

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Journeys in the Imaginal Realm: How Writing and Sharing Fairy Tales With Groups Can Generate 'Moments of Magic'

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In this article we present an approach to inviting change through Moments of Magic. Moments of Magic is our name for the practice of writing and sharing fairy tales in a participatory action research group or business workshop. The name arises from the notion that fairy tales incorporate elements of change, which are often described as 'magic.' By engaging our participants' imaginations through fairy tale writing, we invite them to access a well of subconscious resources that enables them to author their own tales, discuss the undiscussable, and initiate personal and organizational change. We have noticed that through this process participants often register an inner change, which may arrive instantaneously as a 'jolt', or manifest slowly over time.

In the article that follows, we begin with a literature review in which we introduce fairy tales as a potential resource for change, explain how fairy tales work as extended imaginative metaphors, and share how others have used fairy tales to support learning and change. After, we present our first shared experience working with fairy tales in a doctoral workshop we co-facilitated. In this section of the paper, we write together as 'we.'

We then present two separate accounts of bringing Moments of Magic into our individual contexts and practices. In the first case, Ekaterina shares her experience working with fairy tales in business consulting in a context of dramatic political change. In the second case, Matthew presents his work with fairy tales as insider participatory action research within an international development organization. In our individual cases, we write as 'I's,' sharing our personal experiences.

Following our individual cases, 'we' come back together to explore the longer-term impacts of working with fairy tales. In conclusion, we share our reflections and present a step-by-step methodology for other practitioners to use or adapt. We recognise that the placement of a full methodology at the end of the article is unusual. However, doing so enables us to incorporate evolutions to the method based upon learning from the experiences described.

A Discovery of Fairy Tales

Each of us knows the world of fairy tales, from the 'Once upon a time...' opening, to the talking animals, enchanted locations, unsuspecting protagonists, and, often unwanted, quests. There is a cast of characters –

dragons, princes and princesses, cursed beasts, witches, and wizards, which, despite minor variations, we all seem to know well. A hero or heroine is submitted to trials, cruelty, and injustice. The plot takes a sudden turn, presenting a change of fortune or what Aristotle called *Peripeteia* (Bruner, 2004). In most fairy tales the hero or heroine overcomes the circumstances of *Peripeteia* and succeeds by taking resolute action to flourish in the happily ever after. But if fairy tales are just fantastical stories for children, what value might they bring to 'adults' in the 'real' world?

Many writers and academics have found fairy tales to be full of nourishment and resources. The mythologist Joseph Campbell, in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* comments that the happy ending of a fairy tale is to be read as transcending the universal tragedy of humankind (2008). Walter Benjamin in his 'Illuminations', argues that the structure, language and characters of fairy tales provide a form of medicine, a support in the turning points of life. "*Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest...*" (1986, p. 47). How and why might this be the case?

According to Maria Tatar, fairy tales take us into imaginal domains where anything can happen, and "what happens is often so startling, magical, and unreal that it produces a jolt" (2010, p. 56). Similarly, Jerome Bruner writes that stories help us to explore possibilities in the forms of might be, could have been, and perhaps will be (Bruner, 2003). When we encounter such a jolt or a new set of possibilities, this may help us identify new options for action that did not seem to exist previously.

Manfred Kets de Vries writes that fairy tales can be interpreted as a dramatization of our inner darkness, allowing us to acknowledge, confront and transform it (2015). Having overcome various internal and external challenges, fairy tale protagonists frequently return to the place they began, but profoundly changed in themselves. Fairy tales teach us therefore, that change is possible, and that frequently we have the internal resources to support needed change.

"If fairy tales do their job properly, they help us to lose ourselves in another world where we experience a sense of wonder, mystery, and excitement in such a way that we return to our day-to-day world transformed for the better" (Kets de Vries, 2015, p. 10).

Azar Nafisi, in her memoir 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' writes that "every fairy tale offers the potential to surpass present limits, so in a sense the fairy tale offers you freedoms that reality denies" (Nafisi, 2008, p. 47). Her book describes her experience as a professor in Tehran, when a literature seminar became the only way to meet and talk freely about her reality. Reading Nafisi's reflections, we wondered about emancipatory potential of fairy tales.

Fairy Tales as Extended Imaginative Metaphors

Working with participants to elicit, share and explore fairy tales, as we have, is an example of arts-based research. According to Patricia Leavy, arts-based research “offers ways to tap into what would otherwise be inaccessible, makes connections and interconnections that are otherwise out of reach... The research carries the potential to jar people into seeing and/or thinking differently, feeling more deeply, learning something new, or building understandings across similarities or differences” (Leavy, 2017, p. 9). Moreover, according to Sofie Vindevogel, arts-based approaches can shift power dynamics by opening “essential spaces for voices from the margins that can contest and transform hegemonic understandings and representations” (Vindevogel, 2022, p. 34). These assertions align closely with our experience of writing and sharing fairy tales in groups and are highly relevant to both of our contexts.

