

Shrink Rap Radio #293 A Jungian Approach to Fairy Tales with Tom Elsner

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Tom Elsner

Transcribed by Alma Maria Rinasz

Introduction: My guest today, Tom Elsner, is a Jungian analyst and also a core faculty member at the Pacifica Graduate Institute. We'll be discussing his work on understanding fairy tales. You can find out more about his background visiting our show notes at shrinkrapradio.com Now here is the interview.

Dr. Dave: Tom Elsner. Welcome to Shrink Rap Radio

Tom Elsner: Well, thanks very much Dr. Dave. It's a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Dave: And it is so good to have you here. If I recall correctly, I got your name sometime back from another Jungian analyst, Monika Wickman.

Tom Elsner: Yeah, Monika and I trained in Switzerland together. She's just, uh, just wonderful, she's one of the world's great dreamers, to tell you the truth.

Dr. Dave: Well that's not something that I knew about her, but that's [Tom Elsner laughing] good to know.

Tom Elsner: Yeah

Dr. Dave: She's made herself pretty available to the show and so she is certainly one of my go to people for interviews.

Tom Elsner: Great, well, it's good, great; I appreciate the chance to be here

Dr. Dave: From the bio that you sent me I see that you were originally trained as an attorney [Dr. Dave laughs] now I have the impression that attorney and Jungian analyst might represent two different poles of cognitive function. Ah, I would guess there might be a story behind your transition from the one to the other. How did that come about?

Tom Elsner: Yeah...[laughing] yeah, well that's really true, I would say in my experience, at least, two poles of cognitive function, oh, wow, I remember, um, for instance, training as a therapist when I was getting my master's degree and being in classes that involved things like 'emotions' and 'feelings' [laughs]

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Tom Elsner: And [laughs] and I remember just sitting there and all the time feeling like I wanted to say “objection” “irrelevant”...

Dr. Dave: [Laughing]

Tom Elsner: ‘Objection’ ‘irrelevant’ When are we really going to learn something important, you know, so there is this sense of being trained, at, at least being trained as a lawyer to, you know, to be able to think linearly...

Dr. Dave: Yes

Tom Elsner: Um to be concise, to be logical and practical, and, um, so the more symbolic ways of thinking that rely on emotions, you know, were, were, a trick for me, definitely an inferior part of my personality that had to develop.

Dr. Dave: But something must have been calling you to move in that direction...

Tom Elsner: Yeah, I would say that was really the case. People sometimes say ‘why did you chose to become an analyst as opposed to a lawyer?’ and the word choose, really, is just to weak of a word, really not the right word, I mean it really, it was really something deeper in my soul that revolted against that direction in my life, really strongly, um, and that took the form initially as a depression and as a sense of a loss of meaning, um and I had dreams , really deep archetypal dreams at the time that, um, involved the destruction of the world, dreams like all the animals in the jungle had been slaughtered , I mean really, really horrific , I would say a very strong inner reaction against that path in life for me.

Dr. Dave: Wow, you know I’ve encountered a number of people who went all the way through law school, did all the very hard work that that represents only to, uh, discover maybe even before they ever practiced that ‘hey this isn’t really for me.’”

Tom Elsner: Yeah, so you know, that’s often not a conscious choice because it’s...it’s a, if you change directions, um, in that way it’s a sacrifice also of time and money and prestige and you know, uh, a lot of the things the ego...

Dr. Dave: Oh yeah...

Tom Elsner: invested in

Dr. Dave: Oh yeah...

Tom Elsner: So yeah...

Dr. Dave: [laughing] oh yeah, and plus maybe parents who might [laughing] might have helped to support one through the process and so on...

Tom Elsner: Yeah, that was really true for me, um at that time, around the time that I was switching careers I guess you could say a ‘quarter life crisis’ my parents had died just recently so that was a part of the story, I think, that was part of the meaning of it for me..

Dr. Dave: M-hum....

Tom Elsner: A part of me had gone with, with that...

Dr. Dave: Well speaking of stories, uh let's turn to the main, uh, the main subject of the interview here. I have the impression that you periodically teach a course on the interpretation of fairy tales at the Pacifica Graduate Institute. Do I have that right?

Tom Elsner: Yeah, that's right Dr. Dave. Um, this is a course I teach in the Counseling Psychology Program to people that are becoming therapists. So it really is, I would say a course in 'applied fair tales', [laughs], we not training folk lore scholars but really a class, and I think primarily, learning to think metaphorically and symbolically as distinct from literally and learning the line of the archetypal language of the imagination especially as it applies to dynamics and psychotherapy, um, transference dynamics, dreams, symptoms...

Dr. Dave: Well I am so jealous, I never had a class like that and uh, I would have loved it and I am really jealous of your students getting that exposure. I have a long standing interest in fairy tales myself and when I was in elementary school, I don't know if it was like this when you came through, but in the old days back when the dinosaurs roamed the Earth...

Tom Elsner: [laughing]

Dr. Dave: We had standard readers that were provided by the state and I seem to recall that there would be some fairy tales in the back of the book...

Tom Elsner: Oh...

Dr. Dave: And just like desert you were expected to read through the whole book and you wouldn't get to the fairy tales till the en of the course, if they made it that far, so I always went straight for the desert...[laughing]

Tom Elsner: [laughing] Well that says something about you doesn't it?

Dr. Dave: [laughing] It does...

Tom Elsner: It's probably not every boy that is zooming straight to the back of the book to read those types of stories. Um, so already that says something about you, that you were fascinated by those types of stories...

Dr. Dave: I probably had some type of exposure to them too; I think that my mother probably read me some of those stories before I even went to school. What do you think it is about fairy tales that leads to their fascination for children? Uh, Because, uh, somehow they seem to stay with us for the rest of our lives. What do you think that is?

Tom Elsner: Well, um, you know I think in a nutshell I would say it is because they are true...

Dr. Dave: Hummm.....

Tom Elsner: Fairy tales are true...

Tom Elsner: But they are not what is *really* true...

Dr. Dave: Right....say a little bit more about that...

Tom Elsner: Um...well I think um I think that the reason I say that they are true is because they are metaphorically true stories um now the problem in our culture is that we are typically trained to think logically and linearly and factually. So, we are, at some point, this isn't true for little kids, for children, but at some point in life we learn that are things are either true or false, either they are literally true or they are a lie. For instance, Joseph Campbell in the DVD "A Hero's Journey" recounts this really humorous but really important story when he was once on a radio talk show, actually. But the interviewer was asking him about myths and the interviewer said to him "well, a myth, that's a lie" and Campbell said "No. It is a metaphor". And the interviewer said "No. That is a lie." And they went back and forth [laughing] about that....

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: So, I think it's just because they are fascinating stories that grip kids and they continue to grip us as adults in different ways because they are true and getting to really basic, core truths about the human situation: basic fears, existential predicaments, longings, um, they touch deep into the archetypal core of the human personality.

