

“The Fairy Tale as a Pathway Toward Dignity for Children of War and Other Oppressions”

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Introduction

This is my starting point: at the intersection of the public and private space. My professional ethnographic work attempts to honor the struggle of every child who seeks to be rescued, to be heard, and to speak the truth about his or her lived experience. Many such students fall by the wayside, too weary from experiences of violence, war, poverty or other oppressions to continue on their journey towards the life force, beaten down by the brutality of it all. The use of fairy tales and other children’s literature in and out of classrooms is and always will be about uplifting the human spirit: a way to survive; a pathway toward hope and dignity, especially for vulnerable children suffering from the trauma of war or other oppressions.

I will share glimpses into some of my interviews with refugee children within the context of my reading some authentic children’s literature to them. The use of fairy tales and other stories can be a healing pedagogical tool in classrooms because they have the capacity to open nurturing, creative and safe spaces. My research work is grounded in the powerful and multi-layered notion of being positioned as the ‘other.’ This is only a first attempt at illustrating and explaining the complex notion of ‘outsiderness’ in its many manifestations; to recognize the tensions and dilemmas, and also the strength and resilience, that these newly arrived students conveyed to me in very informal, ‘grassroots’ ways.

This particular contribution places my own story as a child of refugees within the larger story of the present social context of immigrant and/or refugee students and their parents who arrive in North America overwhelmed by forces of war, political oppression, and violence. They/I carry hidden but enduring scars that influence all aspects of their/my educational experiences. The children in our classrooms remind us that we need to restore our faith in the sanctity of our calling as educators. We must help them to tell us what they have learned from their life stories by sharing authentic literature with them; thus creating an attitude of reverence, passion and a love of learning in each child, especially vulnerable children: what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls "radical amazement." Indeed, worthwhile education is soulful education.

In the telling of fairy tales and other children’s stories and listening to them, teachers and students plant the seeds of compassion, of hope, and of understanding that we can go forth into the world and transform it, if not today then tomorrow and if not tomorrow then the day after -- and if not the day after, then the one after that.