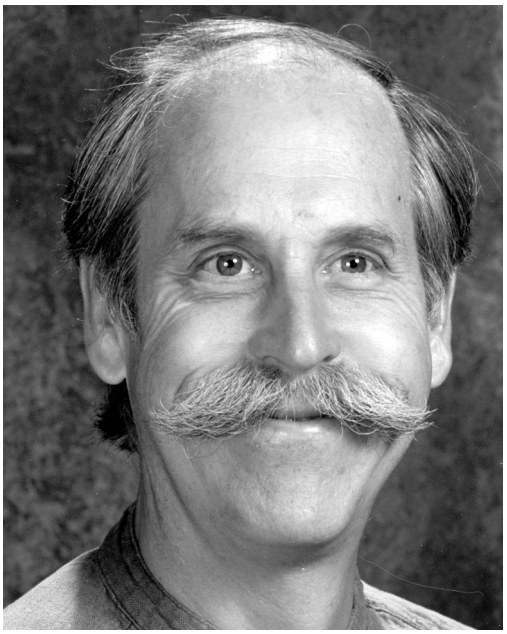
Once Upon a Time....

by James Peterson



James W. Peterson has been an elementary school teacher for 31 years. He graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, where he did his masters' thesis on the subject of clairvoyant children. This thesis led to his book *The Secret Life of Kids* (2nd edition, 2001), which explores children's paranormal experiences. He has utilized aspects of Montessori and Waldorf educational approaches in his teaching and has published three articles on Waldorf in the public schools. He currently teaches kindergarten and first grade in a small, rural public school in California.

Nearly twenty-five years ago when I was teaching second grade, an incident happened to me that I shall never forget. I was working in a newly founded private school called the White Pony in suburban San Francisco. We only had four teachers working with kindergarten through third grade, and we all, therefore, had to share in playground supervision. It was my turn that day, and as I was watching the kids, a tiny five-year-old kindergartener plopped into my lap and put her arms around my neck. "I wish you were my teacher," she chirped.

"Oh, really? Why is that?" I responded.

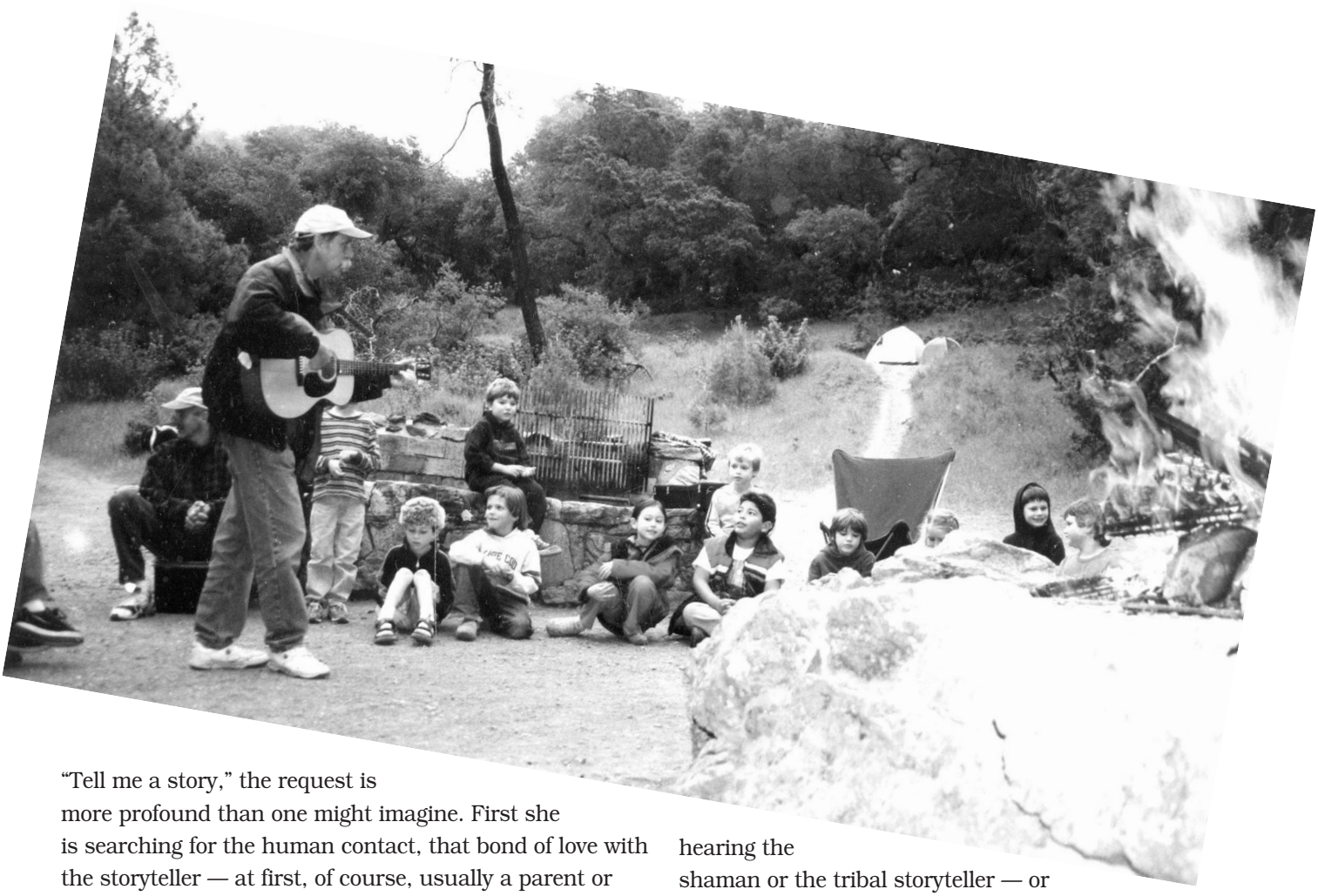
"Because you know everything," she replied very seriously.

