

GRADUATE SCHOOL AS RITE OF PASSAGE

Philomene Kocher

My return to graduate school followed the ending of the research project where I had worked for many years. I intentionally dedicated myself to my studies, but as well to allowing the two years of being “betwixt and between” to act as a crucible for spiritual growth. Only now, three years after graduating, am I aware of how closely my experience resembles a *rite of passage*, “the very same three-part experience of ending, neutral zone, and new beginning that tribal people had ritualized” (Bridges, 2001, p. 8):

1. The *ending* for me was clearly the fact that my 26 years of administrative 9-to-5 employment was over, and so was my identity as an employee.
2. The *neutral zone* has lasted for my two years of study and extended into the past three years since graduation. My beliefs about myself and my place in the world have shifted dramatically, and my passage through this “wilderness phase” might have been eased by knowing that “the resulting state of chaos is not really a negative state... [but] a state of pure energy and great potential” (Bridges, 2001, p. 11).
3. The *new beginning* began for me with the *outer* event of convocation. However, as Karla McLaren (2010) reveals from her study of initiation, “the psyche will intentionally cycle through stages one and two until resolution is achieved” (p. 104). This resolution has arrived for me from attending to the *inner* process of standing in my new authority. This could perhaps be likened to the event of a wedding and the process of marriage: it takes time for new understanding to emerge.

A piece of writing during my second year of studies speaks to this evolution. I was working with Rebecca Luce-Kapler whose research project explored voice and consciousness in writing (Luce-Kapler, Catlin, Sumara & Kocher, 2011). One of our exercises was to re-write a fairytale by experimenting with a style that was unfamiliar. Since I am a haiku poet (using very few words in each poem), I stretched outside of my comfort zone by writing in a way that felt wordy. Upon reflection, I realized how connected the story was to my own experience, and I gave the piece a new title.

Two Years and a Thesis
(also known as *The Three Little Pigs*)

It had been a lean year. And the wolf was hungry, hungrier than she had ever been. She stretched her weary body, and left the dark and empty den which was the only home she had ever known. As she emerged into the blinding sunlight, she sniffed the air greedily in the hope of catching a scent of something, anything. There was nothing. So she withdrew into herself and listened deeply to know which direction to take. Beneath the intense languor brought on by her hunger and fatigue, she could just barely hear the whisper of her intuition. That intuition burned like an ember inside of her, and she had come to trust it beyond all else in her life. She set her course eastward and began trotting. “Keep moving, keep moving,” she told herself, as if the mantra of her words would provide enough energy to keep going in spite of the tiredness that ached in every bone of her body.

Mile after mile after mile she trotted, until suddenly she stopped. She lifted her head to test the wind. There was the scent of something, and she was amazed that she could find the strength still to pick up speed as she aimed toward the source of the delicious, tantalizing smell of pork. Saliva pooled in her mouth, and spittle dropped onto the hard, cracked earth as she ran.

When she arrived at the straw house of the first little pig, she mustered all her reserves and choked out the words as loudly as she was able, “Let me in, let me in, or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in.” Her voice sounded strange in her own ears. It had been a long time since she had called out for what she wanted. And she wanted this food with every fiber of her being. The shrill voice she heard from inside the house called back to her, “Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin will I let you in.” She knew what she needed to do and blew with all her might. The straw flew into the wind, and she saw the first little pig and she ate it.

Further down the road was the stick house of the second little pig. The wolf was feeling a little stronger and when she yelled, “Let me in, let me in, or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in,” she could tell that her voice was clearer and louder. Again, a voice from inside the house called back to her, “Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin will I let you in.” The wolf blew and the sticks rattled as they fell into a heap. She saw the second little pig and she ate it.

Feeling stronger than she had in a long time, the wolf moved along to the brick house of the third little pig. She bellowed, “Let me in, let me in, or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in.” However, the voice from inside the house was as strong as her own, “Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin will I let you in.” The wolf blew and blew. She gasped in even more air to huff, and puffed out her cheeks even more, and blew again. But nothing happened. She climbed to the roof of the house to see if there was

any way that she could gain access from there. Then she nimbly climbed up to the very tiptop of the chimney and looked in. What she could see was a glow that reminded her of the ember of her intuition, so she decided to go in. She jumped. And she was consumed by the fire. The end.

This re-telling continues to sing to me, and the creation of this article is bringing closure to my rite of passage. As Rumi noticed centuries ago: “It may be that the satisfaction I need depends on my going away, so that when I’ve gone and come back, I’ll find it at home” (Baker, 2011, p. 69).

References:

- Baker, C. (2011). *Navigating the coming chaos: A handbook for inner transition*. New York: iUniverse, Inc.
- Bridges, W. (2001). *The way of transition: Embracing life’s most difficult moments*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Luce-Kapler, R., Catlin, S., Sumara, D., & Kocher, P. (2011). Voicing consciousness: The mind in writing. *Changing English*, (18)2, 161-172.
- McLaren, K. (2010). *The language of emotions: What your feelings are trying to tell you*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc.

Philomene Kocher is a haiku and tanka poet living in Kingston, Ontario. She completed her Master of Education studies in 2008 at Queen’s University, where she explored haiku poetry as a way of connection with persons with dementia. She can be reached at kocherp@queensu.ca.