Dr. Dave: You know, one of things that triggered that for me, as you say that, is when you mention fears. And children of course are especially prone to fear because in fact they are small and vulnerable and many of the fairy tales are quite dark and it seems to me that in contemporary culture we sort of try to protect our children from the "dark side" and yet as you point out the fairy tales are true and they are speaking to the truth maybe of the child's fear.

Tom Elsner: Mmmm, I think that is very well put, um. There is a really excellent book on fairy tales written Bruno Bettelheim who was a Freudian analyst...

Dr. Dave: Oh, yes. I remember him...yup

Tom Elsner: You remember him?

Dr. Dave: Yup...

Tom Elsner: "The Uses of Enchantment" and that is primarily a book on how fairy tales affect children and why they are important for children and he says a lot of the same things you were just saying. Um, for instance, we think of our little children as little darlings. That are completely innocent and huh, really, they are filled with fears and aggressions...

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: Umm, and dark aspects to their personalities and Bettelheim's idea was that fairy tales were important part because it provides a mirror for those, um, so the child can see that those unconscious dimensions of it's personality in the story and also a way through the story.

Dr. Dave: You know I had completely forgot about Bruno Bettelheim and that book which I read probably when I was in graduate school so I...uh you know, maybe it was back there somewhere in my unconscious....

Tom Elsner: [laughing]

Dr. Dave: So thanks for bringing that forward. And I've got three grandchildren, little grandchildren, and the middle one who is like three years old about to turn four, has a recently arrived baby brother, or little brother, who's about, I guess, he's pushing two, or maybe just turned two. And you mentioned not only fear but aggression and I've seen her get quite aggressive with him, you know, there will be these little accidental shoves and pushes little sort of glancing blows, you know, designed to fool adults that, should anybody should be looking [laughing] to look like [laughing] or...

Tom Elsner: Mmmm huh right, like you said....

Dr. Dave: [laughing] or hugging him a little too hard...

Tom Elsner: Mmmm huh

Dr. Dave: [laughing]...And the lady doth protest too much....

Tom Elsner: [laughing] Yeah, yeah, yeah I know what you mean I have two boys; they are now six and nine years old. When they were younger I used make up stories for them at night and uh, they would pick, they would always want to pick one animal each. So one might pick "oh I want to hear a story about the jaguar"...

Dr. Dave: ...Interesting

Tom Elsner: ...And the other might say "oh and I want to hear a story about the tarantula" and I would have to make a story about a tarantula and a jaguar...

Dr. Dave: ...That's great...

Tom Elsner: And they'd always wanted the animals to fight, *always*...[laughing]

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: But there were ways in the imagination that things would spontaneously come out where they would fight but they would reconcile, you know, and something

new would happen through the story and those were always really gripping for my boys, fascinating...

Dr. Dave: uh, that's, that's good, that sounds like fun and it sounds like a rich time for the three of you...

Tom Elsner: Yeah, it was uh, yeah it definitely was a bonding time...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I know I know that we mentioned Bettelheim and I know that Marie-Louise von Franz did the seminal Jungian work on fairy tales and I am somewhat embarrassed to admit that I have yet to dive into her tomes. Many of my listeners will be ahead of me there. My own intellectual understanding of fairy tales comes from Joseph Campbell which you mentioned earlier. Is there a way in which you could give us a sense of just the highlights of von Franz's understands of fairy tales?

Tom Elsner: Sure, um, you know Marie-Louise von Franz was, um, probably Jung's most prominent and devoted student and, and, she was really steeped in fairy tales, wrote a lot of books on fairy tales and did a lot of research on the subject. Um, her main take on it, as distinct from Bettelheim, she's approaching the subject, primarily from its importance to adults and primarily culturally. So for von Franz, fairy tales are like the not yet understood dreams of a culture.

Dr. Dave: Mmm hmmm...

Tom Elsner: They're compensatory stories to the prevailing values and myths of the culture she thinks show up in the folk lore. Um, so for her also these very short archetypal narratives in which they're, you know, typically is a miller starts out the ,story, or a soldier or "there was once a king". These abstract, skeletal figures represent for von Franz the clearest and simplest expression of collective unconsciousness content and processes. Um, so they are very simple, clear ways to get in touch with the archetypal and collective dimensions of the unconscious for von Franz. And for that reason they are valuable in psychotherapy, um, because the language of dreams parallel the language of the fairy tales...

Dr. Dave: Mmm hmmm...

Tom Elsner: And vice versa....

Dr. Dave: Yeah you mentioned that fairy tales are compensatory and I know the idea of compensation is, eh, really important in Jungian theory. Just help our listeners that are not familiar with that concept, what do you mean when you say that fairy tales are compensatory?

Tom Elsner: They tell us what we don't know. Um, but what we should know to become whole or complete. They fill in what's missing from the conscious attitude. Um, Jung thought that's what primarily what a dream is doing in the life of the

individual; we are dreaming of what we don't yet know, we are dreaming of what we need to become more in touch with, um, these so called "shadow sides" of our personalities, for instance, show up in dreams. Von Franz's idea with folklore is that it's doing a similar thing but culturally. So, for instance, in the Grimm's stories, if we take those stories which were written down by the brothers Grimm after they collected them from oral story tellers in the 19th century. The, the collective culture of the time in Europe is Christian, primarily Christian, um, and so what happens in the folklore is a lot of pagan imagery shows up in the folklore, um, a lot of the sense of a spirit in nature, for instance, of dealing with witches, of talking animals, um, of, of redemption motifs that involve trickery and deceit and lying um, very non-Christian themes show up in the folklore um, the, the, one could say the repressed feminine world, shows up in the folklore very much of the Brothers Grimm stories.

Dr. Dave: So the other side of Christianity is showing up, the stuff that is sort of denied or suppressed in Christianity?

Tom Elsner: Absolutely, that is von Franz's theory and one can really see it, for instance, in the European stories, I think, especially there.

Dr. Dave: What's the difference between fairy tales and myths? Are they the same thing or are they different?

Tom Elsner: I would say they are very different. Um, you know as Joseph Campbell said a myth is just someone else's religion. If you are inside a mythology...

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: ...it's your truth, right, if I'm a Hindu then that's not a mythology for me but a truth or if I'm a Christian, if I would call, if I would refer to the Christian myth that would already mean that I am outside of it. So myths are really the encoded forms for a culture for what is true and ways that everyone should be; they are models, they are examples. And fairy tales are different than that, aren't they? I mean they, they um, at least the fairy tales in the way that we understand them now, and are exposed to them, they are not put forth as truths. They have a lighter touch to them, don't they?

Dr. Dave: Yes, definitely.

Tom Elsner: And um, they're not codified into dogmas about how everyone ought to behave, um....

Dr. Dave: Mmm hmmm...

Tom Elsner: So that would be one way in which they would be different. Von Franz's idea is also that fairy tales are more purely archetypal and myths typically have a lot of culture material in them. The Greek myths are Greek, the Judeo-Christian myth really has a lot of cultural inflection...

