

Fairytales: A Novel Way of Educating Children About Psychological Health

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Abstract: *It is a truism that the younger we teach health-promoting behaviors, the more likely they will be sustained. Teaching children about healthful practices is not always easy as health-promoting activities are not always fun and engaging. The fairytale is one tool that has been used for over 400 years to engage and educate children. Perhaps the fairytale can be used to teach valuable lessons about psychological health. This paper will analyze how a Grimm's fairytale may be used to teach the true origins of fear and how debilitating fear may be prevented. In doing so it is hoped that the lessons learned about psychological health in childhood might last a lifetime.*

Key Words: *Fear, anxiety, stress, children's health, fairytales, fables*

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of a Hell or a Hell of a Heaven.”

- John Milton

Today we find ourselves experiencing an epidemic of fear-related psychiatric disorders, a virtual culture of fear (Martin and Martin-Granel, 2006). We live in an age of anxiety, wherein fearmongering has become commonplace in both the news media and in politics. So threatening is our world that psychiatric epidemiologists Borwin Bandelow and Sophie Michaelis (2015) state that over one third of people will suffer diagnosable fear-related problems during their lifetime making fear-related disorders the most prevalent of all mental disorders. A key feature of all fear-related psychological disorders is the tendency to misinterpret situations more negatively than they are in actuality or to become overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness and being out of control. These authors, and others, suggest that a key to preventing fear-related disorders, especially in children, is learning to interpret situations in less threatening or more controllable ways. This paper argues that children, as well as adults, can learn to avoid paralyzing fear and anxiety related disorders by learning the lesson of an ancient children's fable.

Writing 100 years before the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault (1697/1925) rendered into writing stories that were common European oral folklore. The focus of his book, *Histoires, or Tales of Past Times, Told by Mother Goose, with Morals* was not to

entertain, rather it was to educate. Perrault understood, however, that in order to educate the child, the story must also entertain. The Brothers Grimm understood this as well. The Grimms' fairytale “The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was” (Grimm & Grimm, 1884) tells the story of a boy who repeatedly finds himself in frightening situations, yet never once experiences fear. This fairytale causes us to challenge our preconceived notion that fear is a necessary and inescapable consequence of threatening or frightening situations. We are inclined to ask the question, “What really makes people fearful, situations or the views which we take of them? Grimms' fairy tale reveals the true origin of fear and how it can be prevented

Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (1975) believes fairytales can help promote psychological health in children. Bettelheim believes they foster the child's maturation process by allowing the child to “externalize what goes on in his mind, in controllable ways ... Once this starts, the child will be less and less engulfed by unmanageable chaos” (Bettelheim, 1975, pp. 65-66). Consistent with this notion, the Grimms' fairytale “The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was” challenges the myth of the inevitability of fear. Psychologists tell us that many people, if not most people, hold a misconception that

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we are helpless to prevent fear because fear resides amongst the people and places around which we reside (Ellis & Harper, 1975). Albert Ellis was a pioneering psychologist. In an era of passively supportive and non-directive psychotherapies, Ellis courageously offered a radically different approach to therapy. He confronted his patients with the realization that situations (people and places) were not what was at the root of their psychological distress (fear, grief, depression), rather it was what they were saying to themselves about those situations that was really causing their distress.

The Grimms' fairytale "The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was" tells the story of a boy who left home on a journey to discover what fear was, for it seemed that he was the only person in his village who did not shudder with fear when scary stories were told at night around the bonfire.

And so, the boy left home on a quest to be more like others by learning to helplessly shudder with fear. The village's sexton heard of the boy's plight and offered to assist. He asked the boy to stay with him and ring the church bell, whereby the sexton would contrive a situation so the boy would learn to shudder. One night the sexton asked the boy to ascend the tower and ring the bell in the darkness of midnight. The boy did not know that the sexton was hiding in the tower portraying himself as a ghost in hopes of teaching the boy to helplessly shudder with fear. But rather than feel helpless and shudder with fear, the boy challenged the man to identify himself. When the ghostly man did not respond, not knowing it was the sexton, the boy threw him down the stairs. Despite being confronted by a ghostly image where most would be fearful, the boy remained fearless. He acted to understand the potential threat and then to remove the ghostly threat. It could be said that the boy remained fearless and acted logically.