Participant generated fairy tales are a form of imaginative metaphor, these are novel metaphors generated by participants that articulate new or different ways of thinking about something (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). Exploring our contexts through imaginative metaphors creates a degree of separation or an alternative perspective from which to view our day-to-day challenges and entrenched ways of thinking. This different perspective can help to uncover previously hidden information about a challenge, or identify new clues towards a solution, as Luciara Nardon and Amrita Hari discovered working with imaginative metaphors to support international students impacted by the Covid-19 lockdown (Nardon & Hari, 2021). This separation between metaphor and reality may also help us to surface and project feelings and concepts that are uncomfortable or difficult to voice directly (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). In addition, once articulated, imaginative metaphors can be examined and deepened, creating new meaning beyond a previously existing similarity (Cornelissen, 2005). Donald Schön writes of the generative nature of metaphors, whereby the process of examining and deepening an imaginative metaphor can bring about new and unexpected insights (Schön, 2017).

Working with imaginative metaphors can be particularly valuable with groups of participants because metaphor is central to our shared human experience, cutting across culture and language (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). In an international group, even where culturally specific metaphors are offered, the act of describing our world using imaginative metaphors is transversal. Alexis Abernethy (2002) writes that “offering a metaphor is a rich and precious gift that, if appreciated and used, catalyzes group process and promotes understanding” (2002, p. 221).

The writing of fairy tales gives participants an opportunity to express their experiences through extended imaginative metaphors, leaning into and surfacing rich detail through stories. By working with fairy tales as extended metaphors, layered descriptions and comparisons help readers, writers, and

listeners break down complex subjects and view the world in new ways. How then might we harness the power of fairy tales as extended imaginative metaphors within organizational settings?

Fairy Tales in Individual and Organizational Change

Andrew Brown, Yannis Gabriel and Silvia Gherardi comment that the 'linguistic turn' in organizational studies "has witnessed considerable interest in stories and narratives, especially as they are linked to issues of knowledge, sensemaking, communication, power and identities" (Brown et al., 2009, p. 324). Examples of participatory storytelling for organizational change are many and include Tricia Cleland Silva and Paulo de Tarso Fonseca Silva's 'Collaborative Storytelling' (Cleland Silva & de Tarso Fonseca Silva, 2022) and Geoff Mead's 'Narrative Leadership' (Mead, 2014). In our experience, most participatory storytelling takes place through the sharing of factual stories – factual, at least, from the perspective of the storyteller. Harnessing the power of fairy tales to support organizational change appears to be much less common.

Therapists know the healing power of fairy tales and bring them into their practice. Educator and therapist Bruno Bettelheim used fairy tales with children with identified social-emotional disorders to restore meaning to their lives (2010). One of the main points, made by psychologists in his book *'The Uses of Enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales'*, first published in 1976, was that children learned to overcome psychological conflicts and grew into new phases of development through the symbolic understanding of the maturation process, as expressed in fairy tales. Bettelheim wrote that fairy tales spoke simultaneously to all levels of human personality, and that the key message of fairy tales was that the struggle against severe difficulties was an intrinsic part of human existence. Through their symbolic language, fairy tales helped children to discover their own identity and to answer basic existential questions of 'Who am I?', 'What is a good life?', and 'How do I make the right choices?' Likewise, Debbie Kramer-Roy worked with the siblings of children living with disabilities, and among several creative approaches, supported her participants to write fantastical stories about the different and virtual worlds in which their siblings lived (Kramer-Roy, 2015).

Writing and Sharing Fairy Tales

Geoff Mead writes that "we all have some natural capacity to tell a story, we just have to overcome our fear of appearing foolish and give it a go" (Mead, 2016, Chapter 2: Joining the Company of Storytellers section). Over the past four years, we have been introducing fairy tale writing and sharing as a methodology for working with groups and in organizations. As we have done so, we have discovered that even when a participant's initial response is, *'I don't know how to write fairy tales,'* the familiar 'Once upon a time...' stem and fairy tale archetypes support the emergence of a storyteller in everyone.