"Oh, I do? What do you mean?"

"Oh," she said, "you know stories and songs!"

In her five-year-old world, everything that made up her humanness was summed up in two words: stories and songs.

Whether in the family setting or in a classroom, in my view there is no more potent way to connect a child to the legacy of humanity or to the spiritual archetypes and ideals of his or her inner human potential than to tell him/her stories — particularly stories passed down from the world's oral traditions. Indeed, when a child says,



"Tell me a story," the request is more profound than one might imagine. First she is searching for the human contact, that bond of love with the storyteller — at first, of course, usually a parent or grandparent. Secondly, she is saying, "Tell me who I am, where I came from, and where I am going." When a toddler rises up on her own two feet and says "I" for the first time, that child has begun her quest, her journey to find out her identity. Of course different answers come during different phases of development. Growth is the doorway to new identities. And stories hold the keys to the doorways of growth.

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In ancient and not so ancient tribal cultures one could not identify oneself as a member of the tribe until you knew the stories of the tribe. Sitting around the fire at night and hearing the shaman or the tribal storyteller — or bard in Celtic traditions — tell the stories of the clan was really what constituted the education of children. For the Celts, the bard or keeper of the stories was so important he actually had authority over the king. Of course, for children, practical apprenticeships in hunting or other occupations were also part of their education. But the critical aspect was to learn the lore of the clan. And several important stories were always kept secret and not divulged until the child entered puberty and became a full member of the tribe.

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Storytelling also was the subject of humanity's first writing and artwork. The earliest cave paintings tell exciting stories of successful hunting expeditions. And what did the Egyptians do with their earliest hieroglyphics? They told the stories of the gods and how creation came to be.

When a parent or teacher sits down to tell a story to a child, one is connecting to a vast human chain of storytellers extending down through the ages, and one is participating in an occupation as ancient as human language itself. That is one of the reasons, in my view, it is so important to tell children stories, instead of merely reading them picture books. For, although reading books to children is a very important activity — reading children books helps them develop vocabulary and other pre-reading skills, for example — and although the act of such reading engages the reader and child in an important social interaction, a reader concentrates primarily on the book, whereas a storyteller focuses fully on the child. And the child feels and basks in this loving attention. Telling a child a story is, in one sense, saying "I love you" to the child.

