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## Awakening the Moral Imagination: Teaching Virtues Through Fairy Tales

When Mendal was already the far-famed and much-hated rabbi of Kotzak, he once returned to the little town in which he was born. There he visited the teacher who taught him his alphabet when he was a child and read five books of Moses with him. But he did not go to see the teacher who had given him further instruction, and at a chance meeting the man asked his former pupil whether he had any cause to be ashamed of his teacher. Mendal replied: 'You taught me things that can be refuted, for according to one interpretation they can mean this, according to another, that. But my first teacher taught me true teachings which cannot be refuted, and they have remained with me as such. That is why I owe him special reverence.'

—from *Tales of the Hasidim*, Martin Buber

The notion that fairy tales and fantasy stories stimulate and instruct the moral imagination of the young is, of course, not new. The Victorians certainly held to that notion when they brought the fairy tale into the nursery. In our day, we have seen a resurgence of interest in the fairy tale. The renowned psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim gave this an important impetus twenty years ago with his publication of *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1975). "It hardly requires emphasis at this moment in our history" Bettelheim wrote, that children need "a moral education...[that teaches] not through abstract ethical concepts but through that which seems tangibly right and therefore meaningful.... The child finds this kind of meaning through fairy tales."<sup>1</sup>

Just in the past several years William J. Bennett has edited three highly successful anthologies that include ample samplings of classic fairy tales and modern children's stories.<sup>2</sup> With *The Book of Virtues* (1994) and *The Moral Compass* and *A Children's*

*Book of Virtues* (1995), Bennett seems to have tapped a tremendous thirst among parents and teachers for literary resources that they might use in nurturing the moral imagination of children. They need, and are asking for direction in how to influence the moral character of the young.

For this reason it is surprising to me how little has been written on the moral meaning in fairy tales. Literary criticism on fairy tales and modern children's literature is a relatively new enterprise that has not yet accumulated a substantial or impressive corpus of interpretation, and the studies done by psychologists and educators mostly address the special concerns of these disciplines. One would have thought that ethicists might do better. Yet religious and philosophical ethicists have not reflected a great deal on children as moral learners nor written much on children's literature. Perhaps

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this is because, like so many others, they have subscribed to the falsehood that children are at a pre-moral stage and that socialization rather than moral formation is more appropriate to their kind. But intuitively and from our experience as parents and teachers we ought to know that it is not that simple.

The American writer Flannery O'Connor spoke a simple but profound truth when she said that "a story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way.... You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate."<sup>3</sup> The great fairy tales and fantasy stories capture the meaning of morality through vivid depictions of struggles between good and evil where characters must make difficult choices between right and wrong, or heroes and villains contest the very fate of imaginary worlds. The great stories avoid didacticism and supply the imagination with important symbolic information about the shape of our world and appropriate responses to its inhabitants. The contemporary moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre sums this up eloquently:

It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance..., that children learn or mislearn what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.<sup>4</sup>

Musing on the wisdom and ethics of the fairy tale, G. K. Chesterton observes that the genre sparks a special way of seeing that is indispensable to morality. Chesterton writes: "I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly rati-

fied by mere facts."<sup>5</sup> I am calling this way of looking at life the moral imagination. For Chesterton is suggesting what the moral imagination is when he remarks: "We can say why we take liberty from a man who takes liberties. But we cannot say why an egg can turn into a chicken any more than we can say why a bear could turn into a fairy prince. As *ideas*, the egg and the chicken are further from each other than the bear and the prince; for no egg itself suggests a chicken, whereas some princes do suggest bears."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, we can say that values are set by the free market or by the state and assess what we are up against and how we should trade our wares or parley our talents; but we cannot know, except within the context of the entire story, why what seemed to be courage in one character turned out to be stupid bravado, while what looked like disloyalty in another character turned out to be creative fidelity to a greater good.