Over the next sections of this article, we will share how we have worked with fairy tales, together on our doctoral program, and individually within our working contexts. We will share practical examples of how we have seen fairy tales 'work' and the effect they have on individuals and group processes. We invite you to look at these *Moments of Magic* together through the lens of the following questions:

- *How might the practice of writing and sharing fairy tales support change in individuals, groups, and organizations?*
- *Might fairy tales support our human need for emancipation, integration, voice and personal agency?*
- *Might this practice, or some version of it, be useful in the contexts that you operate?*

Our Shared Experience with Fairy Tales

The process

We identified a shared affinity for fairy tales as we prepared to facilitate a workshop for fellow participants on Hult-Ashridge Business School's Doctorate in Organizational Change. The Doctorate in Organizational Change is a post-positivist program grounded in action research and provides a fertile environment for engagement with non-traditional and arts-based approaches. The workshop, held in January 2022, was to be our first in-person meeting after two years of Covid-19 restrictions, and we decided to offer fairy tale writing as a way of checking in on each other's doctoral journeys. Ultimately, the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions took the workshop online, but our intention remained.

In preparing, we consulted with Geoff Mead program faculty, who advised us to offer participants the suggestion of writing 'unfinished' fairy tales. This suggestion played a key role in generating a supportive and trustful atmosphere and in enabling our participants to write.

We describe what we did with our doctoral cohort in the following paragraphs, and a full step-by-step methodology is shared in the conclusion to this paper. In advance of the session, we encouraged participants to make written notes about their doctoral journeys, reflecting individually upon the following questions:

- What has happened so far? Milestones? Wins?
- What is your intention? Interest? Motivation?
- What are your dilemmas? Conflicts? Barriers?
- What emotions do you have? What are you proud about?
- Who is engaged, besides you? What are your relationships?

We opened by inviting participants to use their reflections to tell their inquiry journeys in the form of unfinished fairy tales, using:

- Some form or variation of the stem 'Once upon a time...'
- Fantasy or make-believe elements.
- An enchanted setting, which might include forests, castles, water, or kingdoms.
- Some or all the ideas from their pre-session preparation.

We didn't provide examples and gave participants twenty minutes of individual writing time. We emphasized that stories could be unfinished or to be continued... When the twenty minutes ended, we split participants into groups of four. In their breakouts, participants took turns to read their fairy tales, pausing after each to consider the following questions:

- What did you notice? What caught your attention in the story?
- What might the protagonist(s) need to achieve their goals?
- What resources did you notice that might be tapped into?
- What difficult choices might need to be made?

Reflections in the moment

We came back together as a full group afterwards to reflect upon the use of fairy tales to explore our doctoral journeys. In their groups, participants had shared stories of fantastical quests and journeys, conjuring up knights, dragons, ogres, and mice to convey their progress and challenges. Participants spoke to several of the attributes of fairy tales discussed in the literature review, the generative nature of imaginative metaphors, the potential to step outside of a situation and view it from a different perspective, and the value of working with fairy tales in groups.

One participant spoke of how the fairy tale form enabled her to step outside of herself and address issues that would have been challenging to explore directly:

"Entering into the imaginal realm... enabled me to tell a story that had pain in it, but I felt the better for having put it to paper in a fantasy world... And I felt good."

A second participant spoke of how the process operated beyond the individual level, and created a sense of mutuality among those who shared fairy tales in small groups:

“It created a sense of community. A sense of shared purpose, shared concerns, shared anxieties. There are a lot of things that we talked about that are inherent to this experience. And each of us talked about them in their own way, and in their own framing of a fairy tale. But there was this overarching feeling that we are in this together.”

A third participant reminded us of the darker side of fairy tales, and how a superficial playfulness might lead to deeper emotions emerging, which, as facilitators, we must be prepared to manage:

“A fairy tale, there’s often a dark side to it. So, while it is fun and play, and we read it at bedtime to children, there are dark woods and scary creatures and things to be frightened of... And so, the playfulness was a bit of a trojan horse. It looked like a horse, it came bounding in, and then suddenly all these things started coming out.”

In a short time with our doctoral cohort, fairy tale writing and telling had brought the group together surfacing previously unseen knowing, fostering empathy for our shared and individual journeys, and encouraging deep reflection. Perhaps a similar approach could add value to our individual work with groups and organizations beyond the academic setting of our doctoral cohort?

Ekaterina’s Experience

I am a consultant based in Moscow, Russia, working in the field of executive team development and supervision for coaches and organizational development practitioners. In February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine war started. It led to massive restrictions on the state level of what and how was allowed to discuss in a public space. I felt how it affected me, and how my own storyline became divided into ‘before’ and ‘after’. Arthur Frank states that in severe circumstances it is not only you who are affected, but your story becomes broken as well (Frank, 2013). I saw myself and many of my clients as broken stories.

