

Cinderella: Recovering after Loss

Interview with Katie Curtin



I'm very glad to be able to talk to you about Cinderella, Katie. The French version by Charles Perrault, with the fairy godmother in it, very much seems to be your story.

Yes, definitely! For me, Cinderella isn't Cinderella without the fairy godmother.

What drew you into the story?

There are two aspects to it. First you have the character of Cinderella, who is treated like a scullery maid, a slave, and has to do what everybody tells her to. And then you have the fairy godmother, the person who helps other people transform their lives. I saw a link with the fairy godmother and the coaching profession that I was embarking on. I always liked the analogy of being like a fairy godmother. There's a sort of magic to it.

I've loved magic since I was very little. I probably read the whole library full of fairy tales when I was a child. Often, I would read about seven or eight books a week. I would go to our local library and take out every fairy tale I could find. And that was quite wonderful.

Why did you like fairy tales so much as a child?

Well, it was a way to transform! It was a way to get away from everyday life and not just get stuck in what was going on... It was my magical inner world.

I used to argue with my brother, actually. He would read all the encyclopedias. He had a real scientific mind and he would pooh-pooh my fairy tales, and I would pooh-pooh his encyclopedias as being awfully boring. But it's funny because as it turned out, as well as being an outstanding violin maker, he now does fiction writing!



When you went back to the story as an adult, where did you first go? What scene were you drawn into?

Initially, I was drawn into the prior life of Cinderella, which is not told in the fairy tale. She's lost her mother. Then a whole new life happens, which is not the life of her dreams. I explored what it was like to lose a mother, and what Cinderella's life was like before she died. I imagined a very magical time where she was able to be quite wild and free. Her mother encouraged that in her. She was very loved. She was also loved by her father, but when her mother died, her father was in such grief that he wasn't able to respond to her. He married right away, which was not necessarily a sign that he didn't care, it was just his way of going through grief.

Loss is a big part of a lot of fairy tales. They start with a loss, and that leads you from a situation that was perhaps fairly ideal and wonderful to something where it's very hard for you. But it leads to learning and a shaking up of the character which you might not have had in the previous situation.



How did you see Cinderella dealing with that loss?

Well, first of all, she is just there, doing all the tasks at hand, scrubbing the floor, and being taunted and treated really horribly by the stepmother and stepsisters. Her first reaction is to try and please them. This is something I've always tried, is to please people if they're difficult. You do everything you possibly can and they're just impossible. Nothing will please them!

In developing my version of the story in your classes, I imagined that one day, Cinderella prepares this wonderful meal for her family, but things go terribly wrong, and from that moment on, she understands that she will never

be able to please them.

Can you read us a piece of your writing that illustrates how Cinderella came to that realization?

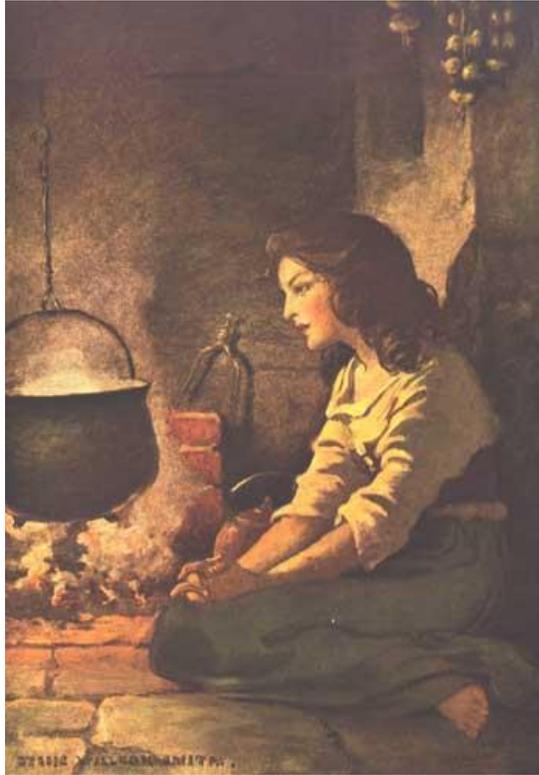
Sure...

One day, my father announced to me he had found another woman who had two daughters. And, well, they came to live with us, They were part of the beautiful people at the court, wearing lovely dresses and gossiping about the comings and goings of court life. But their characters were ugly. They told lies to my father about me, and didn't hesitate to leave all the work to me, kicking me and hitting me if I protested. While I did not like being their servant, I decided to bide my time. I covered up my anger and hatred with sweet words, and served them as they wished. I hoped with time they might change, and that perhaps sweetness could ease their sour temperaments. But in fact it only seemed to make them worse. The more I served them, the more they wanted.

