

12 January 2011



What are modern children to make of *the* Santa Clause, when they may see dozens of them in one day in a shopping centre, weeks before Christmas? What about the Easter Bunny? How well do we manage mythology for our children?

We tell our children fairy tales for a number of reasons: to help them make sense of the world; because we like to revisit stories we were told as children; to speak directly to their unconscious with primal images; to entertain them or get them to sleep.

Some of the stories we hope have enduring value for our offspring, such as the stories which come from or relate to our own spiritual beliefs and/or religious affiliations. However, these are often the stories children will reject in their teens or twenties. Other stories, such as the ones about Father Christmas, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy, we ourselves will soon tell them were only temporary, or their older siblings or school mates will. We hope they survive the shock.

If we tell children at some stage that the Easter Bunny is “just a story”, what are they to make of the stories, and the characters in those stories, which we hope they will believe in for the rest of their days and pass on to the next generation? Such ‘stories’ include what we tell them about the way society works: the justice system, the government, commerce, neighbourliness, etc. They also include cautionary tales, morals and education, such as: doing the right thing; being honest, fair, diligent and patient; about how to be in relationships at work and at home, in public and in private, with strangers and with loved ones; about values and how to live up to them; about making judgements and learning from the consequences.

It is a shame that in this country, as in the USA and parts of Europe, the gift-giving Saint Nicholas has been so thoroughly hijacked by businesses. He used to only give anything to those who had been good in the preceding twelve months and often the gifts were things the children needed and they were almost always small gifts. Depending on where you lived, if you had been exceptionally naughty, you might end up receiving a bag of coal or a switch symbolising the hiding Saint Nicholas thought was appropriate.

I have seen the devastating aftermath of parents who taught their daughter to live a Christian life, obeying the Ten Commandments, including fidelity in marriage and then indulging in extra-marital affairs themselves. The girl suffered a major emotional breakdown and ended up in a mental hospital for the rest of her life. Children rely on the veracity of these stories and being exposed to the lie can be more than they can bear; although some may successfully shrug the revelation off.

Many of the stories we tell children contain heroes and villains. Apart from teaching about good and evil, they provide role models. Some have children themselves overcoming adversity or triumphing over wicked characters, as in ‘Hansel & Gretel’ and ‘Little Red Riding Hood’.

There are also stories of longing and the quest that must be embarked upon to reach fulfilment of that longing. Instant gratification is a modern phenomenon.

Stories told by adults to children used to play a role in gradually 'initiating' children into the realities of the world (as the adults see those realities), hopefully at an appropriate pace. In a few cultures this is still the case. These days, children can be deliberately or inadvertently exposed to information and images for which they are ill prepared and which can stimulate them to grow up too fast and, probably, confused. It is also obscene that those with none other than commercial interests will deliberately entice children into looking and behaving like grownups, even slutty ones, and into demanding from their parents that they be allowed to eat junk. The control over the mythologies to which our children are exposed has been largely taken out of the hands of parents and educators.

It is very difficult now for parents to bring up their children in a manner which they (the parents) consider appropriate and at a pace they consider healthy. Children are directly advertised to and that is wrong. Those with only commercial interests should not be the ones creating stories by which children learn about themselves and the world and which will form the basis of their tastes and decisions, perhaps for the rest of their lives.

We all need to have our lives enriched through imagery and story and no-one more than children. Parents must work hard to regain the upper hand when it comes to what goes into their children's minds and bodies.