

Fairy Tale Endings

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Commentaries are brief opinion pieces that are intended to introduce an idea or identify connections between works which beg for deeper investigation and analysis. Explicitly not an account of a research project or a comprehensive investigative endeavor, a Commentary in Confluence is a snapshot, a single moment from the initial encounter with an idea or connection that suggests possibilities for interrogation toward new understanding. The Commentary is an appeal to think about an idea, to consider a question, and to take up in earnest the possible conversation toward which the Commentary points.

Poverty, war, domestic violence, child abandonment, and a myriad of other traumatic events occur across geography, cultures, and eras. Fairy tales and legends can work as collective methods of dealing with trauma and human frailty, sometimes with black humor. Fairy tales have continued across centuries and morphed into a proliferation of variable narratives reflecting changes in cultural and social mores. Their contemporary applicability should be used more directly in the existing mental health epidemic.



The act of telling, reading, or hearing a story has a physiological effect on the body. Neurobiological measurement shows a synchronized release of hormones, such as cortisol,

oxytocin, and dopamine in both speaker and receiver,¹ illustrating why storytelling is as powerful a social bonding activity as religious rituals, dancing, or singing together. This control of hormones can be applied to traumatized people where their release is maladapted.²

Also, at a neuroanatomical level (via fMRIs), different regions of the brain are shown to be more activated in novice as compared with professional writers.³ These areas overlap with some of the neurological areas that are shut down in flashbacks associated with trauma.⁴ Traumatized people's regionalized brain activity may prevent them from accessing their own stories and being able to speak about their memories.⁵

If writing allows a trauma survivor to bypass obstacles in brain or hormone regulation that prevent participation in traditional verbal psychotherapy, it may allow them to access their issues. The field of writing therapy could be argued to reach back as far as the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. However, it is in modern times that the associated positive mental and physical outcomes have been proven.⁶

The mental health field is moving towards greater acceptance of mind/body/medicine paradigms that incorporate treatments ranging from pharmaceuticals to neuroceuticals (e.g., Deep Brain Stimulation), from theater programs to yoga, computer neurofeedback to successful forms of verbal psychotherapy such as internal family systems (IFS) therapy. There is no silver bullet, but a range of therapies should be assessed to combine for optimal outcomes for each individual. This article's recommendation of using folk tales and legends as a third-person creative writing

¹ Paul J. Zak, "Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React: The Neuroscience of Narrative," *Cerebrum: The Dana Forum on Brain Science* 2015 (February 2, 2015): 2.

² Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

³ Carolin Shah, Katharina Erhard, Hanns-Josef Ortheil, Evangelia Kaza, Christof Kessler, and Martin Lotze, "Neural Correlates of Creative Writing: An FMRI Study," *Human Brain Mapping* 34 (May 1, 2013): 1092.

⁴ Van der Kolk.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ James W. Pennebaker, "Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process," *Psychological Science* 8, no. 3 (1997): 163.

exercise is a response to the reported loss of emotional access and imagination.⁷

The impact of major life events on development of narrative identity⁸ in relation to the Self Determination Theory incorporating mastery, autonomy, and connectedness⁹ is enormous. Our narrative identity is the story that we believe about ourselves. We adapt and manage that story across our lifetime, and it is a critical component of psychological wellbeing.¹⁰ Trauma can bring a sense of shame and ongoing pain to one's narrative; one's self perception may become one of hiding the truth, their story. This results in a feeling of being unconnected and outside respectable society. From the ancient practice of physical exile, through "sending someone to Coventry," to today's cancel culture, the sense of being excluded is a painful punishment. If traumatized people cannot speak or think about major events in their life without painfully reliving the trauma, then we need alternatives to allow them to approach and integrate those events and create a coherent narrative identity.

Stories play a role in helping humans to create structure and meaning in the chaos of our lives. Literature has been a vehicle for many an author's catharsis or wish fulfillment, but there is no reason for this healing effect to be limited to published authors. Most writing therapies are primarily first-person approaches and have often achieved positive results.¹¹ Whereas a first-person stream of consciousness or poetry task is helpful for some mental health issues, it may not be an achievable method for trauma patients who have memory and emotional problems. There is also

⁷ Van der Kolk.

