

## ***The Dove and the Dragon: Binding Adult Objectives and Children's Needs in Storytelling***

By Judith Black

[www.storiesalive.com](http://www.storiesalive.com)

Adult sensibilities and child needs infrequently travel the same orbit.

Adult: "Now sweetie, why don't I tell you that nice story about the little girl who loves visiting the dentist?"

Child: "No mommy! I want the one about the little girl who goes into the wrong house in the forest and the wolf eats her up."

Adult: "How about the lovely fairy tale where the princess frees the imprisoned prince and opens a shelter for the kingdom's peasants?"

Child: "How about the one where the beautiful princess marries the prince and lives happily ever after in a big rich castle."

Adult: "Let's tell the one about the kind dragon, who helps the villagers find water."

Child: "Na, I want the one about the slimy green dragon who rips up all the people into itty bitty bits and gobbles them up."

The chasm is so deep and wide that they opt for a video tape, a shander\* in storytelling circles! (Shander: A Yiddish expression meaning an act of debased dishonor.)

Adults edit and censor the stories they share with children. In so much as we are the adults these are our choices to make. Making them solely out of our wants and objectives instead of based in our children's needs, might result in robbing them of the greatest tool of transformation we have. What I would like to explore in this article are the following questions:

- Is there a difference between editing and censorship?
- Why do we make the choices we do for children?
- What is in the best interest of our young listeners?
- Is it possible to bind adult sensibilities and child needs in the same tale?

To edit is simply to prepare a story for sharing. All storytellers edit their material. The editing process helps us to create a consistent, sharp, work of art that represents who we are and what we care about. For instance, many of us have told the story of The Three Billy Goats Gruff. If what you love is the trickster element in how the younger siblings handle a potentially dangerous situation that is what you will emphasize, or edit for in your telling. If the physical power of the troll is what gets your heart going, that is what you will focus on. If the environmental plunder of the valley, and goats now present need to now exploit yonder meadow for grass, is what speaks to you, you will edit to emphasize this point. If all details were equally explored and emphasized, a 5 minute story could turn into a dull version of War and Peace. We edit for clarity and to bring home the message we care about. To censor is to suppress details and themes we find objectionable. If you were a member of the Old Norwegian Folklore Church (an original

creation) and your god was a troll, you might find the one depicted in the Three Billy Goats Gruff abhorrent. To pass on an image of a violent, greedy troll would be nothing less than a transgression against your faith, a regular shander. Indeed you would edit, change the troll, for the children in your community. It would be the goats thoughtless gluttony and poor planning that perpetrated the problem and their clear trespass that stimulated an altercation. This is fine. Editing does not turn into censorship until you forbid the hearing of other versions.

“No one has the right to spread such filth and lies about our savior. We will burn all those misrepresentations. Long live the Troll.”

When you deal with your religious story, whether from the Bible, the New Testament, the Koran, or the Dhammapada as absolute TRUTH, then conversely the stories and beliefs of others must be lies. If the Lord created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, then how could the world possibly have come from a broken egg or rest on a turtle’s back? You find yourself banning other interpretations of creation and the Three Billy Goats Gruff, from family, community, nation, and if possible, the world. This is censorship.

Why do we feel the need to censor? This topic is best left for psychological journals, but it would behoove every member of our community to ask ourselves if we do it and why. On more than one tombstone reads the words “He was right!” The desire and need to be ‘right,’ ‘correct,’ ‘appropriate’ is so pervasive we spend a large of our lives validating our choices rather than exploring those of others. Think about the most common arguments you have with the people closest to you. Did you have the better path for getting from one location to the next? Did you have the better preparation techniques for browning the onions? Did you not get your undergraduate degree in the better subject for future growth? Is not the God of your choice The G-d of gods?

Once at a potluck a storyteller had just finished telling her version of Owl, the Haitian tale collected by Diane Wolkstien from her book *The Magic Orange Tree*. Our teller made no claim to represent Haitian culture, but simply said she had been touched by the tale and wanted to retell it through her eyes. As she neared the end, instead of retelling the plot as Diane had collected it, she created a different ending.

The girl leapt upon a horse and chased her love rather than passively allowing him to ride off into the sunrise. A Simmons College Library School graduate listened in horror and announced to the crowd “She can’t do that!” He went on to explain that the words in print were a final version and must not be played with or altered. As a librarian, that’s where he had put his time, faith and energy. Even though this was clearly a folk tale, he would not accept the legitimacy of another path.

Our insecure natures leave us feeling vulnerable about our choices. This then turns into censorship of the ‘other’ and rigidity results that narrows the stories we are willing to share with children. If we accept that we live in a world where there is room for many interpretation of this life, then we must share the stage of legitimacy with all peoples. If,

as Jane Yolen proposes, a folk tale is a window into another culture, there is no better ambassador than a story. If we censor people's stories, we are closing windows. We are denying our children the opportunity to know their world.

