

## Into The Woods

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Once upon a time, in a far away kingdom, there was a *new* year filled with uncertainty that was waiting to pounce. Like a great forest, it loomed, dark and full of mystery. Unknown creatures and experiences lay waiting there. But, no one knew what it was that waited in the shadows, behind that tree, deep in that cave. All anyone could see was the first few feet of the path, and the rest lay in darkness. It was easy to be afraid, because nothing was certain.

At the edge of the forest of the new year, with all its uncertainty, was a village called Christmas. It was a comfortable place, where everything was familiar, where everything was known. The stories all had familiar endings. All the lyrics, and all the notes of the songs were securely held in everyone's heart. There were trees to be enjoyed without even having to go into the woods. There was talk of angels and saviors and peace. It was a lovely village.

But there was something lurking in the woods that was threatening the village. The people wanted to get rid of it. To make it go away. It was threatening to change their lives, and they had no choice but to deal with it. There was no alternative. They had to go into the woods.

*“Once upon a time, in a far away kingdom, there was an uncertain future about to happen.”* Wait a minute. I've violated the formula here, haven't I? Once upon a time isn't about the future; it's about the past. And a far-away kingdom, isn't *our* kingdom. It is someone else's kingdom, and the problems that exist there are *their* problems. The uncertain future that's about to pounce is not going to pounce on *us*. Right?

We all love an adventure. Don't we? But, mostly, we love it when it is someone *else's* adventure, and we're just members of the audience. That phrase "in a far away kingdom" let's us know that the uncertainties of the looming forest are not going to affect *our* village. And even if it was our kingdom, that "once upon a time" assures us that the dangers of the adventure are over and done with. They're in the past. There is no threat *now*. *Our* status quo is secure.

The well known opening "once upon a time" that sets the tone for an adventure story can work in two ways. On the one hand, it can reassure us that we're not the ones facing the uncertainties of the forest. We're not the one's being tested by he challenges of the quest. The scary monsters are not *our* scary monsters. It's in another time in another place, so relax.

On the other hand, "once upon a time" can be a reminder that there always *have* been scary monsters threatening us; there have always been challenges to face, changes to undergo, losses to suffer; and despite it all, we are still here to tell stories about it. "Once upon a time" can encourage us – life is an adventure, full of uncertainty and threat - it always has been and always will be - and yet we know we can face the "monsters" and still have the wherewithall to tell he tale.

Well, the fact is, the new year we are facing right now *is* our new year. So, "another time, another place" - doesn't ring very true to me. The second version – "been there before and lived to tell about it" - sounds a lot more real. It may sound a little bit "pollyanna" with its positive spin, but real nevertheless.

There is no getting around the fact that there's a lot of uncertainty and uneasiness about what's in store in the coming year. And, I promise, I'm not making light of it by talking about fairy tales. The reality is that it's going to be a hard year despite our wishes, and so it isn't a question of whether or not we're going to have to go "into the woods". We are. Some are already there, and the adventure is anything but a fantasy. The question is, *how* are we going to deal with the adventure? *How* are we going to face the unknowns and the fears and the monsters

behind the trees? To wish for a magic wand to cast off the spell isn't going to do the trick. We can't wish this one away.

And anyway, trying to engineer life so that our own personal wishes for security and happiness come true often ends up creating added insecurity and unhappiness for other people. Because, no one is alone. No matter how independent we want to be, our lives are inescapably *interdependent*.

In Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*, the characters find out that the single-minded, self-absorbed quest to fulfill their own wishes for certainty and happiness in life doesn't work. There *is* no such thing as "happily ever after." And, because their lives are interconnected, because their lives are interdependent, their selfish, futile attempts to live "happily ever after" have dire consequences for the others. It's not very different than the impact of Bernie Medoff's quest for financial happiness has had on so many others. Or the that of the executives at AIG; or the big three auto companies.

