

The Pine-eyed Boy Escapes from the Belly of the Dark Night in the Fish's Tale

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It's hard to say where things begin, but they do, as do we, and we are somehow in them and they in us, and a story begins.

Then the story gets silently disclosed as we live it, even though most of us don't tell it until later, if we can find our tongues. But when we tell it we are in another story, often nostalgic for the future but finding the creative past pulling us back down and deep to illuminate the present.

Life is dangerous; we can end at any time. We can also be swallowed by the inarticulate, find ourselves tongue-tied in the face of simple truth, especially the personal kind and how our small-world stories are intertwined with the larger social ones. How there is no escaping that.

There are many, of course, for whom the bell tolls before they end. As Bob Dylan sings it so beautifully in [Chimes of Freedom](#), a song about being caught in a thunder and lightning rain storm:

In the wild cathedral evening the rain unraveled tales
For the disrobed faceless forms of no position
Tolling for the tongues with no place to bring their thoughts
All down in taken-for granted situations
Tolling for the deaf an' blind, tolling for the mute
For the mistreated, mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute
For the misdemeanor outlaw, chased an' cheated by pursuit
An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing.

We are now living in a world where freedom's flashing lightning bolts have been replaced by dim grim grimaces of widespread depression and resignation as the shroud of solicitous neofascism descends on much of the world.

Human freedom is under widespread assault. Free speech is being attacked. Censorship is widespread and growing. Flesh and blood life is being sucked into a whirlpool of what John Steppling calls “a universe of disembodied data.” Mediated reality is replacing physical reality as the world's elites attempt to sell their packaged and commodified stories to publics ensnared and enamored by the technology that is entrapping them. All tradition,

the good and the bad, is gutted out by elites determined to create chaos and digital dementia as they coordinate their power under the banner of the “reasonable center” as distinct from the left and the right. It’s an old story that many can’t hear because they can no longer listen.

But lightning never dies since it is only in flashing that it exists, like us, and here and there you can still see and hear its messages of freedom and revolt. It comes unexpectedly. Out of the blue. It lurks in the shadowy clouds as an invisible force, always ready to strike. You have to be alert and know where to look. Listen. You have to want to see it, to catch its energy.

A year ago, right before the world was locked-down into a devastating hell, my then eleven-year-old granddaughter Sophie, who is a writer, starred in the lead role of a big production of *Matilda*, the play based on the book of the same name by the mischievous writer Roald Dahl, who wrote so many books extolling freedom for children – aka adults. Matilda is about a girl who refuses to be bullied by the headmistress of her school or her parents. When Sophie stepped forward boldly and defiantly looked at the audience and sang her first solo, *Naughty*, a shiver went down my spine, what Coomaraswamy called “the aesthetic shock.” Bold and fearless, she sang these words that flashed like Dylan’s chimes of freedom to a rapt audience wondering who this Matilda might be:

Like Romeo and Juliet
T’was written in the stars before they even met
That love and fate, and a touch of stupidity
Would rob them of their hope of living happily
The endings are often a little bit gory
I wonder why they didn’t just change their story?
We’re told we have to do what we’re told but surely
Sometimes you have to be a little bit naughty

As the historian Howard Zinn has said: Our greatest problem is civil obedience. Zinn tried to change the story but few have heeded his advice. The American story is the embrace of endless war and violence, often justified under the alibi of “the lesser of two evils,” as if lesser evil were not evil. Such evil is always presented as reasonable, the center between two extremes.

A hundred years ago, D. H. Lawrence wrote of Americans that *“All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.”*

In their wish to obey, so many, unlike Matilda, accede to endings that are very gory, echoing Melville’s Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*: *“Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant; I act under orders,”* sometimes not knowing that they are doing so but finding comfort in their obeisance since the leaders and experts and authority figures know what’s best – just do what you’re told, as a current sage recently said. Obey orders.

Yes, these experts are the light-bringers, like Prometheus and his brother Lucifer, they bring the fire. Under orders from Lucifer whom he embodies, Ahab insanely hunts Moby Dick for three days until the great white whale rises from the depths and drags him down to hell, “and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” So it goes. It’s an old story worth remembering, whether the whale be huge or invisible. To resist, you

have to be a little bit naughty, and brave, for we are on a journey without maps and are now in a very dark place.

