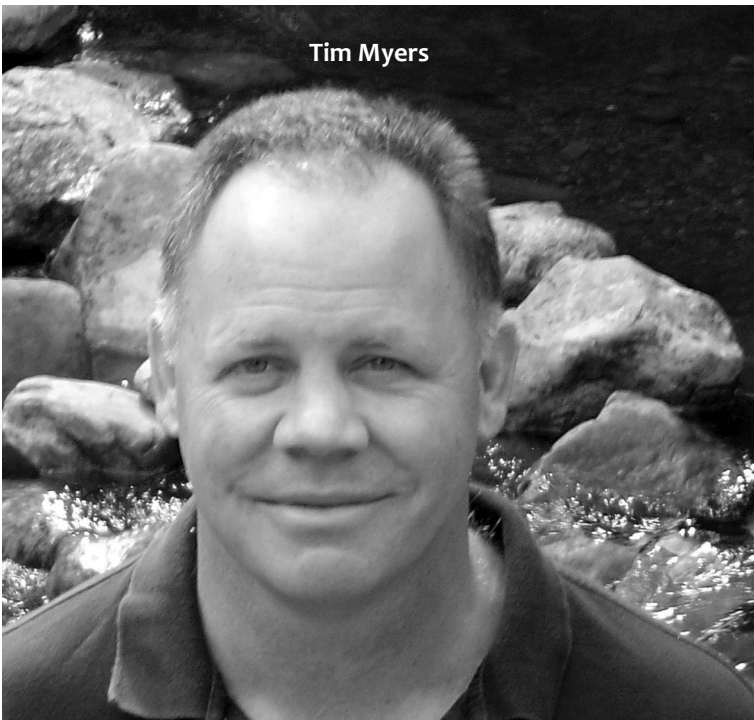


THE WORLD ACCORDING TO NICK

by Tim Myers

Often overlooked in our scientific-materialist age is a simple fact: Story, that profound and intangible force, wields such power over the human psyche that we've channeled significant portions of our economic and technological might into assuring an endless supply of it. From the utter universality of TV and movies, to the ever-growing numbers of books and magazines being published, to our endless fascination with gossip, urban legends and the like, our consumer society churns out narrative as if it were some kind of psychic cornucopia. And there's probably not a more story-hungry group on the planet than children.



Tim Myers

From live-action TV and movies to cartoons to comic books to children's literature, from the playground oral tradition (ever hear the one about the boy who put his tongue against a frozen lightpole?), from the rise in traditional oral storytelling in schools to the family stories so many kids hear, our children are inundated.

We tend not to think about this in a specific way. But we should. Stories are cultural maps, among other things, and children are particularly moved and shaped by the power of narrative. So, leaving aside the question of negative effects, we have to ask: How do we measure the good a story can work in the heart of a child? The truth is there's really no way to pinpoint it; all we can do is look for outward signs. We can see how sto-

ries improve a child's grasp of literacy, building both skills and positive attitudes. We can see children grow in wisdom, through failure and success, when they try to apply lessons from stories to their own lives. We can question them directly about the vast amounts of information transmitted through stories. We can see the strengthening of their imaginations when they use stories in spontaneous play, and then invent new material based on the old.

And at times we can glimpse the process by which children try to understand reality itself through a blending of their own experience and the stories they hear—a mysterious process whereby Life seems to communicate to itself, from one generation to the next, that which is considered most powerful and most sacred.

This last process is profoundly important, and may be the single most potent reason we tell stories - though it's certainly not something tellers or listeners are always aware of. But human beings are meaning-making animals, and one of our most natural behaviours is the contemplation of reality through narrative. Joseph Campbell put it another way when Bill Moyers asked him about creation myths:

"I think that what we are looking for is a way of experiencing the world that will open to us the transcendent that informs it, and at the same time forms ourselves within it. That is what people want.

That is what the soul asks for"

(Campbell, *The Power of Myth*).

One might object that children, with their intuitive directness and focus on concrete experience, can't really be involved in this process. As a working storyteller, however, I've seen lots of evidence to the contrary, particularly in situations where children are enrapt by tales that clearly address cosmic issues. If an eight-year-old is swept away by the outwitting of Old Man Death, who are we to say she has no concept of the metaphysical nature of the story? C.S. Lewis goes as far as to maintain, in *Surprised By Joy*, that our most important thinking is done before we're fourteen. Children aren't fully developed philosophical or spiritual thinkers, of course, but then they're not fully developed in their use of language either—and that doesn't stop them from talking. They talk because talking is part of life, just as asking the great questions is—and they do both as fervently and instinctively as bees make honey.