In my family my mother's mother was the keeper of the stories. When I was a child she told three types of stories: traditional fairy tales, made up stories, and Bible stories. And as I grew to adulthood, she began telling me story after story of her early life in the 1800s in rural Illinois, and stories of members of our extended family, both in the United States and in Sweden. Recently, I kept alive my grandmother's storytelling work by telling one of her stories at my mother's funeral. Many of the elderly guests knew I was a teacher and after hearing my story, many came up to me and said, "I wish you had been my teacher when I was young."

People of all ages hunger for stories. For me, growing up, I had my grandmother. I have countless glowing memories of sitting in her lap or on the floor by her feet hearing her tell stories to me. And I dare to say that my human potential as an adult was unfolded as much by my grandmother's stories as by any other single factor in my life.

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Part of the magic of storytelling involves a human quality that is underdeveloped and under-appreciated: the power of the voice. The storyteller's voice conveys her love for the listeners, as well as, sort of, massaging their souls. With the quality of voice one can create anticipation, excitement, fear, longing, relief, calm — all the human emotions. Children not only gain a wealth of feelings from the stories, but also, through the modeling of the storyteller, learn to use their most human quality, their own voice, in new ways.

Another aspect of storytelling is, of course, the nature of the stories themselves. The voice cannot create the magic, without a good story to tell. Although nothing can compete with the creativity and fun of a made up story — especially at bedtime — a treasure trove of imaginative discoveries and insights can be found and explored in the stories from the world's oral traditions, fairy tales, and mythologies.

To help the reader understand the profound potency these traditional stories have for growing children I have to describe a concept I first heard from Joseph Chilton Pearce, the renowned child advocate and author of *Magical Child* and its sequels. The concept is "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." According to this notion children in their individual development, revisit or run-through stages of thinking and states of consciousness the entire human race experienced in past

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epochs. Children in their thinking recapitulate the history of culture.

Fairy tales arose out of a mode of early thinking that was pre-logical and pre-abstract. It was, one might say, concrete "picture thinking." In other words it was the type of thinking one finds in young children — especially between five and twelve or so. As the late Professor Leo Hiermann of Northern Illinois University told me, "Fairy tales and mythology do not represent the history of literature, they represent the history of thinking, the story of the evolution of consciousness." Particular stories, therefore, resonate with a child at a particular age; they mirror the child's own consciousness, and speak to the child of his own challenges, hopes, fears, and longings.

Ancient storytellers would make up stories spontaneously, but only those tales that fully captured pictures of the human condition would be passed on, told and retold. Only those stories which tapped into archetypes on the deepest levels of human mentality, would join the oral tradition. Of course, these also would be the stories the people most loved to hear. And when a story did have this almost cosmic potency, retelling the story without changes would be critical.

When I was in college I took a course by the folklorist Alan Dundes at the University of California at Berkeley. He told of an experience of a colleague who had collected taped stories from a village storyteller in Yugoslavia in the 1950s. The researcher returned to the same village ten years later and the old woman was still alive. He again tape recorded her stories. In comparing the tapes recorded ten years apart, he was astonished to discover that not one word in each story was different. She told and retold stories always using the identical words!

Of course stories do sometimes change as they are passed along in the oral tradition. I frequently modify a story to bring out a certain point more forcefully for my kindergarteners. But always, I think, the storyteller should preserve the precise sequence of events and the true images expressed in the story. Modern authors sometimes want to completely alter fairy tales to remove the

violence. But when the wolf eats Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, for example, the image is powerfully and correctly suited for the children. It's not an image of bloody gore and severed limbs that the children are receiving; it's an image of the forces of "wolfness" completely taking over the forces of "grandmotherness." And taking forces in by "eating" them is an image that speaks to kids.

