child' s perspective, articulating what the child may know emotionally but has not been able to put into words. This one, for example, for older children:

Children's Song
by R. S. Thomas

We live in our own world,
A world that is too small
For you to enter
Even on hands and knees,
The adult subterfuge.
And though you probe and pry
With analytic eye,

And eavesdrop all our talk
With an amused look,
You cannot find the centre
Where we dance, where we play,
Where life is still asleep
Under the closed flower,
Under the smooth shell
Of eggs in the cupped nest
That mock the faded blue
Of your remoter heaven.

As a small child I was certainly aware that 'my' world was different from my parents' world and the world of my teachers and other adults; that I could see, smell and hear things which they did not notice. Use of advanced language as in this poem does not necessarily prevent understanding of the underlying meaning. I think that even quite young children can understand the idea that they have a private (sensory) world, which is different from adults.

In 1929 the writer and poet John Drinkwater wrote an anthology, *More About Me,*[6] which explored different aspects of childhood, also largely written from a child's point of view. I loved these poems when I was young and many of them are still as relevant for children today as they were when they were written more than eighty years ago. The first example below, which describes the difficulties involved in learning multiplication tables, is timeless.

Multiplication

'Multiplication is vexation'
That is a thing they said,
And from twice times ten to ten times ten
It bothers me in my head.
I can do quite well if I'm told to tell
The whole of a table through,
But dodging about quite puts me out
Till I don't know what to do.
When seven times five are thirty-five
I can tell you seven times six,

But seven times eight must kindly wait,
Or get me into a mix.
And yes, if you please, in the middle of threes
They asked me eleven elevens,
And that is the kind that makes my mind
All at sixes and sevens.

Wanda Wild

Now Wanda Wild was not a child
That I could recommend;
She broke the rules in all her schools
Because they wouldn't bend;
She told her Aunt I shall I shan't,
And pulled the puppies tails,
She rang the bell and didn't tell,
And bit her finger nails.

She made a noise with several toys,
And if her mother said-
'Now Wanda will you please be still,'
She made some more instead;
She'd point and stare; she didn't care;
She trespassed in the wood;
She poured the ink all down the sink;
In fact, she wasn't good.

And sometimes if she took a tiff,
Although her nurse* was charming,
She stamped the floor, and banged the door,
And carried on alarming;
When told to wash she said 'O bosh!'
And took the soap and threw it
And broke a glass, and bold as brass
Then said she didn't do it.

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* Today the term nanny, au pair or child minder would be substituted for 'nurse'.

And, if you please, on days like these
She simply would not dress;
Till stitch by stitch they made her, which
Displeased her none the less,
And then she'd shout 'I won't go out,
Because I do not choose;
I do declare, I will not wear,
I *will* not wear my shoes.'

So you'll agree I think with me
That little Wanda Wild
Was not at all what we should call
A satisfactory child.
But, just between ourselves I mean,
I'm willing to explain
That you would look outside this book
For Wanda Wild in vain

Today Wanda Wild, like her predecessor Fidgety Phil, might easily be labelled as having a conduct disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)! If her behaviour continued into later childhood and adolescence, in the first decade of the twenty-first century she might have been in line for an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO); but this poem reminds us that wilfulness, obstinacy and disobedience have been a normal part of childhood for generations, and it is the responsibility of parents and society to regulate and weave these personality traits into acceptable and positive behaviour. Almost every child knows what it feels like to be Wanda Wild, and can see the difference between behaving like her and *wanting* to behave like her. This sets the scene for starting to understand self-control. The stories in 'My Naughty Little Sister' and the behaviour of Beatrix Potter's Tom Kitten do much the same thing, not through sterile and direct teaching of right and wrong, but by using humour to tell stories which exaggerate aspects of behaviour. Caricature and comedy are often more powerful agents of learning than formal education.

Fairytales

Fairytales are not the property of childhood alone but are in a sense the archetypal form of oral narrative upon which so much 'literary' writing is based. Some of the best stories enjoyed by adults fall within the fairytale format. Features of fairy tales are that they usually involving legendary or magical deeds and creatures, are highly fanciful and often contain a hidden moral or explanation. They can be found throughout Europe and in many parts of Asia and many probably derive from folktales passed on as oral entertainment. Many of the best-loved fairytales today such as Cinderella, Bluebeard, Sleeping Beauty, Puss in Boots, Beauty and the Beast, The Frog Prince, Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Rumpelstiltskin, Rapunzel, The Tinder Box, and The Little Mermaid have been 'imported' from other parts of Europe and have been absorbed into English culture. Other more exotic tales such as the *Arabian Nights* and Aladdin came from further afield, notably Arabia. Traditional English fairy tales include Jack and the Beanstalk and Tom Thumb but the majority of fairytale texts recorded in Britain were found either in Scotland, Wales or among gypsy storytellers.

