

Flight Toward Maturity: The Tooth Fairy

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INTRODUCTION

Did you welcome the tooth fairy when you lost your first teeth? Through interviews with children and parents, author Cindy Dell Clark takes an up close look at this widely practiced ritual. She finds that it serves the needs of both children and their parents. On the one hand, the money that the tooth fairy brings might offer comfort to a child who has experienced the pain and fear associated with losing a tooth. But by encouraging their children to believe in a fictional character, parents can reassure themselves that their child still believes in fantasy and has not totally "grown up" just yet.

. . . MAGICAL HEALING TO THE RESCUE

A better informant could not have been found to tell us about the contemporary American Tooth Fairy than Jimmy, a seven-and-a-half-year-old middle-class boy of Italian-Irish extraction living on Chicago's northwest side. Jimmy had lost his front tooth (the sixth baby tooth—or as they say, "milk tooth"—he had lost) about two weeks before I interviewed him at home one autumn day. Jimmy's mother alerted me to the situation. This last tooth was wiggling for a couple of weeks, and he wanted it out in the worst way. It was bothering Jimmy. Then one morning, getting ready to leave for school, he was in the back bathroom brushing his teeth. His mother called to him to come so she could brush his hair. All of a sudden she heard a scream, then tears and crying. He had been brushing his teeth when the bothersome tooth had fallen out and gone down the bathroom drain.

Jimmy's tears didn't surprise his mother:

He couldn't leave his tooth for the Tooth Fairy if he didn't have the tooth. . . . And I said, "It's OK, Jimmy, I'll call Uncle Joe . . . and maybe he could take the sink apart and get the tooth." I wasn't really going to ask him to take the sink apart, but he had to get to school. And then I told him that night that "they couldn't get it apart. But it happened to a friend of ours, when they did take it apart, they couldn't find the tooth anyway. But maybe if you left a letter for the Tooth Fairy." So he did and taped it to the front door.

Taping the note to the front door (for the Tooth Fairy to see as she “flies by”) seemed to do the trick. “She gave me the money and everything,” Jimmy explained to me—and he still had the dollar squirreled away in a drawer. What Jimmy didn’t know was that his mother had saved the note he wrote and had tucked it in her wallet along with her mercenary “valuables.” Penned in Jimmy’s own printing, the note read:

Dear The Tooth Fairy,
 Sorry the tooth can’t come because I was brushing my teeth and it fell down the drain.
 Love, Jimmy

Jimmy was sure that the Tooth Fairy is a she, as most children I’ve interviewed would agree, even though he had not personally seen her. With exceptional imagination, Jimmy speculated that the Fairy might live in “some dentist’s office” hiding somewhere unbeknownst to the dentist. (“If she’s an inch small like I think she is, she’d be in a drawer somewhere.”) It was no coincidence that the Fairy was associated, in Jimmy’s mind, with a dentist: Her job has to do with the trauma of losing a tooth and children’s fear of toothlessness.

CDC: If you were going to talk to somebody like your little brother, and they never lost a tooth before and they didn’t know anything at all about the Tooth Fairy, what would you tell them about it?

JIMMY: I might tell them that when you lose your tooth, you put it under the pillow. The next morning you’ll get something for it. And not to worry because you’ll get another tooth. You won’t be toothless after you lose all your teeth.

CDC: It’s important to know you’re not going to be toothless, a kid should know that part?

JIMMY (nodding): The tooth they lost, I think they’ll understand it better and not think it’ll hurt or anything.

CDC: You think kids think it might hurt?

JIMMY (nodding): The fairy godmother, if they never saw the tooth, I think they might [think that].

CDC: What if the Tooth Fairy stopped coming? What if the Tooth Fairy said, “I’m tired of doing this. . . . I’m not going to come any more when kids lose their teeth? How would that be?”

JIMMY: I’d just glue the tooth back into my mouth. I’d leave it glued. And you don’t really deserve any money for it, just a tooth.

CDC: What’s more important, getting the money or getting another tooth?

JIMMY: Getting another tooth.

