

Re-Storying the World

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I can’t sleep at night for all the tossing and turning. There are disturbing stories everywhere, stories of desperate futures for humanity. Bad news blares from newsstands, clogs airwaves, insinuates itself into dinner conversations, and, most distressingly, invades my dreams. There, and in the waking that follows, the stories play out, featuring my children in various apocalyptic scenarios, hungry and suffering. How could any mother sleep?

Years ago I experienced the sleep-killing power of stories when someone told my young son “Hansel and Gretel”, giving special attention to the part when the witch checks caged Hansel’s finger for plumpness, determining his readiness for the stewpot. For weeks my son was terrified at bedtime, asking tearfully as I tried to tiptoe out, “Why would an adult *want* to eat a child?”

Now, years later, I’m the one wide-eyed in the dark, digesting the bleak stories du jour, paralyzed by the deluge. In that midnight solitude, I fear my children’s generation is being raised to expect a dismal future, and may thus be more likely to create one. I seek defense against despair, something strong, warm, and shining in which to wrap myself. If I had a game plan, maybe I could rest. What can I do, as a mother and writer, to help create a future with health and wholeness, laughter and justice?

Many nights pass in this way—weeks, months of them. One night, I think of my son’s “Hansel and Gretel” terror, and remember how we finally got him to sleep: we whispered our childhood stories into his ears, about wrestling in foam coats, Daddy’s cat, and the time Uncle

Chris tipped into a fountain while reaching for coins. Every night, my husband or I erased—through distraction—the image of Hansel’s finger through iron bars, and replaced it with comical felines, neighborhood spy games, and heroic adults. Over time, my son took himself out of that cage in his mind’s eye, and placed himself center stage in adventures he could imagine as his own.

Human experience has always been shaped by stories, “Adam and Eve” being an example of just one with profound impact, particularly on women’s lives. Stories have the power to terrify or subjugate, but they can also unleash our imaginations, and raise our expectations, thereby enriching our futures. I cannot erase images of a nightmarish world to come, because they arrive fresh daily. But I can heed their warnings, and then tell different stories, new ones, made of light and possibility. I need to hear—and write— stories saying, “Yes!” to the future, especially those that include road maps for claiming it.

I may not redirect the grand evolution of world events. But I might find some peace in engaging the troubling questions. And so I get up from my bed, often when it’s still dark, and reach for that warm and shining garment, the storyteller’s cloak. I wrap it around myself, and, feeling fortified and a little more hopeful, begin to write.