Dr. Dave: Mmmm hmmm

Tom Elsner: Fairy tales a little more universal

Dr. Dave: Ok, and you mentioned that there was a relationship between fairy tales and dreams in terms of the kind of underlying metaphorical thinking that is going on. And I am guessing that as with dreams there might be a lot of potential levels of meaning or analysis of any given fairy tale. For example, there might be a personal interpretation, a cultural interpretation, an archetypal one, many others. Can you comment on that?

Tom Elsner: Sure, um I would say in the true fairy tale or folktale there isn't any personal level at all which what makes it a distinctive form of story for instance there is no author to a folktale. No one knows who invented the story. Um, it's like a recipe for chicken soup. Who made it up? No one knows but here it is...uh...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I guess when I say personal though, if I were to talk a fairy tale and apply it to my own life..

Tom Elsner: Oh, I see...

Dr. Dave: That is what I would mean by personal...

Tom Elsner: Mmmm, well that definitely is true. I mean these things impact us in our personal lives so I guess then it would be a way of phrasing the question "What does the story mean to me?" "what does it mean to the culture that I'm in?" and then "what might be it's more universal, archetypal significance..."

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: So one can definitely approach the story from all those three levels

Dr. Dave: I very much enjoyed reading the paper that you sent me about animals and analysis, the Grimm's tale about the three languages which I had not heard or remembered. You start that paper off with a dream that you had when you were just starting off your Jungian analysis training in Switzerland. Let's start off, maybe you'll be willing to share that dream with us.

Tom Elsner: Sure Dr. Dave, I'd be happy to. Yeah, this was when I was first training as an analyst in Switzerland I had a dream. I guess you could say I had an initiatory dream for my analytic training. Um, and the short version of the dream was this: I was speaking to one of the older male analysts there and we were talking about cases, psychotherapy cases. And this older man had learned, I knew, to understand the sound of animals and in the dream I wanted to learn that too and I wondered I could learn that also...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah...uh so what was your initial sense of that dream?

Tom Elsner: Uh, no sense at all [laughing] I thought it was completely strange...

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: ...in fact I didn't really like it because here I was in Switzerland spending all this time and money and you know, training as an analyst, it's a serious thing, and this really the reason I've come all the way to Switzerland, to learn animal sounds? Really? [laughing]

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: So I don't know, it didn't really mean anything, I mean, it wasn't quite nonsensical, and I think that at best it was quaint or strange, um, yeah.

Dr. Dave: Well, in your paper I seem to recall that uh eventually you figured out that the dream was somehow compensating for being too much in your head calling you to the instinctual life of the body. Do I have that right?

Tom Elsner: Um, yeah eventually I wound up there; I would say that now...

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: Um, yeah, I would say compensating for an idea that I had about analysis or psychotherapy um, the dream seemed to be saying, I can say now, it seems to be saying that at least one of the things that is very important about psychotherapy, because remember that was the context of the dream, we were talking about cases, was what you could call a kind of natural wisdom or an instinctive wisdom that's different from the theories and preconceptions and conscious ideas of the therapist um, just, that is what an animal has, how a bird knows how to find its way home, how a spider knows how to spin its web, the kind of instinctive wisdom...

Dr. Dave: Yes...

Tom Elsner: ...that is different than an intellectual, conceptual, theorizing...

Dr. Dave: A few years after that dream, as part of your exams and it almost seemed, uh, synchronistic, as you told it, that as part of your exams you were asked to interpret the Grimm's fairy tale "The Three Languages" and as I mentioned that's not one I was familiar with. Maybe you can share that story with us.

Tom Elsner: Sure, yeah, that was not one I was familiar with either, as, a few years into the program one of the hoops we have to jump through, or initiations, is we get locked in a room for four hours and they throw a fairy tale at us that we haven't seen before and we have to write an interpretation. So, that was the one I got, this Grimm's story "The Three Languages" and the story in brief is that there is an aged count in Switzerland that has one son. And the son according to his father is just so stupid that he just can't learn anything and the father becomes very frustrated with his son so he

says “since I can’t get anything into your head no matter how hard I try I am going to send you away for a year to study with a master in a strange city and we’ll see what he can do with you. So he sends his son away for one year and at the end of the year the son comes back and the father says “Son, what did you learn?” he says “Father, this year I learned what the dogs say when they bark.” [laughing]

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: And the father just didn’t like that as you can imagine. So year two to another city with another master he learns the language of the frogs’ then year three the language of the birds and at this point the father is infuriated. He, um, orders his servants to take the boy out into the woods and have him killed and, um, as in common in folklore, the servants take pity on the boy and let him go. He wanders around, um, the world eventually coming to another town where he is able to redeem this town from a curse that involves rabid dogs that are locked up in a dungeon bellow and because he can speak their language he can redeem them from this curse and eventually the boy actually becomes the new pope because he can speak the language of these animals, um, and as he is the pope he doesn’t know one word of the mass, the story says, but the birds come down and whisper the whole thing into his ears.

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: So, that was the story of the “The Three Languages”. Now when I read that you know, this story about a boy going away to a strange city to learn from teachers there how to learn how to understand the sounds of animals I thought “Oh my God this is my story!”

Dr. Dave: It reminded you of that dream at the beginning of your analysis, right?

Tom Elsner: It brought that dream freshly back to mind, the dream in which I had traveled to Switzerland and there I was learning from some teacher to understand animal sounds. [laughing] So I thought “I know what this guy is learning! He is learning to become a Jungian analyst!” [laughing]

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: That is what is going on in the story [laughing]

Dr. Dave: Right...[laughing]

Tom Elsner: So, so um but that, that is what really um really opened my eyes to the possibility that there could become importance to that dream motif, um, and that it wasn’t just some idiosyncratic or kind of nonsensical thing that appeared in my dream.

Dr. Dave: Well, as you looked into tales more, actually I believe it turned out that the ability to understand the language of animals is a kind of motif that recurs in other stories from around the world. Do I have that right?

Tom Elsner: Yeah it is absolutely true. This is what we would call an archetypal motif. In other words, it's not a motif that comes from my own person life, I was completely unaware of it personally. And it is not a motif that appears in my culture, say the Southern California...

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: twentieth century culture that I am from...

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: Um, but so it is an example of an archetypal motif and those are motifs that one has to do research to learn about. So as I began to dig into other stories, myths, um, shamanism, what one really finds that this idea of understanding the sounds of animals, um, goes all the way back to ancient Egypt. One can find all over the world in shamanism, um, it appears in many folk legends from around the world, where it appears really as the greatest, most valuable gift that can be given. Um, and, it is a theme that has a universal significance in a very meaningful way.

Dr. Dave: Well, what is larger significance of this theme then?

Tom Elsner: Well this, I would say, in a nutshell it's the ability to connect to what we would call the wisdom of nature...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that, that does put it in a nutshell [laughing] that's pretty clear...