From a child’s perspective, the Tooth Fairy is a way to handle the *loss* of the tooth—far more than many parents realize. This aspect is foregrounded in Jimmy’s case because Jimmy had experienced a double loss: losing the already lost tooth down the bathroom drain. In turn, Jimmy’s transaction with the Tooth Fairy centers on loss: “Sorry the tooth can’t come because I was brushing my teeth and it fell down the drain” is Jimmy’s explicit message to the Tooth Fairy. “Sorry you lost your tooth, but you’ll get another one, and here’s some money in the meantime” is the Tooth Fairy’s implicit message to Jimmy.

So important is the easing of this loss that Jimmy guesses that God himself gave the Tooth Fairy her job.

CDC: How did the Tooth Fairy get started doing this, do you suppose?

JIMMY: Probably God made them. . . . One day Adam or Eve, either one, lost their tooth, and didn't know what to do with it. So God spoke to them, and she told them, put your tooth when you're sleeping and it'll go away and you'll get something for it.

CDC: How come God knew they'd need to do that? . . . How do you think he thought they'd feel?

JIMMY: He figured, toothless! Then they might not be able to bite so well.

CDC: So God made the Tooth Fairy and said, put the tooth under your pillow, and that's that? What did the Tooth Fairy think about getting the job?

JIMMY: Happy, . . . because not too many people get to see God while they're living, and then the Tooth Fairy got to see him any time that she wanted to, if she had any questions or anything. And she was a very special person because people wouldn't want to be toothless.

Spiritual intervention to reassure kids that tooth loss won't hurt and won't be permanent is warranted, as far as Jimmy is concerned. His case is not exceptional. Children described to me a host of physical displeasures that can accompany losing a tooth. There is bleeding and discomfort when too much pressure is applied to the loose tooth, as when eating or when someone pulls a tooth. There is the potential of swallowing the tooth, which happened to a few young unfortunates. And there can be difficulty in talking. (The lisp lampooned in the song "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth" is indeed a reality for some kids; by some cruel mistiming of speech development, many kids begin to make sounds such as "th" just when they lose the teeth needed to make these sounds.) Children are enthusiastic about getting "big teeth" or "grown-up teeth," but there's certainly need for a lot of reassurance along the way.

Being reassured about losing one's teeth is undoubtedly a deep human need. In literature (including biblical literature) and folklore, teeth have long been characterized as representing potency, beauty, and pain. A terrible Old Testament curse was to appeal to God to break the teeth of one's enemies. Toothlessness is a state associated with helpless dependency, exemplified in infants and the elderly. Such expressions as "arming ourselves to the teeth" "fighting tooth and nail," and "escaping by the skin of our teeth" reveal the risk to power that the loss of teeth represents.¹

Dreams of losing teeth are widely reported among adults, as Freud and others have noted, not only in Western culture but around the world. During an interview, one mother reported with a white-faced look of shock and fear a recent dream: She had dreamt of all her bottom teeth coming out, one by one. Years earlier, she dreamed she was appearing on the Johnny Carson show as the teeth fell out of her mouth and everyone stared. . . .

That tooth loss is such a rich metaphor for loss, retreat from power, and vulnerability would not surprise youngsters. Children experiencing second dentition, firsthand, make it clear how upsetting the experience can be. At times, I've been told, losing a tooth can be worse than getting stitches, or worse than getting allergy shots. The loose tooth is aggravating and "bothers you." It hurts when you eat or brush your teeth. The bleeding is "icky" and "disgusting"—sending some tooth losers into a near panic. Especially for the first tooth, one

is apt to be scared: The required courage is itself enough to make you into a “big girl,” a girl named Sarah told me. And the concern that one might remain toothless, as Jimmy described, is a serious matter to some children. After all, one uses teeth to chew and eat and thereby survive. Kids losing their first tooth can worry that they “won’t have no teeth,” in the words of one first-grade girl, and “won’t be able to eat.”

If there is enchantment in the Tooth Fairy ritual, it partly comes from its power to allay these concerns through the transformative meaning of expressive symbolism, turning second dentition into a positive, valued experience. Consider the story told by Peter, age seven, whose father took it upon himself to yank out the child’s tooth personally (as it is not atypical for control-minded fathers to do).