⁸ Dan P. McAdams, "First We Invented Stories, Then They Changed Us': The Evolution of Narrative Identity." *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 3, no. 1 (December 1, 2019): 3.

⁹ Edward L. Deci and R. M. Ryan, Self-determination theory, in *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, ed. P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), 416.

¹⁰ J. M. Adler et al., "Variation in Narrative Identity Is Associated with Trajectories of Mental Health over Several Years," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 3 (2015): 484.

¹¹ Anna Delamerced, Cia Panicker, Kistina Monteiro, and Erica Y. Chung, "Effects of a Poetry Intervention on Emotional Wellbeing in Hospitalized Pediatric Patients," *Hospital Pediatrics* 11, no. 3 (2021): 266.

an existing field of fairy tale therapy,¹² but this is based on group verbal psychotherapy.

This article combines the advantages of fairy tale therapy with the advantages of the writing mode. A major reason for the recommended chatbot approach is that structuring narrative can be a daunting task for any writer; however, having the narrative structure provided by Vladimir Propp may open an entry point for novice writers. His *Dramatis Personae and Narratemes*¹³ provide discrete roles and narrative building blocks on which to base choices. They are easily explained and understood and lend themselves to programmatic language and structures. The intended process involves choosing a folk tale or legend version with which the writer identifies (e.g., Ulysses for a returning war veteran, or The Little Mermaid for difficult choices between one culture and another), then modifying it according to the writer's choices and imagination. The ubiquity, familiarity, and flexibility of fairy tales and legends in the face of cultural and generational differences is an important element of accessibility to the writing.

Familiarity of existing narratives would make the writing task feel possible and less complex. The explanation that not every story uses every narrateme, or in the same order, shows how the narratemes are simply "puzzle pieces" to be moved around. The roles also can be fluid. For example, The Princess is often simply an object. The point is simply to progress issues in a constructive manner, and the "puzzle pieces" can be used in as simple or complex manner as desired. There is, of course, also that easy start to any story ("Once upon a time...") to provide an immediate opening to a sense of mastery and overcoming any fear of writer's block. It is apparent that you, as writer, control it all: the characters, their story, the themes, the ending.

It is the ability to approach trauma as a first step that is addressed in this concept, as part of working towards acceptance and management of the associated emotions. Emotions have

¹² Chiara Ruini, Licia Masoni, Fedra Ottolini, and Silvia Ferrari, "Positive Narrative Group Psychotherapy: The Use of Traditional Fairy Tales to Enhance Psychological Well-Being and Growth," *Psychology of Well-Being* 4, no. 1 (2014): 13.

¹³ Scott Myers, "Vladimir Propp's '31 Narratemes': Another Approach to Story Structure," *Go into the Story* (blog), April 24, 2004, <https://gointothestory.blcklst.com/vladimir-propps-31-narratemes-another-approach-to-story-structure-da756027ed13>.

physical ramifications. Dealing with emotions is a major step in autonomy; literally, self-government. The only way a person can stop oneself from having emotions is by total shutdown. Being able to experience emotions is a necessary part of being a fully functioning person, and to achieve this requires the belief that you will have some self control and some mastery over your emotions.

Writing in a third-person voice has been shown through self-distancing techniques to “facilitate adaptive self-reflection,”¹⁴ thereby increasing self control, decreasing fear, and leading to better planning, problem solving, and conflict resolution. The performance of third-person works is used successfully in therapeutic programs of theater, such as Shakespeare in the Courts for juvenile offenders¹⁵ or Sophocles’ Ajax by Theater of War for returned veterans.¹⁶ Rather than the predominance of verbal psychotherapies and writing therapies that focus on the first-person perspective, engaging people on their issues using this psychological self-distancing technique via legendary or folk tale characters would provide a less threatening and more effective approach.