In no time, I discovered that many people, whose views I thought were similar to mine, did not necessarily share my position, and I stopped most conversations. In this period, I started to work with fairy tales, wondering whether they might support my own and others’ needs for emancipation and voice. I used *Moments of Magic* in team development sessions with business clients, in a storytelling masterclass, in coaching supervision, in a training and development conference, and in a retreat for my own team. Fairy tales seemed to be a way to talk about things we had stopped talking about in Russia - including ourselves. At the beginning of sessions, I shared my research interest in conducting fairy tale sessions. In my introduction, I shared ideas of narratives as stories we tell about ourselves and our work, and how stories, once told, start to take on a life of their own. I believe I sounded

like a storyteller myself. None of my participants were researchers, most of them were top or mid-level managers, some were coaches and organizational development practitioners, and a few were owners of training businesses.

The case I present below, *"First put a mask upon yourself"*, describes a group coaching supervision session. It took place two months after the war had begun. In this case fairy tales stood out as a method to talk in times when speaking openly had become dangerous. In this session I noticed the transformative effect of writing and sharing fairy tales in an environment which was perceived by participants as a safe place to share.

Case study: 'First put a mask upon yourself'

In April 2022, a group of coaches asked me for a supervision day, the first one after a long break. It was a self-organized group of nine coaches and HR managers with coaching qualifications that had been meeting for around two years. This time only four of them, less than half, planned to come. The group met as needed to discuss difficult cases. Most of the cases participants brought were professional, but we had agreed that people could bring personal cases if needed. It was our first session since the beginning of war, and I wondered what cases participants would bring.

In the morning, as they gathered one-by-one in the meeting room, I noticed how unusually silent and reserved they were. It was a striking contrast to the behavior I recalled. I welcomed them and invited everyone to sit in a circle around a coffee table, to take a cup of tea or coffee and say how they were feeling. Checking in, they talked about themselves and other group members who were absent. I learned that several absent members moved out of the country after the war started. The check in this day brought the theme of war into the room, even for those who didn't mention it directly. One of the participants, K., shared that she felt empty. She didn't have a case and was not sure why she had come. Others shared that they didn't have urgent coaching cases to discuss either. Rather they felt a need to come and meet people they liked, in the familiar environment of a supervision session.

I shared that I was exploring how to work with fairy tales in supervision and coaching sessions, and asked if they felt like trying to write personal fairy tales in this session. The group members agreed, and I introduced the activity. As we were a small group, I didn't use slides and made an oral introduction of the exercise. The task consisted of two parts. In the first part, I invited them to look back over the five months since our previous session, and to individually recall and put on paper meaningful events. I suggested they make a note of their intentions, actions, results, wins, conflicts, losses, and emotions. I suggested they mention meaningful people as well. I allocated five minutes for this preparation work and allowed them another five minutes when they said they were not yet ready.

In the second part they wrote a fairy tale. From my previous experiences, I knew there would be a request to share some examples. I intentionally decided not to fulfill this request, as I believed they could succeed without examples, and that writing without an example would create a sense of

accomplishment. I suggested they look at the notes they had prepared and take some or all of them as elements of their fairy tales. To provide support, I shared some possible fairy tale beginnings, like '*Once upon a time*', and reminded them of typical elements of fairy tales, like princesses, firebirds, or simpletons. My invitation was to write an unfinished fairy tale within twenty minutes. I suggested, and everyone agreed, that after writing they would share their fairy tales, and the rest of the group would reflect on the emotions raised as well as the meanings heard.

I remember them writing in silence, heads bent, hands moving fast, putting their stories on paper. When they finished writing, the sharing started. K., the lady who had checked-in saying she had no case to solve, read first. In her tale the Big Dragon defeated the previously dangerous Small Inner Dragon. As she was reading, I understood immediately that the Big Dragon was the war. I noticed that after finishing reading, K. started to smile. I noticed as well, how her reading was supported by bursts of laughter from group members, which sounded like approval.

Responses generated after listening expressed hope for the victory of Good over Evil, support for bravery of the authors and their characters, surprise at the immediate emotional transformation they experienced while writing, and wonder at how the fairy tales worked:

- If the Small Dragon could be defeated, the Big Dragon could be as well. I felt power in your fairy tale.

- I wonder how it works? Probably, it helps to immerse in the emotions and events of that time?

- I was not writing about myself, but you gave me feedback, as if the hero was me, and now I feel like I'm the hero.

The image of the Big Dragon, the War, appeared only in one tale of four. Most participants chose to follow other storylines. When leaving my office, participants chattered and smiled. K., who had arrived silent in the morning, was talkative now. I thought that they were all helping professionals, working with their own clients. Suddenly I had an image of the invitation on an airplane to put on your own mask first, before helping other. I wondered if they felt resourced now and ready to coach their own clients.

