Fairytales come true
How fairytales can help your child’s development and their importance in our lives today.

By Ann Gadd

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.”

Albert Einstein, Scientist (1879-1955)

Once upon a time there wasn’t Barney, The Jetsons, Johnny Bravo or Dexter. There were fairytales. While these programs will be forgotten in the short term, fairytales have remained an essential part of our culture throughout history.

Folk tales passed down from generation to generation long before your average man or woman could read and write. In the days before DSTV, Playstation and computer games, fairytales fulfilled the role of entertainment. Initially, with themes of cannibalism, rape and even torture, the stories were not designed for children, but rather for adults who could gain insight and understanding about their lives through the telling of the tales. For example in some early versions of Cinderella, the prince has his wicked way with her while she lies asleep poisoned by her jealous stepmother and she wakes only when she is giving birth to twins!

The history of fairytales

Gradually, what had been an oral tradition became a written one, when people such as Charles Perrault (in the late 1600’s), and the Grimm’s brothers (1700’s) started transcribing them. Particularly when the Grimm’s brothers were rewriting them for the English market, they removed or altered some of the more unpleasant aspects in the tales. Later, around the early 1800’s, Hans Christian Andersen, not only wrote down existing tales, but created many of his own. Andersen himself had had a particularly tough life and many of his heroes, such as The Ugly Duckling, are thought to be representative of his own life.
Why these tales have survived over the centuries is testimony to their inherent value, and symbolic reference to aspects of our lives and growth as people, sadly lacking in most of the cartoons we see today. (However Walt Disney had a deep understanding of the stages and symbols in fairytales and recreated the formula in his classics such as The Lion King and Bambi).

What is interesting is that many fairy tales with similar plots and characters are to be found in almost all cultures throughout the world, from the Native American Indian folklore through to the Chinese tales. The Chinese can lay claim to the oldest known written version of Cinderella which dates back to the ninth century A.D. Yet in spite of not having any written method of recall for many years, they have withstood the test of time and lucky children throughout the world, continue to listen in awe to them.

**Gender Stereotyping**

In recent times, much of the popularity of fairy stories was quelled by feminists who claimed that the roles of males and females in fairy stories were too gender stereotyped. Some institutions banned them, as did certain schools, in an attempt not to create incorrect or unpopular/politically incorrect perceptions in children. For it seemed on the surface, that the overall objective of the stories was to create a kind of women who was vulnerable, helpless, exceptionally passive, naïve and in need of the assistance and strength (protection) of men, making them less than “equal.” It was this attempt to have men and women portrayed as equals that threatened the demise of the fairytale.

It is completely understandable how this stereotyping could offend and be seen as detrimental, to women striving for empowerment and independence. However, if you can see the roles as simply archetypes rather than portraying actual people, and if you can understand the value of these archetypes in what they teach us, then characters and their functions can no longer be seen as specifically demoralizing to a gender but rather as archetypes who reveal a stage in our process of integration and development which we can relate to, no matter what our sex.

Archetypes were used by Carl Jung to describe aspects of behavior that we have come to associate with types of people. One only has to say for instance that someone is a “real princess,” for everyone to understand what type of person one is dealing with.
Likewise, we know exactly what is meant when we describe someone as a “computer nerd, a couch potato, a matriarch” and so on. It stands to reason then that there are archetypes that best describe our emotional/spiritual growth – literally where we are at. Fairytales have been used over centuries to describe this path, and consequently the familiar archetypes appear time and time again in them, such as the wicked witch and the noble, brave prince.

Realists also argue that fairytales fill children with whimsical fantasy and that they would be better off dealing with concrete, provable, physical facts. Yet it is only through seeing what we cannot see, imagining what is not physically real and believing in the unbelievable dream, that we can reach beyond ourselves and achieve the imaginable. Great men by their nature have always imagined beyond the existing confines of their fellow man. Fairy Tales assist us to do just that.

**What then are the benefits of fairytales over the average cartoon?**

- Firstly, if your children are lucky enough to have you read to them, it’s quality time which will certainly enhance their sense of well-being and feeling of being loved and calm them down before bedtime. While Goldilocks may not hold the same attraction as a good novel for you, it is a way to unwind after a long day in what appears to be a simple story and brings you a lot closer than watching TV in separate rooms.