Tom Elsner: Yeah, I mean this is something we have grown far from, at least, you know, in the culture that I'm from. The idea that there even could be such a thing as a wisdom in inner and outer nature, um, different than being intellectual or clever, um or theoretical; wisdom has a lot to do with survival. And um, Jung in "The Redbook, I think Monica Wickman talked about "The Redbook" with you. I know Nancy Furlotti did an interview with you about Jung's "Redbook"...

Dr. Dave: Yes...

Tom Elsner: Um, Jung refers to this split in his experience, between the spirit of the depths and the spirit of the times. And the language of the animals for me is really um, and language of the depths, it's um, a language that is non intellectual, non conceptual language that has to do with emotion, the body, with something more primal in us and older and instinctual than the spirit of the times...

Dr. Dave: Mmmm hmmm

Tom Elsner: And this language of the depths, for me, really, it's the archetypal language of the soul. The word animal is related to the word in Latin for soul; "anima" and so I think it is the ability to understand what we would call the mythopoetic language of the soul, at least in part.

Dr. Dave: You know I never made that connection before between animal and anima, and it's such an important connection that you've just drawn for us. Let me give me a quote from your paper. You write "fairy tale interpretation is a process of self discovery, an individuation process involving a participation of the conscious and the unconscious." Maybe you can expand on that just a bit.

Tom Elsner: Yeah, I sure can. This is something that really hit me as I was engaged in working with fairy tales myself and seeing into the unconscious background of my psyche through the mirror of the story. Um, there is a way in which, for instance, at Pacifica, um, very interesting to watch. If you say the story "The Frog King" that we are, most of us are familiar with, that famous story from Grimm's about the prince that is trapped in the body of a frog. If you through that story out to a class of thirty five people um and ask them to give an interpretation of it, inevitably what starts to happen are, [laughing] it's like a Rorschach Test or a symbolic projected self portraits of the individual start to come out in the way that they get into the story: what fascinates them in particular...

Dr. Dave: Mmmm hmmm

Tom Elsner: um what do they like, what do they not like, what characters do they identify with or not, and it is different for different people...

Dr. Dave: Sure...

Tom Elsner: Um so, for instance it was very funny the other day. A student in class said, they broke up into small groups to talk about that story "The Frog King" and she came back into the larger class and said "one of the things that happened in our group is that we started to get really heated in our discussions and angry with each other and at one point I had to say 'Look we are just talking about princesses and frogs guys!'" [laughing]

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: But just not its, this story is not about a princess or a frog, if you know what I mean, these are stories that touch complexes in us, and um, complexes that have archetypal cores that means there is emotions involved too, and the whole psychic background can get wrapped up in fairy tale interpretation...

Dr. Dave: Where they getting into gender politics? Is that what they got heated about?

Tom Elsner: [laughing] That's one of the things that comes up. The reaction of the women and the men in the class were very different. So they had the experience of fundamentalism...

Dr. Dave: Ahh...

Tom Elsner: ...um, of people being connected to a certain image in an emotional way and fighting for it as the real truth...

Dr. Dave: This might be related to what you are saying. In your paper you worry that maybe you were being too confessional and then you go on the quote von Franz to the affect that and quote "personalistic interpretations of archetypal narratives nullify their healing effect and obscure their deeper meaning." And I was a bit confused and puzzled when I read that. What are you and von Franz getting at there?

Tom Elsner: Well what I was getting at was, you know, I'm writing this article and I'm talking about my own dream my own experience and you know, as I was going along with that I thought you know, "this story is all about me and maybe it's not, you know, not really a great subject for an article" but then I realized that the importance of the motif is just that it isn't only about me, the understanding the sounds of animals, it not just something idiosyncratic or personal to my life it has a very wide significance that's non-personal and coming into contact with that is healing, coming into contact with what we would call the other worldly archetypal significance of our personal lives is what heals and what makes us whole gives a sense of meaning, a sense of what one could say what story is living me or what myth is dreaming me...

Dr. Dave: So is Franz saying, von Franz saying that, eh, if you stick just to the personal level without sort of getting to the archetypal then it is not healing?

Tom Elsner: For her it's not healing, you stick to what you already know or if you only project into the story say a psychology, say from the perspective of psychology, a theory or a concept, and explain the story through a theory then you are just seeing what you already know namely the story only becomes a mirror for your theory or kind of proof for a pre-existing theory. That is very different from getting into a motif and saying "I have no idea what this means but I am going to learn something about it, I am going to learn something new". So, von Franz for instance there are many stories that involve abandoned children, you can think of Hansel and Gretel, you can think of many, many more in which there is an orphaned child or an abandoned child. This abandoned child, in folktales, almost always becomes the new hero. Von Franz's perspective is if you interpret that abandoned child in a folktale as a real child, say, and project the family drama of our time onto that character, then you miss that deeper healing significance of the image which is the new principal, the new creative principal is coming from what is lost, what's alone, what's orphaned, what has no home yet in the culture. Um, and just like with the Jesus story this one that has no home often becomes the locus for a whole new sense of meaning in the culture, a sense of renewal. That's Shrink Rap Radio #293 A Jungian Approach to Fairy Tales with Tom Elsner

what she would mean by the archetypal significance of these motifs and for me it really is getting in contact with that sense of deeper meaning in us that we don't yet know and that we don't know through our theories either, um, through these images.

Dr. Dave: I am struck by that idea of discovering what we don't know and that something I kind of wrestle with I know that the same idea applies to dream work and often I have the experience I have a dream and I think I know what it means, [laughing]

Tom Elsner: Mmm...

Dr. Dave: You know...

Tom Elsner: Yeah, yeah well me too. It's natural, "oh of course I know exactly what that is"

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: And that's exactly not it. Um, um, I was so impressed by the analysts I trained with in Switzerland, the Swiss analysts there, in case colloquial, for instance, we would go through a dream and they would go through the dream so slowly. It would be first sentence, an hour later...

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: Second sentence [laughing]

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: And you know when you really do that the whole dream itself can open up and illuminate in ways you had no ideas about in the start. Um, so it's exactly not that no think about the first "I know what that is" and you know interpretations that start that way become very boring, don't they, because eventually you just start to see the same thing over and over and it becomes very boring...

Dr. Dave: Ok...

Tom Elsner: Yeah...so it is hard though, this is the poet John Keats called negative capability which is a hard, something difficult to develop. The capacity he said to remain in mysteries, doubts and uncertainties without any irritable reaching out after fact or reason.

Dr. Dave: Mmm hmm, mmm hmmm, that reminds me of James Hillman too, I think he was kind of, didn't he sort of champion not foreclosing on meanings but sort of accepting the images kind of as they are.

Tom Elsner: Absolutely, stick with the image, and James Hillman really, you know he highly valued Jung's Red Book he thought, for instance you could only save one book out the fire in Jung's library, it would be the Red Book

Dr. Dave: Wow

Tom Elsner: Um because the Red Book really has no psychology language in it at all, no conceptual language at all, no theoretical language but it is filled with vivid mythopoetic image, um, and that imagery is the real truth, the real truth of the soul, the real language of the soul is speaking in the mythopoetic image. So it's not as though reducing the image to a concept is a better thing to do. For Hillman it's not, it's best to stick with the visceral, emotional, gripping qualities of the living image. This has the most truth in it, not the least truth.