As only a few of these tales actually include fairies, they have some times been referred to as 'Wonder Tales' or 'Magic Tales'. The modern word 'fairy' derives from the French 'faerie', which meant 'enchantment' or 'magic', which in turn derived from 'fae', the source of the English word 'fay'. Both words originate from the Latin plural *fata,* used to personify the Fates, three goddesses who in ancient mythology governed human destiny. Thus, fairy stories are as much about human destiny and our encounters with 'enchantment' and good and evil in our search for meaning as they are about fairies. In the introduction to his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Tales of Magic and Wonderment,* the Austrian psycho-analyst Bettelheim writes:

> If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in out lives […] An understanding of the meaning of one's life is not suddenly acquired at a particular age, not even when one has reached

> chronological maturity. On the contrary, gaining a secure understanding of what the meaning of one's life may or ought to be is what constitutes having attained psychological maturity.

The enchanted world of fairies and stepmothers, its magic forests and wise old kings, has been an integral part of childhood for hundreds of years. By revealing the true content of such stories, Bettelheim shows how children may make use of them to cope with baffling emotions, whether they be feelings of smallness and helplessness or the anxieties the child feels about strangers and the mysteries of the outside world. Taking the best-known stories in turn, he demonstrates how they work, consciously or unconsciously, to support and free the child.

One of the key features of fairytales is that they are fanciful in nature – meaning imagination or fantasy superficially exercised in a capricious manner (although the patterns, repetitions and rhythms in fairytales often, in fact, draw deeply on inherently human aspects of experience). As in poetry or drawing, fairytales nurture an artistic ability to create imagery and decorative detail which act as outer 'clothing' for deeper meaning. They are valuable because they contain an imaginative power that, like dream, can reach deeper than logic. Interestingly, as the popularity of fairytales in a younger generation of parents made wary by political correctness has declined, so have some of the words and sayings which accept fantasy as an inherent and valuable part of everyday existence. One of my father's favourite replies when told something new was, 'Well, fancy', meaning 'just imagine that'.

Just as night-dreaming is essential for mental health, so day-dreaming is important in helping to solve new problems and knit new information into the existing fabric of the known world. In following flights of fancy (fantasy) in the waking world, both children and adults are able to 'develop inner resources, so that one's emotions, imagination and intellect mutually support and enrich one another.'[7] More importantly, fairytales enable children to do this at different ages at whatever level or phase they are in at the time.

In one of my previous books, *What Babies and Children Really Need,*[8] I discussed how modern technological society – and childhood in particular – has become 'sanitized' in the sense that natural

biological rhythms of life are held at one remove. In less complex cultures, as part of normal everyday living, children witness birth, breastfeeding, rites of passage, the killing and preparation of animals for food or clothing etc., inclusion of the aged and infirm within the family, death and burial ceremonies. These natural events are not hidden away in hospitals, abattoirs, nursing homes, morgues and chapels of rest. Children grow up understanding that life is not always easy or fair, but naturally brings with it joy and sadness, love and loss, growth and degeneration; and that every physical process has appropriate accompanying emotions. If as parents or society we seek to protect children from all unpleasant events, we do not equip them to deal with the real world. Paradoxically, one potential consequence of this type of over-protectiveness is a subsequent *in*crease in mental illness when children have to fit into the real world but lack the emotional tools, imagination or resilience to deal with it.