Having failed to learn to shudder with fear, the boy went forth on the great highway where he met a man who would try to help the boy learn to shudder. The man took the boy to where seven men had been hanged. "Look, there is the tree where seven men have married the ropemaker's daughter and are now learning how to fly. Sit down below it, and wait till night comes, and thou wilt soon learn how to shudder" (Grimm & Grimm, 1884, p. 14). So, the boy did as the man directed. By midnight the cold night wind blew. Rather than fear, the boy felt sorry for the cold dead men, so he cut them down and placed them around the fire. Seeing no response, he viewed them as ungrateful and hung them back in the tree. When morning came the man returned to see how the boy had done. To his amazement, despite being alone with seven dead men during the night, the boy remained

fearless. Once again, the story contradicts the myth that fear resides in situations by showing the boy remained fearless despite a situation that would be expected to cause fear.

The boy continued his journey to learn to shudder with fear. He came upon the host of a tavern who told him about a haunted castle wherein treasures would be found, but the castle was guarded by evil spirits. If the boy wanted to learn to helplessly shudder with fear surely the castle was the place to learn. The boy eagerly embraced the challenge of staying in the castle for three nights with the promise not only of learning to shudder, but of gaining great treasure and the hand of the King's daughter in marriage. On the first night, the boy was confronted with frightening cats and dogs. As the night progressed watching the animals, the boy sensed a threat, but rather than respond with fear, he pulled out his knife and killed them all. Some would say he acted logically and so he did not shudder. On the second night, the boy was confronted with dead men who played a game of bowling with human legs as pins and skulls as balls. Rather than merely watch, the boy asked to join the game. So, the night passed into morning and the boy did not shudder. When asked how he did during the night, the boy replied, "I have been playing at nine-pins, ... and have lost a couple of farthings...I have made merry" (Grimm & Grimm, 1884, p. 18). On the third night, the boy was threatened with death not once but twice. When the boy's dead cousin emerged from a coffin and attempted to strangle him, the boy responded to the threat not with fear, rather the boy threw his cousin back into the coffin and shut the lid. The coffin was carried away. Soon after that, a large old man appeared to the boy. In a threatening manner, the old man said, "Thou wretch thou shalt soon learn what it is to shudder, for thou shalt die" (Grimm & Grimm, 1884, p. 19). But rather than helplessly die, the boy responds with defiance. "Not so fast, ... If I am to die, I shall have to have a say in it." "I will soon seize thee," said the fiend. "Softly, softly, do not talk so big. I am as strong as thou art, and perhaps even stronger." "We shall see," said the old man. "If thou art stronger, I will let thee go—come, we will try" (Grimm & Grimm, 1884, p. 19). Rather than simply give up, the boy eagerly entered the contest for his life. He did not helplessly shudder with fear. By the end of the contest, the boy had defeated the man in a test of strength and then beat the man into submission. The next day the King came to the castle. Seeing the boy had survived three nights in the castle, he awarded the boy the treasure and his daughter's hand in marriage. The boy had failed to shudder with fear. He was fearless despite being confronted with many threatening situations and he was rewarded for doing so. The notion of remaining fearless and confronting

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things that threaten us can be a powerful message to combat a culture of fear, especially for children.