Some of us listen and watch and tell the stories that will help children grow out of a place where they are stuck and into new possibilities. Some of us tell stories that inspire children to honor the best in themselves and share it.

Some of us tell stories that value a child's experience and present it so we will have a window into their world. Some of us tell stories that offer children a window into times, places and people that they would not otherwise have known. Some tell stories that act as an ombudsman. Stories can be powerful, powerful tools for human growth and communication. Most of us simply tell entertaining stories. This too is a noble end. If however, we pride ourselves on telling stories that touch children deeply and move them, then we must begin where they live. This is often an uncomfortable place for adults.

If we are to believe both our developmental psychologists and the ancient tales that have survived and thrived through the centuries, then children yearn for broad, graphic, testimonials of their inner most feelings, acts of justice, the challenge of their physical world, and their unique visions and imagination. These tales often challenge or offend adult sensibilities.

Most of us prefer stories that model peaceful, healthy, loving ways of being. This is a well intentioned motivation for sharing tales with children. Since our world contains only elements of these objectives we must somehow help children find their way to them.

Stories can help us find a byway from pathos to activator, but the road is not like a simply slide down a rainbow. How many of you have seen a picture of a healthy, fit, thin, attractive person next to a product advertisement? If only you purchase what they are hocking, this will be you. You look down at yourself, disgusted by slack muscle, layers of drooping fat, unplucked facial hair. You look back at the advertisement and a bitter laugh wells up in your throat. "Right" you snicker and head straight for the refrigerator. It is no easier for a child to maneuver their way from a well of fear, anger, or self doubt towards being a peaceful, healthy, loving person, than it is for you to become that model on the advertisement. Just as we need to see clear, incremental, doable, actions that will bring us closer to the healthy, fit, thin, attractive person we want to be, the child needs to see their issues fully acknowledged and clear, doable models for ascension offered through the tales we tell. The child wants stories that acknowledge and help her play out fears, anxieties, insecurities, and nurture fantasies. Stories that do not take people from where they are cannot lead them to any other place.

A number of years ago I wrote a story for a little boy in my nursery school class. His mother would come to pick him up each day with the new baby sister cradled in one arm and other filled with baby accoutrmo. His mother would ritually crow: "Hi Gabie! Come and kiss your baby sister." Gabe would obediently sidle over, kiss the baby and promptly

bang the next child he saw on the top of the head. "I don't know what's gotten into him," the mother would claim apologetically. After a few years of teaching older siblings, I had a good idea, and created the story "Dumb Baby" for my little friend. The story, about a mom, a big brother, and a new baby sister, begins:

"Hi, my names Jamil and I am this many (holds up 5 fingers) years old. I like sunny days, and ice cream that stays on the cone and my pet stuffed mouse Frederick. I don't like rainy days, ice cream that falls off the cone, and I'll tell you guys a secret. I don't like my dumb baby sister. When I get real real mad at her I sing this song:

Dumb little baby  
Dumb, dumb, dumb  
Doesn't know know her finger  
from her bum!"

Jamil goes on to tell about how he's waken every morning by the baby's cries, and because his mother is so busy with the infant he has to do everything for himself. We see him getting dressed, proudly mismatching socks, maneuvering turtle necks, and tricking his Osh Kosh overall straps into coming to him. We feel his anger and sadness as his mother feeds the baby, and ignores his attempts to get her attention. He's left to fend for himself, and makes his own breakfast. We experience his pride as he masters tasks he never had to negotiate prior to the 'dumb baby,' and finally we see the mother, acknowledge his new skills and ally him as a help in caring for and raising this baby.

The story is enormously popular with young children because it takes them from where are, feeling rejected and angry and leads them carefully to where they can be, identifying with the parenting role.

Many years ago I was banned in 124 schools by the Western Suburban Arts Council because of this story. The reviewer said that the language, "bum" to be specific, was inappropriate and foul, and story was simply not nice.

"Nice" is not a feeling this child was having, and judging from the parents full review of the work, the child's authentic emotion was not something she wanted to touch with a ten foot pole. Alas, you can't lead anyone to sunshine unless you meet them in the rain where they stand.