Ekaterina's Casebook,
9.04.2022

The case with coaching supervision helped me notice the transformative effect of fairy tale writing and sharing. I believe that working with fairy tales can help to address needs of integration, emancipation, and voice. My participants spoke, for the first time, about vital changes in their lives. Fairy tales gave them a language, a method, and an auditorium for this expression. The emotional transformation of my participants during the session was tangible.

During the year that followed, I included fairy tales in several team sessions. I usually suggested to look back on personal and professional events from the previous year as source material for fairy tale writing. While it was emotionally difficult to speak about the war, it felt liberating to follow the invitation to write 'unfinished' fairy tales in the context of the unfinished conflict.

I have noticed that reading fairy tales in a group setting is often supported by laughter, which has a fleur of joyful approval, a confirmation. What is the audience approving or confirming, I wonder? Tolkien (1964) wrote that the joy in successful fantasy could be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. Are fairy tale listeners confirming that they share common truths with the author?

Over time, I began to offer more choice for my participants. I started with an invitation to read their fairy tale only if they wanted to, with an option to read to a small group of 4-5. Participants made this decision only after writing was completed, as before writing it was never clear what would emerge in the tale. As some of writers confessed, the fairy tales were 'writing themselves,' emerging from the "Once upon a time..." prompt as if participants were discovering a well of subconscious knowledge that had always been at their disposal.

Russian fairy tales often use inversion, a different ordering of words than we usually use. I noticed that participants quickly 'recalled' and used these fairy tale constructions, as if they worked with them every day. A group of lawyers I worked with struggled initially with their habitual bureaucratic language, but suddenly, beneath their lawyerly facades appeared pagan storytellers playing a traditional Russian '*gusli*' (stringed musical instrument). Did their fairy tales transform them, at least, for a moment? Could personal change support organizational change?

Matthew's Experience

I work in a large international development organization with offices across Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. The international development sector can feel simultaneously magical and absurd, hopeful, and deceitful. Promising, and sometimes, but not always, delivering solutions to the diverse challenges of global health, education, livelihoods, environment, and inequality. Many colleagues, including myself, remain optimists, who believe it is possible to work towards, if not happily ever after, at least a better world for everyone. The sector feels, therefore, like an appropriate space in which to work with fairy tales.

Raymond Apthorpe (Apthorpe, 2005, 2011), has written about the international development sector using the fairy tale allegory of Aidland, modeled on Alice's Wonderland, "not a nowhere exactly but inexactly a somewhere with the characteristics of a nowhere" (Apthorpe, 2005). The 'aid-nography' of Apthorpe and others, such as Rosalind Eyben (2014) and David Mosse (2011), focused on adding value through rich descriptions of the development aid system, its processes, peculiarities, and people.

My use of fairy tales has been as a creative prompt for catalyzing and supporting participatory action research within the social field of the international development sector. The case I am sharing comes from two insider participatory action research groups that I convened within my organization together with a colleague. The groups brought together diverse colleagues to explore different aspects of working better together across geographies, cultures, and organizational units.

Working Better Together #1 (WBT #1) ran from September through December 2021, and had a general focus on improving relationships across organizational units. The session in which we worked with fairy tales took place on November 29th, 2021, (before the session at Hult-Ashridge) and explored the question, *'How can we work together as one organization, across geographical and functional divides?'*

Working Better Together #2 (WBT #2) ran from November 2022 through March 2023, with a more specific focus around strengthening our organization's internal communities of practice (Wenger, 2008). The session in which we worked with fairy tales took place on February 13th, 2023, and explored the question, *'How might we promote and sustain engagement in a community of practice, especially remotely?'*

My case shows how fairy tales can open windows into our imagination, which enables us to see ourselves, our organizations, and our sectors in new, and potentially transformative, ways.

The approach to the fairy tale activity with the WBT groups followed the pattern of the session that Ekaterina and I facilitated at Hult-Ashridge. We began with advance reflection on a set of questions related to the inquiry question, spent twenty minutes writing fairy tales individually, shared our stories in breakout groups, and reflected upon the experience as a group. Because of the geographical diversity of participants, the sessions took place online on Zoom, and did not carry the same rich experience as the face-to-face sessions described by Ekaterina.

What emerged from both WBT groups were stories about our organization and its work expressed in the extended metaphors of magical kingdoms, dragons, quests, and sentient animals. I'm sharing, with permission, a few short excerpts from co-researcher stories below:

"Once upon a time, there were a group of fifty fish that wanted to create a new kingdom in their enchanted sea – one that would help any fish become who they wanted to be, be given the powers to swim in any dangerous waters safely, and ensure their dreams, however wild, could come true."