Moral living is about being responsive and responsible toward other people. And virtues are those traits of character that enable persons to use their freedom in morally responsible ways. The mere ability, however, to use moral principles to justify one's actions does not make a virtuous person. The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber tells the story of how he fell into "the fatal mistake of *giving instruction* in ethics" by presenting ethics as formal rules and principles. Buber discovered that very little of this kind of education gets "transformed into character-building substance." In his little gem of moral and educational philosophy, an essay appropriately entitled "The Education of Character," Buber recalls: "I try to explain to my pupils that envy is despicable, and at once I feel the secret resistance of those who are poorer than their comrades. I try to explain that it is wicked to bully the weak, and at once I see a suppressed smile on the lips of the strong. I



try to explain that lying destroys life, and something frightful happens: the worst habitual liar of the class produces a brilliant essay on the destructive power of lying.”<sup>7</sup>

Mere instruction in morality is not sufficient to nurture the virtues. It might even backfire, especially when the presentation is heavily exhortative and the pupil’s will is coerced. Instead, a compelling vision of the goodness of goodness itself needs to be presented in a way that is attractive and stirs the imagination. A good moral education addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of human nature. Stories are an irreplaceable medium of this kind of moral education. This is the education of character.

The Greek word for character literally means an *impression*. Moral character is an impression stamped upon the self. Character is defined by its orientation, consistency, and constancy. Today we often equate freedom with morality and goodness. But this is naïve because freedom is transcendent and the precondition of choice itself. Depending upon his character, an individual will be drawn toward either goodness or wickedness. Moral and immoral behavior is freedom enacted either for good or for ill.

The great fairy tales and children’s fantasy stories attractively depict character and virtue. In these stories the virtues glimmer as if in a looking glass, and wickedness and deception are unmasked of their pretensions to goodness and truth. These stories make us face the unvarnished truth about ourselves while compelling us to consider what kind of people we want to be.

“Beauty and the Beast” is one of the most beloved of all the fairy tales just because it contrasts goodness with badness in a way that is appealing to the imagination. It is also a story that depicts with special force the mystery of virtue itself. Virtue is the “magic” of the moral life for it often appears

in the most unexpected persons and places and with surprising results. At the beginning of the story, we are told that a very rich merchant had three “daughters [all of whom] were extremely handsome, especially the youngest; [so she was] called ‘The little Beauty.’” But nothing more is said about Beauty’s physical attributes. Instead, the story draws our attention to her virtuous character. Beauty’s moral goodness—her “inner beauty”—is contrasted with her sisters’ pride, vanity, and selfishness—their “inner ugliness.” Although Beauty’s sisters were physically attractive they “had a great deal of pride, because they were rich... [they] put on ridiculous airs...and laughed at their sister [Beauty], because she spent...her time in reading good books.” By contrast, Beauty was “charming, sweet tempered,...spoke ...kindly to poor people,” and truly loved her father.<sup>8</sup>

Because she is virtuous, Beauty is able to “see” the virtues in Beast that lie hidden beneath his monstrous appearance. At her first supper in the monster’s castle, Beauty says to Beast: “That is true [I find you ugly], ...for I cannot lie, but I believe you are very good-natured.” And when Beast tries her the more with his repeated self-deprecatory remarks, Beauty responds emphatically: “Among mankind...there are many that deserve that name [Beast] more than you, and I prefer you, just as you are, to those, who, under a human form, hide a treacherous, corrupt, and ungrateful heart.”<sup>9</sup> The sharp contrast between Beauty’s goodness and her sisters’ badness, which is masked by their physical attractiveness, parallels the irony that the Beast who is repulsive physically is good and virtuous. “Beauty and the Beast” teaches the simple but important lesson that appearances can be deceptive, that what is seen is not always what it appears to be.

Similarly, this great fairy tale also bids us to imagine what the outcome might have

been had Beauty's sisters been put in her position? No doubt they would not have recognized or appreciated the goodness beneath Beast's monstrous appearance. Nor does it seem at all likely that they would have made Beauty's courageous and fortuitous choice. The story portrays the paradoxical truth that unless virtue is in a person she will not be able to find, appreciate, or embrace virtue in another.

"Beauty and the Beast" embraces one last important moral truth: a person's decisions in life will define what kind of person she becomes. In this sense also our destinies are not fated: we decide our own destinies. At the end of the story, the "beautiful lady" who has visited Beauty in her dreams appears at Beast's castle and brings with her Beauty's entire family. The fairy then says to Beauty: "Beauty...come and see the reward of your judicious choice; you have preferred virtue before either wit or beauty, and deserve to have a person in whom these qualifications are united: you are going to be a great queen."<sup>10</sup> Beauty's sisters, however, are unhappy in their marriages because they chose their spouses solely upon the basis of good looks and wit. Through greed, jealousy, and pride their hearts have become like stone. So they are turned into statues, but retain their consciousness that they might behold their sister's happiness until they admit their own faults.