Our stories enclose one another, the largest being the story of the social world we always live within, a big story that usually eludes our understanding or focus until one day we realize it has always been the womb we have been swimming in all our lives. We are always inside one whale or another, but the biggest whale is the social story about external “realities” told by those who control the media that encloses all our smaller tales. It is crucial to understand this story through discernment and not to let the media monsters convince us of their versions, for they are not our friends. They lie for their masters.

Referring specifically to novelists, but by extension to everyone since we are the novelists of our own lives, George Orwell, in his essay “Inside the Whale,” whose primary focus was the writing of Henry Miller, wrote:

Get inside the whale – or rather, admit that you are inside the whale (for you are, of course.)

By which he meant the feeling that external forces are out of control and that as society disintegrates and the autonomous individual is stamped out of existence, “the increasing helplessness of all decent people” becomes a widespread feeling. He was not endorsing such quietism and resignation, but was describing it.

Such a feeling is clearly far more widespread today, long after Orwell penned those words. He was praising Miller for saying what regular people (his phrase was “ordinary man,” a phrase he held was accurate but “denied by some people” who believe all generalizations are piffle) thought and felt despite it being taboo to say it. It is why Miller’s books were banned; they were too truthful. He dragged “*the real-politik of the inner mind into the open.*”

The establishment always prefers refined bullshit to the secret thoughts of regular people, those who are fed up with the endless lies that pour forth from the official narrators’ mouths.

My entire life has been framed by the story of America’s constant wars, their glorification and justification. From the first detonation of the nuclear device in the New Mexican desert, blasphemously called “Trinity” by Robert Oppenheimer, until this very day in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Yemen, etc., I could not understand my story without situating it within the belly of this beast called the U.S.A. This is true for most people alive today. Stories within stories.

Peel the American onion and at its heart you’ll find a bomb. “Fat Man” or “Little Boy” or whatever sick name you choose to give it.

Our smaller tales nestled in the private recesses of our minds are seemingly sometimes boring to many but illuminating to those telling them. They can and often do appear when one is bored by the repetitive nature of the screaming, fear-mongering political headlines meant to reduce people to quivering victims of false narratives. “*Boredom,*” wrote Walter Benjamin in *The Storyteller*, “*is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away.*”

Far more than a rustling, we are living in a digital media world of cacophonous lies that drown out the silence necessary for independent thinking or dreaming.

So here I sit in the silence and try to conjure up the Pine-eyed Boy.

The boy was five or six, he can't remember which, when his father took him to the movie theater to see Walt Disney's *Pinocchio*. Just the two of them, a father with his only son, the boy's five sisters left at home. By the time two more sisters had arrived, this intimate dream experience had penetrated deep into him. His father followed up the movie by entertaining the boy and lulling him to sleep many nights by telling him improvised Pinocchio tales, none of which the boy could remember but could never forget. These stories became the penumbra of his life.

He always remembered Thoreau saying that *"it is so hard to forget what it is worse than useless to remember."* But while nodding assent to that truth, he always felt Pinocchio was different. Pinocchio must be remembered, not so much the Disney version, but the stories his father told on the theme; but more importantly, why he told them. He knew that it is so easy to forget what is important to remember, and that we often use our forgetteres to do just that.

Like most small children or adults, the complexity of this Disney film eluded him. He remembered being mesmerized and frightened and delighted in turn. The cricket, the whale, the puppet maker, his pine-eyed creation, and the Blue Fairy – all of these seemed so real to him, images that would drift through his unknowing mind unattached to words, like images in an inner mirror. Fleeting and fascinating. Moving.

When the kidnapped boys were taken with Pinocchio on the dark sea journey to Pleasure Island, he was frightened. He had no words for it, but the Coachman Barker, the kidnapper, seemed to ooze menace. But his father's large protective presence in the aisle seat to his left seemed to enclose his fear and tell him all would be fine. He felt contained in his protective love. His father felt like a counterweight to the satanic looking Barker with the pedophile's red laugh and demeanor. His father was his protector.

The man the boy became spent decades meditating on the meaning of his youthful encounter with Pinocchio's story. Or was it his relationship with his father, or perhaps his relationship with his father's encounter with Pinocchio, or maybe his father's relationship with his father without Pinocchio but with the feeling the boy must save his father after the father wishes the boy to life and his mother dies and leaves the father all alone, trapped in the belly of a dark life.