One day, I decided to cook a delicious banquet and make it so exquisite that even they could not complain. However, when I came to serve the fragrant soup, I stumbled, and the soup went all over my stepsister's gown. She howled in fury and tore the dress I was wearing from off my shoulders. It was a dress my mother had made. With deft fingers she had stitched it, and it was now desecrated by this court hag. I screamed, "Leave me alone!" and ran up to my room in the attic, tears of anger streaming down my face.

Your Cinderella must have felt completely betrayed!

Yes, and that's when her anger starts really bubbling inside her. She's seething. She doesn't show it, but she really is *seething*. She's angry at the loss, but then she's also angry at the way her father has reacted to the loss, and the fact that she's with these people who are jealous of her, who don't see her. They don't



see anything of who she is. She's almost completely invisible to them. They don't see her gifts, they don't see her beauty, and so it's a very hard time for her. She's become an outsider in what was her own home.

It's also a time of despair. She goes through this period where everything is without hope. There doesn't even seem to be a chink of light at that point.

I know that you've worked with people who are going through the grieving process. Do you sometimes see people who are like Cinderella's father, who try to get past it quickly?

Oh, definitely. And you do see people trying by all means to put aside the grief. It may be by having a relationship with somebody else, it might be by just going on with their work and not paying attention to it. There's all kinds of ways that we avoid the very deep grief. So I see him as doing that. And in particular, men will not always deal with their emotions, and they'll find ways in the outside world to work it out.

That has pretty terrible consequences at home!

Yes. He forgets about his own daughter. Actually, if you think about it, if you are a parent, and you are going through grief, it's very hard for you to be with your kids in their grief, because you have your own pain, and are

going through your own process. It's almost impossible to be present for another in the way you might want. So in some ways, the fairy tale represents that reality of losing one parent and then losing the other one to grief.

What is Cinderella's turning point? Can you read a piece that expresses that?

I said that I wanted to go to the ball, and indeed it was my right but my stepmother and her daughters would have nothing of it and even taunted me for thinking of going. "You," they said, "You want to go to the ball?" They laughed derisively. "Nobody would want to dance with you." I hung my head. Humiliated and hot with shame, I went back to my work at the hearth. In the days and nights that followed I was forced to help them prepare for the ball, sewing their gowns, helping them prepare their hair and make up for their faces. And yet even the loveliest of gowns couldn't hide the unpleasantness of their characters. I wondered if the prince could fall for their artifices and simpering ways. When they left on the first night, I fell weeping at my hearth.

Then out of the smoke appeared a woman with a magnificence and power I had never seen. Auburn hair tumbled on her shoulders, and she had fiery eyes and a dress of dazzling colors. She held a wand which she tapped on my head. "Darling, that's enough weeping! Get ready, I'm taking you to the ball! I've had enough of watching those sisters maltreat you. I can't stand it any longer. Come on, chop chop! There's no time to be wasted!"

Your fairy godmother really cuts-to-the chase!

She is not ethereal. She's not a fairy in the sense of being a sort of transparent wishy-washy type of creature. She's there, ready to go. And in action. And she doesn't take any silliness. She has this magical nature, but she has this earthiness. She's a combination of the earth mother and the fairy together—a fairy godmother!

And why does she appear at that particular moment, would you say?

Ah, well, Cinderella says, "I want to go the ball, too." But the others won't let her. At that point, if she just stayed in her despair, the fairy godmother would not have come. Cinderella needed to have a readiness, an ability to believe that magic can exist, and that in some ways the conditions of her life can be transformed.

What I find interesting about the fairy godmother, looking back at it, is that she takes the creatures around, the things that are already in Cinderella's life, and transforms them. The pumpkin becomes the carriage, the mice become the horses, the rats become coachmen. Various people are needed to bring Cinderella to the ball. The fairy godmother uses the creatures that are around her and the circumstances that are with her. They all transform *with* her.

That's very interesting. And how does that translate to life?

Well, a person has to have an openness to change. even when you're going through your worst times—if you have some faith that something good will come, then opportunity does open up eventually and show its face. And to me, also, there are choices that you make when you are faced with loss. You can say, "It doesn't matter. I'm going to go on living and I'm putting that behind me." Or you can say, "Oh, this is so terrible, I will never ever get over it. It's the worst thing that's ever happened." And the other choice, in a sense, is to say, "Yes, it's a terrible loss. Yes, I need to grieve. And, at the same time, I can make out of this something beautiful. Something will come out of this."

One can be a victim of fate in many ways and yet at the same time one can change that role, and be somebody who uses whatever is thrown to one, as a way of strengthening oneself and becoming more beautiful within oneself. And so, that's what I think happens with Cinderella.

