

Coming of Age

Weeping, laughing, living, growing

A story in memory of Geoff Sanders, inspirational headteacher
10 September 2005

Proud Songsters

*The thrushes sing as the sun is going,
And the finches whistle in ones and pairs,
And as it gets dark loud nightingales
In bushes
Pipe, as they can when April wears,
As if all Time were theirs.*

*These are brand-new birds of twelve-months' growing,
Which a year ago, or less than twain,
No finches were, nor nightingales,
Nor thrushes,
But only particles of grain,
And earth, and air, and rain.*

(Thomas Hardy)



Once upon a time, in a land west of the sun and east of the moon, and where it can happen that the fox and the hare bid each other good evening a cordial good-night, there lived a king and a queen. They were good and kind people, well, good-enough and kind-enough, which is as much – or is it? – as you can expect from anyone, especially if they're a king and a queen.

Good-enough and kind-enough. But their hearts were heavy, there was a deep sadness in their every thought and movement.

A dark shadow brooded over every step they took, every word they spoke, every look they cast. Their lives were so stale, so dry. There was something holding them back – back from being the flowing and passionate, hopeful and delighting, creative and creating, people they had it in themselves to be.

The land over which they ruled, this king and this queen, was pretty and picturesque – and placid. Not passionate, not a place you'd want to be part of, if you wanted to be fully alive. Conservatives and liberals didn't even give each other stony glances or dirty looks there, let alone snarl or dispute. In the land as in the royal palace there was something holding people back, something that kept them even from embracing each other, let alone embracing strangers. Civil servants and other officers of the crown were, indeed, civil. But not cordial. Not a land you would want to go to, if you wanted to receive, or give, a cordial embrace.

What was it, do you think, that was holding the king and the queen and their country back? What was the sadness, the shadow, in their lives? What do you think?

Listen, I will tell you. Listen with your noses and with your eyes. I will tell you.

The sorrow in the hearts of the king and queen, and in the consciousness of the people in their land, was to do with their child. Their child, as Thomas Hardy might have put it, had been almost twelve years growing. But unlike the thrushes, finches and nightingales in Hardy's poem, the child was not a proud songster.

The child had never sung, not once. Actually, the child had never spoken, had never uttered a single word. How can a human sing if they have never even spoken? Also, the child had never laughed, or even smiled. How can a human sing if they have never laughed or smiled? And the child had never cried, or even wept. How can a human sing if they have never cried or wept?

We come into the world, said Hardy, as birds come, from earth and air and rain, and whilst here we are nourished, as birds are, by particles of grain. We are not here for long before we return whence we came – the earth and air and rain. But whilst here we have it in ourselves to be proud songsters. In ones and pairs, and in choruses and flocks, we have it in ourselves to pipe and sing. As if all time is ours. Even though it's not.

The royal child in today's story, the one who had never sung or spoken or smiled or wept, the one who was approaching their twelfth birthday – was the child a prince, do you reckon, or a princess? Which would you prefer? You can take your pick, for I am not going to say. And either way what is the sex of the person with whom the royal child will one day fall in love and with whom they'll find sexual fulfilment? Such questions have to be asked if we are to avoid here today the sexist and heterosexist stereotypes that are taken for granted in the vast majority of traditional tales about kings and queens, and princesses and princes.

(One day my prince will come, Mr Right with no Mrs Right in the background or in the bed as a third person in the marriage. Or one day my princess will come: a beautiful, desirable and selfless woman – beautiful and desirable precisely because she's so selfless, and therefore so utterly unlike the wicked, petrifying witch that, in my experience, most other women resemble – who will transform me from the beast, the bear, the bull, the frog, that I have latterly been.)

The king and queen published an advertisement.

TUTOR WANTED

Purpose of post: to make the royal child sing, speak, laugh and cry or minimally at least two of these. Duties: whatever the postholder judges appropriate. Salary: negotiable, but if postholder is successful at least half our kingdom. Interviews: shortly before the royal child's forthcoming twelfth birthday. Penalty for failure: death.