Children like boogers. Boogers are gross. They are congealed phlegm, dried and hardened viscid secretions of mucous membranes. They are full of bacteria. They are yucky. They are scatological terms reserved for the doctor's office and the sandbox. They are where 5 year old kids are 'at.' If you want to take a five year old on a journey, they can easily be enticed by boogers. Now if your middle and end content is merely more boogers....gross me out! But, if you use this sure fire enticement to take them from where they are to a new place, hurrah! Johnny Moses, a Native American teller from the American Northwest introduced us all to the Boogie Woman. This fair dame resides in the woods where she has determinedly rejected bathing, hair combing, middle class

deportment and most traditional personal hygiene practices. She does however have a formidable appetite for unwashed children. By the stories end there is not a child in the audience who won't carefully brush her teeth and wash his face and hands after every meal. In addition, the story offers its listeners the vicarious experience of making a poor decision, seeing the result and mending their ways. Finally, a child, and a rather anal compulsive one at that, is the heroine of this tale. If Bettelheim's theory plays out and all children become the heroes and heroines of the fairy tales and folklore they hear, then the old Boggie Woman just raised their sense of success in this world. Isn't all that worth a few boogers?

Adult sensibilities, left unharnessed, have produced a long series of insipid, 'feel-good' tales that children will tolerate, but probably not grow on. Both contemporary literature and ancient lore have fallen victim to middle class taste, the Christian, Muslim, or Jewish zealot, and the political correctness enforcers. Each group has a profound motivation for determining what children should hear. None of their motivations, unfortunately, are based in a desire to help children transform from where they are to place of greater possibilities.

Middle class values, in their desire to not offend anyone and make all material accessible, have diluted story content from a spicy fricassee to a cream of wheat mush. From the trading of words like 'death' to 'passing on' and softening of an evil action results, they have created a road map of behavioral expectation that draws children in a circle rather than to an elevated plane. Their sanitized folklore and fairy tales leave Little Red Riding Hood undigested, evil brothers with all their limbs in tack, and conniving step mothers with in-law apartments in the castle. They leave us with a world that has no hard and fast moral order because mature adults usually prefer the mercy of Shakespeare's Portia to the Old Testament's blazing justice.

This is a perfectly legitimate preference for adult stories, but if we want to move children towards this moral plane we must begin our journey where they live. That place is fraught with all the demons that can be conjured from the life of a small and powerless being struggling to gain experience, love, and affirmation in this big world.

Children, as Bruno Bettelheim pointed out in *The Uses of Enchantment* learn in black and white before they learn in gray and beige. They want strong and clear borders in their world outlining good and bad, what is permissible and what is forbidden. They want that step-mother, not in a tasteful condo over the castle, but to get her due. Losing her eyes to the birds seems perfectly just. She could not perceive her step daughters beauty, and so she does not deserve the gift of vision. Another step mother lived by the machinations of her vanity, and so dancing herself to death in red hot slippers feels a perfectly just end for her. Children need to know that they live in a morally principled and ordered world before they can begin to make exceptions to the rule. Traditional folk and fairy tales offer that clearly defined world. If you have ever worked in a classroom where rules of behavior are clearly posted, you will have experienced this following episode.

A child disobeys the rules. The teacher asks her peers, “What shall we do with Susie, since she cannot seem to follow our rules?” Left to the wisdom and kindness of her fellow kinder gardeners Susie would most likely be pulled apart by 4 ferocious horses, burnt at the stake, or covered with honey and left for the fire ants.

Children like an ordered universe that resonates with ‘fairness’ as they know it. If you disobey the rules, you pay the price. The longer we function in the world, the broader our experience, the more we stretch and accommodate, but wouldn’t you like your children to begin in a place with a kernel of good and right as the core of their universe?

The ever popular ‘Arthur’ series is a fine example of contemporary middle class mush. It is modern literature about lovable characters who all learn important lessons about things like sharing, manners, and kindness by the stories end. These stories are well written, illustrated, hold the attention of young children, and are generally approved of by adults. Their themes are noble and well executed. There is only one important question you might choose to ask. Are your children more sharing, better mannered, or kinder to one another after hearing these stories? If the answer is “no” or more politely “not really” or tastefully “I’m not quite sure, but they like them” then it is time to evaluate if your ‘good taste’ or middle class sensibilities are a substitute for your children’s more primal needs. Arthur is sweet and entertaining, but does he have the power to transform your children’s lives?

We can remain in the realm of Arthur, or nicified fairy and folk tales, and no harm will be done. There is though the possibility of moving a child from that place of fear, anxiety, unlovableness, to a territory where they feel safe, empowered and loved. There is the world where nurtured fantasy turns into creative problem solving. This potential can only be mined if you meet the child where they are rather than where you’d like them to be.

The ‘not nice’ or less palatable parts of stories often resonant with emotional truth for children. Another point Bettelheim made in *The Uses of Enchantment* is that a child needs their issues acknowledged and played out on the big screen of ‘story.’ From fear of abandonment to Oedipal jealousy, the ancient tales accept the legitimacy of these issues, create a scenario based on their reality and work through them towards a conclusion that leaves the young person identifying with a hero or heroine who has slay their emotional dragon. Anyone who has worked with young people will have experienced how deeply attached they become to certain stories. They will ask for them again and again until one day when you offer the tale they will look at you querulously and say. “Na, I don’t want to hear that old story any more.” What ever issue it was helping them with has been resolved and the tool, no longer needed.