- Secondly it’s a chance to improve their ability to create and imagine. My children cherished this time, and I do believe that in occasionally getting them to finish telling the tales using their own words and imagined endings, or even making up their own stories to pass the time on long car trips, it did help stimulate their creative ability and imagination. (They have both won at least one award for creative writing and their ability to “think out of the box” and problem solve, owes much I believe, to this simple practice). As Albert Einstein, one of the greatest physicists of all time and best known for his theory of relativity, said: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” Unless we can imagine something first, we can never invent or create the world we want to inhabit. So use these stories to stimulate your child’s ability to imagine and problem-solve. Once the children are lost in the forest, ask your child how they could find their way out, given only
some pebbles or the stars. Allow them to figure out creative solutions even if in your mind they are always practical.

- Thirdly reading fairytales helps children to identify with the most common theme in nearly all these tales – namely the ability for the victim to become the victor. Against all odds, be it poverty, such as Jack in Jack and the Beanstalk, starvation as in Hansel an Gretel or dealing with abusive step-parents or parents such as in Cinderella or Snow-white, the tales show that it is possible to become the hero/ine in your own life story. No matter who is trying to do what to you, the tales show we can find the inner strength to emerge victorious and live in our own castle happily ever after. They also show that while there is help available, ultimately each hero/ine has to draw on their own strength and courage if they are to succeed.

- Fourthly, most of the stories feature help that comes in the form of a guide, in the guise of talking birds or animals such as Puss in Boots, funny little men such as the dwarves in Snow-white or other humans such as the ogre’s wife in Jack and the Beanstalk. This teaches children that there is a higher level of help available to call upon, which may come to us in many guises and forms. It doesn’t matter what religion or belief system you adhere to, help is available, we only have to be open to asking and receiving it.

- Sometimes the stories show that it is necessary to go against those in authority if we are to find our own identity. This is not to say that fairytales encourage disobedience, they certainly don’t, however there are times where children have to make a decision or act in a way that shows they have to think for themselves. Hansel’s mother certainly did not want him to return home from the forest, however his clever planning ensured that he was able to do so and in so doing save not only his own life, but that of his sister as well. While Jack’s mother was furious when he traded their cow for a few magic beans, Jack showed that he was able to think beyond the limitations imposed by his mother and ultimately through this decision, to financially support them both.

- Lastly, they also teach children that the world is not always a perfect place and that bad things do happen to good people. However they also show that in the end good always wins over evil. (I particularly like Roald Dahl’s version where Red Riding Hood sports a trendy wolfskin jacket after killing the wicked wolf.) It also shows how from the very worst situations, the very best can emerge and
that love and forgiveness is often the key to this. In many (though not all), versions of Cinderella she forgives her wicked step-sisters and step-mother and actually invites them to live with her in her castle. They teach, to quote Hans Christian Andersen, that: “Every man's life is a fairy-tale written by God's fingers.”

In helping our children to understand the lessons demonstrated in fairytales we teach them how to make the fairytale in their own lives come true.

**Common Symbols in fairytales and what they mean**

Fairytales are rich in symbology and as with many sacred teachings can also be understood on a number of different levels. While telling the tales to your children, it may be interesting to understand what some of the major symbols that appear across many fairytales are all about.

**Witches:** Traditionally in fairytales witches represent the dark or lower side of ourselves, or psychologically our shadow sides and all we have repressed. (In reality witches, from the word *wica* meaning wise, were herbalists, healers and often midwives) and not the dark force they have become in these tales. From a child’s point of view witches could be seen to be that which they feel bad or ashamed about within themselves and what tempts them to act inappropriately. Often used in place of witches, are step-mothers, which have a similar meaning, although being a step parent infers that they are not truly part of the hero/ine, much as our ego nature is not the true nature of ourselves.

**Birds:** Birds, because of their ability to fly, are often seen as messengers from higher realms – a way we humans can connect or receive messages from the Divine. They also represent the ability to soar or rise above our problems.

**The handsome prince:** A prince symbolizes the royal or divine nature of ourselves that through love raises our lower state of being. Consequently children can be shown that through love we access the very highest aspects of ourselves and that loving unconditionally can transform us.

**The forest or wood:** Sometimes the forest offers protection, as in the story of Snow-white who is hidden in the forest by the woodcutter who does not want to kill her.
They can also be seen to be threatening and impenetrable as in the story of Hansel and Gretel who get lost in the wood. Overall though, the forest which is linked to the feminine principle is seen to be that which offers protection and refuge — a sort of safe time-out space where we go to deal with the changes that are being forced upon us. In childhood this safe space can be a tree-house, a corner of a room or special place in a garden.

Ann Gadd is author of *Climbing the Beanstalk - The hidden messages found in best-loved fairytales*, to be released by Findhorn Press UK in July 2007