NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Against Forgetting: Children Stolen by The Erl King

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés | Jan. 20, 2009 El Rio Debajo del Rio

**Old family people spoke sadly and in whispers about the tale of the *Erl King*** ... he who hides in dark thickets, seeks out the vulnerable, childlike heart. The Erl King twists the child-heart into a blinded thing, addling the innocent mind, vampirizing the child's dancing spirit...

The aftermath was horrible then: Erl King, having feasted on the child's spirit, then strode around showing his jagged rat's teeth. All a-smile, Erl King now lived ever gorged and belly-larded.

But there was so little left of the child... just dark-circled eyes, skin so pale all empty blue veins showed through, and right through skin of the chest, one could see... the child's bewildered heart.

There are many ways for the spirit to be stolen by the Erl King. One might wonder how any person, child or adult, any culture, any management, sub-culture or hierarchy, can be carried off by such monstrous intruder without alarms for action sounding everywhere...

**An old poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, based on the ancient story of the Erl King, can help us understand how to protect soul in self, in others...** from the execrable deeds of Erl King...

Here is a portion of the tale in translation:

> Who rides there so late through the night dark and drear?
>
> The father it is,
>
> with his little child so dear.
>
> He holds his boy tightly,
>
> clasped in his arms;

He holds him safely,

keeping him warm.

"My son, why do you your face in me hide?"

"Look, Father, the Erl-King is close by our side!

Do you not see the Erl-King, with his crown and his train?"

"My son, 'Tis only mist rising over the plain."

In our family tale, as in the poem, the father with son in his arms is riding his steed slowly through a deep forest in darkest night. But, Erl King smells the scent, "innocence of child" and like the predator he is, begins to track the young one.

**But, the child, unlike his unknowing father, is still fully aware prescient.**

The child sees the Erl King clearly, scrunches closer to his father's chest, crying out in fear.

Yet, the father dismisses the child's fears, saying his son is imagining a malignant force which does not exist... when in fact, a voracious monster is reaching through dark boughs of trees to steal and carve the child's mind to its own crooked liking.

When Erl King speaks, only the pure, alert child-heart can hear him...

"Oh come dear child! Oh come with me!

Full of games, I will play with thee;

On my necklace, lovely flowers unfold,

And my Mother shall grace you with garments of gold."

**The child pleads with his father to awaken, to heed danger...**

"My father, my father, do you not hear??

The words the Erl-King now breathes in my ear?"

But the father cannot rouse himself sufficiently.

"Be calm, dearest child, your fanciful thinking deceives...

'Tis only sad wind sighing

through the withering leaves."

The tale goes on in "the ancient mythic three," meaning thrice the child proclaims the actual threat, and three times reality is denied by his protector.

Each time the child cries, "Look, look!" the father does not, cannot listen, for the father has lost his own instinct to see predators. He thus makes light of what is bearing down on them:

"My darling, my darling,

I see it aright...

'Tis just aged grey willows

deceiving your sight."

**Meanwhile the father's steed begins to gallop as though chased by demons, the father cannot rein his horse in.**

But, the Erl King keeps right up, whining its promises and pretties, its votives and victories toward the child, whispering grandiose words that begin to turn the child into a stunned, helpless, eventually feelingless thing...

feelingless because the child's spirit cannot bear to be assaulted so. Without fierce sustained protection, instead-- to bear it all-- the child surrenders, goes deadened.

At the end of this ancient theme in tales and in some part of human nature, the Erl King, a malignant Pied Piper, a stealer of souls, professes his love for the child. Seeing that the child is now weakened and has nearly capitulated, fills Erl King with a seizure of dark joy.

**The child whispers the final truth:**

> "My father, my father,
>
> he seizes me fast,
>
> Fully the Erl-King
>
> has hurt me at last."

The father now realizing his son is somehow pale and drained,

> "now engages in full gallop,
>
> with terror half wild,"

to try to save his beloved child...

But he cannot. At the end of the steed's mad but unbidden dash, the child lies in his father's arms, eyes glazed, body without bones.

**Yet, as it is said by old people who tell this tale, there is light in this terribly dark story**, clues to the mending and resurrection of spirit... if we can ask useful questions... and not forget.

Why and how is the spirit-child self so easily allowed to be plundered, to be given as burnt offering, so easily surrendered to such harmful forces?

**A clue may be found here:**

Via forgetting. The tale dwindles to horrific ending because the father himself was captured by the Erl King long ago. The presiding protector had become so used to living as a weakened, fawning thing himself, he literally thought being captured by the Erl King an unremarkable event. The father had been ordered overtly or subtly, to never miss nor seek a significant part of his own heart and spirit thieved from him long ago.

