

Rumpelstiltskin Revisited

Steven Khan

(Part 2)

Apart from an allegory of moral virtue and the necessary conditions for building an ethical society, what else might Rumpelstiltskin be about? Consider the central metaphor of the story, alchemy, the spinning of straw into gold. A substance that has many domestic and indigenous uses, but which does not have high economic value, is converted, on a large scale, into one with a more limited set of uses. For a King, these uses would include ornamentation, commerce, and the financing of political powows, military or industrial campaigns. This transubstantiation can be read as a metaphor for our (mis)use of nature to create wealth. The King seems unconcerned with how his wealth is created and what has to be promised or must be traded in order to pay for the currency of development and measures of prosperity. This is in sharp contrast to Rumpelstiltskin's values, which have an ecological, biophilic flavour, as he proclaims to the Miller's daughter who tries to buy her way out of her promise, *that something alive is dearer to him than all the treasures in the world.*

Economic prosperity can buy a certain type of life. However, there is no value that can be placed on life itself and we are fast running out of life-sustaining spaces. Do we care where our food, toys, and clothes come from and where they will go when we are finished with them? Do we care how they come to be available to us? Do we teach those for whom we are responsible how to care for that which gives life, or are we only concerned with possessing, like the King, more and more at any cost? In this area, too, we have opportunities to act more responsibly than we have been and to cease from creating more and more of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to as *Wasted Lives*—the inevitable and disastrous consequences of our modern appetites—marked by fear, anxiety, deprivation, un-belonging, and homelessness.

There is also the leitmotif of the power of one's name and the power that other people have in naming us. Words and labels can be cages placed around us, restricting physical and psychological mobility or they can be heralds that go before us proclaiming our virtues and guiding our vision. An exercise I use with teenagers is to ask them, *If your life were to be summarized in one word, what would that one word be?* From a group of Form 5 Holy Faith Convent students at a recent retreat, I got examples like, "Love," "Friend," "Compassionate," and "Generous." How truly wonderful if one's entire life could be oriented by and towards words such as these. On another occasion, I placed it before a group of Form 3 students of Fatima College, in a context where their Principal had just labelled the entire class "a Shame." As he buffed them, re-naming them as "shameful," I could see the defiance in these young men's eyes grow as the playful light of youth left to be replaced by a mature anger. After he left, I implored them to work so that some other word, not shame, would define their lives. I saw something change in their eyes and body language—it looked like the beginning of sorrow.

Through re-naming we sometimes position others as less than human or self, an action that continues to underlie our justifications for committing atrocities (slavery, genocide, terracide) against other living beings. We must be very careful whom and how we name, and who we allow to name us in this century. We must not forget the painful lessons of human history.

As I ended, I placed the following question before the students, which I now place before us all, *What is the word, the name by which you wish to be called, the name that is a true reflection of the life and person that you are and want to be?* On that day, I proudly joined with their families in welcoming those students as Graduates, and reminded them that in the years to come it would be they who would decide what they would be called by their actions/inactions. They alone would determine whether they would create a wasted life or a life of waste for themselves. “Remember,” I told them, “you have the power at every instant to change the direction and course of your life and that of others. You have the power to author a better world. Choose wisely and responsibly.”

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