

## Get Lost! The Psychic Value of Wilderness Adventures in the Lives of Children

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*We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness, which no one can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world.*

– Marcel Proust

It's a familiar story—a parent with naïve notions about the safety of the world or the maturity of their child sends or allows their youngster on an errand or adventure, only to have that child encounter a situation that puts them clearly out of their depth—assailed by life-threatening circumstances or brought face to face with a dangerous predator. I'm not referring to news reports on television of a teenager plucked from the Indian Ocean when her nautical attempt at circumnavigation fails, or the two San Diego girls raped and killed by a serial murderer that authorities should have had closer tabs on. The story I have in mind is "Little Red Riding Hood," and the moral of that story is never how irresponsible the parents are for letting the youngster head off into the woods towards Grandma's house. Nor is the story interpreted as an Old World admonition to never let your kids out of your sight. Rather the archetypal lesson contained is this: *There are devouring things in this world, and unless one learns early on to pay attention and, when necessary, use creative guile and intelligence, one may be swallowed whole with no promise of rescue.*

It's no coincidence that fairy tales often feature the motif of children lost or in peril, and that many fairy tales are set in the woods or wilderness. As Proust's astute comment above points out, the wilderness, beyond being simply a place of desolation or dismemberment, represents liminal psychic space where the uninitiated or immature parts

of the individual can be transformed into wisdom. This occurs through unmediated, and often unwelcome, contact with forces that seem tailor-made to evoke one's inner fortitude, creativity, and courage. Stories where children face trials in the woods are archetypal constructions designed to highlight that there exist inner and outer wild spaces. The image of the child or children alone in the wilderness is not simply a symbolic or narrative device; properly prepared children must be allowed to literally venture forth and have adventures in the wild without the constant mediating or protective influence of adult figures of authority if they are to grow up.

There are several versions of "Little Red Riding Hood." The earliest published version, according to Alan Dundes' collection of interpretive essays, dates to 1697; however Dundes notes that, "The tale must be older than 1697, although we cannot say for certain how much older" (3). In this version of the story, young Riding Hood is killed at the end of the tale (6). Dundes states that this implies a fragmented recording of an oral tale, since, "in purely oral fairy tales [...] the initial victim is rarely if ever killed permanently" (3). However, for my purposes of applying the archetypal lessons of this fairy tale to contemporary life, it is important to recognize that the actual, literal death of the child-adventurer is always a very real possibility when speaking of authentic contact with a world that has inherent risks. Children, supervised or not, do occasionally die when accidents occur or pedophilic "wolves" attack. Certainly the latter of these two scenarios is the one most often (and most luridly) imagined by parents and 24-hour news channels alike. However, Lenore Skenazy, author of *Free Range Kids*, notes that according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the statistical likelihood that a child will be abducted and killed by a stranger—the wolf in the woods—

is about 1 in 1.5 million (16). Skenazy goes on to explicate this statistic in a more vivid way: “If you actually *wanted* your child to be kidnapped [...] how long would you have to keep her outside, unattended, for this to be statistically likely to happen? About seven hundred and fifty thousand years” (16-17). Wolves in the woods hiding behind trees are not the most likely killers of children: auto accidents with mom or dad present are. And yet there seems to be little uproar about irresponsible parenting when children in America are killed in droves in auto accidents; no one is asking how parents could possibly let their children near a vehicle when the statistics bear out that the risk to children is alarmingly elevated during this activity.

There has, however, been plenty of uproar lately over the story of Abby Sunderland, a 16-year-old California girl who was rescued by Australian authorities after the boat she was piloting alone suffered a snapped mast in the Indian Ocean. Sunderland was attempting to break a world record and become the youngest person to sail solo around the world; a record set in May by another 16-year-old, Australian Jessica Watson. A Grimm Brothers version of “Little Red Riding Hood” is helpful here. In one German version of the tale, “Little Red Cap,” the young protagonist is sent dutifully off to visit her grandmother. As in the earlier telling, she meets with a wolf that eats both her and her grandmother whole. In this version, however, they are rescued intact when a huntsman cuts open the belly of the wolf, allowing them to escape (Dundes 11). Children (and adults) at times do need rescuing; the intervention of a higher power (huntsman / Australian military) may be required. And yet in our modern times when the rescued party is a young person rather than an adult, the rhetoric is far more pointed. Adam Dickters’ online op-ed piece in *The Jewish Week* is typical of what many media pundits