Not many people were heroic enough to apply – not many dared face the unknownness of trying and the terror of failing. In fact, applications were received from three candidates only. They were interviewed by a committee whose task was to make a recommendation to the king and queen. The selection process took the form of a formal interview, to be conducted, of course, in accordance with equal opportunities principles and good practice. It was agreed that the royal child, since they were almost 12 years old, should be in attendance. Naturally, it was of course not expected that the royal child would actually say anything during the interviews.

'Well,' said the interviewing panel to the first candidate, 'can you tell us please how you will set about making the royal child sing, speak, laugh or cry?'

'Yes, certainly,' replied the first candidate. 'I shall concentrate on making the royal child cry. Crying is something children ought to do. It's not natural for them not to cry. When people grow up they don't cry, because basically there's nothing for grown-ups to cry about. But children have a lot to cry about, most of all the fact that they're children. We adults have a duty to make them cry.'

'Mm,' said the interviewing panel. 'Don't you think that's rather, like, cruel?'

'Not at all. Crying is not something adults should do, but definitely it's something children should do.'

'What should children cry *about*?'

'About the fact that they are children. The fact that they there's so much they don't understand. The fact that they are incapable of making their parents cry. The fact that they have no choice but to become adults. I don't want them to cry all the time. *Au contraire*, I want them to be carefree. But they ought to cry whenever they realise that they're ignorant; and every time they realise they are basically evil; and every time they realise their childhood is eventually going to end, and they'll be responsible, never carefree again.'

'Well, your idea certainly sounds interesting. How are you proposing to make the royal child cry? You're not thinking of using torture, are you? Or sending the child to a country where people are routinely tortured?'

'No. What I'm going to do is tell stories.'

'Tell stories?'

'Indeed. Stories are a good way to make children cry without torturing them. I shall sit down on the ground with the royal child – not literally, you understand, for in practice I shall stand on a dais, as is right and proper, it will only be the royal child that sits upon the ground – and, as someone once put it rather well, “tell sad stories about the death of kings”. Sad stories tell children about death, and teach them that they're ignorant, that they're wicked, and that their carefree days will be over by the time they are twelve, or shortly after. Shall I explain?'

'Please do.'

'I shall quote various storytellers. I don't agree with them in all respects, mind you, but they help me make my point. First, Michael Morpurgo. Stories, he says “enable us to discover that we're not alone in the world.” Well, actually we are, but I'll let that pass. He continues: “They allow us to travel to places we've never been, meet people we've never met, be someone we've never been. And all the while, as we go on these great adventures, our horizons widen and we live more deeply, if not necessarily more comfortably.”'

'Those last few words – “not necessarily more comfortably” – are key. It's important that children shouldn't be too comfortable. They should on the contrary be made to cry.'

'Mm,' said the interviewing panel.

'Or let me quote Philip Pullman. Basically I don't agree with him about anything, but he does help me to make my point. He is against the teaching of grammar, as you may know. He says people think that teaching grammar in secondary schools will make pupils “politer and more patriotic and less likely to become pregnant”. Well, so it will, and he's wrong to criticise. And he also says that children should be encouraged to play – play with language and storying in the same way they play with sand and water:

It's when we do this foolish, time-consuming, romantic, quixotic, childlike thing called play that we are most practical, most useful, and most firmly grounded in reality, because the world itself is the most unlikely of places, and it works in the oddest of ways, and we won't make any sense of it by doing what everybody else has done before us. It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries, we create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. The youngest children can do it, and the greatest artists and greatest scientists do it all the time.

'What nonsense. A certain amount of play is important before the age of twelve, I accept, but it's even more important to make children cry, since (a) they're ignorant and unknowing (b) they're wicked and (c) their childhood will one day be over.'

'Mm,' said the interviewing panel.

