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A too modern fairy tale

Joan Chittister | Oct. 3, 2011 From Where I Stand

Every culture, including ours, raises its children on fairy tales, archetypes of social relationships and models of human development. It is in fairy tales that we learn our place in life at a very early age.

Social roles and human ideals are clearly defined there. Human types and public values emerge in vivid colors there -- ogres and witches, fathers and princes, authority and obedience, emerge painted in broad, bright strokes. Most of all, little girls learn without doubt the proper roles and virtues of women in society.

Expectations are drawn to a fine point. In fairy tales there is no confusing the good and the bad.

In ?Cinderella,? for instance, of which there are more than 700 versions in world literature, little girls learn that it is their beauty that really counts if a girl hopes to get ahead. Men, they can see, value them for their looks, not their brains.

In ?The Little Mermaid,? girls learn to be silent and listen. Nice girls, it is clear, are not loud, not sassy, not confident, not self-initiating. They are to be ornaments in this world, not organizers, seen and not heard. They suffer in silence. They merge into the woodwork and, best of all, they do what they?re told.

In ?Hansel and Gretel,? they find out who?s in charge. Every idea for how to handle the situation comes from Hansel. Gretel simply goes along, trusting in her savior, dependent on his strength and wisdom. Girls learn young that ?father knows best,? that ideas are not their metier.

We like to think that fairy tales come from another era, some ancient mythical, whimsical, foolish kind of unsophisticated place.

Unfortunately, we learned last week, these stories are very much alive and functioning well in us yet. They live on as old undercurrents of past beliefs, and so as subtexts to a very modern story. Last week we heard a new fairy tale that, if you look at it carefully, sounds very much like all the old ones we read. This story is called ?Walmart and the Six Silly Women.?

Once upon a time there was a big, big store called ?Walmart.? In fact, there were more than 3,000 of them all over the land in 4,300 installations. Many, many people worked for Walmart. One-third of them were men and two-thirds of them were women.

But one day six of the women who work there began to realize that though most of the work was being done by women, who were 65 percent of the hourly workers, only 33 percent of the managers were women. The company appointed men, not women, to positions of leadership.

They saw, too, that women were commonly paid less than the men they worked with -- that when they did get a raise it was less an advance than the men around them were getting, that women got fewer promotions and that they were more commonly assigned to work with little chance of promotion, like sorting or stacking or clerking.

Things without varying degrees of proficiency or varying degrees of difficulty, in other words, that commonly expose special talent or management skills.

So, the women took their appeal to bring a class action suit against Walmart all the way to the Supreme Court. In June, five male justices said there was no proof whatsoever that the situation as it stood was company *policy* [1]. Which, apparently means that there was no piece of paper with a resolution denying women the right to equal pay, or promotions, or management track positions -- the very kind of argument that underlay the existence of *de facto* segregation.

?Even if every single one of those anecdotes is true,? Justice Scalia wrote, ?that would not demonstrate that the entire company operates under a general policy of discrimination.?

The notion that there might be unwritten policies to be dealt with did not, however, escape the four members of the Court, three women and one man, who took the minority position.

As a result of that decision, the right to let the courts test the largest class action suit in the history of American business has been denied. The company was too large for that, the Court decreed, never mind the million women.

On the weight of one decision, then, the fairy tales go on: Women are not to be valued for their work; they?re meant to adorn it. Women aren?t meant to lead; Hansel will do that for them. And most of all, women are not meant to be mouthy mermaids, to speak up for themselves, to take matters into their own hands. They are to be silent and do what they?re told.

They can, of course, the ruling agrees, bring to the judicial system their one million individual cases one at a time, prove that each one of these million women -- one at a time -- has been personally and pointedly discriminated against.

Right. Of course. Why didn?t we think of that?

But the fairy story doesn?t really end there: Walmart, the good prince, has come to the rescue of women.

According to *The New York Times* [2], the company announced two weeks ago programs to carry $20 billion dollars worth of products from women-owned businesses in the United States over the next five years, and to double what it buys from women-owned businesses around the world in the next five years. Finally, they promise to support training programs for women in factories and farms that are Walmart suppliers and, irony of irony, donate $100 million in support of women?s economic development.

It?s a brilliant diversionary move. If the buying prices are fair and the training programs are real, women may certainly benefit. These are good programs. Good enough to make women, who are also the majority of their customers as well as their workers, forget that to buy from this store is to support discrimination against women. These are, after all, very cheap substitutes for what the payment of back wages would have cost them.

The problem is that these programs do nothing to end unfair labor policies in their own stores. These are crumbs thrown against the wind. But beneficence is not justice and, in fact, may even make an injustice worse because it denies rights in favor of doing charity -- of giving where we will rather than where we must.

From where I stand, there?s a better idea: They could just pay the women who work for them a just and equal wage. They could bring women into the management level of the company. They could promote them and listen to them and value them for the steady and creative workers they are.

Then, Cinderella, the Little Mermaid and Gretel wouldn?t need to live in a fairy tale world in the 21st century where men give charity and women, especially the silly ones, don?t count.

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