On the other hand, in Act II the characters learn to accept the inevitability of troubles in their lives, and act out of compassion for one another instead of selfishness and fear. And, in the end, their acceptance of their interdependence is the very thing that gets them through the hard times.

Troubles and uncertainty are a fact of life. Threats are all around us. But, there are different ways to deal with them. I saw the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* Friday night. It is a fantastic movie. Go see it if you haven't already. It's a kind of fairy tale, in fact. One that is full of grim realities, but joyful realities as well. The story revolves around two brothers who grow up on their own from a very early age in the slums of Mumbai. They're probably about ten when their mother is killed in mindless sectarian violence. The depth of the horrendous existence they are faced with is barely imaginable to someone like me. The two boys take very different approaches to coping with the troubles in their lives. The older brother decides on a plan. He

decides that money and violence will protect him from the terror and uncertainty of his life. He goes to work as an assassin for a gangster. His plan doesn't work the way he wished it would. He closes off his heart to everyone and everything. He has no faith that the rose will ever open. He ends up divided from himself, ashamed of the person he has become.

The younger brother doesn't have a plan for his own happiness. He seems to accept uncertainty and trouble as a given in life. He spends most of the movie trying to take care of girl he took in out of the rain when the three of them were just kids trying to survive on the streets. He takes advantage of whatever opportunities come his way, and approaches them with curiosity and an open heart. What he learns along the way, by simply paying attention to what life offers him, ends up helping him win ten million dollars on a TV game show. But, winning the money just a piece of good luck. Throughout the movie, his main focus has been on trying to help his friend Latika with the trouble in her life. He has faith that she and he will make it through "the woods." He knows the rose will open.

Like Stephen Sondheim's musical, the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* shows us two different ways to go *Into the Woods*. One is in fear, trying to protect ourselves from everything that could cause us pain or sorrow. Isolating ourselves from everything we think might shake up our world. Trying to create a sense of certainty in a world where things simply are not that certain. No matter how safe we try to make ourselves, troubles are inevitable.

The other way to go into the woods is in faith. I don't mean any particular religious faith. Not the kind of faith that believes some divine being is going to protect you and, if you play your cards right, will make you happy ever after. I'm not talking about any kind of dogmatic faith. But, simply a faith in your own resilience and in the support of the people going with you into the woods. And the faith in your ability to support them in return. Faith that you will eventually come *out* of the woods; different, maybe than you went in, but still in tact. Still whole. Maybe

even *transformed*. I'm talking about going into the woods with the faith that "you *know* this rose will open."

Pretending we never have to go into the woods is folly. Pretending that we can avoid being hurt by it and changed by it, is equally foolish. We *all* will have to face the witches and giants and dragons that appear our lives, whether we wish to or not. We all have to face the unknown. We have no choice about that. But, we *can* choose how to deal with it. We can live in *fear* of the unknown, and let that fear control our lives, or as the Buddhist priest Pema Chodron teaches, "We can learn to meet whatever arises with curiosity" and "try to look at what scares us instead of running away." I know it's so easy to talk about, and not so easy to do. But, even so, it seems like the smartest approach to life to try to teach ourselves. To move *toward* frightening, difficult situations, with friendliness and curiosity, trying to accept the essential uncertainty of our lives, and focus on the whole picture, rather than just own individual problems. To try to learn something from our experience. To see, in our times of trouble, the opportunity to grow, to develop – to be transformed. To have faith that "Witches *can* be right; Giants *can* be good. *You decide* what's right. *You decide* what's good."

