

1 Hearing Tales: The Behavioral Dimension

A major task in times of rapid cultural change is to develop images applicable to the personal dimension of the process, new models of humanness, emergent possibilities for specific individuals. I mean a truly imaginative grasp of what may be hoped for, expected, of Tom, Dick, and Harriet: increased sensitivities, the expansion of capabilities (including intelligence), more productive relationships with others and with the environment, the enhancement of mental and spiritual well-being, the development of individual creative capacity. Futuristics, a discipline intensely interested in change, has devoted itself primarily to technological, political, and social progress, and for the most part writers of science fiction have populated their worlds with creatures too strange to serve as actual models of human development. The problem has been exacerbated by the contention of the postmodernists that none of the great classic scripts by which we have lived is any longer available for our guidance.

My purpose is to suggest that there is a *role* here for traditional narrative—fairytale, folktale, legend, religious teaching-story. These genres are usually regarded as bearers of tradition. But they have also played—and continue to play—a significant role in stimulating the intellectual, spiritual, and psychological development of human beings, breaking rather than simply reinforcing the bonds of tradition. Jack Zipes has studied the transformation of fairytales in contemporary Europe into instruments of political subversion, and Ruth Bottigheimer has examined, among other feminist issues, the treatment of women's conversational patterns in the Brothers Grimm. (Fairytales have stimulated, if not supported, liberationist thinking.) So we can say that traditional narrative has sometimes been used to call attention to, dramatize, clothe with a certain imaginative grandeur various still-scantly recognized possibilities—places to go (including within), powers to develop, new moralities to explore, relationships to nurture, weaknesses to assess, sensibilities to refine.

That is to say, fairytales and folktales, which are so often grounded in the bizarre, the abnormal, even the supernatural, carry out certain creative functions as they summon their hearers out of the normal, the accepted, the rational, the modern to possibilities that are speculative but also experience-enhancing. The popular tale enormously expands our repertoire of possible behaviors—both by suggesting alternative patterns and by describing other worlds where these patterns might be tried out.

Our experience of the world as Westerners of the twentieth century (and that is all I have any claim to know about) is for the most part geared to very restricted purposes. Our sense of what is consequential embraces much but leaves out even more. The modern educational enterprise—a major determinant of all our later experience—is both inclusive and exclusive. In the eyes of many (local school boards, for example), the principal purpose of education is to control what immature individuals allow into their experience, even to restrict their selection to what is acceptable to the community or to some group of experts, and to limit sharply the range of acceptable responses. A very narrow map of reality is offered. Twentieth-century education has stressed the development of individuals with a strong sense of self, whose capacity to seek out and accept new experiences is distinctly limited, who are confined to what Emily Dickinson called “a world of circumstances.” Such individuals are at home in an area of proven and generally accepted physical and social facts, and the personality itself is seen as rigid, formed early, relatively unchanging. “Real-world” individuals have become accustomed to acquiring knowledge through the senses and by reasoning and kept records, and efforts to secure a place for intuition, dreams, and “voices” are rarely successful. The world for which they are trained finds its power in wealth, vocation, family, status, progress, but impulses to what is beyond the here and now are weak, and the possibility of other realities, or experiences radically different from what they are trained for, is denied or passed over by influential thinkers. Morality is seen pragmatically, as whatever keeps the system going, and individuals who depart from the norm are ignored or condemned. So much is left out! so many limitations accepted! so many resources ignored!¹

For some few individuals, however, education means enlarging the range of data which they admit to their mental files, encouraging responses well beyond those acceptable to the community, giving to their experience dimensions which even their teachers may know nothing of.² Within certain more daring frameworks it is acceptable to

redirect reflection, to reimagine truths thought to be fundamental, to alter the method by which basic data are collected, even to challenge (by suggesting alternatives) the assumptions that may lie behind reflection itself. It is such possibilities that we can think of as enhancing experience, and it is in this area that the human potentialities movement of the 1970s flourished. But in the rubble of deconstruction and postmodernism, the liberal—and often liberating—assumptions of that decade seem overly optimistic, too rigidly patterned.

Various tools are available for broadening experience beyond the limitations of the traditional curriculum or academically acceptable images of the mature personality. These means include poetry, intentional exploration of altered states of consciousness, contacts with other cultures, the crafts, and travel. And, as I have suggested, the sharing of legends, fairytales, and folktales has always had a place of special importance in this process, alerting readers and listeners in highly personal ways to *other* arrangements and interpretations of the stuff of experience. Such narratives have summoned both children and adults to forgotten or neglected possibilities of experience and have suggested the extraordinary potential of even the simplest situation to take on life-enhancing or transcendental implications. But above all traditional narratives have generated in certain readers and listeners the firm conviction that other worlds (i.e., patterns of experience) exist, the worlds where these stories take place, beyond the world in which most of us spend our lives, and that it is possible to enter these worlds and draw strength from them. Michael Metzgar speaks of the power of fairytales to induce an individual “to change his own way of being.”³ When this concept is firmly planted, a significant shift in perception occurs—away from judging fairytales by how well they conform to our world, to judging our world by how well it measures up to the possibilities offered by certain other realities.