Like all the great fairy tales, "Beauty and the Beast" invites us to draw analogies between its imaginary world and the world in which we live. It supplies the imagination with information that the self also uses to distinguish what is true from what is not. But how, we might ask, is the imagination itself awakened, and how is it made moral? These are important questions for the moral educator, and they are not so easily answered.

Buber's frank discussion of the mistakes

he made when he first taught ethics helps us to see how difficult awakening and nurturing the moral imagination is. Buber's mistakes are not uncommon. They are often committed today, especially when the role of reason in human conduct is overestimated and the roles of the will and the imagination are underestimated. This hazard is increased by a utilitarian and instrumentalist ethos that has seeped to the moral tap roots of our culture. Despite the overwhelming evidence that we are failing to transmit morality effectively to our children, we persist in teaching ethics as if it comes from a "how to" manual for successful living. Moral educators routinely introduce moral principles and even the virtues themselves to students as if they are practical instruments for achieving success. When we tell our children that standards of social utility and material success are the measurements of the value of moral principles and virtues, then it is not likely that our pedagogy is going to transform the minds or convert the hearts of young people. As Buber observed in his own classroom, all that we will accomplish is to confirm the despair of the weak, darken the envy of the poor, justify the greed of the rich, and encourage the aggression of the strong.

Much of what passes for moral education fails to nurture the moral imagination. Yet, only a pedagogy that awakens and enlivens the moral imagination will persuade the child or the student that courage is the ultimate test of good character, that honesty is essential for trust and harmony among persons, and that humility and a magnanimous spirit are goods greater than the prizes won by selfishness, pride, or the unscrupulous exercise of position and power.

The moral imagination is not a *thing*, not so much a faculty even, as the very process by which the self makes metaphors out of images given by experience and then employs these metaphors to find and sup-



pose moral correspondences in experience. The moral imagination is active, for well or ill, strongly or weakly, every moment of our lives, in our sleep as well as when we are awake. But it needs nurture and proper exercise. Otherwise it will atrophy like a muscle that is not used. The richness or the poverty of the moral imagination depends upon the richness or the poverty of experience. When human beings are young and dependent upon parents and others who assume custodial care for them, they are especially open to formation through experiences provided by these persons. When we argue or discuss what kind of education or recreation our children should have we are acknowledging these realities.

Unfortunately, more often than not, this society is failing to provide children with the kinds of experience that nurture and build the moral imagination. One measure of the impoverishment of the moral imagination in the rising generation is their inability to recognize, make, or to use metaphors. My college students do not lack an awareness of morality, although they might be confused or perplexed about its basis or personal ownership. But when they read a novel they are perplexed because they are unable to find the inner connections of character, action, and narrative provided by the author's own figurative imagination. Sadly, the only kind of story many of my undergraduate students seem to be able to follow are news reports and sitcom scripts.

Several years ago, I administered a surprise quiz in a course on theology and literature in which I asked the students to list and explain five metaphors that they had found in John Updike's early novel *Rabbit, Run*. The majority of the class was unable to name five metaphors. Some students did not even identify the metaphor in the book's title, which I had purposively discussed in the preceding class meeting. It was not that these young people lacked a practical defi-

inition of a metaphor. They had been provided with such a definition over and over again in English courses. They lacked, however, a personal knowledge of metaphor that only an active imagination engenders. I suspect that in the past these students had gotten the idea that all they needed to do was look for the so-called "facts" in a book. Facts are things whose meaning belongs to their use and whose use requires relatively little interpretation. We are living in a culture in which metaphor is discarded for the so-called "facts." We train minds to catch these "facts" much as one breaks in a baseball glove. Meanwhile, the imagination is neglected and is left unguarded and untrained.

Fairy tales and fantasy stories transport the reader into *other worlds* that are fresh with wonder, surprise, and danger. They challenge the reader to make sense out of those *other worlds*, to navigate his way through them, and to imagine himself in the place of the heroes and heroines who populate those worlds. The safety and assurance of these imaginative adventures is that risks can be taken without having to endure all of the consequences of failure; the joy is in discovering how these risky adventures might eventuate in satisfactory and happy outcomes. Yet the concept of self is also transformed. The images and metaphors in these stories stay with the reader even after he has returned to the "real" world.