In 2009, a poll of 3,000 British parents carried out by TheBabyWebsite.com revealed that a quarter of mothers rejected some classic fairy tales saying that traditional fairytales were too scary and not politically correct enough. Stories that have been favourites with children for generations such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, and Rapunzel, were being dropped by some families who thought they might emotionally damage their children:

> A third of parents refused to read Little Red Riding Hood because she walks through woods alone and finds her grandmother eaten by a wolf. One in ten said Snow White should be re-named because 'the dwarf reference is not PC'. Rapunzel was considered 'too dark' and Cinderella has been dumped amid fears she is treated like a slave and forced to do all the housework.[9]

Fairytales are important precisely because, among other things, they use 'make-believe' to teach fundamental principles of moral behaviour. Stereotypes of good and evil are used to illustrate that goodness endures and bad behaviour will eventually receive its just deserts. Far from demonizing the dwarfs, the story of Snow White shows that underlying physical diversity there can be greater kindness and generosity than is found in the stereotypes of beauty and wealth so lauded by celebrity-worshipping cultures. In many fairy stories

(Goldilocks for example), the smallest and weakest in the group is the one with whom the heroine identifies; and in The Emperor's New Clothes, vanity and pride are revealed as vacuous posturing without substance, masking stupidity and obstructing the use of common sense. These stories are not cruel and discriminatory; rather they help children to understand, firstly, the quirks and weaknesses of human behaviour in general, and secondly, to accept many of their own fears and emotions. As Bettelheim said:

> In child or adult, the unconscious is a powerful determinant of behavior. When the unconscious is repressed and its content denied entrance into awareness, then eventually the person's conscious mind will be partially overwhelmed by derivatives of these unconscious elements, or else he is forced to keep such rigid, compulsive control over them that his personality may become severely crippled [...] The prevalent parental belief is that a child must be diverted from what troubles him most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies. Many parents believe that only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child – that he should be exposed only to the sunny side of things. But such one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one-sided way, and real life is not all sunny.[10]

It is often said that the world is different for each generation and therefore we should not apply the standards of previous generations to the next. Actually, the natural, physical world changes very little, but the activities of mankind and society force accelerated social and evolutionary adaptations on each new generation.* I am always fascinated when I look through old photos. One of the first things I notice is how different things and fashions look from those of

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* When visiting a Steiner-Waldorf school recently, I was struck by how the faces of children who do not use e-media and are not forced into reading and writing before they are ready, still have a 'look' of faces I remember from when I was a child fifty years ago. Their faces, strikingly, looked free of tension. Conversely, a cosmetic surgeon recently commented on the ageing effects of computer use on women, suggesting that the need to focus at this visual distance for long periods of time is resulting in the formation of lines and jowls!

today; but if I peer a little further into the background of the picture, other than man-made structures the landscape has usually changed remarkably little. It is *human* nature that engages in often superficial change, yet keeps meeting, in different forms, the problems of greed, jealousy, anger and so on. Interestingly, most fairytales in some way incorporate these concepts, allowing children to externalize and thus acknowledge 'bad' feelings without guilt. Fairytales inevitably enlist children's innate wish for good to triumph. Many qualities embodied in these folktales parallel the Christian concept of the seven deadly sins and virtues.

Deadly sin	**Opposing virtue**
Pride	Humility
Avarice (greed)	Generosity
Envy	Love
Wrath (anger)	Kindness
Lust	Self-control
Gluttony	Temperance
Sloth (apathy or laziness)	Zeal

C. S. Lewis's much-loved tales of Narnia have enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in recent years. Their author was a professor of medieval literature and a late convert to Christianity, and these stories not only incorporate the seven deadly sins and opposing virtues in the behaviour of various characters, but also allegorize sacrifice, resurrection and a totalitarian regime. In one of the later chronicles, *The Horse and His Boy,* he introduces the hypothesis that all religions are fundamentally one and that the benevolent intentions of all faiths are received by a single deity while malevolent intentions are directed to a mythical demon similar to the concept of the devil. The Chronicles of Narnia are stories which can be enjoyed at many levels: simply as exciting adventure stories, but also, at their best, capable of revealing more profound beliefs, theories and universal truths. At some places, their allegorical meanings are evident just below the surface of the narrative, whereas true fairytales, as Betteheim indicates, admit of many different levels and interpretations, and can be understood by each person at their particular developmental and intellectual level. It may well be that in our more intellectual age it is hard to write

fairytales that have the multi-layered depths acquired in an oral tradition deepened by each successive teller through the generations – all the more reason, therefore, to value them as a repository of archetypes that can scarcely be bettered.