Not only are the images and words important, but also the content. Telling a child the right story with the right archetypes and at the right time can significantly support his pattern of growth and point the way to the next stage of development. The best way to describe this power of fairy tales for children is to briefly outline a story and then examine the archetypal pictures the story offers. The story is a Hungarian tale presented to me by the great folklorist Stith Thompson. It's called "The Lamb with the Golden Fleece." Unfortunately, I have space here only to give the barest sketch of the fairy tale:

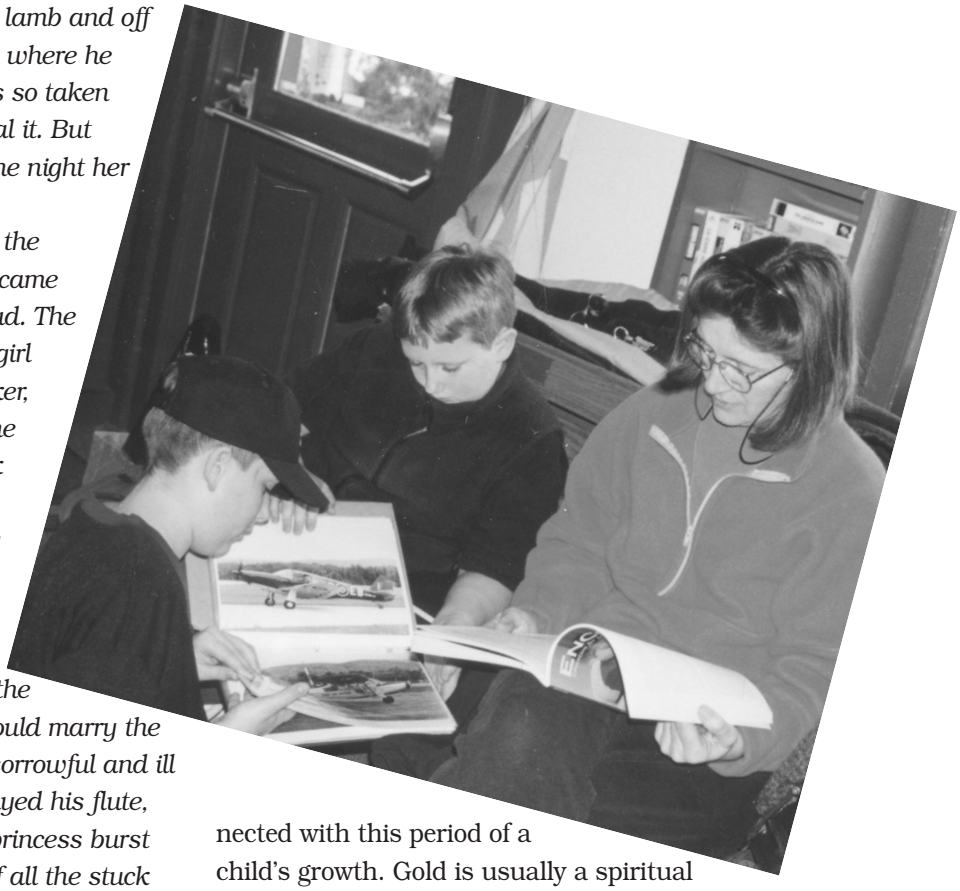
All characters in a story are aspects of oneself.

A father sent his son out into the world to seek his fortune. The boy got a job as a shepherd at a grand ranch. The master gave him a silver flute to play to keep the sheep together. The boy learned to play and was quite astonished when his flute playing caused a little golden lamb to stand on its hind legs and dance. The boy loved that lamb and was told he could keep it as his wages if he worked as a shepherd for one year.

The year passed, the boy received his lamb and off down the road he went. He came to a farm where he spent the night. The farmer's daughter was so taken by the golden lamb that she decided to steal it. But as she grabbed the lamb in the middle of the night her hands stuck to its golden wool.

The next day the boy continued down the road with the lamb and the girl. Soon they came to a village where a baker was baking bread. The boy played his flute and the lamb and the girl danced. "Stop that right now," said the baker, "you're making a fool of yourself." When she hit the girl with her bread shovel, she stuck onto the girl. Next they met a priest and when they all danced, the priest said "they SHOULD not do such a silly thing." Well, he stuck too when he whacked the baker with his cane.