As a nursery school teacher in Brookline, I saw more than one child cling like a panicked leech to their mothers leg at the days start. The parent would patiently explain. “Now honey, you are just going to play here with your friends for a little while, then mommy will come back and get you.” The grip now begins to choke off the parents blood supply. “Sweetie, mommy will come back.” The leg now turns blue and the child’s nail marks break skin.

“Kid, do we have to go through this every morning? I’m coming back, now let go!” As the teacher I could have echoed the parents’ pledge, but the mother’s return was not the real issue. The real issue was that this little girl was going to be dropped off again tomorrow and the next day and the next. She would have to conquer her fear of abandonment and learn to survive this new environment. Now to explain to little Christy “Honey, you are simply suffering abandonment anxiety. This is a normal developmental stage. You’ll get over it,” might have proven less than useful. I did however set the tone for the three hours that Christy was with me, and during that time I was careful to tell the story of Hansel and Gretel, which became her favorite for almost half a year. You see these children were not dropped off at a tasteful middle-class nursery school, they were dumped, left, rejected and ejected into a child eating, witch infested forest. This was a slight amplification of how Christy felt each morning. Now no one said to Hansel and Gretel “Don’t worry kids, your folks will be back for you in no time at all.” That was not the point. Christy’s mom or dad would be there to pick her up, but she would be left again the next day and the next, and like Hansel and Gretel, she would somehow have to survive in this hostile environment.

What better role model than these two urchins? Without the aid of physical beauty or magic (both Disney additions to fairy tales) to draw others to them, they survived and thrived, utilizing powers that every child has access to. Their ability to maintain a loving and supportive relationship and the use of their wits got Hansel and Gretel out of those woods, and they would serve little Christy just as well in the nursery school setting. Stories offer us the opportunity to acknowledge her reality and model a means by which she can conquer her demons. Stories drawn upon the legitimacy of the child’s world allows them to explore their issues unthreatening milieu. Given this latitude the story often provides a catharsis to reverberate through and deeply touch the listener. The starkness of the tales and level of cruelty often shocks or makes adults uncomfortable. Try to look past your own sensibilities and see if they address your children or students where they are.

Whereas Bettelheim uses the traditional model of fairy tales, I have discovered that we can create original tales, shaped upon the specific needs of our children and students to help draw them through issues.

Here you have the ability to bind your objectives and sensibilities with a child’s needs. I don’t like gratuitous violence. As a matter of fact, I am not a big fan of violence in most forms. Now, I recognize that simply being small and young, (ie. a child in a big persons world) brings up threatening feelings.

The Three Billy Goats Gruff (remember them from the beginning of this article) addresses this reality. The troll is bigger, tougher, and meaner, than that little goat. Children recognize the troll. He is us! The story in its traditional form has each goat not fighting but tricking the troll into leaving them alone.

This is a wonderful power that is always available to the small. The troll when finally facing a being of equal strength (the third Billy Goat Gruff) could get his due, be knocked

off the bridge and driven downstream in a tide that will probably drown him. Here is where my objections and objectives clash with the traditional. The balance of justice requires that evil be balanced by punishment, but the Troll never really hurt anyone. He just bluffed the Gruffs (so to speak). Here then is an opportunity to blend my adult sensibilities with child needs. Since the Gruffs have indeed proven that they are smarter why not model a little violence prevention.

The third Billy Goat Gruff stood at one end of the bridge.

The Troll stood at the other.

They looked each other up and down.

They looked each other all around.

Neither of them decided to flee

Cause they both liked what they did see.

The charge began:

But neither caused any harm.

They ran into each others arms.

They reopened the bridge and charged a toll.

Pay your quarter or deal with the troll.

They bought a house big enough for all their needs.

With a grassy yard for all to feed.

This is not an epic attempt at catharsis, but it does accept the powerlessness of being small, model a way to survive (cunning) and integrates adult objectives (peaceful conflict resolution). The story of Dumb Baby (available on Glad To BE Who I Am) begins in the heart of the child's feelings and takes him to a place that developmental psychologists would say is available to five year olds. This is a place of peace and growth. The stories on OPPS MA: Songs and Stories of Family Life do this same thing with daily issues. The stories accept the powerful emotions that are part of daily conflict over things as simple as waking up, getting dressed and eating breakfast, and model ways of being to help families grow into new possibilities. The world of child needs and adult wants can be bound. It is our job to move them from that hard place of anger, rejection, fear, or failure to one where the character has new skills and options. If the images make adults squirm, we can only beg them to look beyond their own discomfort and observe the young listeners. Evil must be vanquished, good rewarded and characters must embody our problems before they can help to solve them.

We have the power of transformation if we are willing to use it.