When we were at our grandmas for a sleepover, [my dad] said, “Come here,” and he yanked it out. It hurted pretty much. . . . I didn’t know what he was gonna do. Finally, he just reaches into my mouth and yanks it out, and I’m [shrieking noise]. I’m screaming and I go, “OOOOOWWWWW.” And I said, “Did you do it to me?” and he goes. “Yeah.” And he shows me that [tooth]. And I didn’t feel the pain’ cause I started jumping up and down and saying, “Yeah! I’m gonna get the money!”

Jennifer (age eight), explaining why she thought the existence of the Tooth Fairy is a “good idea,” also testified to an attitudinal shift provoked by the ritual.

Sometimes when you’re a little kid, I know when I was five, when I heard I was gonna lose my teeth, I said, “Well, am I ever gonna get it back? What’s gonna happen to me? Will I be toothless for the rest of my life?” And so I sort of got a little scared. And I think that it was a good idea because when you lose it, then you get something in return. And you’ll get a new one that’s better.

The Tooth Fairy is largely a Western custom, having evolved in the cultural melting pot of the United States, most likely during the nineteenth century.² But all over the world, shed-tooth rituals of varied forms have eased this process for children. Anthropologists and dental folklorists report a remarkable array of such customs, whereby the lost deciduous tooth is discarded in some meaningful way.³ For example, the tooth might be buried with an ancestor (New Guinea), in the hearth or fire (Sheffield, England, ca. 1895), or at the entrance to the lodge (Teton); left for a squirrel (Bohemia) or beaver (Cherokee) or some other straight-toothed animal; blackened with charcoal (Chippewa); or tossed into a mouse’s hole (Mexico) or into the sea for a many-toothed dolphin (Patagonia). Often, some kind of incantation is spoken aloud when the tooth is placed. In Vietnamese society, children toss the tooth over the roof of the house (if an upper tooth) or onto the ground (if a lower tooth), calling out to the rats: “Oh rats! Oh rats! Since your teeth are both long and pointed, you must work in such a way that mine shall grow as quickly as they fall out.” A Cherokee child recites, “Beaver, put a new tooth into my jaw.” . . .

A particularly exotic form of shed-tooth ritual occurs among the Wendish population of Spreewald: The parents are supposed to swallow their child’s tooth—mother swallowing a son’s, father swallowing a daughter’s (parental control indeed!).

With striking regularity, the developmental process is aided by external powers (such as ancestors or potent animals), who are called upon to give good, straight teeth. Often this involves what anthropologists term “sympathetic magic”—calling upon an object with the necessary qualities (say a rodent with strong, prominent teeth) to impart these qualities to the needy party. (Presumably, dentistry, with its X-ray magic, reduces the worry about good, straight replacement teeth in our culture, since dentistry itself explains the process, to adults at least.)

Yet even with modern medicine, a child's body image needs to accommodate the loss of a body part, be it tonsils removed through surgery, hair cut off by the barber, or natural loss of teeth.⁴ To come to terms with losing "a part of you," it is therapeutic—even cathartic—that the baby tooth be purposefully put to rest, rather than tossed off at random. The analogy to a funeral runs deep, in that the tooth is entrusted to a higher, supernatural domain (the realm of the Tooth Fairy) as a kind of final resting place.

The grief involved in coping with loss, whether loss of a loved one or of a body part, needs to be expressed. Ritual provides a way to work through the separation and to discharge fear and apprehension about a new status.⁵ Even children sense the analogy to a funeral: When thinking about offering a tooth to the Tooth Fairy, Lisa was reminded of her backyard burial of a dead goldfish (buried ceremonially—and perhaps too appropriately—in the empty matchbox from a seafood restaurant).

Just as a corpse is placed in a casket prior to burial, a tooth is commonly placed in a special receptacle, a Tooth Fairy pouch, to wait for the Tooth Fairy's exchange. Such Tooth Fairy pouches are a fairly recent innovation, thought to be invented by Elizabeth Bryant of Winter Park, Florida, in 1974,⁶ but since then widely copied. A Tooth Fairy pouch is usually a hand-crafted item, either crocheted, embroidered, or hand sewn. (My son has a wooden box bought at a church crafts fair, shaped and hand painted to look like a tooth.) Tooth pillows or pouches are commonly made for the child by a relative or perhaps purchased from the individual women who make them at crafts fairs. Often, a relative or friend gives a Tooth Fairy pouch to a child as a gift, before the child loses any baby teeth. Such a gift has the social effect of endorsing the Tooth Fairy custom and encouraging that the healing ritual be observed.