After a child has read Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* or C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, her moral imagination is bound to have been stimulated and sharpened. These stories offer powerful images of good and evil and show her how to love through the examples of the characters she has come to love and admire. This will spur her imagination to translate these experiences and images into the constitutive elements of self identity and



into metaphors she will use to interpret her own world. She grows increasingly capable of moving about in that world with moral intent.

When the moral imagination is wakeful, the virtues come to life, filled with personal and existential, as well as social, significance. The virtues needn't be the dry and lifeless data of moral theories or the ethical version of hygienic rules in health science classes; they can take on a life that attracts and awakens the desire to own them for oneself. We need desperately to adopt forms of moral pedagogy that are faithful to the ancient and true vocation of the teacher—to make persons into mature and whole human beings, able to stand face to face with the truth about themselves and others, and desiring to correct their faults and to emulate goodness and truth wherever it is found. We need to take greater advantage of the power in stories to humanize the young, whether these be Buber's beloved tales of the Hasidim or the stories we commonly refer to as fairy tales.

“Values” is the chief buzz-word of the contemporary educational scene. The word carries with it the full burden of our concerns over the decline of morality. Teaching values, whether family values, democratic values, or religious values, is touted as the remedy for our moral confusion. Of course, this consensus about the need for stronger moral values immediately cracks and advocates retreat when the inevitable question is raised as to which values should be taught. I do not think that the current debate over values lends much promise of clarifying what we believe in or what morality we should be teaching our children. Values certainly are not the answer to moral relativism. Quite to the contrary, values talk is entirely amenable to moral relativism.

In her book, *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Val-*

*ues*, Gertrude Himmelfarb exposes what some students of Western morals have known all along, that values is a rather new term in our moral vocabulary. Its history reaches back not much farther than the late-nineteenth century. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche seems to have been the inventor of our modern use of the term as a category of morality. Nietzsche was opposed to what he called “effeminate” Christianity and advocated the “Übermensch” or superior human being with the courage to defy conventional religious morality and invent his own values. In his famous essay entitled *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche used values in this new way, not as a verb meaning to value or esteem something, nor as a singular noun, meaning the measure of a thing (the economic value of money, labor, or property), but in the plural, connoting the moral beliefs and attitudes of a society or of the individual.<sup>9</sup> In his turn of the phrase “transvaluation of values,” Nietzsche summed up his thesis about the “death of God” and the birth of his new “noble type of man.” Nietzsche described this new kind of human being as “a determiner of [his own] values” who judges right from wrong upon the basis of what is good or injurious to himself. Thus the values of conventional morality were false values bound to be replaced by the self made values of the truly autonomous and free individual.

Nietzsche's innovative use of values did not gain immediate approval or acceptance. Even as late as the 1928 edition, the *Oxford English Dictionary* did not list values in the plural form referring to moral qualities. More recently, the 1992 edition of the *Oxford Modern English Dictionary* defines values not only in the modern sense of moral qualities but assigns them a subjectivistic character. The dictionary's editors give this definition: Values refers to “one's standards, one's judgement of what is valuable or important in life” (the emphases are mine).



Another way of putting it is that values belong to those things we call individual lifestyles, and in common discourse a lifestyle is something we choose and even exchange for another according to our personal preferences and tastes, much in the same way that we might replace one wardrobe with another. Himmelfarb is justified when she says: “‘Values’ [has] brought with it the assumptions that all moral ideas are subjective and relative, that they are mere customs and conventions, that they have a purely instrumental and utilitarian purpose, and that they are peculiar to specific individuals and societies.”<sup>11</sup>

In our consumerist society moral values may even take on the characteristics of material commodities. We easily assume that personal freedom is about *choosing* values for oneself in an unregulated and ever expanding marketplace of moralities and lifestyles. *Choosing* values turns out not to be much different from shopping for groceries at the supermarket or selecting building supplies at the home improvement store. As a society, we are learning how to regard morality and values as matters of taste and personal satisfaction. For some people married heterosexual monogamy is a value and for others it is a romantic relationship with one or several lovers, male or female or both. Some people say abortion is wrong and they do not approve of it; but these same people also say that for others abortion may be all right. This is possible only if values are the creation of the self and are not universally binding moral norms. If one scratches just beneath the surface of the moral outlook of many Americans one bumps into the rather naïvely but also often vehemently held assumption that the individual is the architect of his or her own morality built out of value “blocks” that the individual independently picks and stacks. We suddenly run into the ghost of Friedrich Nietzsche.