"Percival joined a group of other heroes, called the Heroes Guild of Learning. The guild was supposed to be for heroes like Percival to learn from each other and support each other through thick

and thin. However, Percival found that the group didn't meet regularly, and when it did many people were too busy or too far away to join."

"At the end of the day, they didn't find the golden book because they didn't have enough time to look for it. They spent all their time trying to report on what they were doing and how they were doing it."

The fairy tales illuminated aspects of our experiences within the organization's social field that might previously have been hidden, or only visible to people with certain perspectives. For example, we found that we assume our colleagues are working towards a common goal, while in fact different units and individuals may have different incentives, and need to come together to interrogate and align our intentions.

"We have to work together to slay the dragon. But I think we sometimes assume that we know that there is a common dragon. We make an assumption that we're all working together on the same page. And I think that's what we need to constantly revisit. What is our shared goal, what is our shared vision?"

Another example highlighted the challenge faced by convenors of organizational communities of practice, who need to prioritize their efforts in a context of limited time and resources.

"If we go back to the magic brush that the character was using. What is the character using the magic brush for? Because there's a limitation. They can only use it once a day. So how do they prioritize? ... The character knows their intent, what they want to create ... But how do you choose how to use it? It was a battle of resources, time, energy, knowing the why. What do you use it for? Who do you use it with?"

In a third example, we noticed that the characters in the stories, and by extension those of us working in the organization, all have some agency in deciding when and how to engage, and disengage in communities of practice:

"We were looking at the choices that the characters were making about what to do or what not to do. And there is an acknowledgement that all the characters have some agency ... They are open to contribute. And they are also open to receive."

Each of these examples illustrates how the fairy tales told by participants illuminate an aspect of the organizational social field, and, by doing so, generate new possibilities for engagement and transformation.

Following the session, co-researchers reacted to the experience. One spoke about the power of sharing fairy tales as opposed to more traditional approaches to experience sharing.

"I can remember each one of the fairy tales even right now, you know. Not all the details, but I can remember them. Versus if we had just shared experiences... So, I think there is a power behind sharing our disappointment, our challenges, our successes, our triumphs in this way that I found quite surprising."

Another highlighted the fairy tale exercise as one of her favorite creative methodologies that we explored with the WBT co-inquiry groups:

"People not only used their creativity, they used their humor. They were able to think in metaphors, ongoing metaphors. Which we know is a really powerful tool, and people don't use it. And so, it allows you to think on things in a completely different way, and it allows you to really start thinking about 'what do I want to change here?'"

In the case of both WBT groups, the fairy tale activity contributed towards larger, four-month inquiry processes, interacting with other components of the participatory action research to generate new insights and ways of working. This approach worked, in part, because both groups had achieved high levels of trust and safety prior to the fairy tale activity.

Between the two WBT fairy tale sessions, I also conducted a one-off online fairy tale session with a community of development practitioners that I participated in. Although the stories were as beautiful, the insights as significant, and the participant reactions as positive, this one-off activity didn't seem to generate the same potential for change. This suggests that the fairy tale method works best as an activity for groups that already know one another, have some shared history, and have developed a degree of trust.

Although all the fairy tale sessions I have convened have followed a similar process, one shift I have made is to gradually increase the accessibility of the methodology for a diverse community of participants. Initially, we asked participants to write a complete fairy tale from scratch and in English, in 20 minutes. Although we have maintained the short time frame, I now prompt participants to write in any language, to perhaps draw instead of writing, and to leave their stories unfinished (to be continued...). All these changes make the activity more accessible to participants who are non-native speakers of English, or who prefer to work with non-written forms.

Revisiting our Fairy Tales Experience

After a year of working with fairy tales in our own contexts, we were even more enthusiastic about the method. In our initial session at Hult-Ashridge we played the dual roles of facilitators and participants, writing and telling our own tales. We wondered what had happened to our authors and their

fairy tales since our session? Did they live 'happily ever after'? We began to inquire, and discovered that over a year later, some of our cohort were still working with the fairy tales they wrote in our session or with new fairy tales they had written since.

One of these was Kate, who was inquiring into women's ways of being in the workplace, and who had written a fairy tale about workplace interactions using the imaginative metaphor of quiet mice, for women, and loud mice, for men. We interviewed Kate on March 2nd, 2023, over a year after the Hult-Ashridge workshop. We asked her to speak about what happened as we invited her to write a fairy tale. Her initial response was surprising, though perhaps not unusual:

"I remember well when you asked us to do it. Because my initial reaction was internal rejection to the invitation. I just thought... I've no idea how to write a fairy tale. What is it I would write about?"