Dr. Dave: Wow. One of the things that emerges out o your article is that the unconscious animal within us is not only the source of conflict and destruction but also a potential ally to be befriended. Do I have that right?

Tom Elsner: Absolutely, I would say both, both. The animal nature of our soul is not only nice and friendly, um, it can be potentially destructive um, if it possesses us which is the folklore motif of being turned into an animal right, which is different than relating to or speaking to the animals. If one is turned into an animal that means possessed by that layer of the psyche that's a curse that one needs to be redeemed from...

Dr. Dave: Mmm hmm

Tom Elsner: But on the other hand, what von Franz said for instance in all of the folklore she studied from all around the world there were no universal sort of rules that she could pin down, with one exception. And that is that if the hero or heroine in the story obeys or follows the advice of the helpful animal always they turn out right, always. And if they fundamentally disregard that advice or kill the helpful animal, they always go downhill [laughing] the go down the tubes...

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: So it's is, uh, significant in that way the danger, the animal layer is different than the collective, conventional layer of social appropriateness...

Dr. Dave: Yes...

Tom Elsner: but on the other hand it's vital, and it is alive and it's full of wisdom, um, so it is this paradoxical image, learning to successfully deal with that animal, so to say, that is often the subject of folklore...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, you make frequent references to alchemy in your article. How does alchemy fit into to what we have been discussing here, uh, learning to understand the language of the animals?

Tom Elsner: Um, well alchemy, um...Jung thought of fairy tales as alchemy for everyone. The alchemists were often the highly elite, the very well educated member of their society; the poets, the mystics, the theologians, the doctors, the scholars, um, but one can find alchemical motifs in the folklore as well. For instance, the redemption of the feminine, the sense of nature being alive, having a soul, um, how to negotiate with evil, how to deal with evil, um, the great motif in alchemy of course is the so-called “mysterium coniunctionis” in Latin the mystery of the conjunction of opposites and many fairy tales have that as their goal at the end, the marriage, the wedding or the idea in fairy tales that eventually two worlds come together; the royal world and the ordinary world.

Dr. Dave: And they often have that line “and they lived happily ever after” so that would be that conjunction as well?

Tom Elsner: That conjunction as well that one has to see really as a symbol and not take literally

Dr. Dave: Mmm hmm

Tom Elsner: Um which is often where people get into trouble with fairy tales as they think too literally about them and they think of that wedding as an actual wedding um, and they say well, “that never really happens in real life” [laughing] you know

Dr. Dave: Yeah....

Tom Elsner: But you see it as a symbol for the union of opposites and is fundamentally something mysterious and you can find the parallels with alchemy, um there for instance.

Dr. Dave: I mentioned earlier my own love of fairy tales particularly when I was a kid but there is one of Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tales stuck with me all my life and in fact I’ve integrated into a class I teach called “Myth, Dream and Symbol” and often I give a very dramatic telling of that story. And I would love to see what sort of Jungian sense you could make of it here if you are willing...

Tom Elsner: Yeah, sure I am willing to give it a go...

Dr. Dave: Ok...

Tom Elsner: It sounds great by the way...

Dr. Dave: Ok, we are without a net here...[laughing]

Tom Elsner: [laughing]

Dr. Dave: The story I am thinking of is called “The Tinderbox” and I thought maybe I’d give an abbreviated narration of it here rather my full dramatic, elaborate telling, and

I'll pause at significant beats in the story for you offer some interpretation up to that point. Would that work for you?

Tom Elsner: Sure, that sounds good. We'll have a back and forth...

Dr. Dave: Ok, yeah...

Tom Elsner: with the story...

Dr. Dave: Ok, so here is how the story starts out. There is a soldier, and this is in a long, ago, in a land, far, far, away, a soldier is released from service and uh, he is walking down the road and he encounters an old woman, might be called a hag or a witch, who makes him an offer...

Tom Elsner: Mmm hmm

Dr. Dave: So, I'll stop there...

Tom Elsner: Hmm, well I mean, the first thing I would say is just to point out something sort of in the background which is these stories that grip us and fascinate us is that one has to keep in mind the possibility is that they really are saying something significant about our fate, or destiny in life especially if you think of the listeners out there to think about perhaps the story, the film, um, the gripped them as a child...

Dr. Dave: Yes...

Tom Elsner: you know the one that you just had to listen to over and over and over and over. Often if people can get in touch with that the story is saying something very significant about their past and their fate. So I just kind of wanted to put that out there in the background.

Dr. Dave: Yeah I've always thought that too and I've invited to students to try and remember if there was such a story for them and to maybe write a little about that a little bit. So go ahead, you talk about fate and of course immediately I think of the road as a being on the road and we have all these road sto- literature is filled with stories about being on the road, we have a book titled "On the Road" and uh, so it really seems like it is a metaphor for the path of life.

Tom Elsner: Yeah, and in this story, a particular path of life it's often good to start looking at fairy tales by looking at who are the characters at the start of the story and where is the setting taking place...

Dr. Dave: Yeah....

Tom Elsner: and compare that with the end, who are the characters at the end and who are the characters at the end, um, and what has happened because one can get a sense of the purpose of the story or what it is trying to get at by doing that. Um, this is a story

about a soldier that has been released from military service and he is walking back so this is a return journey uh, the image of a man who has gone out into the world who's fought the battles of life, who has developed a strong ego, who is the mature personality and now he is on this return journey back home, um, so he is going to encounter something different than he has in this typically masculine way of adaptation, one could say, that he is already accomplished, something new is going to come up, a new encounter.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's good! See, I've got a new take on it here, just like it is supposed to happen, right? [laughs] When you bounce it off someone else you get a new view point, uh, that I hadn't really given much thought to the fact that he's a soldier, and what you said about he's returning and a mature personality and all of that and that is something for me to reflect on.

Tom Elsner: Hmm, yeah, there's this end list that will continue to have those reflections I think...

Dr. Dave: Hmm, yeah and something I never really thought about before, I mean, the guy is a soldier and I was born during war time and uh and know that had a strong imprint even though I never had to go to service but as a male, I've always felt that, you know, I might have to go to war, and that has been a sort of burden...

Tom Elsner: Hmm mm...

Dr. Dave: both burden and probably as a young kid it seemed like an exciting uh, wonderful prospect...

Tom Elsner: Hu-huh, sure both yeah that's really, that's the personal experience of that imagery...

Dr. Dave: Now what about the witch? I mean, talk about your gender politics here, that's an image that is ever popular in fairy tales but not in contemporary culture.