There are real and very important differences between what we now call values and the virtues as they had traditionally been understood. Let me put it this way. A value is like a smoke ring. Its shape is initially determined by the smoker; but once it is released there is no telling what shape it will take. One thing is certain, however. Once a smoke ring has left the smoker’s lips it has already begun to evaporate into thin air. Volition and volatility are the character of smoke rings and values both. By contrast, a virtue might be compared to a stone whose nature is permanence. We might throw a stone into a pond where it will lie at the bottom with other stones. But if, at some later date, we should want to retrieve that stone from the bottom of the pond, we can be sure that the shape of the stone has not changed and that we will be able to distinguish it from the rest of the stones.

The virtues define the character of a person, his enduring relationship to the world, and what will be his end. Whereas, values, according to their common usage, are the instruments or components of moral living that the self chooses for itself and that the self may disregard without necessarily jeopardizing its identity. Accordingly, values are subordinate and relative to the self’s own autonomy, which is understood as the self’s highest value and essential quality. But when we say in the older speech of character that Jack is virtuous and that he is a courageous person, we are saying that the virtue of courage belongs to the very essence of who and what Jack is. Being courageous is not subject to a willing for it to be so or a willing for it not to be so. Virtues and vices define the will itself and also properly describe the willing person. The color orange is both a quality of an orange and an inescapable description of it. If we find an object, however, that looks like an orange but is brown, it must either be an orange that has gone bad or it is not an orange at all. Similarly, it

makes no moral sense to say that a courageous man has decided to be a coward. We cannot say on the basis of some subsequent behavior that we have observed in Jack that he must have decided to become a coward. If Jack's late actions were indeed cowardly and not courageous then we are obliged, rather, to revise our original description of Jack.

Thus, I am contending that what seems so self-evident to many of our contemporaries about the centrality of values to moral living might not be true, nor be consistent with human nature, nor take into account adequately the larger share of human reality over which we each personally have little or no choice or control. Rather, the best of sources in the Western tradition have argued that morality is much more than, indeed qualitatively different from, the sum of the values that an essentially autonomous self chooses for itself. Classical, Jewish, and Christian sources such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, or Augustine, John Chrysostom, Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin insist that morality is neither plural nor subjective. Instead, they maintain that human morality is substantial, universal, and relational in character, founded and rooted in a permanent Good, or in a higher moral law, or in the being of God. From this standpoint, values and decisions whose claims of legitimacy extend no further than individual volition are as effervescent as the foam that floats on top the waves. They cannot be reliable guides to moral living.

The great teachers of our historic culture insist that morality is deeper and more substantial than effervescent foam. It stands to reason, they insist, that where there are waves and foam there is a deeper body of water. These sources describe a sea of substantial morality that lies beneath the ephemeral and ever-changing surface expressions of emotion, taste, and satisfaction in ordinary human intercourse. They describe charac-

ter as the gravity that keeps us afloat and virtues as the sails that propel us and the instruments that help us to maintain our course even when the ship is being rocked by stormy waters and high seas.

Sailors need to know when to use ballast or throw down the anchor, lest the ship sink and they drown. In like manner, the virtues enable us to respond correctly to those moments of life that are the moral equivalents to such conditions at sea. However, an ability to discern these moments and respond appropriately entails more than formal techniques of decision-making; just as successful sailing requires that one knows more than just the techniques of good navigation. As the latter requires a knowledge of and familiarity with the sea that cannot be taught in books but can only be learned from sea-faring itself, so the moral life requires that we also *be* virtuous. The virtues are not just the moral equivalent of techniques of good sailing; rather they are the way as well as the end of goodness and happiness. If we assume, however, as so many of the textbooks would have us believe, that problems and quandaries are the whole subject matter of ethics and that the decisions we make are the purpose of morality, then we are likely to interpret even the virtues in the same superficial, utilitarian way that we already think of values. But if we pay heed to the ancient sources we will recognize that the virtues are related to a much thicker and deeper moral reality. We will see the virtues as the qualities of character that we need in order to steer our way through the complicated and mysterious sea of morality into which we all have been placed. For such journeying a pocket full of values is neither sufficient ballast nor substitute for sails, compass, or sextant.