Cinderella

The story of Cinderella includes many of the so-called sins and virtues: the good father who loses interest in his young child when his wife dies, and brings a new woman and her two daughters into the household, giving them the authority of stepmother and older sisters over his natural child; the younger child whose early life was so surrounded by love and affection that she does not immediately approach her new family with animosity, believing in the innate 'goodness' of others. She is ill-equipped to understand the envy, avarice, sloth and duplicity of her stepmother and older sisters. The relative virtue of the 'youngest child' is a theme in many fairytales, mirroring the relative powerlessness of the young child in a world where everyone else seems to be bigger, stronger and to know more of the world than she does. One of the morals of the story is that being small and less 'worldly wise' is only a temporary state. (There are many other possible interpretations – for instance that Cinderella as an aspect of ourselves we suppress but that will eventually, after many travails, come into rightful self-possession.)

Cinderella's sisters make her into a drudge who must answer their every whim. Their vanity knows no bounds, although by all accounts they have little to be proud of in this respect. When an invitation to the prince's ball arrives and Cinderella knows that she will not be able to go, her humiliation is complete when she is made to dress them for the ball. She is left feeling desolate, abandoned by those she loved.

The arrival of her fairy godmother is like the gift of opportunity and has many parallels in other cultures and stories, from the genii of the Arabian Nights, to the leprechauns in Irish literature and even the concept of a guardian angel – each 'agent for good' bringing material form to the heart's desire, or more importantly the potential to fulfil it. The transformation of mice into carriage horses, a pumpkin into a coach and rags into the most beautiful

dress is perfectly possible in the magical thinking of a child's mind, or perhaps even the 'dream logic' of a sleeping adult, but there is also a stern warning that accompanies the magic. 'You must leave the ball before the clock strikes twelve. Disobey me and your wonderful dress will turn to rags. There will be no fine coach awaiting you; only an old pumpkin and four little mice. Do you understand?' The concept of obedience to a higher authority, which has provided the gift of opportunity, is part of the deal.

At the ball, all of Cinderella's virtues shine through. For a few hours, she is everything she is meant to be and she meets the prince of her dreams; but caught up in the joy and wonder of the evening she nearly forgets the warning of her fairy godmother. As the clock starts to strike, she runs away in haste, her dress turning to rags – but not before she loses one of her glass slippers in her flight down the stairs. She rushes home in rags, her carriage having turned back into a forlorn pumpkin at the palace gates, believing that she will never see her prince again. Her moment of opportunity was like a wonderful dream which fades with the coming of the day.

But, something from her dream has remained; something which retains its form and which, unbeknown to her, will lead her back to the land of opportunity. The glass slipper left behind on the stairs is found and given to the prince who cannot understand why his love deserted him. The prince's desire to find her again is so strong that he commands every woman in the land to try on the slipper until a perfect fit is found. When the stewards carrying the glass slipper arrive at Cinderella's house, she is pushed aside by the two older sisters, who struggle to squeeze their oversized feet into the dainty shoe. The steward notices Cinderella in the shadows and remembering the prince's stricture that every woman in the land should try the slipper, he insists that she must also try it. The slipper, is of course, a perfect fit because the shoe was made for Cinderella and Cinderella alone. No one else could take her place.

As she is taken to the palace to marry her prince, to live 'happily every after', the listener has learned of avarice, greed, envy, deceitfulness, cruelty, neglect and adult weakness on the part of the father, but also humility, generosity, love, kindness, obedience, zeal in the pursuit of opportunity, and most of all, of hope. The story is complete. It needs no explanation. The images speak for themselves

in the child's mind, without need to intellectually 'point up' any single moral.

Some of C.S. Lewis's less well-known science-fiction novels are also a form of fairytale for older readers. *Out of the Silent Planet* is the first novel of a trilogy sometimes referred to as 'The Space Trilogy', which according to C.S. Lewis's biographer A.N. Wilson was written following a conversation between Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, in which both lamented the state of contemporary fiction. It was agreed that Lewis would write a space-travel story and Tolkien one based on time-travel.

In *Out of the Silent Planet* there is a moment when the hero, Professor Ransom – who dreams he visits the planet Malacandra – has spent so much time on Malacandra that when he sees his own kind in the distance, he does not recognize them as human beings. For the first time he views humans with the eyes of an outsider and mistakes them for clumsy aliens. This is a profound and shocking revelation, and reminds the reader that individual perception is highly subjective, and that others do not necessarily see the world in the same that we do – an important insight when taking the needs, perceptions and opinions of others into account. A later approach to this theme appears, for instance, in the 'Martian' poems of Craige Raine (specifically 'A Martian Sends a Postcard Home') which take a new look at human life and artefacts from a strange, alien perspective.