Perhaps the most celebrated study of fairytales in recent decades has been the late Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment*. This book has sold widely and has been acclaimed by both parents and experts in child training and therapy. And many of Bettelheim’s analyses have literary importance as well—I am thinking especially of his remarks on Sindbad, on the frame story of *Thousand and One Nights*, and on “Tales of Two Brothers.” But it must also be observed that the pronounced Freudianism of Bettelheim’s work has raised many eyebrows.⁴ Part of my own quarrel is with Bettelheim’s view that there comes a time in the maturing process of every individual when he/she moves away from the fairytale mentality toward an adult view of the world.⁵ Adults, I believe, continue to benefit by the enrichment

and expansion of experience that popular tales offer. There is no time at which this material can be put aside as irrelevant. Old stories can call individuals at any stage of development to higher or richer experience.⁶

Closely related to this problem is Bettelheim's apparent acceptance of the values of the "modern world" as normative. His view that "fairy tales do not pretend to describe the world as it is" (25) reflects "modern" rational attitudes. The interest of this material—for me, anyway—lies precisely in the way it challenges norms and opens up new possibilities. Bettelheim, by contrast, stresses the importance of achieving a mature consciousness (23), enjoying "a rewarding, good life" (24), and finding one's place as an individual. He speaks of the need to develop the superego, learning to live in accordance with the reality principle, gaining "true" answers to one's questions (47), and finding out "what the world is really like" (45). He notes the importance of learning to view reality "in an adult way" (51), integrating the personality, and developing a self of which one can be "unambivalently proud" (69). The point is not that we are ready to reject these values now—nothing very solid is in place yet as a substitute. But we must recognize that they represent a *modern* way of thinking being challenged today by various postmodern thinkers and deconstructionists, whose views promise to introduce new elements into the debate about the use of traditional narrative.

I am aware that these terms—*postmodern* and *deconstructionist*—have many meanings, and many of them I welcome to this discussion. I am taking 'postmodernism' to represent, in its most essential form, the view that all the constructs/assumptions/philosophical positions/metanarratives that have been laid on us by the modern world are to be opened up to question once again. They are to be seen as no more valid than any of a number of other assumptions that might be accepted or adopted. This seems to imply that we are all becoming aware of the fragility of any narrative we construct or of any position we might assume from which to look at our world(s). And it suggests that myth speaks from a broad, authoritative point of view; fairytale more tentatively and with a narrower focus. 'Deconstruction' I take to mean the rejection of not only old patterns but the very notion that we must depend on patterns, the search for alternate possibilities. This does not mean—to me, anyway—cynicism or negativism. Rather, it evokes a hopeful, optimistic frame of mind, the faith that various ministructures can be found within which satisfaction lies and creative work can be carried out.

Now it may be objected that traditional narrative seems to be based on some rather rigid patterns. For the narrator this is in some sense true, although he/she can never know what positions an audience will bring to the hearing of the story. But the story itself invariably describes individuals who are *feeling their way*, who have not heard their own stories, and who have absolutely no way of knowing how they will turn out. So the premodern ignorance of how things are blends with the postmodern insistence that the patterns we thought were there are not really there, after all.⁷

Something more needs to be said about this process of blending the old and the new, and I make the following points:

1. Many of the important concerns of contemporary scholarship (especially in religion, psychology, social psychology, and ethics) as it studies emergent human experience are linked with motifs that also figure prominently in traditional narrative. The human will, the ongoing interpretation of everyday data which we all engage in, dreaming, problem-solving, networking, social behavior, the structure of the personality, relations with the environment, and all kinds of negotiating procedures are areas that have attracted the interest of both modern thinkers/researchers and traditional storytellers. As Maria Tatar observes, "fairy tales translate (however roughly) psychic realities into concrete images, characters, and events."⁸ This state of affairs suggests that many of the possibilities described in traditional stories are open to human beings in our world. This issue I will deal with throughout the book.

2. Another way of drawing the link between traditional tales and modern needs is to suggest that the structure of the situations described in old stories often replicates and intensifies the structure of ordinary experience. This may come as a surprise to those who believe that traditional tales are dominated by the supernatural or otherwise nonrealistic material. At the structural level, however, everything seems very sober indeed. Structural factors transcend the truth/fiction dichotomy. And when we grasp the structure of a story we may also grasp that story's life-enhancing implications. More about this in chapter 2.