offered regarding Abby Sunderland: “I hope and pray neither of [my children] reach the level of courage and empowerment to do something as stupid as what Sunderland’s parents let her do.” He goes on to say that when his daughter “was barely a teen” he wouldn’t allow her to go to the mall by herself: “It’s not her that I don’t trust. It’s the rest of the world.” Dickters’ comments highlight the contemporary notion that it is the parent’s job to, as far as possible, eliminate all risk from the lives of their children—a notion absent in every era but our modern one. It is not the moral of “Little Red Cap.” Dickters’ column also reveals a widely-held prejudice that the individual child’s level of maturity is irrelevant in a devouring world. Sunderland herself presents a response that illustrates her maturity and insight: “I think that a lot of people are judging me by the standards they have for their teens and other teens that they know [...] and thinking ‘she’s exactly like them.’ They don’t understand that I’ve sailed my whole life and I do know what I’m doing out there” (Dickters). The lessons of Sunderland’s story and this version of “Little Red Cap” are valuable ones, lessons never learned if the adventure is prematurely disallowed: peril can befall even the most competent, the world truly is powerful and unpredictable, and even the best prepared among us sometimes need the intervention of a higher power if we are to survive.

Ironically, the 16-year-old who holds the world record for youngest solo circumnavigation—the girl who didn’t need rescuing, Jessica Watson—was lauded by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd as “Australia’s newest hero” (“It Wasn’t All Bad”) just weeks before the Australian media fanned the flames of uproar over Australian taxpayers footing the bill to rescue Abby Sunderland. Jessica represents an alternative version of “Little Red Cap” collected by the Grimm brothers, the version where Little

Red Cap, with Grandmother's help, uses cunning and creative resources to avoid being swallowed at all, instead filling a trough with water scented with sausages in which the Wolf drowns (Dundes 12). This telling of "Little Red Cap" represents the kind of child adventure that modern people are most comfortable with: the successful kind! The divergent reactions to Sunderland's and Watson's similar stories is, however, both telling and distressing; seemingly children who undertake adventures and are successful are "heroes" while those who fail and need outside help are "stupid." Likewise, Sunderland is left defending and justifying her actions and qualifications while Watson is free to state humbly "I don't consider myself a hero. I'm an ordinary girl who believed in her dream" ("It Wasn't All Bad").

All of the collective worry that is transformed into media efforts, products, laws, and parenting books designed to eliminate all risky childhood behavior or scenarios would be laudable but for this simple bit of wisdom imparted by fairy tales: getting lost in the dangerous woods is an essential part of growing up. The three versions of the "Little Red Riding Hood" tale mentioned here illustrate three of the most likely outcomes of contact with dangerous, archetypal forces: death, triumph, and a qualified triumph at the hands of a rescuer. Modern culture has added a fourth possible outcome: avoid the woods altogether, or maintain constant contact with one's children in order to ensure nothing bad ever befalls them. In this vein, it is now possible for parents to outfit their children with cellular telephones that transmit GPS data to a parent's computer for monitoring and even real-time vehicle speed if the youngster in question is traveling in a car. Conversely, there are concerns about *under*-protective parents who push their children into adventurous exploits for media fame or attention. Abby Sunderland's parents certainly

didn't allay any of these suspicions when they admitted an interest in a reality show or book deal to be based on their daughter's (mis)adventure.