Many fairytales enable children to face their fears in imaginative form and, at least during the story, to overcome them. This is the general 'good overcomes evil' or 'smallest or derided wins in the end' theme, which runs through a great many traditional fairytales. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, The Sleeping Beauty and The Ugly Duckling are all examples of this.

The Ugly Duckling

When the Ugly Duckling is born, his mother looks at him in alarm and says, '*What* are you? I hope you're not a turkey child. I just couldn't bear that kind of disappointment.' His siblings ask him why he isn't pretty like them, and the description of his silence and an unhappy feeling descending on him like a damp mist is something every child has felt at some time. Fear of not being good enough, of

not being loved, of not 'fitting in', of being abandoned, misunderstood; or of the world not being fair – all of these fears are a normal part of growing up, but children do not know that these (we hope) fleeting episodes will pass. Anticipatory fear in the absence of real and present danger is a form of fantasy – a projection of how we think we are viewed by others and what *might* happen in the future.

As Mother Duck reluctantly accepts him as part of her family, she is constantly checking to see if he really is one of them. He can swim so he cannot be a turkey after all, but she readily accepts the cloak of shame when others laugh at him. Unable to bear it any longer, the ugly duckling sets out to find his happiness. He meets the same attitudes outside of his adoptive family. He is too ugly to be befriended by the geese, too bedraggled to be eaten by the dogs; an old woman takes pity on him, but when she finds he cannot even lay an egg or cluck like her hen he is chased away by her cat. All his worst fears are confirmed. He does not belong. He nearly dies as he struggles to survive alone through the long, hard winter, and when spring comes at last he sees some beautiful white birds on the lake. As the ice melts he sees a reflection in the water and the reflection reveals not the ugly scarecrow that he had expected, but a graceful, long-necked swan; and the beautiful white birds welcome him into their family. The ugly duckling knows for the first time what it is to be happy. He has found his true family at last.

Inside the wan, little ugly duckling, with all his fears and isolation, the swan was present and waiting all the time. The transformation to a creature of beauty is not the main point of the story, although the symbolism serves a purpose. The story explores many human emotions from fear, rejection, enforced conformity, discrimination, ignorance, shame and loneliness to endurance, hope, growth, maturity and the courage to be true to the self. Although beauty may serve as the passport, it is belonging which is the ultimate prize.

The Water Babies

Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies* tells a different sort of story of the journey from savage behaviour born of ignorance to success acquired through knowledge and experience. Set in Victorian times, it tells the story of Tom, a child chimney sweep, who escapes a dreadful life by

being transformed into a water baby by the Queen of the Fairies. The story follows his journey to redemption, starting as an ignorant boy, who is the product of the cruel upbringing he has received from his master Mr. Grimes. Throughout his journey, better ways of behaving are inferred through the characters that he meets along the way – the indubitable Mrs Be-done-by-as-you-did and Mrs Do-as-you-would-be-done-by – being examples of this. The story also has mythological elements and contains some wonderful natural descriptions. As with anything really well written, it takes the reader beyond the mundane, leading us in the author's footsteps in observing aspects of the world and our place within it. It goes on to warn that any journey of discovery or success is not without risk or failure along the way, pointing out that, '… people who make up their minds to go and see the world as Tom did, must needs find it a weary journey. Lucky for them if they do not lose heart and stop half way, instead of going bravely to the end as Tom did.[11]

As I have suggested, fairytales are not just for children. The following story, *When Two Hearts Were One,* originally written by my husband Peter Blythe when he was a young sailor returning from in Ceylon at the end of the second world war, and rewritten in 2010 to be included in this book, is a fairy story for adults.

When Two Hearts Were One
by Peter Blythe (1945)[12]

> Before we are born we are filled with an inner sense of happiness, well-being and completeness. We really are complete.
>
> In this 'other place', which we inhabit before we are born, we have two eyes with which to see the glorious things around us, and there are a lot of wondrous things to see because we are in a realm of beauty. We have two nostrils to enjoy all the delicate smells always around us. We have a mouth with which to eat and tongue to taste all the flavours of the surrounding world. We have two lungs so we can breathe and fill our being with the spirit of the air. We have two arms to hold things and to give us balance and we have two legs which give us the freedom to move around the wonderful world we are in. But most of all we have two hearts that beat as one.

There are no men and women, boys and girls, male or female – just us – a complete us.