The whole procession finally reached the royal city, where the boy learned that he could marry the king's daughter if he could only make the sorrowful and ill princess laugh. Naturally when the boy played his flute, everyone wiggled in such a silly way, the princess burst out laughing and the golden lamb shook off all the stuck people. They all received jobs in court and the boy married the princess.



It's a sweet, happy story and five-, six- and seven-year-olds simply adore it. But why does it enchant children so? I would like to offer an interpretation of some of the images in the story, knowing full well that my view is only one of many possible ways to understand this fairy tale.

Any actions in fairy tales are internal events having to do with one's thoughts and feelings and desires. And all characters in a story are aspects of oneself. It's like a mirror: one is meeting a portion of one's inner being. Understanding a fairy tale is similar to interpreting one's dreams. In fact, the dream world and the fairy tale world are essentially identical.

When the boy leaves his father to "seek his fortune," it's a picture of leaving inherited forces and traditions and searching for one's own, true identity. The journey is a picture of life.

The boy acquires a flute which causes the golden lamb to dance. Shepherding animals represents managing one's instinctual desires — in this case with a flute. The child between five and thirteen is strongly connected with rhythms, including the bodily rhythms of the heart and breath. The boy playing a flute is an archetype connected with this period of a child's growth. Gold is usually a spiritual force, or simply indicates love. Here love is an animal, so I might say, it is materialistic love, or worldly love, connected with desire.

As the boy journeys (i.e., grows) with his love very delightfully controlled with his rhythmic breath, he acquires new, human forces. Human beings in fairy tales represent more conscious impulses — say, attitudes or ways of looking at life. So "sticking to him" is the thief (representing forces of instinctual desire) living off the earth (farming), as well as the baker, who is an embodiment of a higher type of "thinking." The baker says,"What will other people THINK OF YOU?" And then the priest sticks who says, "You SHOULD not do this." The boy in his journey of growth meets all the conventions of culture, and they "stick" to him, they become part of his education or social conditioning. (Space permitting, I could also perform a Freudian analysis of this story, showing how, for example, the story illustrates the boy's getting in touch with his Id, the girl; his Ego, the baker; and his Super-ego, the priest.) A similar archetype (though only appropriate for older children) is found in the Greek myth about Theseus. This young hero meets social conditioning too when he stays at the house of Procrustes. Procrustes has his guests sleep in a special bed. If the guest is too long for the bed, he cuts off his feet. If he's too short for the

bed, he stretches him. Conformity is the goal. Naturally, Theseus has to kill Procrustes.

But let's see what happens to our shepherd friend. The princess, representing the boy's shining, higher, spiritual self, was not happy that the boy became so stuck in conditioned, materialistic life. When the princess laughed at the silly dancing, the exact words of the story say, "... it made the lamb so glad it shook everyone off." Then all these aspects of the boy's personality began to work for the princess and lived in her castle. In other words, the lower forces were sublimated and channeled to assist in spiritual awakening — spiritual growth.

"The Lamb with the Golden Fleece" is a powerful story and at about age of six or seven, when the child feels as though he's really leaving his "father" and journeying into the outside world, the images of this story give him inner confidence in an adventurous and happy future. This is the time when the child loses his baby teeth, reminders of his inherited babyhood, and pushes through his "adult" teeth. It's also the time his father sends him or her off alone into the "outside" world of the school. It's a scary time, but a critical time, for it's the beginning of the more conscious journey towards adulthood. The forces of growth in the child lead the way toward claiming, or reclaiming his or her humanity. And the archetypal pictures in the great stories of the oral tradition are the child's "backpack" holding the supplies essential for this journey.

Of course the storyteller never actually explains the archetypes of a story to the child. However, one must always be prepared for the inevitable question that all children ask after hearing an unusually significant story: "Is that story true?" The wise storyteller who honors the storytelling tradition which points the way toward new human patterns of growth can truly say, along with the incomparable Native American elder and teacher Black Elk, "I don't know if that's the way it really happened, but I know it's true."

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