My father's father, my grandfather, was the Deputy Chief of the New York Fire Department, which was the highest rank for a uniformed firefighter. He had battled many dangerous fires to save people's lives. Defeating the fire "devil" was his calling. But when my father was eighteen years old, his mother died, and my grandfather was left alone. I never asked him, but I am wondering now if my father, then aged 18, felt it was his duty to save his father from the monster of loneliness, the feeling of being shipwrecked, abandoned by God. And if that sense of obligation was connected to Pinocchio's story, where the puppet boy is first nearly killed by putting his finger into a candle flame but is saved by his father, Geppetto, the wife-less toy maker, who puts out the fire with water, and then at the end, in a role reversal, when Pinocchio saves his father from the belly of Monstro the whale by using fire to make the whale sneeze them up to the shore.

Such an ending evokes the terrible heavy burden felt by any child whose “cricket” tells them that they must save a parent. Such role reversal exacts a heavy price.

In the Biblical story, Jonah surely felt obligated that way after he was spit up on the shore by the great fish whose belly had saved him. He did not want to do his father Yahweh’s will and tell the people of Nineveh that they must repent their ways. So he fled, only to find himself thrown overboard but saved by the God he didn’t obey.

I once asked my father to tell me about his father, whom I knew as a young child, but my memories were few and scattered and he died when I was ten-years-old. This was after my father had sent me many letters describing in detail his father’s and mother’s relatives, what some might call genealogy but which were actually mini-short stories. To my father and to me, it was the stories that counted, not the bloodline; exquisite writer that he was, my father knew that it was the gift of stories that would allow me to shape my own, and that he was, to use Benjamin’s words, starting a “web which all stories form in the end.”

Despite these detailed epistles about our family history, my father seemed hesitant to describe his father. I kept pressing him. He finally wrote that he would get the bio sketch of Pop in the works for me. *“I’m afraid,”* he wrote, *“it will be like the closing words of St. John’s Gospel though: ‘And many other things did Dennis of Woodlawn do that are not written in this book; but these are written so that reading you may believe that Dennis was quite a man.’”*

My father knew his Bible, for these are the closing words of John’s Gospel: *“There were many other things that Jesus did; if all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written.”*

He never said another word about his father. I knew the comparison to Jesus was farfetched, but beside that, I was left in the lurch, except to realize that my father idolized his father, and I had learned from experience that idolization was not good, for it leads to blind obedience. I had idolized my own father, but it was only until I knew his human weaknesses and faults that I came to love him even more and idolization turned to deeper gratitude.

Ever since my father’s death and up until recently, I have felt that this missing piece of his story was a result of my father’s fear to convey the full truth about his father, despite my repeated requests to him to do so. I have changed my literal mind. I now see it as a brilliant extension of the improvised Pinocchio stories he told me as a child. Just as they always left me wondering why they never had a clear ending as I fell sleeping into the belly of the night, I see this absence of his father’s story as a present, a gift like a fairy tale. *“The fairy tale tells us,”* wrote Benjamin, *“of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest.”*

One such myth, the one that I have long felt true and that has informed much of my life is that I could save others. It is sheer arrogance. It is violence. It is a mythic nightmare that I have carried on my chest. Fr. Walter Brown, S.J., who was a guiding light in my life, once told my parents when they were visiting my high school for parents’ night: *“Eddie will be fine once he gets the world off his shoulders.”* And Fr. Brown didn’t know the half of it, but, being an artist of deep intuition, knew enough.

All my efforts to “save” others in the personal realm have failed, as I should have expected. No one really wants advice or counsel; to be saved; they want to be free to create or destroy

their own stories.

I have also written and published many things trying to convince people through logic and facts that this is true and that isn't; that they need to change their beliefs. I have tried to light a fire in the belly of Monstro the whale to save others from the descending shroud of solicitous neofascism that is upon us. To alert others to the overarching American story of violence that is consuming us.

In all of this, I was missing the story in the story. The absence that is the present. The transformative gift that keeps circulating because it is freely given to us by the spirit to pass on in the telling.

"It is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it," said Benjamin. I have tried.

Or as Nietzsche said of the chorus in Greek tragedy:

With this chorus, the profound Hellene, uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering, comforts himself, having looked boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and being in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art - life.

It's still the same old story, especially when you know what's missing.

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