Years ago in a series of essays entitled, simply enough, "Education, or the Mistake About the Child,"<sup>12</sup> G. K. Chesterton en-





tered into a debate that was no less important than it is today. That debate is about what counts for moral education. In conclusion, I want to review what Chesterton had to say, thus bringing this conversation around full circle to the claim I made at the start, that stories, especially fairy tales, are invaluable resources for the moral education of children.

Modern educators have not been well disposed toward traditional fairy tales and their like. They write them off as too violent or not contemporary enough and so forth and so on. They favor “practical” and “realistic” stories—stories about the lives children live today that easily lend themselves to distillation into useful themes, principles, and values. What some educators can’t find they create. Off of the pens of values textbook writers, stories spill whose sole purpose is to clarify so-called moral problems or “draw out” reasons for making intelligent moral decisions. These stories are of the disposable kind, made to be discarded like empty cartoons once the important “stuff” that has been packed in them has been extracted. Teaching reasoning skills, not the virtues, is considered the means to a moral education; values-clarification, not character, is regarded as the goal.

These educators think that moral education is like teaching children reading or arithmetic. But that is not even quite accurate, because in the case of moral education children are supposed to be permitted to discover and clarify for themselves their own values and personal moral stance in the world. Yet we do not permit children to invent their own math: we teach them the multiplication tables; nor do we encourage children to make up their own personal alphabets: we teach them how to read. What might one suppose would be the outcome of an education that did permit children to invent their own alphabets and math? No doubt the result would be confusion or

chaos. Ought we to be surprised at the outcome of our recent efforts to help children clarify their own values, in point of fact invent their own personal moralities?

In his own inimitable way, G. K. Chesterton exposed the flaw and deception in this modern approach to moral education. And he identified the dogmatizing in its anti-dogmatic rhetoric. In our day this modern approach is justified by prior commitments to certain psychological theories that elevate personal autonomy and self-realization above what is dismissively called external authority. The teacher must not introduce values into the classroom but work, instead, to “draw out” from children their own moral beliefs and through a process of clarification help them to better formulate their own values. But here is how Chesterton characterized this historic debate:

The important point is...that you cannot...get rid of authority in education.... The educator drawing out is just as arbitrary and coercive as the instructor pouring in: for he draws out what he chooses. He decides what in the child shall be developed and what shall not be developed. He does not (I suppose) draw out the neglected faculty of forgery. He does not (so far, at least) lead out, with timid steps, a shy talent for torture. The only result of this pompous and precise distinction between the educator and the instructor is that the instructor pokes where he likes and the educator pulls where he likes.<sup>13</sup>

In answer to the skeptics, Chesterton stated what he thought to be obvious. Whether we admit it or not, education is bound to indoctrinate and bound to coerce. Rabbi Mendal especially thanked and praised his first teacher because he faithfully inculcated in his young student the necessary rudiments of culture and passed on the essentials of a religious and moral way of life. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines indoctrination as to imbue with learning or bring into a knowledge of something, such as a

dogma. Chesterton argued that an authentic moral education is not possible unless something like this occurs. He spoke of the responsibility to affirm “the truth of our human tradition and hand it on with a voice of authority. That is the one eternal education; to be sure enough that something is true that you dare to tell it to a child.”<sup>14</sup>

The real corruptions of moral education are an imperious moralizing, on the one hand, and the indulgence of spurious argument and undisciplined opinion, on the other. Nevertheless, a valid and effective moral education is bound to be coercive at times and even do a kind of violence, whether or not opinion is “drawn out” from the student or dogma is “put into” him.

Exactly the same intellectual violence is done to the creature who is poked and pulled. Now we must all accept the responsibility of this intellectual violence. Education is violent; because it is creative. It is creative because it is human. It is reckless as playing on the fiddle; as dogmatic as drawing a picture; as brutal as building a house. In short it is what all human action is; it is an interference with life and growth.<sup>15</sup>