'Or let me quote P.L.Travers, not because I agree with her but to make my point. She says that when we approach stories we should, if we want to understand them, first stand under them:

In order to understand, I come to something with my unknowing – my nakedness, if you like: I stand under it and let it teach me, rain down its

truth upon me. That is, I think, what children do; they let it make room in them for a sense of justice, for the Wicked Fairy as well as the Sleeping Beauty, for dragons as well as princes.

Travers seems to think unknowing and ignorance are good things. Well, they're not. Children must grow out of them. They should be made to cry that they're unknowing, not take any pleasure in it. But at least she's right that children should be made to be frightened – frightened by, for example, wicked fairies and by dragons.'

'Mm,' said the interviewing committee. And they added: "We think we've heard enough. You may go.'

The royal child had remained totally impassive throughout the interview, not apparently listening to – or even, indeed, hearing – a single word.

The second candidate entered.

'Well,' said the interviewing panel to the second candidate, 'can you tell us please how you will set about making the royal child sing, speak, laugh or cry?'

'Yes, certainly,' replied the second candidate. 'I shall concentrate on making the royal child laugh. Laughing is something children ought to do. There won't be many opportunities for laughter, or even for smiles, after the age of twelve.'

'Mm,' said the interviewing committee. And how will you make the royal child laugh?'

'Do you mean, you would like to hear some examples?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. Try these...'

What was the Ugly Duckling after it was five days old? – A six-day-old Ugly Duckling. Who shouted "Knickers!" at the big, bad wolf? – Little Rude Riding Hood. – Do giants eat Englishmen with their fingers? No, they eat their fingers separately. What goes: MUF OAF IFE EEF? – A giant walking backwards. Why did Dick Whittington have a beard? – Because nine out of ten cats prefer whiskers. How come Cinderella was able to send an email to Prince Charming? – One of her footman had to change into a mouse.

How does Christopher Robin surf the web? – On his com-poooh-ter. How did Mark Twain do research? – On the Huckleberry Finn-ternet.

What do you get if you type `www.abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz.com` into your computer? – A sore finger. Why did the headteacher paint his computer screen in little black and white squares? – He wanted to check his email. Teacher: You told your parents that I'm an ogre. I'm very upset and angry. – Pupil: Sorry, I didn't realise you wanted it kept confidential.

First child: Are you having a party for your birthday? Second: No, I'm having a witch do. First : What's a witch do? Second: She flies around on a broomstick being horrible.

How do you know if your little brother is turning into a fridge? — See if a little light comes on whenever he opens his mouth. How do you stop a head cold going to your chest? — Tie a knot in your neck. Doctor, Doctor, I keep thinking I'm a caterpillar — Don't worry you'll soon change. Doctor, Doctor, I keep thinking I'm a dog. Sit on the couch and we'll talk about it. But I'm not allowed up on the couch. Doctor, Doctor, I keep thinking I'm a woodworm. — How boring for you.

Waiter, this soup tastes funny. — Then why aren't you laughing? How do you make milk shake? — Give it a scare. Knock, knock. Who's there? Aladdin. Aladdin who? A lad in the street who wants to come in. He's feeling very lonely, miserable and unappreciated...

'Are there,' asked the interviewing committee, 'any more where those came from?'

'Thousands.'

'Mm,' said the interviewing committee. And they added: "We think we've heard enough. You may go.'

The royal child had remained totally impassive throughout the interview, not apparently listening to — or even, indeed, hearing — a single word.

The third candidate entered.

'Well,' said the interviewing panel to the second candidate, 'can you tell us please how you will set about making the royal child sing, speak, laugh or cry?'

'Not really,' replied the third candidate. 'What I'd like to do is ask you three questions. I hope that is in order?'

'It's not, strictly speaking, in accordance with our equal opportunities policy. But still, proceed.'

The third candidate spoke as follows.