However, Kate pushed through her initial rejection and as she began to put pen to paper, magic happened:

"I was very surprised, during the exercise, how the story told itself once I started. So, it just came... and actually it became quite fun and energizing."

One year, and many stories later, we asked Kate why she thought writing and working with fairy tales had become so generative for her inquiry:

"There's a playfulness to storytelling. You don't have to get it right... It's just telling a story. And it becomes a subconscious thing. So, the story takes over. And I believe that my experience of it is a connection to my subconscious, or to my inner wisdom, that I don't access just through sitting, thinking, and writing..."

I'm just curious when I read them back, what have I written. Wondering then, why that? And why that image? And every time I read them I see something else... It's like it's a door into a knowing space.

And then it's always really interesting when somebody else reads your story and sees something in it that you don't... And that then brings another layer. So, it's become a real important way of knowing for me."

Once participants have created and shared a fairy tale, many remember it in detail for a long time and their stories seem to become a part of who they are. For how many of our participants did their fairy tales continue to work after sessions, continuing the old traditions of fairy tale as a personal magical talisman?

What we have learned

We discovered that by introducing fairy tales we can create the potential for individual and group transformation. We think of these experiences as 'Moments of Magic' – with 'magic' representing instantaneous or longer-term change. Below we summarize our observations and conclusions.

There are *five main processes* when you work with fairy tales in a group: reflecting, writing, sharing, listening, and analyzing fairy tales with others. Each process has a different role in creating the potential for change:

- **Reflecting** on our experiences generates the source material for our fairy tales.
- **Writing** connects us to our experiences and imaginations, drawing out of us a story that simultaneously represents us and surprises us.
- **Sharing** requires trust, inviting writers to demonstrate courage by bringing their story to life.
- **Listening** creates resonance between the storyteller and the group, generates empathy, recognition and a common language.
- **Analyzing** the stories together identifies new contradictions and possibilities that the writer may have missed.

Everyone can write a fairy tale in a short amount of time. Even people who initially have a negative response to the prompt frequently warm up. This is facilitated by prompts that facilitate fairy tale writing, for example, offering the 'Once upon a time...' opening, suggesting that the story can be unfinished, written in any language, and that it could be drawn or represented in a non-written form.

Participants often experience an *initial inner struggle*, of fear and resistance to writing. This anxiety relates to our inner critic who tells us we are not writers. Session facilitators may recognize this in their own anxiety when inviting participants to write fairy tales. We believe this is a normal embodied way of anticipating the reactions of the group. To address our own and participants' anxiety we invite magic into the room and tell participants that '*they will all manage in a magical way,*' a way which is unknown to them. From our experience, everybody manages in their own way, often with the surprise that '*the story begins writing them*'.

As highlighted in the story of our doctoral colleague Kate, the discovery of the stories and the writer inside of us is a first example of the transformation that working with fairy tales can bring about. Allowing oneself to write in the form of fairy tale, our participants discover a resource or '*well*' of *unconscious or subconscious knowing*. Every human being has access to

this resource, which represents the sum of our embodied experiences and embodied sensations as human beings. A prompt to use an imaginative metaphor, such as a fairy tale, encourages us to go to that well and to draw from it. Fairy tales are complex extended metaphors, act as a guide to our subconscious wells, and what is drawn from the well often catches us unaware.

We believe that the resource of fairy tales is also *a collective human well*, to which they have access in that moment. Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that, “the telling moment of the story draws its power from a towering column of humanity joined one to the other across time and space... If there is a single source of story and the numen of story, this long chain of humans is it” (Estés, 1992, p. 18). There is greater pressure to write in a group, but also greater resource. This shared well represents the accumulated stories of humanity, common history, common path, common traditions. We have used our fairy tale method with participants from over a dozen countries in five continents, and all have been able to write their own stories, especially with the invitation to write in their own language and to represent their story in alternative creative forms. This is possible because of the transversality of fairy tales as imaginative metaphors.

Participants are frequently surprised by the amount of depth of meaning they summon into a fairy tale. They speak of using fairy tales to *write into difficult or challenging experiences*, and of *discovering new information* about a context or situation they couldn't previously see. This is because fairy tales create a separation from the mundane. In doing so, however, participants and facilitators must also be prepared to deal with the emotions that are unearthed.

