

## Changing Traditional Tales

To understand our obligations to traditional tales, we need to understand two contrasting aspects of oral tradition:

- The fluid nature of traditional tales
- Their embodiment of timeless cultural wisdom.

### The Fluid Nature of Traditional Tales

We can hold the published version of a **literary story** - by Poe, for example - in our hand. When we do, we hold the entire story. To be sure, background information about Poe and his times might help us interpret the story, but there's little doubt that "the story" is a **welldefined entity**.

In the case of an **oral, traditional story** like "Cinderella," however, "the story" is a misleading phrase. "Cinderella" has been told in **thousands of variants** for hundreds of years, in myriad cultural settings. If one teller first told it centuries ago in China, his/her listeners passed it on, transforming it (consciously or not) to fit slightly different social and historic conditions.

Each new teller, furthermore, began a **new line of transmission** and transformation of the story. Many such lines exist at once, both within China and without.

The story" of Cinderella, then, cannot refer to anything we hold in our hand. The traditional story exists the way a ripple in a pond exists - expanding continually in more than one dimension, changing shape as it reaches each lily pad, submerged stone, and contour of the shore. To say it another way, a written (or recorded) version of a traditional story represents the totality of the story only as a snapshot of a person represents the person: one moment, frozen in time, of a dynamic, changing entity.

This is the argument for changing folktales. But does this fluidity of oral tales mean that anything goes? Since there is no ghost of Poe to cry foul when I change "Cinderella," should I change the story in any way that I see fit? If there is no author, is there no authority?

## Preserving the Wisdom

Even though the traditional tale is multi-dimensional, it does have limits and boundaries. No one person is "humanity," but humanity has its genetic constraints.

The tale, while changing and evolving, has

- content
- an embedded history.

Both of these are part of its meaning. If we tell a traditional tale, we'd be foolish to omit **what has made the tale worth telling**, much of which is unconscious: a beautiful blend of powerful symbols that speaks to people on many levels. If it's been worthy of transmission for so long, why would anyone want to change it at all? This is the argument for preserving folktales.

## Standing On the Continuum

Which motto do we follow? "The tale is fluid, give it your own shape," or "the tale is wiser than you; pass it on intact?"

Do we have to split the storytelling world into two warring camps, each under one of these banners?

My answer is simple. Choose both. At the same time.

We can view these two mottos as **ends of a continuum**, not as absolute positions. Wherever we stand on the continuum, we can feel both ends of it pulling us at all times:

One side pulls us to be in touch with the **roots** of the traditional tale, nourished by its wisdom, respectful of its ancient beauty. The other side pulls us to help the story be **alive**, now, for the current listeners.

To make the story live, we need to change it. If you don't understand Chinese, hearing it in the "original" language won't help you experience what a "Cinderella" variant meant to a Chinese audience of four hundred years ago.

Even if I taught you medieval Chinese and could reconstruct a Chinese village of that time and let you live in it for a week, your experience of the story would still be different from the original. For the original listeners, the tale was told in daily life, not as part of a recreation of something exotic.

For us, then, there is **no** possibility of a pure, **unaltered version** of a folktale - even if we are able to identify how it was told at one moment in its history. We must change the story in some way. We can preserve the exact **form** only at the expense of its contextual meaning. We can preserve the exact **contextual meaning** only at the expense of changing the form:

- words
- gestures
- other particulars of expression.

From this, it follows that we must make choices about what to preserve and what to change.

### **What to change?**

How do we choose what meanings to keep and what to change?

My personal formula is first to educate myself about the folktale:

1. I find many written and recorded traditional versions of the story.

2. I learn about the culture that gave rise to the version I want to tell, through:

- books
- audio and video recordings, and, where possible,
- talking to members of the culture.

3. Then, once I've done as much research as I'm willing to do at that time, I just tell the tale the way I think it should be told. I'm like a translator into my native language. I don't always understand all the nuances of the speaker's language. But what I do understand, I can restate in a way that speakers of my language will be likely to comprehend.

## **Making choices**

We all find **meanings** - conscious or not - in a traditional tale. We all make **changes** in the tale (or pass along the changes made by collectors, translators, editors and re-tellers) - consciously or not - in order **to convey those meanings** to non-traditional audiences. It's reasonable to differ with the choices another teller makes. It's unreasonable to pretend that it is not necessary to choose.

### *To tell a traditional tale*

Acknowledge your dual roles as

- a water-carrier
- a jug-maker.
- Learn about the tale.
- Decide what meanings you care about.
- Imagine your intended audience.
- At this point, simply tell the tale in a way that helps your audience
- Breathe life into the meanings you chose.

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