



# What Can a Long Ago Princess With a Lost Shoe Teach the Modern Child About Success?

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Once upon a time (well, actually more than once), a young college grad went out into the world after living the good life of an academic darling. This grad had great SAT scores, good technical skills and a dream to become a computer programmer. Unfortunately, times have changed and many programming jobs have been outsourced to low wage countries. The poor, outdated grad knows he's smart and capable, but no one wants him! He finds himself an outcast in his own world and is facing a challenge that is bigger than he can handle. What is he to do?

For starters, he could return to the world of once-upon-a-time to discover the lessons that have long ago been learned. The set-up of our story is remarkably similar to the set-up of some of the older versions of the Cinderella story. In Grimm's collection, Cinderella's foot is deformed – that's why the shoe fits her and only her. She is also outwardly ugly compared to her stepsisters who are beautiful on the surface, but weak on the inside. Just like our college grad, Cinderella begins the story as well loved and accepted, but when the outside world changes, she becomes an outcast who must use her own inner strength to succeed in a challenging world. Told this way, the story acts as a metaphor for those times in which we feel handicapped. It guides us through the process of self-transformation.

By telling the story of the changes both in the Cinderella story and in our society, we can begin to see the role for folktales in our modern day world. Cinderella became



beautiful and lost her deformity back in the 1600's when a French author named Charles Perrault modified several folktales to entertain the French aristocracy. By the time Walt Disney chose Perrault's version for his entertainment blockbuster, other versions were already out of use. Out of use, as well, was the understanding of the folktale as a tool for the development of inner strength and an emphasis on the importance of the inner world in general.

The late 1800s and the 1900s were the day of the "external" – we counted as important only that which was tangible and could be measured. In science and industry, we favored the mechanics of large, tangible machines and the measurable collection of profits on those tangible assets. In education, we pushed measurable IQ-type skills such as data acquisition and logical-deductive reasoning.

It is easy to see why we did this. During the industrial age, job growth was concentrated in jobs that required, in the early days, manual skills and, in more recent times, routine cognitive skills (rule-based thinking or logical-deductive reasoning, such as is used in computer programming). These are skills that are easily measured and that hold up reasonably well (but not perfectly) to a scheme of external rewards and punishments like pay-for-performance contracts, contests and grades.

But these days, the tangible is old hat and we are moving onto (or back to) the intangible. Science is asking us to believe in invisible quantum phenomena and ten dimensions of string theory. The Creative Economy is the hot moving sector of industry with its focus not on already existing machines, but on the next big idea.

In the past several decades, we have seen little to no growth in jobs that require either manual or routine cognitive skills. Those jobs, even "good" white collar jobs like computer programming, are growing in low wage countries, but not here in the US. Instead, the US has seen an increase in micro-businesses and self-managed careers and in the areas of the economy that require complex communication of intangible ideas (best done with the aid of a relationship) and the ability to solve problems that have never before been solved. In other words, career success in the modern economy requires a capacity for creativity, relationships and entrepreneurialism.

These are all capacities that start with an inner motivation. They are difficult to measure directly and hold up very poorly to external motivators like contests and grades. For example, creativity relies on the ability to keep oneself in the creative flow, a state of total engagement in the process. It can't be controlled or micro-managed because, to paraphrase late director Robert Altman, if you're expecting something that you've never seen before, how can you tell someone how to do it in advance?

The temptation, once we realize that we can't exert external control over the skill, is to assume that we don't have to develop it all. Our children either have it or they don't. But, modern research on social and emotional intelligence tells us that this belief is just as out of place in today's world as the belief that a computer programming job awaits your child when he finishes college. In his latest book, *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman supports the claim that humans have a built in bias towards the inner capacities of empathy and cooperation, which form the foundation of our social intelligence, provided we nurture and develop these capacities. Creativity, too, stems from well developed cognitive habits like the ability to manage attention and remain in the creative flow long

enough to bring an idea to fruition. Entrepreneurialism, almost by definition, relies upon an inner sense of responsibility akin to virtue or moral character, which also does not just happen without proper development.

The internal skills that we find ourselves more and more in need of, and that our children will certainly find to be essential, can't be forced into a person by command, but neither will they appear if they are abandoned. They require guidance. In particular, they require a sense of guidance that understands the importance of the internal. And currently, we are not, as a society in general, giving our children this guidance. Emotional intelligence, not a perfect measure of the level of internal guidance we provide, but something that either underlies or is correlated with our ability to engage in meaningful, creative work, act with social intelligence and attain a sense of inner responsibility, has been decreasing throughout the population at least since researchers began measuring it in the 1970s. Just like poor, deformed Cinderella, we're facing a bit of a challenge.

So, how do we turn our challenge into a happily ever after? Head to the folktales. They've all taken that journey before, especially when they are heard in the oral-aural format (from the mouth to the ear). When I first began to tell folktales, I tried memorizing each story verbatim, but found this difficult to do. So, I tried another tactic - I began to meet the stories on an emotional level. By imagining myself as every character, I found that I have had experiences that feel similar to the experiences of the characters in most of the folktales. I could remember the stories more easily by simply remembering my own experiences and relating the story to those experiences. But more importantly, I came to see how these stories operate on a symbolic level.

The stories that remain in our cultural memory today are those that could be remembered by enough storytellers to pass them on. That is, we keep the stories whose underlying emotions speak to human experiences that are general enough that many, many storytellers and listeners would have encountered them. This is why the passed-on folktales continue to have a sub-surface level of meaning that symbolizes ordinary occurrences. If they didn't, they couldn't be remembered well enough to re-tell.

Hearing stories that contain emotional scripts of ordinary human experiences helps children to build emotional intelligence. According to emotional intelligence researcher Robert Solomon, all emotions have narratives that are part and parcel of the emotion itself. By running through these narratives, we exercise a child's ability to experience these emotions. For example, when children imagine themselves being Cinderella, they feel her loneliness and gain experience in the feeling of being an ill-fitting outcast. When they come across this feeling in real life, they will find that they have it paired with a memory of how to use inner strength to defeat that feeling.

With folktales, children don't run permissively through the emotional landscape. Rather, the experience is guided. Sure, the stories end happily ever after, but only for the characters who always strive to do good. The characters like the evil witch, who run us through the narratives of greed or envy, do not meet happy ends. The heroes only earn their happy endings after facing great challenges, which they overcome with the use of admirable qualities like persistence, kindness and courage. In the end, children learn that striving for purposeful dreams, working hard to overcome meaningful challenges, and putting aside greed and envy are all strategies for a successful life.

These lessons come with a feeling of truth that far surpasses the ignorable, eye-rolling force of a lecture. Because children instinctively imagine themselves as every character as they listen to an oral-aural tale, they learn these lessons with the force of virtual life experience. Modern day brain imaging science tells us that we experience the same brain wave patterns when we imagine doing something as when we actually do it. Because of this, children who imagine themselves living through the emotional narratives of a common life situation will come as close as possible to learning-by-doing without actually suffering the real pain of actual mistakes and struggles. As an added bonus, children practice empathy as they imagine themselves as each of the characters and practice mental flexibility as they experience all sides of an issue, along with the consequences of these different approaches. A childhood rich with stories will help a person to enter adult life with the wisdom of experience.

Through the act of imagining himself living through important emotional dramas, a child builds creativity by exercising his imagination; social skills by practicing empathy; and a sense of inner wisdom that can lead to entrepreneurialism if further developed. Like Cinderella at the ball, our children will be internally ready for a successful life, job and all. But the best part is that they will be able to bring it about all by themselves, with our guidance, of course.