The writer’s impetus to imagine a different theme or ending is key. If imagination, as Bessel Van Der Kolk posits, “alleviates our pain, enhances our pleasure, enriches our relationships, gives us places to go, goals to reach, a better future, hope,”¹⁷ then it is clearly a necessity to achieve Freud’s definition of mental health as “the ability to work and to love.”¹⁸ Historically, oral modifications to folk tales were done anonymously and organically, and written modifications were done authoritatively by well-recognized writers. This second category includes authors or collators as diverse as Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, Roald Dahl,¹⁹ and Walter

¹⁴ Ethan Kross and Ozlem Ayduk, “Making Meaning out of Negative Experiences by Self-Distancing,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 3 (June 1, 2011): 187.

¹⁵ Trauma Research Foundation, “Let’s Get to Know Shakespeare in the Courts,” August 3, 2021, <https://traumaresearchfoundation.org/lets-get-to-know-shakespeare-in-the-courts/>.

¹⁶ “Our Projects, Theater of War Productions, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://theaterofwar.com/projects>.

¹⁷ Van der Kolk, 17.

¹⁸ Alan Elms, “[Apocryphal Freud: Sigmund Freud’s Most Famous ‘Quotations’ and Their Actual Sources],” *Luzifer-Amor: Zeitschrift Zur Geschichte Der Psychoanalyse* 18 (February 1, 2005): 89.

¹⁹ Roald Dahl, *Revoltin’ Rhymes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

De La Mare.²⁰ The history of changing these stories to reflect the beliefs and needs of the writer, who in turn reflects their contemporary society's mores, shows how any writer can do so.

The writer can use the story for many purposes, including to fulfill a sense of justice or vengeance, to envisage a better situation or world, or maybe to change how they see their role in a story or in the future. For example, a survivor of date rape may choose *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White*, where the many versions show society's changing perspectives on consent, agency, gender roles, and familial relations. Reimagining fairy tales in this way can create a broad canvas for interpretation of power and position and reflection on the influence of social context including class values, age, looks, and romantic expectations. The writer can rewrite the same story multiple times, experimenting with changing different elements each time, or work on multiple different stories. The aim of the therapy is to link the thoughts around the narrative changes to the writer's own issue, position in society, and experience.

The process is also extremely flexible. It could be initiated at maximum levels of distance, including being completely online, and could initially even be set up as an app or chatbot interaction.²¹ However, the ultimate direction is still toward progressing to verbal discussion of the issues, even if in the context of third parties (e.g., legendary or fairy tale characters). This is because of the importance of the *connection* part of self determination theory. The goal of establishing working human relationships is critical.

A consistent element of folk tales, legends, and many pop culture books and movies is that of the liminal state. Victor Turner's cross cultural work found that "liminal entities are neither here nor there...betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention."²² This state of being outside of society is an uncomfortable one and is intended only as a temporary state before reintegration back into the community.

²⁰ Walter de La Mare, *Old Tales—Told Again* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

²¹ SoHyun Park, Anja Thieme, Jeongyun Han, Sungwoo Lee, Wonjong Rhee, and Bongwon Suh, "I Wrote as If I Were Telling a Story to Someone I Knew": Designing Chatbot Interactions for Expressive Writing in Mental Health," DIS '21: Designing Interactive Systems Conference 2021 (June 2021): 929.

²² Victor Turner, *Liminality and Communitas* (London, UK: Routledge, 1969), 22.

Trauma leaves some people permanently in this place of unknowing; therefore, decreasing the sense of shame and isolation is an important aim of this fairy tale writing therapy.

The power of art lies in its emotional manipulation. It seems only appropriate to use this power for a higher purpose. Using topic-appropriate, third-person legends and fairy tales to assist a person in writing about their issues is like using comfort food for healthy nutrition. Such a therapy could help with self-reflection, with emotional pain relief and management, and with the restoration of imagination, therefore becoming an easily accessible way to improve people's ability to love and work.

Confluence