Tom Elsner: Yeah, I would say, um, naming that type of woman as a witch is the cultural layer of the story, it is the way that that culture in Europe, um, imagines and experiences that feminine layer, that darker, feminine layer of the soul that is connected to nature in a deep, imaginative way. That is the witch, well that is a cultural conclusion one could say, she is, one could also say she is archetype of the wise old woman and including the dark dimension of nature, in the European culture we have grown far from accepting that and regarding that as something acceptable, and therefore she pops up in the folklore of European stories in paradoxical ways. Um, for this particular individual, um, he's in this circumstance that a psychotherapy client of mine once said, just starting psychotherapy, and I asked him "what's your problem?" and he said "I'm perpetually broke and I am perpetually single." [laughing] So, you know this is a fairy tale sort of starting, and what is this hero then is going to do is encounter the

feminine, um, he's going to have to turn radically towards the feminine, that means away from power, activity, success, um, and as Jung would say "in the individuation process" turn towards what is lacking in this development and lacking in his culture. That is a scary thing to do; a paradoxical, scary thing to do. Seems like that is the setting of the story...

Dr. Dave: Ok, and of course Campbell's journey, Campbell's Journey of the Hero has had a big impact on me and on my thinking and so I see this part, also in terms of Campbell's calls to adventure. This guy is sort of walking down the road, leading a kind of ordinary life and then this witch pops up and makes him an offer that is totally different from the way that things were going.

Tom Elsner: Mmm, yeah, I would completely agree...yeah the call to adventure is paradoxical, it is not always welcome or a nice, happy thing that it involves, so yeah...

Dr. Dave: So, back to the story. This witch makes the soldier this offer. She gestures toward this tree trunk which turns out is hollow and leads down into the earth down to a cave below and she asks him if he will go down; if he will allow her to lower him down with a rope into this cave where he will encounter three rooms filled with different kinds of treasure.. In the first room he will find lots of copper, in the second room lots of silver and the third room lots of gold, but there is a problem. Each of these rooms is guarded by a dog, so there are three giant dogs, one with eyes the size of saucers, the second one with eyes the size of dinner plates and the third one with eyes the size of mill wheels...

Tom Elsner: [laughs] Isn't that great...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, so he is going to be able to pass these obstacles if he uses her apron, uh, if he'll put each dog as he encounters onto her apron he'll be able to pick up the treasure without the dog being able to get him and all she wants in return is for him to fetch her tinder box and uh, listeners', a tinder box, you know, that is pre-cigarette lighters, maybe even pre-matches, it is a way to start a fire with flint, a little bit of tinder that will catch fire easily and strike the flint against steel. So I think it is what they used in those days, especially the image of those three dogs, you know, I think that is one of the reasons this story has stuck with me so much is those, I could really picture those dogs with their large glowing eyes of the three sizes. So that was a big, a whole bunch of stuff in that part here, so let me stop here and listen to your reflections.

Tom Elsner: Ok this is the weird, strange language of fairy tales we are in the midst of. This imagery is not Hans Christian Anderson's invention and it's certainly not the invention of European culture. Um, so this is what Jung meant by the archetypal layer of the psyche that speaks in these bizarre images, to the conscious mind these are just strange, strange images that one doesn't quite know what to make out at all. Um, the first thing is that one has to take these images as metaphor; as symbol and not take the thing literally. That might seem obvious...

Dr. Dave: Sure...

Tom Elsner: but I just really want to emphasize that point. Um, if one takes this imagery literally of course it is just nonsense, it's just delusion, um, it's nothing, but if one can start, try to see the symbol it can be taken seriously, although not literally.

Dr. Dave: So, where do you go with that?

Tom Elsner: Well, so the metaphor of the tree, the tree that extends up and then go down into the tree; he has to get lowered down by the witch into a um, something that is under the ground, inside of the tree, is a metaphor that you find in shamanism, you find in ancient mystery initiations, for instance, the Eleusinian Mysteries, which were um, the most famous initiation rites in the ancient Greek world, involve that kind of image of going down into the underworld to encounter something strange and then returning back again. Um, so these are the pre-European roots of some kind of initiation rite that is no longer a part of the culture and this person is going have to engage in it. It is a fundamental feminine initiation involving this witch. So, um, then he has to go down into what we would call the unconscious. Jung had these types of dreams early on in his experiences. Um, he had dreams where he was in his house and there were other rooms in his house, he had to descend down into the staircases of one of those rooms and gradually deeper and deeper layers of the psyche. Coming into a room of the 18th century, another room with the Middle Ages, and then finally into a cave where there were just skeletons and bones; a very primal layer of the soul. This is a type of dream imagery that led him to formulate his theories of the collective unconscious....

Dr. Dave: Right....

Tom Elsner: So one could, might say, that psychologically this is an image of having to go down to deeper strata of psychic experience. And there is a light down there in the underworld too, and there are doors, right, and there are chests, in other words there are cultural artifacts. In other words he doesn't just descent into primal nature, other people have been down there before. Um, so he is descending into a deeper cultural layer of the human experience. And there he encounters these three dogs. Of course the dog is a very common representation of what guards the underworld. You think of Cerberus in the Greek mythology, that huge dog with the three heads is guarding the underworld, the entrance to Hades. Or Anubis, in the Egyptian mythology was the dog god that had to do with the underworld. So, he is having to encounter something, that you know, you could say had to do with his own instinct, with his own animal nature and that's the guardian of the treasure, he has to learn to deal with that to get the treasure. And the way to deal with it...

Dr. Dave: Well...

Tom Elsner: Oh, sorry, go ahead...

Dr. Dave: Oh, no you go ahead [laughing]

Tom Elsner: [laughing] Well I was just going to say, and you know, to point the way that he has to learn to deal with that animal side of the soul isn't by clubbing it to death or taking his sword out and killing it, which would be his primary adaptation as a soldier. But this strange image of taking the apron of the witch, um, and putting the dogs on that apron; a very mysterious symbol that has to do with the feminine way to contain the animal drive, sort of this instinctual nature. And this is where, you know, one might have to do a lot more research to really get to what that motif is getting at but in general some way to contain to understand and perhaps understand and relate to that layer of the soul different from than attacking it.

Dr. Dave: Yes, that's, that's fascinating, that opens up a new avenue for me, of using a feminine solution to the challenge. I had seen that as a good example of Campbell's amulet. He talks about, when you pass through the threshold often you encounter supernatural helpers and sometimes you are given an amulet by the guardian of the threshold and so I've, in the past, I've looked at this part in that term, from that point of view, but I like the way that you are bringing in the feminine and if I, uh, ever teach about it again I want to make sure to make that point.

Tom Elsner: Yeah, yeah, uh, uh, it is a different way to adapting than he is used to, with the apron of the....

Dr. Dave: Yeah, so moving the story along, uh, the soldier goes through those trails, he encounters each of the dogs, take treasure from each of the rooms. First he fills his pockets with copper but when he encounters the silver he empties his pockets and goes for the silver and then comes to gold and realized "hey gold is worth a lot more than silver" so now he fills himself up with gold and uh, he's back at the opening looking up through the tree trunk from down below. He can see the sky up there he can see the witch's ugly face peering down at him [laughing] I'm slipping into the dramatic telling here...