As disturbing as this exploitation by fame-seeking parents may be, it is equally disturbing when parents ignore the potential negative psychic effects that near-constant adult mediation of the world has on the healthy imaginative development of children. One reason for this ignorance may be that retarded psychic growth is nowhere near as panic inducing (or media ratings-boosting) as the prospect, however statistically remote, of one's child being abducted, raped, or killed. But if it is true that, as author Michael Chabon says, "Childhood is a branch of cartography" (61), then limiting or mediating a youngster's world to a small enough scrap to ensure no dangerous encounters is to shrink a child's imaginative space, perhaps permanently. Chabon, in his essay "The Wilderness of Childhood," encapsulates well the thesis I am presenting: "Childhood is, or has been, or ought to be, the great original adventure, a tale of privation, courage, constant vigilance, danger, and sometimes calamity" (61). Chabon continues, "The land ruled by children, to which a kid might exile himself for at least some portion of every day from the neighboring kingdom of adulthood, has in large part been taken over, co-opted, colonized, and finally absorbed by the neighbors" (63). The maps of one's inner landscape contract soon enough with the onset of adult responsibilities; to start with a truncated inner life is a recipe for small-mindedness, stunted problem-solving abilities, and a limited ability to experience compassion—that valuable but elusive character quality born of one's own experiences of radical failure. In our modern world, the point is no longer to find one's way through the thicket alone (or more to the point, without adult hand-holding), arriving on the other side with a deeper understanding of how the world

works and how one works in it. The point nowadays is to get from point A to point B in the safest, most efficient way possible.

There exists an internal and an external wilderness. Through unsupervised adventures in the outer wilderness children learn to navigate their way through inner archetypal landscapes later in life. In the outer wilderness they are forced to develop self-reliance through negotiation, organically experiencing the process of learning on their own to balance unbounded desire with what can be realistically or safely achieved—lessons that need to be internalized and applied to one’s inner life for true adult maturity to be gained. Through the process of crafting creative solutions to dilemmas and anxieties in the outer wilderness, one becomes prepared to negotiate the twists and turns of the internal wilderness.

Even when quests in the outer wilderness are relatively tame, they are invaluable to the creation of the imaginative life of the child, which may be carried through into adulthood. Carl Jung notes in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* how, as a youth, he would sit on his favorite stone, away from the sensible, mediating influence of adults, and wonder to himself, “Am I the one who is sitting on the stone, or am I the stone on which *he* is sitting?” (20). Jung’s very un-adult-like comments reflect an inner development that would manifest in adulthood as an irrepressible curiosity regarding relationships: between what is known and unknown, the self and other, the meeting of light and shadow. Jung, through his own solitary adventures, learned that the world about him did not exist simply as an external objective reality to be accepted, consumed, or rejected, but rather as subjective and autonomous features of an internal landscape with both unknowable pockets and divine portent.

The interior lives of children, when allowed to develop in a healthy and organic way, form out of a mixture of imagination and experience. As a discipline, depth psychology proposes that these imaginative experiences must include experiences of independence *and* failure if they are to be authentic and transformative. As the poet Franz Wright wrote, “The humiliation I go through when I think of my past can only be described as grace. We are created by being destroyed” (39). What Wright is alluding to is that humility (a virtue that one ought to emerge from young adulthood possessing) is tied to humiliation—that the formation of character is inextricably tied to failure.

What then, when failure is never experienced and powerlessness never known because the child is not allowed to experience trials alone or in the company of other children? When the outer world is perceived as foreign and scary *because* of the constant presence of adult authorities ready and waiting to eliminate any risk as soon as it arises? If we value the imaginative life of children, we ought to encourage them to create their own worlds and explore them. This is not to say that parental influence has no place, or that the world isn’t dangerous. There are wolves out there. But there must be a balance, and one carefully and mindfully developed with each individual child in mind. If we take seriously, and truly value, the imaginative development of children, then we ought to consider the detrimental psychic effects of teaching children that they are only free to develop imaginative lives based on experiences of wanderings and getting lost, so long as adults aren’t inconvenienced by the occasional rescue or no real danger is ever encountered.



Sooner or later, the woods are waiting. So is the Wolf. If unmediated experiences do not happen through encounters with the sandlot bully (not an unlikely occurrence) or a broken mast on the high seas, then these encounters may surface during adolescence or young adulthood as they already so often do: through experimentation with drugs, alcohol, unsafe sex, or other risky behavior. The idea that the woods, the dwelling place of wolves, can be neatly snipped out of the lives of youngsters is absurd. It is a notion that blatantly ignores the lessons so often found in fairy tales: prepare the child the best you can, arm them with common sense, and then let them go.

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