There is a cartoon by Gary Larson. Do you remember the "Wild Side?" In this particular cartoon there are two women standing behind a locked door, peeking out at a scary-looking monster on the front porch. One woman is saying to the other: "Calm down, Edna. Yes, it is a giant hideous insect, but it may be a giant hideous insect in need of help." Well, to get back to my "once upon a time" theme, there is a fairy tale called *Snow White and Rose Red*. It has nothing to do with the *Snow White* story that Disney made famous. In this story, there are two sisters – Snow White and Rose Red – living with their mother – a poor widow – at the edge of the woods. One winter night there's a knock at the door, and when Rose Red opens it there's a huge bear on the doorstep. She's terrified and wants to run away, but the bear tells her to calm down. He's just cold and wants a place to warm up a little. Well, just as Rumi advises in The

Guest House, she welcomes him in and he warms up by the fire. He ends up spending the night, and then goes off into the woods in the morning. He comes back that evening, and then ends up spending the nights at their house every night for the rest of the winter, and they grow to be very good friends. “Treat each guest honorably,” says Rumi, “He may be clearing you out for some new delight.” Wellll, in the summer the bear tells Rose red and her sister that he has to go guard his treasure from a wicked dwarf. And he leaves.

One summer day, the sisters are walking through the woods and they come upon a dwarf with his beard stuck in a split in a tree trunk. They free him by cutting his beard, and in return for their help, he shouts insults at them and then goes off with a sack of gold that was under the tree trunk. The sisters run into this dwarf several times over the summer, each time helping him out of some trouble he in, and each time getting shouted at and berated for their efforts. Then he always goes off carrying a bundle of some jewels or gold or whatever.

One day they come across the dwarf as he is being threatened by their old friend the bear. The dwarf pleads with the bear to eat the girls instead of him, but the bear pays no attention, and kills the dwarf with one swipe of his enormous paw. At that moment, his bear skin disappears and he is revealed to be a handsome prince; the dwarf had put a curse on him and stolen his gold. But the minute the dwarf was dead the curse was broken. Snow White marries the prince, and Rose Red marries his brother. Go figure. You just never know when a terrifying bear is a terrifying bear in need of help. “Witches can be right, Giants can be good.”

This coming new year is full of uncertainty for many of us. The woods are dark and full of danger to be sure. There’s no telling what’s in store for us as we enter the thicket.

But we do have a choice about *how* we approach this journey. We can go into the woods intent upon slaying the dragon or killing the bear. Trying to defeat or escape everything that threatens the life we have wished for ourselves; the life we’ve been taught to believe - or have

taught ourselves to believe -is the “right life” for us. This is the “Shoot first, ask questions later” approach.

Or, we can go into the woods curious to explore what we find there. We can open ourselves up to whatever experiences the woods have to offer. We can learn to pay attention to the things that frighten us. As Rumi says, we can “meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” We can invite the bear in by the fire, and help the unpleasant dwarf. We can try to learn something from our troubles, while we wait for the rose to open.

And, speaking of roses, remember that we are not going into the woods alone. Because, No one is alone. Look around you. Truly, no one is alone.

I'm going to finish with some words from the finale of Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. Forgive me if I inadvertently slip into song.

Though it's fearful,  
 Though it's deep, though it's dark  
 And though you may lose the path,  
 Though you may encounter wolves,  
 You can't just act,  
 You have to listen.  
 You can't just act  
 You have to think.

Though it's dark,  
 There are always wolves,  
 There are always spells,  
 There are always beans,  
 Or a Giant dwells there.

So it's  
 Into the woods  
 You go again,  
 You have to  
 Every now and then.  
 Into the woods,  
 No telling when,  
 Be ready for the journey.

The way is dark,

The light is dim,  
But now there's you,  
Me, her and him.  
The chances look small,  
The choices look grim,  
But everything you learn there  
Will help when you return there.  
Into the woods-  
You have to grope,  
But that's the way  
You learn to cope.  
Into the woods  
To find there's hope  
Of getting through the journey.

Into the woods-  
Each time you go,  
There's more to learn  
Of what you know.

Into the woods to mind the Wolf,  
To heed the Witch,  
To honor the Giant,  
To mind,  
To heed,  
To find,  
To think,  
To teach,  
To join,  
To go to the Festival!

Into the woods,  
Into the woods,  
Into the woods,  
Then put off the woods  
And happy ever after!

CINDERELLA  
... I wish..