At the same time, it's not like people either do one or the other. In grief, you often play all of those roles. There's periods when you say, "Ah, I'm just going to put that aside and go on, and I don't want to deal with the grief," and there's other periods when you go right into your despair. You go right into *why did it have to be me?* There are other periods, if you keep going, that you see that your grief can be transformed, and you stay in the journey. Because I do believe it's a journey.

What does that look like, that sort of staying-openness? How did you experience that?

Well, a number of years ago, my life partner was killed. We were on vacation in Mexico, hiking on top of a mountain when we were held up by two men. Something Peter did must have startled one of them, and he fired his gun. They ran away immediately, leaving me alone with Peter, who died almost instantly. Even in that moment of terrible shock, I knew that there was a choice in the way I could respond to this experience. There was an inner voice saying, "This will transform you in the end, Katie. However horrible it is." At the same



time there was a feeling of being a part of a community of people who have gone through pain and grief. Right there on the mountain, I thought of women in Nicaragua who had lost sons in the fighting, or in Europe, and I thought of other people who I had seen on TV... and I felt part of that community. I had the sense that what was required of me was a spiritual transformation. It's not like it took place easily or quickly. It took many years. In fact, I'm still processing it in different ways, but it really did change my life. It changed my outlook on life and began an incredible journey.

Could it have shut you down?

Well, it did at times. It's funny because in the initial period I got a fair amount of support, but during the first few months of grieving, I was able to spend some time in the country. It was a very sacred period. At that time, a mythic story, *The Sorrowkeeper* first emerged. In the story, the character of the Sorrowkeeper tells a young woman who has lost her husband, that "out of your greatest suffering will come your greatest joy." That little story kept me going through the very difficult times that followed.

It sounds like you found your own fairy godmother!

Exactly. The Sorrowkeeper in the story kept me going with the thought that out of this, something better was going to come. There were a number of really difficult years, but I think what grief does is that it opens up everything in your life. You confront all sorts of things you don't want to. I'm not saying that always happens, but in this particular case, it opened up a lot of issues for me.

It seems to me that in the story of Cinderella, at the hearth, when the fairy godmother first appears, there's a peril. She comes in with such "chop chop" energy, with such earthy fairy-ness. Why?

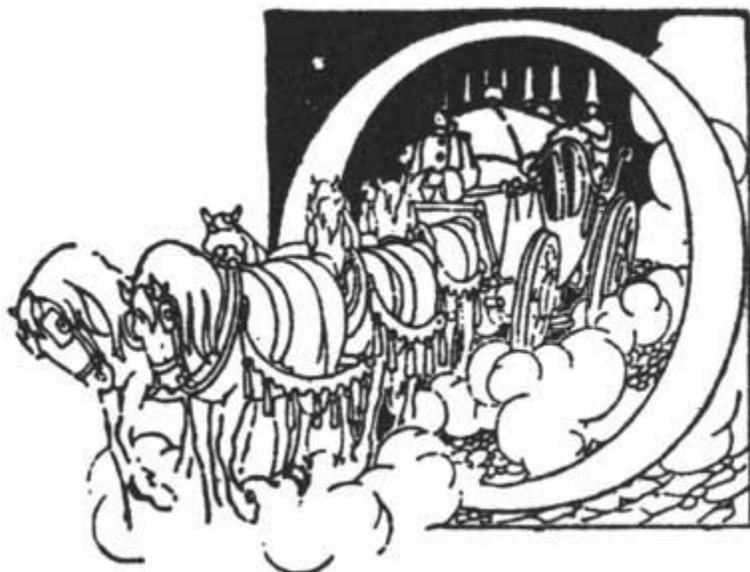
You're right. Cinderella needs something to wake her up. She needs some kind of energy that will get her up on her feet. She's gotten so ground down by the abuse of her stepmother and her stepsisters, she's almost getting used to being a victim, used to being without hope, and not seeing any other way. And as I said, the glimpse of the prince awakened in her the feeling that there might be something else. But there was still the danger that she would just stay at the hearth. She certainly wasn't going to run on her own to the palace!

Would you say you bring that kind of magic to others in the work that you do as a life coach, and as an artist?

Well, I know that for me, art is a way to make sense and meaning of what I've lived, and transform it into something more beautiful.

One of the things that I've been doing—I'm not quite sure where it will go but it's really a lot of fun—is to do improvised monologues I call "rants". Through them I've worked on some really hard stuff. It seems that by being very very honest, by saying how it really is, I'm freeing up some of my energy. I've had such a wonderful response from people. I feel seen in my whole self, as unperfect as I am, with whatever problems or challenges I'm facing. I just declare them and say, "This is what living is like! Not this false dream that everybody's aspiring to!" Well, that's been freeing to me.