Lewis is, in fact, a great example of how Story itself can shape a child. In *Surprised By Joy*, he recounts how Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin* produced in him an overwhelming and intense sensation he could only describe as 'the idea of Autumn'. In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis reaches for a metaphor to express the soul's desire for God—and finds Siege Perilous, the seat at Arthur's Round Table reserved only for the most pure. Lewis wrote that he learned to yield to God 'through the gods of Asgard...' Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*—though in some ways a Freudian tract—is full of similar examples.

I was lucky enough to get a very close look at this crucial process—simply because my five-year-old son was feeling talkative one night as he had a snack before bed. What he told me is, I think, more or less representative of what goes on unconsciously or half-consciously in the minds of most children who hear stories.

We were sitting at the kitchen table on a school night in February. The floor was cold against my bare feet, the night outside very dark, the potted plant on our side table standing pale under the kitchen lights. Nick just started talking—and I quickly realized this was more than cheerful babble. He and his brother hear a lot of stories—in school, from my wife and me orally, and in books we read to them. For twenty minutes or so, as I sat fascinated, Nick wove various elements from stories and his own life into what was basically a map of the universe—not a physical but a metaphysical one. I let him talk, asking only three questions; the rest is his own.

"The Earth's not the only place there is," he began. "There's also 'the gods' land', a place that's all 'misty' because 'gods are misty'. This is where the gods live, and it's joined to Earth by a rainbow." I recognized, of course, how much Asgard and Bifrost the Rainbow Bridge (from Norse myth) had impressed him; we'd been reading a picture-book version of 'Baldur and the Mistletoe' which he and his brother were agog over. Nick was fascinated by Loki's evil plot to kill Baldur, and passionately interested in the prophecy that the Christ-like Baldur, young, beautiful and good, will eventually return from the land of death. (Interestingly enough, C.S. Lewis was deeply moved as a child by Baldur).

"And if you're a god," Nick went on, "you can see the other gods" - which explained to him, I think, why beings of such enormous vitality and dramatic existence can't be seen by human eyes as they go about their divine business.

But this wasn't the only rainbow bridge. "Another", he continued, "links the gods' land to 'Fairyland'. Wild Robin is there [a young character in an old Scottish tale]. And Mossy. And Tangle. And the cabin." This last referred to characters in George MacDonald's *The Golden Key*, that marvelous spiritual fairy tale my boys had also been entranced by, a book whose powerful themes probably helped set Nick to thinking in this vein to begin with.

Another rainbow bridge crosses from Fairyland to 'Heaven'. Between bites of cereal, Nick described it. "There's no dirt or rocks in Heaven. It's a cloud, a huge cloud with 'shapes of fogs' in it. Angels and people... live there. When you're in Heaven, you become a 'shape of fog' and then you can see the angels, etc., 'in their real colours'. In Heaven you can be with the people you know who 'died early' - kids can be with their moms and dads if their moms and dads 'died early'. And grandmas and grand-

pas!” he added with sudden delight, explaining and inventing as he went along. “If Grandma Nell dies, you know what? We’ll see her there and she’ll still give us M & M’s!”

I could see in his face the comfort this gave him. For Nick, Heaven seems to be a mysterious answer to some of his deepest fears, as well as a place for seeing into the truer nature of beings—and, naturally enough, a way to continue the pleasures of life.

I asked if God is in Heaven. “Yes... no! No god can leave the land of the gods—except Baldur. He can go anywhere.” Although Nick didn’t realize it, his answer to my question was essentially “yes.” In his heart he accepted a single Being whose nature was absolute power and absolute good, centering his awe on the version called ‘Baldur’.

The next rainbow bridge leads to ‘Hell’, where the devils live. “They’re all mean and grumpy,” he explained seriously, “They kill people and stuff.” Because they’re bad, they can’t find the rainbow to get out of Hell. People from Earth are good, so “if they’re sent to Hell, they just find the rainbow and go out.” Like any child, Nick believes in evil and can describe it—but he added an assertion of the possibility of forgiveness, of redemption through a change in understanding. This continued when I asked if devils can turn good (like Nick, I’m troubled by the idea of everlasting punishment). Yes, he said with a smile, and then they find the rainbow.

He munched for a moment in silence, then began to speak seriously about ‘The City of the Dead.’ “It’s ruled by the ‘Princess of Dead’ on her ‘stone throne’ and is made up of ‘crumpled rocks’ and ‘rocks broken to sand.’” Here Nick was remembering the episode when Freya, Baldur’s mother, goes to the kingdom of Death to beg for the life of her son—a compelling scene found in many stories, most familiarly, perhaps, in the myth of Persephone. This place is ‘all dark’, Nick said, and added that a dead person goes here before going to Heaven. When you’ve gone far enough in, you can see some ‘huge crumpled rocks.’