Tom Elsner: [laughing] Good, I love it! I love it!

Dr. Dave: And she calls down to him "did you get my tinderbox, sonny?" [laughing]

Tom Elsner: [laughing]

Dr. Dave: And he says "yeah I got the tinderbox" and she says "well, tie it to the rope so I can bring it up" and he says "no you pull me up and I'll give you the tinderbox once you've pulled me up". So she grumbles about that but she pulls him up and uh, and as soon as he gets up, he, I think he demands to know what, you know, why does she want the tinderbox so much and she refuses to tell him so he whips out his swords and he cuts off her head. And I will pause there....

Tom Elsner: [laughing] That doesn't seem very nice of him, but....

Dr. Dave: Right....

Tom Elsner: Um, you know this reminds me actually of the story now that you telling of a Grimm's tale called the Blue Light, and I will just mention that for your readers just as a parallel for another fairy tale. So this is the motif of descent and then return...

Dr. Dave: Yeah....

Tom Elsner: Um, he is able to go down into that underworld, successfully deal with those that are terrifying and those eyes which you mention, that must be something to be seen by the animal in a way and brings back the money but that also brings back something even more valuable than money, at least to the witch. Which is this strange symbol of the tinderbox. Um, this for me is a beautiful image, this tinderbox, um, very strange again, but, um, one could say, this is, you mentioned alchemy in the relationship between fairy tales and alchemy. Alchemists often talked about light in nature, a "*lumen natura*" or a "*deus teranus*" a kind of god that is in the Earth. Um, this is a beautiful symbol for me, this ability to create light out of darkness, um, and it is one we could talk about for a long, long time and it is something that is even more valuable than money although we don't know why at this point in the story. Um, the soldier then upon returning up, um, he has to, he cuts the head off that witch, um, Jung would say in the encounter with the unconscious the unconscious often starts off in the paradoxical way as a uh, called to adventure but as well as to destruction. The witch as she appears of contemporary men often has the meaning of a depression or an addiction, something that drags us and leads into the underworld so to speak, the unconscious, but that has a potentially destructive aspect to it, a negative mother complex, one could say, a pull towards regression. Perhaps that witch would take that light and keep it all to herself and in that sense one could say the new consciousness that could have come up is going to return back into unconsciousness again and the ego in this fairy tale has to defend its own values against those of the unconscious. Cutting the head off a witch one can find in many stories and has to do with the most general way with the overcoming the potentially regressive pull...

Dr. Dave: That's the son has to differentiate himself from the mother and potentially the negative aspects of the mother?

Tom Elsner: Uh, yeah, and understood as a metaphor that would mean the negative aspects of his own unconscious if this were a dream of an actual man. For instance, there is a dream I ran across recently that is very similar to this fairy tale. A man who was in a very severe depression had a dream that he was sunken in this underworld chamber and a witch came in and he had to fight with her and he was able to overcome her um, and with her daughter, got her daughter then return back to life again. And that has the sense of overcoming a very serious depression that's a dangerous aspect of the unconscious or the ego the unconscious isn't only nice and helpful it is paradoxical. This witch is a paradoxical figure...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I am uh, reminded of the Star Wars movies too and uh, the sword fighting under the ground with Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader somehow, even though he is not a feminine figure but there is...

Tom Elsner: Mmm, absolutely and then having to overcome something potentially negative and then it transforms. Jung would say the starting of the encounter with the anima starts off with the encounter with a witch and then you'll see it probably transforms into other feminine images...

Dr. Dave: Yes, indeed, so moving the story along, strange that you mention that. The soldier is now rich, he's got all this money, he goes to town and it almost become like the prodigal son you know in the New Testament, because he engages in riotous living. He hears about the beautiful princess that is locked in the tower, so there is the transformation of the feminine that you were kind of foreseeing. So he exhausts all of his money in riotous living and he is in his attic and he wants to have a smoke and he remembers the tinderbox and he strikes it to light his pipe and low and behold the dog with eyes the size of teacups appears saying "what command has my master for his slave?" so he sends the dog off for money so he can be rich again. And there is a whole literature of wasted magically wishes, I'll let you comment here.

Tom Elsner: Mmmh, this is like Aladdin and his lamp, isn't it?

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Tom Elsner: So he thinks there is a beautiful princess locked away in a castle which is one of the typical fairy tale motifs of having to redeem this princess. This is another image of the feminine that is far away but will be a goal to attain to bring her down out of that castle into real life, to connect with his soul, the anima no longer his mother but his partner as a soul image. So, um, the way to do it involves this tinderbox. So he is wealthy he has all this money and he uses the money up. Well I can only say that there's, it's typical that people should start off psychotherapy with ideas about "why the hell should I do this underworld journey" and one often thinks "to get better, to become more successful, or to become more adapted, to have more energy" um, those are all things that are symbolized by money and of course it is what the soldier lacks at the start of the story, he has no money at all and that is a scary situation. So one understand the impulse to want to have money. But then at the other hand he has this tinderbox that is more mysterious and more valuable um, thing that's there in his encounter with the subconscious and he doesn't fully appreciate that yet. Um, it has to do with the spark of life in nature one might say, and inner creativity, the ability to make light out of the darkness, um, imagination itself and that's related to this princess. This is the value of Eros, the story of love, the story somehow a connection to his own soul that he doesn't fully appreciate yet. If he were a real man one would think of it like that.

Dr. Dave: Well, once he's got his money then he remembers the princess and he send the dog with eyes the size of teacups to bringer to his apartment and uh, to put it

politely, they bond and the next morning she tells the queen that she had a dream that she was riding on an enormous dog.

Tom Elsner: Oh, beautiful. I mean, this is beautiful, beautiful image. The sleeping soul, the sleeping beauty that arrives at his apartment on the back of an enormous dog that's a striking symbol. That means that, this, instinctual layer, his own animal side it what brings the soul image to him and she is still asleep that means, still unconscious. That's a paradox because that means our rage, our instinctuality, our sexuality, um, bodily drives, everything that might be symbolized by that dog um, is what brings up the sleeping soul and the problem with love.

Dr. Dave: Moving the story along, I love that by the way, now moving the story along. One of the serving ladies follows the princess on the dog, and the next evening, the next evening, and marks the door of the soldier's house with a large X but when the queen's men go searching for the house they discovered that all the doors have been marked with an X.

Tom Elsner: Uh, well, I don't like her very much. Uh, that is the feeling function of stories, what you like and what you don't like [laughing] This is the maid of the king and queen, right....

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: who's discovered something that is "*forbotten*" mm hmm mm. Not allowed. This often, uh, returns to the negative side of the ruling principals, the collective ideas of a culture, they are symbolized by the king and queen, the status quo, um, the collectivity does not want this event to take place. Um, this is, um...

