

A Relational Journey With the Community: 10th Annual Restorative Justice Conference, Ferndale Institution, November 16, 2006

In 1939, J.R.R. Tolkien, famed author of *Lord of the Rings*, and acclaimed by many as the greatest novelist of the 20th century, delivered a lecture entitled *On Fairy-Stories*¹. It is interesting to me that this should be written on the eve of World War II. Didn't Tolkien have better things to do with the overwhelming threat of war looming?

In the long lecture later published, Tolkien in fact spends a lot of time saying what fairy-stories are *not*. He also debunks the notion that fairy-stories are primarily written for children, or "believed" by children in what is called "willing suspension of belief". Tolkien will have none of that. True Fairy-Story – true story – is not willing suspension of belief, rather "making or glimpsing of Other-worlds" (p. 41). He calls this *fantasy* and says "The keener and the clearer the reason, the better fantasy will it make" (p. 55). He adds: "Fantasy remains a human right: we make... because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker" (p. 56).

He goes on to discuss three further aspects of fairy-story: *recovery*, *escape* and *consolation*. *Recovery* means "regaining of a clear view" (p. 57). It's a word often used in addictions. We all know what it means.

Of *escape* he says: "Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?" (p. 60). The ultimate escape is from death itself. Then Tolkien says of fairy-stories, "Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending" (p. 68). And Tolkien here invents a word made up of two Greek nouns: *Eucatastrophe* [*eu* = good; *catadrophe* = sudden event], which he says is the opposite of Tragedy. I'll quote a few lines:

The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist'... In its fairy-tale – or otherworld – setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur [happen again]. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe* [another made-up word, meaning tragedy], of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium* [a German word meaning Gospel/Good News], giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief... In such stories when the sudden 'turn' comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends [tears] indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through" (pp. 68, 69 and 70).

¹ Published in *Tree and Leaf*, J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", London: HarperCollins, 1988.

What J.R.R. Tolkien explains here he demonstrates throughout his entire tales of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. They are true “fairy-stories” about journeys with and into community. When I first thought of our theme, Tolkien’s master stories came immediately to mind. They are about something entirely greater than ourselves to which we are called through all the whispers and loud speakers and everything-in-between experiences of our lives. As with us, they are all about search and quest, about doubt and certainty, joy and pain, and all the other emotional opposites we encounter with all that is in between.

My first point then is: Life is an unfolding story of quest, and, if we have eyes to see, of sudden unpredictable discoveries of “joy”. This joy has two reference points: the Transcendant (God) and community.

“Tolkien’s mythology is also an immense theological drama, with God at the very center of the plot. And even if God remains unseen in Middle-earth, He is no more unseen than in our present, postmodern world... Grace abounds throughout all of creation”²

My second piece of reflection is: Grace, surprise, sudden turn, *eucatastrophe*, are all the stuff of the world we live in. Not always. And we can’t “work it up”. But it’s there if we keep our eyes open. If we’re patient. If we work at letting go of ourselves. If we keep on the journey with and towards community with faith, hope, and love. We should never lose hope.

Tolkien concludes his whole essay on Fairy-Stories by saying: “This ‘joy’ which I have selected as the mark of the true fairy-story... merits more consideration... The peculiar quality of the ‘joy’ in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth... it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world” (pp. 70 & 71).

Now Tolkien was a Christian quite convinced that the Story of the Bible was what would finally take us all home, the cosmos even, on our journey into/with community. He held out hope that there was indeed an Underlying Story that summed up all other true stories, and pointed the way home in a trackless cosmos. In fact, there are three major world religions that all point to one Ultimate Story of Hope, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They of course all derived from the Story of Abraham, and the Great Quest he set out on to find the Promised Land.

I’ll read a little more of Tolkien’s own words to describe this amazing Story: [p. 71, bottom].

² Bradley Birzer, back cover, *The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien’s Divine Design in THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, Fleming Rutledge, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.