What can explain the Grimms' boy's repeated fearlessness? This Grimms' fairy tale uses examples from folklore to point out that fear is not a necessary outcome of threatening situations, but it fails to explain why. Insight into this question is provided to us by ancient Greco-Roman Stoic philosophers. Stoicism states that a happy life is one based upon logic and rational thought. They boldly assert that fear results not from situations themselves, but from one's interpretation of being helpless and out of control in those situations. Epictetus was a Greek Stoic philosopher. To Epictetus stoicism was more than a philosophy, it was a practical way of living one's life. In Epictetus' (125AD/1865) *Enchiridion*, he famously wrote over 50 maxims to guide one's life. The maxim most relevant to the thesis of this paper is: "Men are disturbed, not by things, but the views which they take of them" (Epictetus, V, 125AD/1865, p.218). This notion is echoed by the Stoic Marcus Aurelius. In *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, (Aurelius, 1749/2008) perhaps the most important lesson relevant to the boy's story is this: "Have these two thoughts ever the readiest in all emergencies: one, that 'the things themselves reach not to the soul, but stand without, still and motionless. All your perturbation comes from inward opinions about them'" (Aurelius, 1749/2008, p. 48). Despite being confronted with frightening and even life and death situations, Grimms' boy did not interpret the situations as hopeless. He chose to act and thus remained fearless.

Modern psychological science reinforces the notion that interpretation of a situation can, not only avoid the helpless shudder of fear, but can also lead to actions that are protective and self-empowering (Ellis & Harper, 1975; Meichenbaum, 1977). A close review of Grimms' fairy tale shows that in each threatening instance the boy seemed to prevent the sense of helplessness from occurring by viewing the situations without fear and taking action. The boy met the threat of the ghostly man by throwing him down the stairs. He met the uncertainty of situation with the hanged men by engaging them rather than waiting to see what would happen. When sensing the animals were becoming aggressive, the boy acted before they could. The boy responded to the frightening bowling situation by joining in the game. When threatened with death not once but twice in the castle, the boy acted to defend himself. Psychologist Donald Meichenbaum (1977) notes that taking action focuses one's thoughts away from destructive fear and helplessness and onto constructive self-empowerment. Grimms' boy demonstrated that time and time again. But if we all could only learn that lesson.

The theme of the power of interpretation over circumstance as taught by the Stoic philosophers is echoed and extended in English literature by John Milton, an English poet and philosopher. William Hayley called him the "greatest English author." Perhaps, his greatest work is "Paradise Lost" (1667). Milton not only endorses the importance of interpretation; he underscores the importance of acceptance in situations one cannot control. Much of the poem focuses upon the Devil's banishment from Heaven and relegation to Hell. In one of the most famous lines from Book I, the Devil contemplates his banishment to such a horrid place, but he quickly has two significant insights relevant to the thesis of this paper. First, he decides to accept a situation over which he has no control. He must now reside in Hell rather than Heaven not because he wants to, but because the almighty God has said that he must: "Be it so, since He who now is Sovran can dispose and bid what shall be right...force has made supreme...Whom thunder has made greater" (Milton, 1667, p. 96). Second, he controls that which he can by reinterpreting the situation within his own mind: "A mind not to be changed by place or time. The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of a Hell or a Hell of a Heaven. What matter where," (Milton, 1667, p. 96). In Milton's portrayal, the Devil understands that it is not the situation within which he finds himself that is important, it is his mind's interpretation of that situation. The realization that we may not always be able to control our circumstances, but that we can always control how we react to our circumstances seems an important lesson for children, as well.

Psychologists (Ellis & Harper, 1975; Meichenbaum, 1977) indicate that many of us embrace a toxic misconception that fear is an inescapable consequence of exposure to threatening or challenging situations. Evidence suggests that this misconception contributes to a virtual epidemic of fear-related psychiatric disorders that sustains a culture of fear and helplessness (Martin and Martin-Grauel, 2005). Grimms' fairy tale "The Story of a Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was" contradicts this misconception and demonstrates that one's interpretation of a situation matters more than the situation itself. It further shows us that action in the face of threat moves us from a state of helplessness to empowerment. Writing in *The Guardian*, journalist, Anna Bradley notes, "Today fairytales still nourish our imaginations... but these stories teach us important life lessons." This Grimms' fairy tale can serve to teach both children and adults an invaluable and universal psychological truth advocated by psychologists for decades and philosophers (Epictetus; Aurelius) for centuries which is that fear is a burden we need not assume. Perhaps we can borrow from the

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great American polymath Benjamin Franklin and conclude that fear, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder! And that such a lesson can be taught to not only children, but to us all, through the medium of the fairytale.

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