

Rumpelstiltskin Revisited

Steven Khan

(Part 1)

In June 2008, I gave my very first graduation address to the educational community of Malabar RC Primary School. I decided to tell a story—a simple fairy tale, “Rumpelstiltskin.” I hoped, though, to challenge them to think more critically about what this story about a poor miller’s daughter, whose father boasted to the King that she could spin straw into gold, might really be about, and draw out some implications for how they might choose to live their lives.

As I told the audience, typically, this story is read to children as a warning against boasting, and was meant as a cautionary tale for young women. The little man, Rumpelstiltskin, is cast as a villain or demon for wanting a human child and for having what is seen as unnatural abilities—alchemy—the ability to turn base material (straw) into something of value (gold). But reading the story in this way is easy; it fits with the way many people see and construct the worlds in which they choose to live—worlds that often imprison their imaginations as well as their bodies and spirits. Our challenge in this century is to learn to read the stories that we have received in our childhood differently, to ask new and more challenging questions, and to seek answers that are not going to be found in textbooks. Another challenge is to write new stories—better, more hopeful stories. I sought to illustrate this in the remainder of the address.

Consider two questions about this story: 1) *Who acts ethically?* and 2) *What are the values espoused?* These are not questions about right or wrong, about rules, or about villains or demons. They are not about picking a character to *follow* but about *learning* about and from each character.

Let’s start with the miller, whose *boastfulness* and *pride* place his daughter in harm’s way. Does he act ethically? He is irresponsible with his daughter’s reputation and this irresponsibility places her at risk of being taken advantage of by the King, the symbol of nobility and justice. Does the King act ethically? Or does his *greed* drive him to the very brink of committing murder? And what of the miller’s daughter? She has the power to put a stop to the lie initiated by her father. However, she *chooses* to enter into an arrangement with the little man whose name she does not even know, but who promises and delivers what she is unable to do. She becomes indebted, reaps the rewards of her deceit, and places her future, and that of her child, at risk. Through her *thoughtless* and *self-preserving* actions, she promises away her future and that of the kingdom. She later reneges on this promise.

All three are complicit. All three have the power at every instant to transform the situation into one where their actions can create opportunities for others to acknowledge their responsibilities to each other and act more ethically. The miller can go to the King and admit his lie; the King can be satisfied with less gold and choose not to kill the miller’s daughter; the daughter can admit that she is unable to do what is asked of her. All of these require *courage* and *strength of character*. Sadly, in this story, and in those we hear, read, and enact most commonly today, these do not appear to be virtues that are widely practised. Instead, the values exhibited are boastfulness, deceit, greed, thoughtlessness, forgetfulness, and cowardice.

Rumpelstiltskin seems less a villain now and more a victim. His skills have been used and he does not receive the agreed upon payment. He offers several opportunities for the daughter to take responsibility for what she can and cannot do, and to face any consequences. He offers her opportunities to act ethically and responsibly towards herself and the King. He pities her, but he cannot choose *for* her; it is she who chooses to keep silent and benefit from the lie, fraudulently taking credit for what is not her work.

The educable moment always presents a gift—the opportunity for the enactment of an ethical practice. It presents opportunities to choose and model how to be unconditionally responsible for another and so build an ethically responsible society. In education, politics, and the public service, we are blessed every day to be offered opportunities to come clean, to take up our responsibilities, and face the consequences courageously. Sadly, many, following the examples of the King, the miller, and his daughter, choose not to do so.

(Steven Khan is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia)

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine