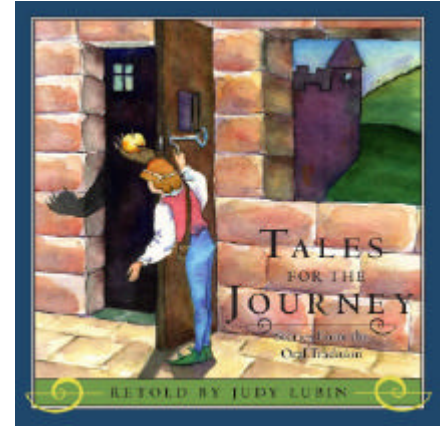




Story Guide For Tales for the Journey

Stories From the Oral Tradition
Retold by Judy Lubin

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Story Guides are meant to be used by adults, and teens grades 6 and older, to help choose and use stories. They explain the hidden meaning and symbolism that I give to each of the stories when I tell them. The information in this guide is not meant to be shared with children. Children experience stories through their imaginations as a fun, engaging and concrete experience, nothing like the abstract and intellectual approach taken in the Story Guides. Telling children what we expect them to take from a story is akin to giving away the secret of a magic trick. We take away the fun and the magic! And remember, children relate best to stories when they have a chance to process them. Whenever possible, play the stories one at a time with play or quiet time in between.

Cinderella is a story from the collection of the brothers Grimm. While we all think we know this story, the original Grimm's version offers several important differences that give the story an entirely different sub-surface meaning than that of the Disney adaptation. As a storyteller, this is my favorite example of how the original folktales differ from their modern day entertainment-focused cousins.

In Grimm's version, and in my version, Cinderella is deformed. That's why the shoe fits her and only her. Because she is deformed, she is an outcast in her own society. The story, then, asks us to examine times when we feel we don't fit into the groups to which we want to belong.

In the 1700's, an author named Charles Perrault modified several folktales so that they could be used as entertainment at the court of the King of France. Before this, folktales were used as the common person's lessons in the trials and tribulations of ordinary life. Folktales were the literature of a pre-literate society and were used the same way that good literature is used today – to meet oneself and explore what it means to be human. In their original form, the tales are deeply symbolic and are meant to be met not on the literal



level, but at the deeper metaphorical and moral levels. And at this level, they take on challenging issues.

When Perrault turned them into entertainment, he stripped them of their deeper lessons and brought the focus up to the literal level. Cinderella became a beautiful girl who was miscast in ugly clothes and sat patiently waiting for a fairy to change those clothes.

Since Disney used the same version for the same entertainment-focused purpose, its no wonder that today's parents have, by and large, forgone folk tales in search of something with more a empowering message for their children. The entertainment version of Cinderella entertains – it was never meant to empower.

When a folktale is turned from a piece of challenging literature into entertainment, as Cinderella was, the whole message can be flipped on its head. It is simply not very entertaining to look within oneself and face feeling like an ugly outcast. But that is exactly the purpose of the original story – to give guidance on how to handle those times when we feel we don't fit in. As a deformed, ugly outcast who learns to come into the mainstream of society, and even to take on a leadership position, by enacting a self transformation through the use of intuition and good judgment, my Cinderella is very empowered.

Of course, that understanding of the story is not fully visible at the surface. Part of the message comes from the medium itself. When we watch a story transcribed literally onto a screen, it is hard to imagine that it is anything but someone's else's story and someone else's business. But listen to a story (or read it) with no accompanying illustrations, and suddenly, it becomes your story. Children naturally imagine themselves as every character in the story. When adults are encouraged to do this, we can see that the characters all represent aspects of the way an ordinary human being approaches life. The story, then, shows its hidden symbolism.

In Cinderella, the hazel tree is a symbol for true nurturing. In ancient times, the hazel tree represented wisdom precisely because the new flowers move away from the parent flowers before maturing – just what a wise parent would encourage in a child. The tree is also associated with the mother who understands the true nature of nurturing and supporting. By connecting herself to this true understanding of nurturing, Cinderella is able to find help from characters that symbolically reside within herself.