I think there's something really important for us to understand as change-makers, as coaches, in whatever place we're doing it. When I was young, I just wanted to batter down walls and change everybody. I tried to force the issue with people who weren't open. And that's such a false place to be. It's just totally frustrating. Really, you can see when people are open. And when they're open you don't need to force



it. They will take what they need from what you have to give.

Cinderella can't give to her sisters. They won't take her gifts. They don't appreciate her compassion. They just throw it in her face. But the prince will.

It's like that in life. You can waste a lot of time trying to convert people, or bring them around. And then there's somebody right there in front of you who's open, and that's where you need to be.

What was the prince looking for in Cinderella?

She is his chance for freedom. He's looking for someone to join with him, who will give him the strength to go forward on a very new path. I wrote a little piece from his point of view, so if you'd like to hear from him, in his own words, here is what he says:



I've heard that my courtiers have found her, the one who for three days danced in my arms, whose heady fragrance intoxicated me, whose compassion and substance unfroze my heart. Too long sugar-coated by the manners and artificialities of court life, I have become cynical, expecting no more than the endless line of women looking to marry me, not for who I am, but for my wealth and standing, and for a handsome husband to show off.

She was different. She looked me in the eyes and saw my soul—my vulnerability, my sensitivity, the dreams I no longer dreamed. She awakened in me a longing I had almost extinguished in my need to fit into the role of being heir to the throne. She gave me new hopes, perspectives on a kingdom that could be far different from that of my mother and father, a kingdom where spirit, fire and light are cultivated, where the songs of the birds and the scent of the flowers are held in greater esteem than all the man-made concoctions on which our artificial lives depend. She was fresh air, wild, and she awakened in me a nature which had been asleep for too long. I wait for the moment for her to arrive. I hear the sound of horses' hooves and bugles being trumpeted. I hear the sound of feet coming towards me and then I see her step forward. Her face is covered with ashes, her clothes are rags, and yet for me she is more beautiful than any court lady in her finery. Her luminous eyes draw me in. Now there is no turning back.

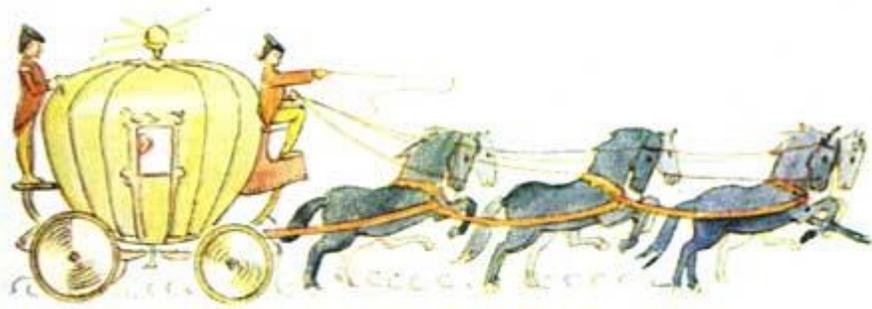
In a sense, we all need others to transform. We all need some support from others in our process. If you think about it, in our society there is such an insane emphasis on the individual doing it all! It's a total myth. Nobody ever does it all. We're all connected, we get help all the time! We don't eat something on the basis that we've done it all! People have grown the food, picked it, packaged it, and sent it. So, yes, the prince needs Cinderella. She is the one who helps him transform just as the godmother is the one who helps her transform.

When you first came into the story, you found yourself identified with the grief of Cinderella in the hearth. Where would you say you are now?

Well I think I'm pretty close to the part where the prince finally comes with the slipper and puts it on. I've come through a whole number of years that have been very difficult. I've had some great experiences, but there have been some huge issues to deal with and learn through. Now it's the time to harvest. I'm beginning to understand how I can get to a place of greater joy. It's not about expecting something huge to happen. It's about understanding who I am and having greater freedom with who I am, and consequently, greater joy.

It sounds like you've really got that wand working now!

Yes... I think what has transformed is my outlook on the journey. Now it's more like an adventure. It's more fun. There's lightness here, and freedom!



For me the prince represents the return of love in her life, because she had lost that love with the loss of her mother. So that's part of it, and the other part is living her life on a larger scale, and growing up in a more full way and being able to realize her talents and possibilities in the community. She is seen for who she is and she is able to manifest that on a larger scale, with others, in terms of the kingdom. She's somebody who, without artifice, is able to bring to others the possibilities for freedom and living more authentically and in a less stultified and more real way.