I was struck by the power and dark beauty of these images whereby my child tried to face and understand our deep fears and misgivings about death. Then I asked my third question: What happens to animals when they die?

I asked because I know how deeply children identify with animals—Nick especially. For him this was no mere theological detail.

“They go to animal heaven,” he answered without hesitation. “But it depends on what animal it is. There are thousands of heavens—thousands. Thousands!” His young face was suddenly bright with joy. And it seemed to me that he’d found his way to a vision of the universe as a place of overflowing ultimate goodness. I could see, of course, that he was just as interested in the next bite of cereal as he was in a universe crowded with heavens. But in his eyes there was also something more—something unmistakable.

And overall there was more than mere wish-fulfilment in Nick’s map of all things. Yes, children are naturally fearful, and they’re perfectly willing to dismiss painful thoughts or to rely on adults to make everything better. But there’s a profound honesty in their young hearts, and they can’t help but heed their own experience in the real world. Nick was aware, in some dim way, that his great schema was intangible, a huge contrast to the world of home and city, playground and school. So he added a kind of proviso, a statement that registers both his realism about how the world really is



Baldur by Johannes Gehrts

and his deep hope.

In Norse myth, Baldur is destroyed by Loki's malice, and all the cosmos grieves—but the story reminds us that one day, long after Ragnarok and the destruction of Asgard and of all the gods by the frost giants and the flaming sword of Surt the Fire-Giant, after Fenrir the wolf swallows the sun itself, Baldur will return. Then islands will rise from the desolate sea, and eternal peace and joy will reign across earth. As he sat across the table from me, Nick was obviously thinking about his everyday world, its dangers and frustrations and compromises, and about the desires so instinctive to his own heart. I could see him considering, pausing for a moment, a dribble of milk on his chin. Then he told me that everything he'd been describing—his whole cosmography—actually exists only “after Baldur came back, and there's new land.”

This certainly wasn't a logical explanation—but it gave him a way to explain the contrast between such lofty questions and the ordinary world he's learning to live in. In that way—and perhaps in others—it has a truth to it. Tolkien's philosophy of fantasy included the idea of the best kind of happy ending—the ‘Eucatastrophe’ - in which a plot is tied up in a way that's ‘sudden and miraculous...never to be counted on to recur...’, denying ‘...(in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat...giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief’ (Tolkien, ‘Fairy Stories’). With the utter ease of childhood, Nick envisioned both the real world and this same kind of ultimate good, and joined them seamlessly.

He was finished—both with the universe and his cereal. I sat back in awe. The richness of the stories that moved him gave Nick a variety of tools with which to do his spiritual thinking. As our ancestors did—as we do today, whether we realize it or not—he was struggling through Story to understand himself and his place in the cosmos. His answers were crude and simple, and they came out in a hodge-podge of cultures and traditions, but they touch on the deepest questions humanity faces—questions that too often lie dormant within us, though their answers shape our lives. These questions are illuminated for all of us, to some degree, by the light of stories—which are, of course, repositories of our deepest wisdoms and desires.

As Nick grows older he'll formulate new answers to the eternal questions, answers that are in many ways more sophisticated than these. But even at five he's begun to consider such questions—and the answers he comes to in adult life may well be based on what he gleaned from stories and from his own heart as he sat eating cereal with his dad on that cold February night.

We put the empty cereal bowl in the sink, called his brother, and climbed the stairs together to their bedroom. It was story time.



Orpheus in the Underworld by John Flaxman

Tim J. Myers is a writer, songwriter, storyteller, and senior lecturer at Santa Clara University in Silicon Valley. His children's books have won recognition from the New York Times, Kirkus, NPR, the Smithsonian, Nickelodeon, and others. He's published over 120 poems, won a first prize in a poetry contest judged by John Updike, has two books of adult poetry out, won a major prize in science fiction, has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, and has published much other fiction and non-fiction for children, adolescents, and adults. His Glad to Be Dad: A Call to Fatherhood won the inaugural Ben Franklin Digital Award from the Independent Book Publishers Association and made #5 on Amazon's "Hot New Releases in Fatherhood" - he won the West Coast Songwriters Saratoga Chapter Song of the Year award—and he won the 2012 Society of Children's Writers and Illustrators Magazine Merit Award for Fiction. His website is at www.TimMyersStorySong.com And he can whistle and hum at the same time.

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