**The wounded can wound the unwounded so.**

It is not that the father is cold. It is that he is, in his own way, deeply wounded... thereby conflicted about the evident and hidden truths to believe. In the end, he continues on, blinded... just as Erl King would have it.

But, that is not the end of the story.

When this tale was told in our family, old women tellers who come from tribes of fierce horsemen and horsewomen, would lean forward in the small lamp lit circle, shaking their

warning fingers, saying that Erl Kings look like normal people

... but are always prowling to find the purest minds, sweetest hearts, the most creative spirits... of those who remain naïve, either on purpose, or out of ignorance.

**Their teaching was that Erl Kings walk amongst us in daylight, but do their soul-stealing deeds out of sight in the dark forests...**

But that it is the horse in the tale who shows us the way to protect spirit... as the horse is the only one who has sense to run and run to try to save the lives of those she carries.

(Here in the family would likely begin a long discussion of the prescience of mares versus stallions.) The horse is the only other one besides the precious child who sees the Erl King too...

Even though the father tried to rein the horse in, thereby delaying their escape for far too long... old believers would encourage that in order to save spirit, we are supposed to act, not like the father, but like the horse...

That is, to have "horse-sense," so we shall not fall asleep, but rather when there is crisis, run and run fully awakened, to save and protect soul and spirit wherever we see it threatened.

Horse sense: common sense, meaning the instinct intact for wanting to see and weigh what stands behind persona and facade, rather than proceeding through life with eyes sealed closed and heart afright to untangle all the complexities of what might stand behind.

**Be brave, be brave. Our cultures have Erl Kings too: It's worthy practice to be better at being "Erl King-proof."**

You and I as old believers, live somewhat oddly nowadays (not that we're not also hopefully blessedly odd in other meaningful ways as well, oddity often being the first sign from Creator that there are special good plans for us on earth.)

We curiously often live in several modern, semi-modern, and ancient cultures at once... an ethnic one perhaps, a racial category at least, a religious culture, an educational and familial culture, a small community culture, a secular culture, an inner-work culture, a sacred work culture, a culture on the job. There are more.

To be "Erl King-proof" in each culture, means to strive to remain awake. Not padding a heroic fantasy, nor allowing those who mislead us to pretend one thing, but under forest cover, act out their own vampiric fantasies.

**There is a natural predator in each psyche, as well as on every road, in every group.** To neutralize harm means giving time to develop consciousness, sight, seeing under, over, around, beneath...

to not allow oneself to be destroyed by the "it must be me, it cant be anything/anyone else" gene, to not allow others to eat up and break the spirit-- one's own or the spirits of others.

To be conscious does not mean to be imagining hobgoblins where there are none, but in no way glossing over true evil as it walks before us -- aware or unaware of itself -- but nonetheless attempting to take into its dark body, true lights of other souls.

Being a watcher. Appointing able watchers. Turning, in whatever ways we are called, to mend, rebuild ties, hearts, spirits, in every culture we live in, are tangential to.

No doubt we all are passing through the hollow woods in some way as we speak...

*Who will fend off the Erl King and come out whole? Let it be all of us. Each in our own way.*

**There are four worthy endeavors for recovering and restrengthening after having seen the Erl King in society, in self, in others.**

Endeavors to mend soul and spirit are often made clearer by prayerful inquiry, asking, How shall I go? But what means can I do this with Help Greater? Please, could you send helpers I can recognize? If I am on the right track, could you give me just the teeniest of signs: I promise I will be watching.

All these endeavors are deepened by undertaking inventory of one's bold strengths and one's tattered strengths

foremost, of one's past and current vulnerabilities equally.

Together, these four aspects, can slowly return to the stolen child-heart, these attributes and more:

--heartened heart instead of hardened heart

--sailing spirit instead of flailing spirit

--properly protective sight for the sake of preserving soul and spirit;

--prospective sight (ably seeing ahead, underneath, behind matters);

--sight that carries able perspective without trivialization

-- most especially, a customized combining of these four endeavors, fastens spirit into good works, meaning...

learning to put such dangerous and hurtful past to work in useful ways that pure soul and spirit will agree with heartily... stirring all these together in coming days with serious intent and good will... will also, on some days, bring on excellent humor with perhaps a sparkle irony even.

These are the four worthy endeavors:

**Ferreting out**: seeing what one sees, saying what one sees without cease: By so doing, chances are increased that others will come to see it also. One might call this being a "broken-record clarion," repeating without cease the most critical issue. Attempting to speak crisply but with compassion would constitute a zenith worth working toward here. Not forgetting means remembering speaking is strength.

