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Why We Should Still Be Afraid of the Fairy Tales Our Parents Read to Us

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I attended the recent BBJ Advancing Women event and was struck by how the conversation regarding women in business has effectively remained unchanged for the last 30+ years. Why? The challenges women face in the world of work are significantly more complex than those faced by white men. While inroads have been forged, we still have a long way to go before advancing women is no longer a hotly discussed topic.

What is it that continues to impede our success? As a trailblazer in business coaching, I have come to conclude that women are confronted with three significant barriers that are not issues for men: societal attitudes, organizational structure that reflects those attitudes, and the stories we women have racing through our heads. Perhaps the most deadly of these barriers is the last...the stories that form our sense of self. To this day (and I'm well past my 20's), I hear that nagging little voice asking: "who's going to rescue me?" – a question that is totally antithetical to who I am. Guess where that comes from. FAIRY TALES! Those awful stories read to us about princesses being saved (or rescued) by the knight in shining armor.

Have you ever examined the messages embedded in fairy tales? They are horrifying! To demonstrate the insidiousness of these messages, let's examine one of the most beloved, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This story, like most, was written by the very grim Brothers Grimm.

Snow White's (SW) mother dies. Her father is seduced by a narcissistic evil woman (**Message #1**: Seduction gets you what you want). The evil stepmother (ES) is threatened by SW since she's more beautiful. Therefore, SW needs to be eliminated. (**Message #2**: Annihilate anything that threatens your "hearth" or source of well being. Think Mother Bear).

SW is left to die in the woods. Miraculously, she's saved by a group of men who offer to take care of her if she becomes their indentured servant. She sings happily as she slaves away keeping the house neat and the men well fed. (**Message #3**: Take on menial jobs and be happy in exchange for being protected and taken care of. Or, give it all up for a man).

devious manner...again. (**Message #4:** Look like you're a friend of your enemy so you can take them down). The first two times, the dwarfs find SW in time, successfully reviving her. The third time, they're unsuccessful and SW dies with a poison apple lodged in her mouth (not so coincidentally, the biblical symbol for knowledge).

The dwarfs are beside themselves with grief. They are still so smitten by her that they can't bear the idea of burying her. Instead, they put her in a glass coffin so they can continue to bask in her beauty. (**Message #5:** Be beautiful so you can be worshipped as a lifeless trophy.) They place this glass enclosure in the middle of the woods for reasons only known to them.

SW is lying in state when a prince happens upon her corpse and is also stunned by her beauty. So much so, he either kisses her or he buys her from the dwarfs depending on the version of the story. Either way, why would a prince (a man) want to kiss or buy a dead woman? (**Message #6:** If you're beautiful and lifeless, you're worth a lot more and/or you'll attract rich men.)

Lo and behold, SW wakes up either to the prince's gentle kiss or because the apple pops out of her mouth while she is being transported to the palace. (**Message #7:** The only way a woman can have a life is through a man. Remember the apple of knowledge gets dropped from the story.) And they live happily ever after.

The End.

We women wonder why we have strong self-limiting beliefs (e.g., we'll be promoted solely on the merit of our work). We wonder why the 30+ year old conversation regarding women's inequality in the workplace still persists. Perhaps all of us, women and men, mothers and fathers, need to take a closer look at how we've been influenced by our society and pay particular attention to the fairy tales we've been raised on. For therein lies a wealth of clues.

So, here's one recommendation: eliminate anything that has to do with princesses being rescued or men having to be the rescuers. Let's write new fairy tales in which the hero and heroine work respectfully side-by-side, leveraging each other's strengths to create a world in which everyone thrives happily ever after. Now, that would be a story worth perpetuating!

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