But Chesterton was not an advocate of the blunt and heavy instrument; nor am I. This is one reason why fairy tales appealed to him so much. Fairy tales might not qualify as scientific hypotheses or theories, but they do resonate with the deepest qualities of humanness, of freedom, and of the moral imagination. At the same time, they deny the materialism and psychological determinism that lurk behind much of the modern talk of human liberation, and they discredit the hubris of reason and rationality that displaces faith and confidence in truth. Again, they show us a way of envisioning the world—a world in which everything that is need not have been and the *real* moral law connotes freedom and not necessity. The fairy-tale philosopher, wrote Chesterton, is “glad that the leaf is green precisely because

it could have been scarlet.... He is pleased that snow is white on the strictly reasonable ground that it might have been black. Every colour has in it a bold quality as of choice; the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like spilt blood. He feels that something has been *done*,”<sup>16</sup> that there is something *willful* in all of it as if someone decided that things ought to be this way instead of another way and that these things are repeated either in order to improve them or simply because they are a source of delight in their repetition. The fairy-tale philosopher respects the deeper mystery of freedom in its transcendent source.

Second, fairy tales show us that there is a difference between what is logically possible and what is morally felicitous, between what is rationally do-able and what is morally permissible. In fairy tales the character of real law belongs to neither natural necessity nor rational determinism. Rather, real law is a comprehensible sign of a primal, unfathomable freedom and of a numinous reality and will. Real law, the realest law, can be obeyed or broken, and in either case for the very same reason—because the creature is both subject of and participant in this primal freedom. Fairy tale heroes are called to be both free and responsible, thus virtuous and respectful of the moral law.

Fairy tale and modern fantasy stories project fantastic other worlds; but they also pay close attention to real moral “laws” of character and virtue. These laws ought not to be high-handedly shoved down the throats of children (or of anyone else). More accurately, they are norms of behavior that obtain in patterns of relation between agent, act, other, and world. Rational cognition is capable of grasping these norms. They become habit, however, only when they are lived, or, as in the case of fairy tales, experienced vicariously and imaginatively through the artful delineation of character and plot in story. Thus, while fairy tales are not a



substitute for life experience, they have the great capacity to shape our moral constitution without the shortcomings of either rigidly dogmatic schooling or values-clarification education.

By portraying wonderful and frightening worlds in which ugly beasts are transformed into princes and evil persons are turned to stones and good persons back to flesh, fairy tales remind us of moral truths whose ultimate claims to normativity and permanence we would not think of questioning. Love freely given is better than obedience that is coerced. Courage that rescues the innocent is noble; whereas, cowardice that betrays others for self-gain or self-preservation is worthy only of disdain. Fairy tales say plainly that virtue and vice are opposites and not just a matter of degree. They show us that the virtues fit into character and complete our world in the same way that goodness naturally fills all things.

I realize that the views I have expressed defy what the advocates of late-modernity or post-modernity insist upon, that there is no such thing as a common human condition or a perennial literature that lends expression to the experience of that condition. I do not expect to persuade those who are entrenched in these positions to change their minds. I can only appeal to that certain “stuff” of human existence that the human imagination takes hold of and makes moral sense of in fairy tales. I mean such things as: the joy in the birth of a first child and the crippling sorrow of illness and deformity, childhood fears of getting lost matched by childhood desires to escape parental authority, the love that binds siblings together and the rivalry that tears them apart, the naming we do that gives identity and the naming we also do that confuses identity, the curses of dread malefactors and the blessings of welcome benefactors, the agony of

unrequited love and the joy of love that is reciprocated.

I could go on. But the skeptics and critics will not be satisfied. The skeptics say there is nothing of commonality in such things, just individual lives and the particular conditions in which these lives flourish or fail. I am not convinced. Nothing of what these people say is proven, and as I grow older and become more traveled and my memory fills with so many different lives and human faces, the wisdom of fairy tales, the wisdom of a common human condition underlying and running through all of the diversity and difference, seems far more reasonable than moral and cultural relativism. One last thing in which I agree with Chesterton. Fairy tales lead us toward a belief in something that, if it were not also so veiled in a mystery, common sense alone would affirm: if there is a story there must surely also be a story-teller.

#### Notes

1. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975), p.5.
2. William J. Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster).
3. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), p.96.
4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd Edition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 216.
5. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1959), p. 50.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
7. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., Inc., 1978), p. 105.
8. Ionia and Peter Opie, eds., *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). pp. 182-83. This is the English translation of Madame de Beaumont's version of the fairy tale published originally in French in 1756, subsequently translated into English in 1761.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
11. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 10.
12. These are collected in Gilbert K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1910).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
16. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 59.