3. We recognize that the characters, settings, events described in popular narrative also constitute a coherent world of their own, a world many fantasists have described and many very real individuals have chosen to inhabit. When such a choice is made, that other world can quickly envelop an individual and his life-goals.

In dealing with this third point, this third kind of connection

between human experience and traditional narrative, I may be allowed certain personal reflections. My own initial experience of world-expanding beyond the obvious things on the "maps" being supplied me was the result of contact with *My Bookhouse*, a collection of poems, fairytales and folktales, legends and biographies, illustrated delicately and evocatively, which was popular children's fare in the 1920s. I came into possession of a set at an extremely tender age, when emotions ruled my nature and when the closets and backstairs and attic rooms of my grandparents' house were all invitations to other realities. I still turn to these precious, battered volumes for orientation, refreshment, and inspiration: to open any volume of that set has always meant entering another world. No context I have inhabited has gone untouched by it. Among other things, *My Bookhouse* nurtured certain sensibilities which made particularly meaningful to me, when I was very young, the return of an uncle from the Middle East after many years' absence, and a further broadening of my sense of the range of experience that might be open to me. That man spoke often of a distant place called "Angora," and it is in Ankara (the more modern form of the name), strangely enough, that I write these words, over half a century later. No one else on the scene knew about the lines of force that were passing to me, a tiny five-year-old, from that splendidly romantic individual. Yet his appearance began to open up power sources I have continued to exploit all my life, and over the years he broadened enormously the physical context in which my life has been lived. These early experiences, all belonging to what Gendlin has called the "preconceptual" stage of development,⁹ motivated my later "professional" interest in old narratives, and they meant, inevitably, that professional concerns were never uncolored by personal involvement.

Since those very early days I have encountered many versions of what was so moving in *My Bookhouse* and my uncle's reappearance, none more poignant, more capable of enhancing the ordinary than a passage in C. S. Lewis's autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis has been discussing certain early childhood experiences that gripped him with extraordinary power and pushed out the bounds of his own experience—how the flowering of a currant bush stirred thoughts of the Garden of Eden; how Beatrix Potter's animal stories helped him "possess" the idea of Autumn; and how Longfellow's sagas and the music of Wagner aroused in him a sense of the North—something "cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote."¹⁰ These "stabs of Joy" finally coalesced into a settled way of looking at the world when he read George MacDonald's *Phantastes*:

Even when real clouds or trees had been the material of the vision, they had been so only by reminding me of another world; and I did not like the return to ours. But now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow (*Surprised by Joy*, 181).

"Bright shadow" goes back to Shelley's "Alastor" and was picked up from MacDonald by Lewis. It seems an appropriate designation for the transcendental region this book deals with, a world that embraces searches and quests, secret doors and casement windows, poverty and wealth, puddles and lamps, twilight and dawn—as well as grandmothers, flea-market types, craftsmen, poets, third sons, and sometimes encountered individuals who resemble Mozart. All for the most part very ordinary beings, but all messages from another world (if one chooses to postulate such a reality and so populate it), strangely, incomprehensibly significant to some real-world individuals.¹¹

A compelling case for admitting various abnormal dimensions to our experience has been made by contemporary social scientists. For example, it has been argued that anything like full integration of the human personality is possible only for those who can envision and move easily within multiple worlds. Thus the anthropologist Gregory Bateson has suggested that transcontextual gifts (the ability to move between different levels or types of reality) are a vital element in creativity and that inability to move across contexts is one of the roots of schizophrenia.¹² The Iranian analyst Reza Arasteh has observed that "all Western and Eastern ways of attaining maturity in the adult personality have recognized as an essential quality the ability to become aware of multiple realities." The individual who knows only one world lacks psychic material of sufficient richness and complexity; he/she cannot achieve a level of personality integration appropriate to the demands of the modern world.¹³ And the philosopher Paul Feyerabend argues that only by inventing dream worlds can we "discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit."¹⁴ Traditional world views, he feels, "can be used to modify, and even to replace the 'scientific' cosmologies of a given period" (46).

Traditional narrative describes many points of entry into other worlds. A careful examination or close reading of one's environment, such as modern education rarely equips individuals to undertake, is the initial experience-broadening activity for some people, allowing

them to examine the unusual capacities for observation demonstrated by many characters in traditional narrative and bringing to their attention many important but easily overlooked elements of their own worlds (chapters 3, 4). For others an expansion of experience is tied to various moves along whatever "edges" their worlds offer them, of which, of course, travel is an obvious symbol (chapter 5). For still others, the enhancement of experience means primarily the struggle against enchantment and all that threatens consciousness and alertness (chapter 6). Certain individuals realize this broadening and transcending and deepening as they come into contact with peculiar forms of power the bright-shadow world offers, especially the power of the will (chapter 7), or as they make various moral commitments that differ from those we make in this world (chapter 8). One price of the enlarging of experience which I am postulating may be a certain reimagining of the nature of the human personality, the unsettling realization that it is not nearly so stable as had been imagined (chapter 9), but one of the rewards is the discovery of rarely exploited sources of knowledge (chapter 10). Problem-solving techniques related to rarely used mental abilities are described in chapter 11, matters of behavior and style in chapter 12.