In a certain nation there some who were cast out by authority and tormented, made to suffer for the general wrong. Pogroms in the east, lynchings in the west, and everywhere springs of hope were dried up and hearts ached in unending pain. How, it was asked, can I grow to a man's stature? How can I cherish my man in such days, or become a mother in a world of destruction? Some, bidding to root out fatalism and despair from their souls, as they thought, were moved to respond to hatred with hatred, and to injustice with embittered bullets and bombs. But I want tell you about someone who responded to hatred not with hatred but by speaking truth to power, and by living craftily on their wit and wisdom. This person was known by everyone as the Fool.

One morning the Fool was arrested by the police. ‘Make a statement, Fool. If your statement is false, you will immediately be shot. If it is true, you will immediately be hanged from that lamp post.’ The Fool made a statement.

‘My first question to you,’ said the third candidate to the interviewing committee, is this. What do you think the Fool said to the police, and thus survive to live by wit and wisdom for another day?’

At that point, something extraordinary happened. The royal child – who, you remember, was in attendance at the interviews – became very animated and excited. ‘I know, I know, I know!’ shouted the royal child, and gave the answer. ‘The Fool said: “Today I am going to be shot”. If the police had then shot the Fool the statement would have been true, but the punishment for telling the truth was hanging. If, however, they had hanged the Fool, the statement would have been false, whilst the punishment for a false statement was to be hanged. So either way the police would get into trouble for meting out the wrong punishment. Therefore they had to let the Fool go.’

Everyone on the interviewing panel was amazed. The royal child had spoken! No-one had spoken to the child, but as plain as eye could see and ear could hear, the child had spoken. But having spoken, the child fell silent again, and deadpan.

‘May I ask you a second question?’ asked the candidate.

‘Mm,’ said the interviewing committee.

The next day the president of that country asked his advisers what was the Fool’s secret? Why did the Fool remain cheerful, when everyone else was in despair and fear? ‘The Fool’s secret,’ replied the advisers lies in the Fool’s heart. The Fool has a special kind of heart, the kind that enables someone to love life and living, and not sink into hopelessness, dryness and despair.’ — ‘Really?’ said the president. ‘Well, supposing the Fool’s heart were to be cut out and I were to eat it? Would I then be cured of hopelessness, dryness and despair?’ — ‘Undoubtedly, your Excellency.’ — ‘Very well, bring the Fool here. I personally will cut the Fool’s heart out, and then eat it.’

A group of civil servants went to find the Fool. ‘His excellency the president,’ they said, ‘has heard what a wonderful person you are and would like to invite you to have dinner with him this evening at his official residence. We will collect you at 1800 hours, and take you to him.’

The civil servants collected the Fool and took him away in an official limousine. Now that they had The Fool in their power, they could see no reason not to explain what was going to happen. ‘His excellency the president is going to cut your heart out.’ — ‘Oh,’ said the Fool, ‘what a pity.’

'My second question to you,' said the candidate to the interviewing committee, is this. 'What do you think the Fool said to the civil servants at this point, and thus survive to live by wit and wisdom for another day?'

At that point, something extraordinary happened. The royal child – who, you remember, was in attendance at the interviews – became very animated and excited. "I know, I know, I know!" shouted the royal child, and gave the answer. 'The Fool said: "What a pity you didn't mention this earlier. If you had done, I would have brought my heart with me. As it is, I have left my heart at home. The fact is I didn't think I would need it when in the company of the president. But let's turn back, it won't take long and I'll pop into the house and collect my heart and put it back inside my breast.' – "OK," agreed the civil servants. But when the car got back to the Fool's home, the Fool simply ran off.'

Everyone on the interviewing panel was amazed. The royal child had spoken! No-one had spoken to the child, but as plain as eye could see or ear could hear, the child had spoken. But having spoken, the child fell silent again, and deadpan.

'May I ask you a third question?' asked the candidate.

'Mm', said the interviewing panel.

The next day the Fool and two friends decided that they would venture forth into the world each to find the most valuable object in the world. They agreed to meet again in eight days. Each set forth. They put their feet on their respective paths without knowing what to expect, but feeling in their bones that life expected great things of them. Having been given life, they had to use it. They were not afraid to leave home, or the various ways they had been moulded by their homes. Not afraid to be creative and creating. They were not afraid, in a word, to live. Not afraid, for that matter, to die.