The sparrows represent intuition. In folktales in general, birds represent spirit because the bird's eye view is analogous to the broader perspective that the higher self has over one's life. Sparrows, however, are earthly birds. They represent a very grounded sense of a broader perspective – intuition. The intuition is symbolically used to complete a task that sounds unusual at the literal level – pick good beans from bad. At the symbolical level, of course, the task is simply to distinguish good from bad – to use judgment and to know how to affiliate yourself with the good and move away from the bad.

Each time she learns to distinguish good from bad, Cinderella grows on the inside. Her new dress is a reflection of this inner change, not the cause of her change. When we change on the inside, it will show on the outside. Even our own family members may not know us after we have undergone a transformation. The step mother and step sisters, however, do not know how to change on the inside. They are beautiful on the outside, but empty on the inside. All along they fail to accept Cinderella because of her differences on the outside. When they realize that she is about to become powerful in the outside world, they mistakenly attempt to change themselves so that they will look like her on the outside – they deform their own feet to match Cinderella's! But it does them no good, because inner beauty is what counts in this story. After her transformation, Cinderella understands this. Because her intuition understands that they cannot change on the inside, she chooses to live the next stage of her life without them.

The Wildman is a Swedish tale that speaks metaphorically about our relationship to our own emotions. The character of the Wildman clearly represents our raw, untamed emotions. These emotions can be ugly and animalistic and difficult to deal with. The story presents us with two alternatives for dealing the animalistic side of ourselves. The King shuts them up in a gesture representative of suppressing, or bottling up, uncomfortable feelings. This leads to problems throughout his kingdom – war and the feeling that he must fight; a growing distance between himself and his loved ones to the point of eventually losing his own son. The story is clear that this is not a healthy path.

His son shows us an alternative route. The Prince befriends his emotional side and eventually comes to rely on his deep emotions for the attainment of love. A comparison of the two approaches shows us that when we shut off the negative side of our emotions, we also shut down love and passion. The Prince pays an enormous price for his befriending of the Wildman, but only because of his father's limitations. In the end, he gains greatly from his emotional courage.

The Water of Life is another story from the collection of the brothers Grimm. In this story, we deal metaphorically with issues of growth, change and healing. The story begins with the announcement that the King is sick. This tells us that we are meant to consider times in our lives in which our ruling viewpoints and perspectives can no longer sustain us. Change is on the horizon and the only question is: will we manage it successfully, or will become rigidly stuck in our old ways?

The two older princes show us how to prevent change, when they fail to listen the quiet voices inside (symbolized by dwarf) and end up stuck in stone. The youngest prince, however, does succeed in bringing about change and healing to the King. As a first step, he stops to listen to the dwarf, telling us symbolically to listen the quiet voices coming from below the surface of our own lives.

Then he must make the journey into the enchanted castle, which symbolizes our deepest emotional life. If we can find the courage to make this journey, we will not only become master of our emotional realms, as the Prince does, but will acquire treasures that will ensure that emotionally healthy change and healing comes to our lives.

The water of life itself symbolizes the essence of life – that which gives us our "joie de vivre". The Prince finds it, but before he can bring it back to his father, his brothers steal his healing power and claim it as their own. This reminds us not to let success go to our heads. The two older brothers represent ego, arrogance and power mongering. When we let these sides of ourselves take credit for the deep emotional work done by a more innocent side of ourselves, we lose the reigns on our path of change.

But, folktales always end well, and this one is no exception. The two older brothers cannot keep up the masquerade, because they have no track record of helping others and cannot properly decipher between what is valuable and what is not. Inner beauty, symbolized by the maiden and her connection to emotional life, is valuable, but outer beauty, symbolized by the wealth implied by a gold road, is not. The youngest prince knows this, and so he is the one that earns the happy life.