There is even more magic (and potential for transformation) when we go on to *share our fairy tales with others*. Others frequently see our stories differently, noticing features, patterns, or inconsistencies in a story that we thought were insignificant. Noticing and questioning by others can be incredibly generative, raising questions that we never thought of before, and generating insights that lead us into whole new realms of inquiry. Sharing in this way also generates connection and empathy among participants through the mutual understanding that comes through experiencing a story together. Frequently, when we hear stories, we become implicated in some way in that story. Few people are like Kate, going on to write several fairy tales, but, in our experience, many participants hold their stories in their hearts or their pockets for a long time after writing them. The fairy tales we create become a part of our personal stories.

Working with fairy tales has brought *significant value to the group processes we have been involved in*. The greatest transformation has been where we have used this methodology as part of a longer-term engagement with a group, where our participants come into the session with existing trust, and where the energy and ideas generated are worked with afterwards. This has been the case in Matthew's example where the fairy tale methodology

was embedded within a longer-term participatory action research process. However, we also see moments of change in a one-off workshop or experience, as highlighted in Ekaterina's example, where fairy tales generate a sudden shift in atmosphere or possibility. More than this, however, fairy tales have brought us as facilitators a sense of joy, enchantment, and possibility, that permeates different domains of our lives.

Much as we are excited about the work described in this article, we recognize we are only scratching the surface of the potential for fairy tales to support action research and transformational change. The fairy tales we have written with our participants have been backwards looking. There is also an opportunity to look forward, to imagine futures that we can work towards. Our work has involved individuals writing fairy tales and sharing them with others. There is also potential for groups to construct a shared fairy tale.

There is something childish in fairy tales, and it is exactly what we need when we aspire to grow and transform our organizations and ourselves. We need to become open to learning and growth in a world of unknowns. We need a positive regression, some unlearning, to come out of the seriousness of 'proper' organizational language and into something which is essentially human, which was told to us by our 'babushkas' (our grandmothers), in the days when we were fast learners, happy to explore untrodden pathways.

Moments of Magic Methodology

We recommend using this method either as part of a longer-term change process, or with a group of people who know each other. This approach is particularly useful where there is a need to address an aspect of shared history, either within an organization or an operating context. The arts-based approach of working with fairy tales enables many participants to discuss the undiscussable and dig deeper into the issues and challenges they are facing. In this case, convening a smaller group of up to 25 participants with a shared history, and a degree of existing trust and rapport, will increase the potential for moments of magic to occur. Alternatively, a one-off event, such as a masterclass or group experience, might be useful to introduce the method to a larger group of up to 100 practitioners, rather than to invite collective change.

Step 1. Identifying a theme

In advance of the session, we identify the theme for the fairy tales based upon a goal that the group is seeking to address. In our case, we have worked with fairy tales to explore doctoral inquiries, organizational relationships, and resilience in turbulent times.

Step 2. Preparing to write

We don't usually tell groups they will be writing fairy tales in advance, as thinking about writing is often more stressful than putting pen to paper.

We begin, either in advance of the workshop, or at the beginning of the session by offering a set of reflective questions, connected with the theme we are addressing together:

- What emotions arise for you as you think about *the theme*?
- What is working well? What are you proud of?
- What challenges/dilemmas/conflicts are you and others facing?
- Which relationships are enabling? Which are constraining?

Reflection can either take place individually in written form, or in a paired dialogue.

Step 3. Creating a fairy tale

After participants have had a few minutes to reflect upon their responses, we share the invitation to create 'an unfinished fairy tale'. We believe that the qualifier 'unfinished' takes significant pressure off our participants, who do not feel they need to complete their story. We invite them in the following form.

Take your experiences and create a fairy tale that:

- Begins with some variation of "Once upon a time".
- Includes fantasy or make-believe elements.
- Draws upon fairy tale or folk tale tropes that feel meaningful to you.
- Incorporates some of the ideas that you noted in response to the reflection questions.
- You can write your story in any language or draw it if you prefer.
- Your tale can be unfinished, to be continued...
- Don't worry about editing, just go for it!

In a two-hour online session, we give participants 20 minutes to write fairy tales. The maximum time we would give participants in an online session is 30 minutes. In an in-person workshop we might give people up to an hour to compose their fairy tales.

Step 4. Sharing and listening to fairy tales

We usually encourage participants to share fairy tales in small groups of 3-5. It's not essential for individuals to tell their stories if they are uncomfortable doing so. After each fairy tale is told, we suggest participants take time to explore the following questions:

- What did you notice? What caught your attention in the story?
- What might the protagonist(s) need to achieve their goals?
- What resources did you notice that might be tapped into?
- What difficult choices might need to be made?

We generally give about 45 minutes for sharing and discussion in small groups, so about 10-15 minutes per storyteller.

We then bring the full group back together to explore the insights that have emerged through the storytelling. If there is time, we might ask volunteers to share their stories with everyone.

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