**Forgiveness**: once there is progress in accounting and consciousness about exact ways matters went egregiously afoul, the instinct to query and understand arises in spirit. What can be understood, can often be forgiven in some way. This can contribute to arighting, to strengthening those who have been harmed, whether harm brought to oneself by false but harmful critique, or harm to spirit brought by predatory others. Not forgetting means remembering forgiveness is strength.

**Forgetting**: As healing from the touch of the Erl King takes better and better hold, turning the klieg lights away from past deleterious events onto a different stage in one's life can be understood as a kind of spirit-healthy "forgetting." Those bright lights were once needed to pinpoint and reveal the Erl King. But, now in daily practice... there is room for other aspects of good life. The lights ought be turned, so one is not penalized or held away from robust life by ever being trapped in deleterious memory only. This kind of "forgetting" is not a going to sleep, but instead, turning attention to the good elsewhere... whilst remaining centered and vigilant. In turning one's brightest lights toward new life, this kind of forgetting is strength.

**Focus**: Like wounds to the skin, the spirit heals in layers too. During the healings, there will be little prompts from the child-heart of the spirit, for it is he or she who is most drawn to deciding where to put his or her energy how to live one's life with true meaning after having met the Erl King... how best to use the energy that comes

from having escaped, from now having face-to-face knowledge of the harsher realities of the world. I'd remind that in a world which often lists heavy to starboard in unconsciousness... the world sorely needs the testimonies of those who have even half-way "made it through the storm." Not forgetting means remembering that personal narrative is strength... not only for self, but most definitely, for others awash... and for those who are rowing hard to aid them.

**For this last endeavor, focus, I'd humbly suggest** for some of us, if we are so called, something like this to focus on: to take up the sharpening of things and to decide with that sharpened sight, hearing, sensing--- where we truly belong, Who we belong to, what clans we belong with, what the underlayment of our work in this world is to be about... not forgetting to remember that sharpened senses are the most creative senses, and even though their sharpening may have come from once being badly harmed, the sharpest sense is to still strive to see goodness despite all else. That is the glimmering proof that the child-heart of the animating spirit, is being revived.

**I AM NOT NEEDED THERE**

I am not needed.

There are enough scholars

arguing both or all sides of everything.

(I always laugh when I hear about "equal time"

as though there are only two sides.

There are thousands of sides to everything.)

I am not needed there.

There are enough etymologists.

There are others who use beautiful words

like nosology, tautology,

eschatology, exegesis, omphaloi --

(not to mention syzygy)

even though only five-thousand people worldwide

know what those words really mean.

I am not needed there.

There are ever so many beautiful singers,

whose voices are sweet or clear or powerful.

And though I love to feel them play my bones,

I am not needed there either.

There are more than enough people busy

stirring the pot, taking the high road,

knowing all short cuts,

calling more cooks to supervise the broth,

adding more coals to the fire.

There are more than enough

who spin evolutionary ideas,

who add more to the heap,

who fill everything that needs filling,

and who are emptying

all things they believe are in dire

need of emptying.

There are enough rolling stones,

enough birds in bushes

(though far fewer in hand).

There are enough of all these.

I am not needed there.

But down at the back of the small house at dusk,

leaning over the great stone sharpening wheel,

my old broken shoes fitted to the rusted pedals,

I can make my legs go forever.

I press the steel blade

of every dull knife --

not hard against hard,

but tender against hard, just right --

against this spinning stone. I make

fly everywhere in the night,

showers of sparks, little fires

that catch often enough, just right,

on various dry old tears,

old useless memories that have

nothing left to teach me, now

just stacked as crisp papers

in some forlorn attic

under hairline soffits or

in cornices of the heart.

This sharpening wheel fire

sets ablaze whatever is needing

warmth,

and burns away whatever is no longer

needed.

Here I have found my place.

Here I am needed

at this great stone wheel

that cannot turn by itself,

but only by the bones and blood

the hands and legs

that can hold to it,

hold to it,

hold to it.

Working long into the night,

tiring,

resting,

coming back

once more.
Fire!

Give me more fire!

Again.

Again.

---

"Against Forgetting: Children Stolen by The Erl King" ©2009, excerpt from La Pasionaria, "I Am Not Needed There," ©1970, both by Dr. C.P. Estés, All Rights Reserved. Permissions: projectscreener@aol.com

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *07/09/2014 - 19:54*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/el-rio-debajo-del-rio/against-forgetting-children-stolen-erl-king?splash=