Dr. Dave: And there is trickster energy at work here, right? In terms of the marking of all the doors with an X

Tom Elsner: You're right. There is a lot of trickster energy tricks, who's tricking who, she tries to trick him, he tricks her, or his dogs trick her [laughing]

Dr. Dave: [laughing]

Tom Elsner: Right, right, absolutely, a lot of the trickster.

Dr. Dave: Alright, moving the story along the third night the queen fills the princess's pocket with fine, white powder/flour, to create a trail and this time they are able to follow the trail and the soldier is thrown into prison. Uh, he is able to communicate with a boy out on the street through the prison bar window, and asks the boy to go to his lodgings and fetch his tinderbox and the soldier is going to be hanged and all the royalty and the town are gathered to see him hanged and for his last wish he asks to smoke a pipe and strikes his tinderbox three times and the three dogs fall upon the judges and

counselors and the king and the queen and the people proclaim the soldier the new king and the princess becomes his queen.

Tom Elsner: Hmm, well this is a typical ending to many fairy tales, the sense of renewal, the old king and queen are dethroned and the new king and queen come so it's a sense of cultural renewal. You could say, symbolically, the renewal of the guiding ideas and values of a culture. Now, this guy didn't do anything wrong, I mean what was his crime? He wanted to release the princess from her tower and connect with her and you think of her of a soul image and then a typical path of life for a man is a decent into the underworld, into the unconscious, an encounter with the feminine world and the fate to, um, find his own soul and the collective in this story use that as a crime. Um and this is something that Jung also talked about. He often referred to individuation. What Jung meant by that was the sense of becoming whole, of becoming oneself, living from the instinctual basis of the depths of one's being, involves tragic guilt because one is no longer contained or going according the status quo of a culture, according to the collective ideas of what one should be, of how one should behave, one has become a criminal in a sense because one has veered off on one's own path and that seems to be what is going on in this story. So he is going to be hanged for trying to the sleeping anima, his own soul...

Dr. Dave: Yeah...

Tom Elsner: And then he remembers the tinderbox and he strikes it and the dogs come. So, for me this is a beautiful image, of one could say, artist have this type of a, through their creativity that is the spark of light that shines through their soul that illumination that can connect to the instinctual depths of things and to nature. That overthrows the bourgeois, collective principals that are too rigid and not willing to suffer renewal and this is a motif that many stories of the old king that won't let go of the thrown because all cultures need renewal so at the end that is what happens and the, you could say, the collective ways of how one should be are overthrown by the person who's connected to the depths, who's connected to this light in nature and the instinctuality of that um, so I like the ending. [laughing]

Dr. Dave: [laughing] Yeah...

Tom Elsner: [laughing] one likes it...you know, you feel, it's good...

Dr. Dave: Well, yeah, when you view it in that way. Might you use a fairy tale like this in the course of therapy and if so, how?

Tom Elsner: Oh, absolutely. One way in which you can use these sorts of stories is as parallels to people's dream. Um, there's many dreams that involve things like this like going down into the underworld, coming across dogs or other dangerous animals down there, um, dreams of a sleeping beauty of some sort trapped somewhere, um, these are very common, what Jung said, amplify the dreams with folktales like this it really gives

one the sense of “oh, what is happening in my own soul, in my own inner process isn’t something idiosyncratic or strange to me but there is a story in me that is living me that lived in other people too.” Jung said for instance “if I am in a dark hole, I feel much better if others are down there with me.”

Dr. Dave: [laughing] Did Jung say that?

Tom Elsner: [laughing] Yeah, yeah, these sort of stories give us that of feeling especially in terms of darkness and disorientation, because the motif of having to go down through the witch, lowered into the underworld, psychologically that is a depression or something that’s, you know, not fun to live through, and the sense that there could be in a meaning in what seems to be dark, um, or if one has lost one’s way in a mid-life crisis, like the soldier you could say is a story of the way that human beings have for many, many centuries, recognized the value of what we would call a mid-life crisis; on the return journey, in mid-life, having to encounter the unconscious in a new way. Artists might have dream like this, this is a fate that might befall an artist or a creative person.

Dr. Dave: I worry about what’s being lost in the “Disney-fication” of fairy tales and I just worry that children will think they know the tale because they saw the movie or they read the Little Golden Book version. Do you worry about that at all?

Tom Elsner: Yeah, I do too Dr. Dave. I mean it is strange for me because on the one hand, Disney for instance, does such an amazing job with their films, with humor and just the characters and I like the films. The Rapunzel one recently, Twisted, I saw with my kids, I really liked it. But on the other hand, the danger for me is that, some of the strange motifs, and some of the details of the story that one can’t really understand or that seem bizarre are left out and cut away and that seems to be a danger for me and also the tendency to make the stories politically correct, you know, also is understandable but also a strange thing for me too.

Dr. Dave: And I also wonder about the importance of a common language, a common cultural inheritance, in which everyone has grown up with the same stories and, you know, that people who grew up with those older tales, they had that I’m not sure if we have that now. Or are we getting it from the Disney movies now? Will adults of the future look back fondly on Rapunzel as Disney portrayed it?

Tom Elsner: Mmm, it could be. I mean, I don’t really know the answer. You mentioned Joseph Campbell and Joseph Campbell had a huge influence on George Lucas, George Lucas said he had wanted to write a modern day fairy tale with Star Wars and then he ran across Joseph Campbell’s books with the “Hero’s Journey” and those types of book, “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” and developed a relationship with Joseph Campbell so in a way that is a modern fairy tale for us and another way you touch on something that is so deep, so central, certainly to Jung’s way of thinking and that’s the loss of a sustaining living myth in our culture and the sustaining effects of that

and Jung wrote a lot about that, um, what Jung really experienced that in his own life. He was visiting the people of the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico, traveling to Africa; experiencing cultures that had a living mythology and then he had to ask himself “well now, what is my myth? The myth that I really live in?” and he said then there was an uncomfortable silence and, um, he had to discover that from within and um, so yeah, it was a big question, what is the new myth of our culture? Where is that coming from? What does that look like? We live in a time, I think that many, many, people have recognized a disintegration of the guiding mythologies that held people together, church and state, patriotism and those have crumbled for many people, so....

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and certainly we know that when primitive cultures lose their myth, they lose their story, they disintegrate, that’s when alcoholism starts and other kinds of addictions and things just fall apart without that sort of guiding meaning....

Tom Elsner: Yeah, I absolutely agree. And that is us today, not just people who live on reservations. A lot of people who come into psychotherapy, there is a sense of uselessness, of alienation, lack of community, addictions, obsessions, um, depression, living mythology has the function of connecting people to a sense of the cosmos and to life in a meaningful way but to also a community in a meaningful way.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, well, look I’ve kept you a lot longer than I think either one of us planned on but it has been absolutely delightful. As we wind down, is there anything you would like to add?

Tom Elsner: Oh, I don’t think so, just, uh, thank you very much, I really enjoyed the conversation and the chance to talk to you about this subject, Dr. Dave, really.

Dr. Dave: Well, me too, Tom Elsner, thanks for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Tom Elsner: Thank you.