The words of wisdom are these: Winter cold means inner warmth, the secret nursery of the seed. The darkness declares the glory of light. On the other side of the desert, the garden.

The three met again eight days later, each having journeyed far and wide. One had brought back a magic telescope, enabling them to see everything and anything everywhere. A second had brought back a magic carpet, enabling them to travel everywhere and anywhere in the world. The Fool had brought back an apple, collected from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

They looked through the magic telescope and saw thousands of miles away a royal young adult who needed a mate. They all climbed onto the magic carpet and arrived in the presence of the royal young adult within seconds. 'I would like to be your mate,' said one. 'And if you become my mate I will share with you this magic telescope. You will be able to see everything and anything everywhere.' – 'I would like to be your mate', said another. 'And if you become my mate I will share with you this magic carpet. You will be able to travel everywhere and anywhere, and it will only take seconds.' – 'I would like to be your mate,' said the Fool. 'But sorry,

all I can share with you is this apple, collected from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.’ The royal young person immediately chose one of the three to be their mate.

‘My third question to you,’ said the candidate to the interviewing committee, is this. Which of the three do you think the royal young adult chose to be their mate?’

At that point, something extraordinary happened. The royal child – who, you remember, was in attendance at the interviews – became very animated and excited indeed. ‘I know, I know, I know!’ shouted the royal child, and gave the answer. ‘The royal young adult chose the Fool. I cannot yet explain why exactly, perhaps I shall never be able to explain why, but I’m quite sure, the royal young adult chose the Fool.’

The royal child added: ‘And by the way, I don’t need a tutor, thank you very much.’

The interviewing panel said: ‘Mm.’

From that day onwards the royal child sang every day, and often spoke and laughed and sometimes wept. The land – west of the sun and east of the moon, and where it can happen that the fox and the hare bid each other a cordial good-night – became a passionate place, where people were flowing and free, hopeful and delighting, creative and creating. It was a place you’d want to be part of, if you wanted to be fully alive. A land you would want to go to, if you wanted to receive, or to give, a cordial embrace. All the people there became proud songsters.

Coda

One of Geoff’s favourite pieces of music was *A Child of our Time* by Michael Tippett. The story told by the third candidate, within the frame of the story which has just ended, contained several short quotations from Tippett’s libretto.

Right at the end of *A Child of our Time* the tenor sings: ‘I would know my shadow and my light, so shall I at last be whole.’

The bass sings: ‘Then courage, brother, dare the grave passage.’

The soprano sings: ‘Here is no final grieving but an abiding hope.’

The alto sings: ‘The moving waters renew the earth. It is spring.’

And at this point in the libretto Tippett writes: ‘Chorus repeats the words of the soloists.’

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In bushes
Pipe, as they can when April wears,
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Which a year ago, or less than twain,
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But only particles of grain,
And earth, and air, and rain.*

Robin Richardson, Mile End Park Ecology Pavilion, Tower Hamlets, 10 September 2005

Acknowledgements

The broad outline of this story is adapted from 'The Mute Princess' in *Elijah's Violin and other Jewish Folktales* by Howard Schwartz, 1985. It derives from oral tradition in the Yemen.

The three stories told by the third candidate are adapted from traditional tales and riddles found in a wide range of cultures.

For material at one point in the story, www.kidsjokes.co.uk, and Max Lane-Richardson, aged 4½.

For phrases, ideas and a quotation, 'The World of the Hero' by P.L.Travers, in *What the Bee Knows: reflections on myth, story and symbol*, 1989.

For a quotation, Philip Pullman in *The Guardian*, 22 January 2005.

For a quotation, Michael Morpurgo in connection with an exhibition at the British Library about Hans Christian Anderson, summer 2005.

Geoffrey Court, who was deputy head of Culloden School, Tower Hamlets, where Geoff Sanders was the head.