My sources for this study of some of the broader, more exotic ranges of human experience are traditional tales—folktales and fairytales, especially those that have reached us through Europe from South Asia and the Middle East. Occasionally I have cited analogues from East Asian and American Indian lore, as well as from various modern fantasists for whom other worlds are more than mere fictions. I have made considerable use of the great ethnic collections of story, such as *Ocean of the Streams of Story*, *Jataka*, and *Thousand and One Nights*, and more rarely of literary compilations, such as those of Basile and Boccaccio, most—if not all—of whose stories have a popular origin. However, I must emphasize that I am not writing here as a folklorist but as one interested in the structure of experience—in studying the elements of their lives that human beings deem significant and how they put these pieces together. This means sometimes using the most authentic available folkloric texts but at other times turning to material that is modern or literary in nature. (I am aware that the dichotomy I have set up here may not be to everyone's liking.) My chief criterion for including material is that it has appealed for extended periods of time to a variety of listeners, children and adults, naive and sophisticated, who have used these tales in thinking about their experience or in making their own imaginative reconstructions of reality. The key I use is not truth about origins (important

as that may be in other areas of narrative study) but the perception of many (as revealed by the broad acceptance of a tale) that bizarre as the events narrated may be they do say something profoundly important and appealing about the way we humans organize the material that life offers us. I could be more specific if I knew, myself, why certain of the original Oz books by L. Frank Baum fire the ardor and imagination of so many young readers whereas the continuations by Ruth Plumly Thompson make little if any impression at all—or why the Dr. Seuss books, for all the wisdom they offer, seem to have little of the charm or magic of Beatrix Potter. Perhaps the contrast has something to do with the distinction between fancy and imagination, or between what is “made up” and what is somehow always there.¹⁵

I am not the only one to have grappled with this question. The problem runs all through Roger Sale's *Fairy Tales and After*. Robertson Davies makes a distinction between genuine fantasy and “faked fantasy.”¹⁶ In his book on Gandhi, Erik Erikson observes that a parable may have “an intrinsic *actuality* much superior to any question of *factual* occurrence.”¹⁷ Jalal ad-Din Rumi, the great Islamic poet-mystic, notes in his *Mathnawi*, “I (had) found the reality: what (use to me) is the clue?”¹⁸ And Lewis observes, in his preface to MacDonald's *Phantastes*, that reading a certain text added nothing to his grasp of a particular theme since he had already “received the myth.”¹⁹ Once a myth becomes part of a person's belief-structure, it takes on a life of its own and its point of origin as a moral/psychological truth is of less importance than its power over that particular individual. Our interest here is in material that contributes to the experience-enhancing process of the individual whose life is surrounded and continuously enriched by traditional narrative, and truth here is a matter of proximity to actual human experience rather than source.

A question may be raised about the validity of any challenge to our normal, rational view of experience constructed from such a range of sources as I have just outlined. Can there be any agreement among widely scattered individuals about the nature of human experience, about other dimensions of reality that might be available to us? As George MacDonald observes in *At the Back of the North Wind*, “the fact is, we have different reports of the place from the most trustworthy people.”²⁰ On the other hand, children's games, which always replicate or anticipate some adult reality, follow similar patterns around the world. When we examine the folk arts, we observe that given similar materials and similar limitations of technique, similar products emerge in widely scattered parts of the globe. Certain Turkish and Tunisian tapestries of mine are invariably identified by my

friends as American Indian in origin. It has often been observed that mystics, whether Christian, Hindu, or Muslim, share similar experiences. Moreover, Jungian psychology pursues the collective unconscious around the world, and the Aarne-Thompson *Types of the Folktale* is a staggering monument to the existence of cultural parallels among folk of the most diverse regions, a convincing demonstration of the worldwide "migration of tales" so assiduously pursued by nineteenth-century scholars. A tale is not accepted into another culture unless it speaks to some important reality in that culture.²¹

I believe that the material I have collected may be of interest to cognitive behaviorists, who make connections between the picture we have of reality and our response to it, and who believe that we can act creatively on the basis of data that we receive. To those interested in children's literature, since I make a case for the continuing importance of certain genres normally associated only with the very young. To religious thinkers, who should always be listening for "rumors of angels." To futurists, who need to be reminded of the humane aspects of their discipline. And to general readers, who may find something here to encourage their continuing exploration of all that can enhance their own experience.