Our life in our first world is beyond human description. Our life is full of all-encompassing love. Everywhere there are the most beautiful colours; gentle scents swirl around us causing us to inhale deeply very often. There is no strife, anger, fear, anxiety, envy, greed, jealousy, illness or death. We are all a part of each other, attached by an invisible connection. Everything we need is there for us whenever we want something, so crime is unknown.

We were complete in every sense.

Then the Creator felt we, his creations, needed something more. So, for a long time He pondered the question, 'What shall I do?' Then He knew what should be done.

He decided we needed to strive to find love and happiness instead of it being a divine gift, but his answer gave rise to another question, 'How shall I do this?'

Time passed and then He knew what to do.

He would separate us; but before he put His plan into operation He decided He would create another 'world' which was quite different from our Home-World. And it took time before our new world was ready to receive us. While the Creator fashioned our new world we continued to live in blissful ignorance.

Then He separated 'us' and sent each one to live in our new world. Each part of the 'us' he sent to live in the new world, were placed many, many miles apart, and in his divine wisdom we were 'born' nearly complete. We had two halves in our brain, two eyes, two nostrils, two lungs, two arms, and two legs, but only one heart. We were incomplete.

Then the Creator showed his brilliance: he placed the heart from 'us' into a woman and the other heart into a man. So from the moment we are 'born' we know, we feel, we are incomplete.

Slowly but surely the 'us' from our real world are 'born' in our new world, but from the moment of our birth we look for our other heart so we can become complete again.

When we are very tiny, a new-born baby, we feel our mother is the other part of us. We recognise her heartbeat when we are placed on her breast because we heard it for the last nine months as we prepared for our new world. And then we get our first

shock: our mother's heart is not our other, missing heart; only for a short time we knew love and togetherness once again. Then we are alone.

When we go to school, without realizing it, we are searching for our other heart. That is why we find ourselves drawn to a girl in our class. More often than not she is not our heart, but there was something which seemed familiar and as a result attracted us to her

Our next stage in our new world is to give up our search for our other heart. It is far too painful and we go through the stage where we tell the boys in our classes that we consider girls to be 'silly', 'they are not like us'; but even as we say this we notice certain girls who we would like to know better.

All this begins to alter when we go to senior school and we become definitely interested in finding 'the right girl to be our girl-friend' and sometimes the girl, looking for her other heart, is equally attracted to us. We are in love and everything in this world changes. We begin to recapture the wonderful feelings that were ours before we were born, when we had two hearts. But all too often the girl we love is not our other heart or she decides that we are not her heart and we separate. Then we feel desolate, lost or heart-broken. And worse still, this may happen many times in our life on this earth as we grow up and into adulthood. But all is not lost.

Each time we fall in love the person we love gives us something, even if the break-up has been agonising. It might be a new way of smiling, a joy in nature, a new way of looking at the trees or the sky; a new pleasure in reading certain types of books, an entirely new way of enjoying listening to music or certain pieces of music or a new interest in art. Or it may be something so small that we only recall it quite infrequently, but everyone who has been in love gives something to the one who has been loved.

And if we are very, very lucky we will meet our other heart somewhere. The moment of meeting is magical. It is as if we have known each other all our lives. We don't fall in love with each other. From the very moment we meet there is love between us, and when we speak to each other for the first time it feels as if we are starting in the middle of something we have talked about

before. There is shared laughter and 'our' own sense of humour. We recapture all the things we had before we were born; all the things we had when we had two hearts.

But what happens if you don't meet your other heart? What happens if your other heart dies before you do?

Do not despair. When we die and return to our other world, our other heart will either be there waiting for us if death has separated us, so we can know the complete and total love of being one once again. Or if we never meet our other heart in this other, all is not lost. When we die our other heart will find us and make us complete once again.

A fairytale? Of course not!

Fables

While fairy stories usually contain a hidden moral, one of their enduring charms is that they have a happy ending. Fables on the other hand contain a moral message, but do not necessarily end well. Certain of Aesop's fables such as *The Boy who Cried Wolf* and *The Tortoise and the Hare* are well known, and the moral of the tale is so familiar that the title of story alone is sufficient to 'tell the moral tale'. Each of the fables carries a warning and is short enough to be enjoyed by even young children if told as a bedtime story.

The Ass, the Fox and The Lion
Aesop's Fables[13]

An ass and a fox went into partnership and sallied out to forage for food together. They hadn't gone far before they saw a lion coming their way, at which they were both dreadfully frightened. But the fox thought he saw a way of saving his own skin, and went boldly up to the lion and whispered in his ear, 'I'll manage that you shall get hold of the ass without the trouble of stalking him, if you'll promise to let me go free.' The lion agreed to this, and the fox then rejoined his companion and contrived before long to lead him by a hidden pit, which some hunter had dug

> as a trap for wild animals, and into which he fell. When the lion saw that the ass was safely caught and couldn't get away, it was to the fox that he first turned his attention, and he soon finished , and then at his leisure proceeded to feast upon the ass.

The moral of the story is clear: that if you betray a friend the act of betrayal will backfire on you, and it is you who will be destroyed by your own act of betrayal. Children do not actually need this explained to them. The story is sufficient unto itself. As opposed to factual stories or the direct teaching of codes of behaviour through instruction and punishment, fairytales and fables both entertain and teach:

> Their special genius is that they do so in terms which speak directly to children […] The way that 'true' stories unfold is as alien to the way the pre-pubertal child's mind functions as the supernatural events of the fairytale are to the way the mature intellect comprehends the world. Strictly realistic stories run counter to the child's inner experiences, he will listen to them and maybe get something out of them, but he cannot extract much personal meaning from them that transcends obvious content […] When realistic stories are combined with ample and psychologically correct exposure to fairytales, then the child receives information which speaks to both parts of his budding personality – the rational and the emotional.[14]

One example where this does not occur is in children with autism, who can often understand a limited range of facts, but find it difficult to enter the fantasy world of fairytales or extrapolate the moral of a fable.

Fables, like fairytales, can be written for all ages and stages of life. C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters,* first published in book form in 1942 is essentially a fable for grown-ups. The story takes the form of a series of letters from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his nephew, a junior tempter named Wormwood, giving him advice on the most effective methods of securing the damnation of a British man, known only as 'the Patient'. Screwtape is not obviously demonic. Instead, he teaches Wormwood how best to manipulate all of the

human weaknesses, offering him detailed advice on various methods of undermining faith and promoting sin. Both senior and junior demon live in a peculiarly topsy-turvy world in moral terms, where individual benefit and greed are seen as the greatest good. These letters have parallels not only in Christian teaching but also in the behaviour of individuals, society and governments. The letters are fictitious precursors of the modern concept of 'spin'. The truth can be turned to serve any purpose, the greatest deception of all being self-deception.

The most enduring stories can be understood at many levels. Even some of the oldest biblical stories such as the story of creation in Genesis fulfill this requirement. Some people believe that the world was literally created by God in seven days; others adamantly refute the concept of God or a higher being having any part in the creation of the universe, using scientific conjectures to explain the origins of the universe and the evolution of all matter and living things. But religion and science do not *have* to be mutually exclusive, and the story of creation can also be viewed as an allegory – a way of explaining evolution in the light of what was known at the time.

All matter and forms of life are the product of energy. Whether you believe in nature, the Big Bang, or divine creation as the hand or force behind it, in the beginning there must have been an original source of *energy*. Energy is expressed through movement, from the motion of the planets to the movement of the tides and the whispering of the wind in the trees. Einstein observed that all forms of life share the characteristic of motion, and that even matter is movement frozen in time. Time itself is the product of space and movement through space. In Genesis we are told that God created the world and mankind in seven days. The theory of evolution explains in detail how the world has developed increasingly complex forms of life and matter over millions of years, but if the *time* factor is removed from the argument, then the sequence of creation and evolution follow a similar pattern: beginning with light, then night and day, water and air, sea and earth, creatures of the sea, air and land, and finally mankind.

These diverse ways of explaining complex ideas and developments are similar to the ways in which the two sides of the human brain process information in different ways – the right brain processing

information visually, holistically and intuitively, and largely unconcerned with rigid timeframes in its need to understand the whole, while the left brain is more logical, and analytical, pays attention to detail, and needs to support what it sees and feels with evidence. While both sides of the brain develop throughout childhood, in the early years of life, the right brain matures slightly in advance of the left hemisphere,[15] and plays a more dominant role in processing expression and regulation of emotional information:[16]

> It has been suggested that investigations into the neural bases for social interaction should focus on the role of the holistic, affective, silent right hemisphere in the mediation of social life.[17]

> The right brain also has more neurological connections in a downward direction to centres involved in the experience of emotions, feelings and instinctual reactions to the outside world.[18]

When new information is experienced with emotion, it tends to be remembered:

> The right-holistic mode is particularly good at grasping patterns of relations between the component parts of a stimulus array, integrating many inputs simultaneously to eventually arrive at a complete configuration.[19]

It is also functions in

> a present-centredness or timeless experience in which all events are perceived to occur immediately and simultaneously. This style of thinking is reflected across many Eastern cultures where no distinction is made between past and present, and time is considered to be an ontological absurdity. The non-linear mode is cultivated deliberately in these eastern mystical traditions for the purpose of arriving at a more accurate picture of reality not based on time, linear consciousness, or the physical changes of this illusory world.[20]

Fairy stories – which traditionally begin with 'Once upon a time', 'Once, long ago', 'In old times, when wishing still helped' – place the story outside of 'real' time and space. Children are able to understand that these stories pertain to the 'real' or physical world yet unfold in a realm beyond it.

Bettelheim observed that 'The truth of fairy stories is the truth of our imagination, not that of normal causality. […] Before a child can come to grips with reality, he must have some frame of reference to evaluate it.'[21] When a child asks if a story is true, she wants to know if it contributes something to her understanding. In other words she wants to know which part of the story is relevant to *her*.

Some of the best teachers are those who convey information by telling stories. For many years my husband trained post-graduate students in the use of specific techniques which he had developed. One of his students complained that 'he is very entertaining, but he teaches *sideways*; each time he starts to tell us how to do something, or what the findings of a test mean, he goes off at a tangent and tells a story. My notes are all over the place, and I don't know how to start organizing them to put what I have learned into a structure'. While there are many different learning styles, from structured and linear to anecdotal, the telling of stories helps pupils to derive meaning from facts and to integrate new information into what is already known. At the end of a course, all of his students had not only acquired factual knowledge but deeper understanding of what they had learned and how to apply that knowledge to new situations – in other words, to think for themselves.

The parables of the New Testament provide examples of stories used in a similar way, to invite the listener to find her own meaning. In the context of the time (when the majority of the population were illiterate) the telling of stories was one of the primary mediums of education. 'The good teacher does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.[22]

The telling of stories encourages the formation of pictures in the mind's eye, as words are translated into images and information is woven into our inner world. The use of Guided Affective Imagery (GAI) serves as an example of how powerful this process can be.

GAI is a form of therapy developed by Hans Leuner, in which the patient is asked to close her eyes and make a journey under the guidance of the therapist. The story may go something like this:

> 'I want you to imagine a country lane. On one side of the country lane is a gate which leads you into the field. I want you to go through the gate and tell me what you see …'
>
> The patient may describe a field or enclosed space. The patient is asked,
>
> 'Is there another way out of the space, other than the way you came in?'
>
> If the patient says, yes, then he/she is instructed to go out of the space and follow where the way takes him.
>
> The way may lead down to a stream. The patient is asked whether she would like to follow the stream up towards the source or down towards the outlet. The direction the patient chooses is not important. What matters is what she describes along the way. On reaching a destination she is invited to stop and rest for a while. When ready, she will be instructed to turn around and retrace her steps back to the beginning, describing what she sees on the return journey.

No analysis of the journey is required. Often, the process of *making* the journey brings about change, and just as we all know that scenery looks different depending on which direction we are travelling in, so the process of setting out and returning seems to bring about beneficial emotional and cognitive change.

> The power of the imagination for growth and healing is still little understood, but may be one of the most potent elements of fairytales and fables for children's emotional and social development. By enriching children's imagination, fairy tales provide new solutions to the dilemmas of childhood through continually reworking and developing ruminative fantasies and daydreams such that mastery over childhood problems can be achieved.[23]

The German philosopher, poet, historian and playwright Friederich von Schiller wrote in his *The Aesthetic Education of Man*:

Deeper meaning resides in the fairytales told me in my childhood than in any truth that is taught in life.[24]

In a nutshell

- Reading and telling stories is sociable.
- Fairytales and fables are narratives told and retold orally from one group to another across generations and centuries. The stories usually contain 'collective wisdom' and imaginative archetypes acquired over time and across cultures.
- Fairytales and fables usually entertain and educate.
- They provide lessons in morality, cultural values and social requirements.
- They encourage imagination, fantasy and humour.
- They help all age groups to understand the human predicament.
- They allow for the examination and reframing of human problems.
- They help all ages to live with the 'unknowable'.
- Analysis and understanding of unconscious material.

Notes

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