FEMININITY AND FAIRIES

Jimmy imagined the Tooth Fairy to be a miniature female, and this was a common perception in the imaginal experience of children. When asked to draw the Tooth Fairy, children drew pastel-colored female figures, often with wings or wands.

Cultural symbols tend to have systematic, interrelated meaning. Pastels are colors we associate with being female (or a baby). Fairies are female, not male: Who has ever heard of a fairy godfather? Intriguingly, the popular use of the word *fairy* to refer to a male homosexual has been used to satirize the Tooth Fairy in cartoons in dental journals, as if to underscore that she is actually female. By taking on a feminine gender, the Tooth Fairy identifies herself as belonging to the realm of home, domesticity, mothers, and early childhood (as opposed to the more mature, literate male world outside the home).

In her therapeutic, healing role, the Tooth Fairy deals with tooth-shedding children in a mode more feminine than masculine. There are ancient precedents for differing approaches to healing among female as opposed to male healers. Dental hygienists, typically female, take their name and their approach to health from the goddess Hygeia, who represented health as an ongoing, natural process of living wisely. . . . These female beings represented nurturance, warmth, concern, intuitive understanding, and relatedness, the very qualities children ascribe to the Tooth Fairy.

A RITE OF PASSAGE

As a part of the body, the baby tooth is symbolic not only of lost power and vulnerability, but of early childhood itself. For children, giving up their first teeth is symbolic of relinquishing early childhood and getting "big teeth" (so that, as one girl said, "no one can call you

a baby”). How fitting, then, that Peter Pan—the mythical boy who never grew up—never gave up his baby teeth (and thereby avoided growing older).

Mothers are well aware that losing one’s baby teeth constitutes a rite of passage, a milestone along the course of growing up. In interviews mothers drew comparisons between second dentition and other life transitions important in contemporary America: learning to walk or to ride a two-wheel bike, kindergarten, . . . Roman Catholic First Communion, . . . and so on. Explaining what the Tooth Fairy custom represents to her, Mrs. Smith replied:

A rite of passage [laughter]. I don’t know what better words to say to you. I don’t know whatever words would fit it, except every kid loses their teeth in order to get their new teeth to grow up. So, it’s a rite of passage.

Time and again, mothers said that tooth loss is a public, tangible sign that their child was “growing up,” “getting older,” and entering a stage of greater independence (“he’s leaving us,” “getting independent”). The change in a child’s physical appearance during second dentition makes it hard for a mother to ignore her child’s increasing maturity. As Mrs. Brown put it:

If you look at someone and they’re missing a tooth, [they] look really different. Or say a child who loses two at once in the front, and they start lisping. It just changes their way of talking, their looks. And when their baby teeth go and their adult teeth come in, it changes their whole look. . . . I used to try to picture my kids with adult teeth, with secondary teeth. [I’d think,] This kid is so cute right now. How in the world can he be any cuter with secondary teeth? Isn’t that a weird thing to think? But I did. I used to look at their pictures from kindergarten and think, oh, I wish they could stay like this. I wish their little teeth could stay. . . . You don’t have a choice in losing teeth. It happens. No one can get around it.

Second dentition, in American society, occurs simultaneously with the child’s transition from home to formal education, associated with a host of other changes, such as learning to read and write, that indeed serve to make a boy or girl more independent of home and more socially and cognitively skilled within the public domain outside the home. Getting grown-up teeth signals that a child is ready for this major shift in arenas. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers often keep charts in their classrooms that mark the occasion when children lose teeth, treated as a cause for celebration. One educational researcher has gone so far as to suggest that second dentition should be used to judge school readiness, since it correlates well with other measures of readiness.⁷

Tooth loss, then, is a natural symbol of shedding one developmental stage and entering another. This is not unique to American society. Across cultures, it is common for children in the five-to-seven-year age range to shift social status and expectations with second dentition. The Ngoni of Malawi, in central Africa, believe that “children who [have] lost their first teeth, and acquired their second, [have] reached a new stage in their development.” When Ngoni children complete second dentition, they are held accountable for discourtesy, they are recognized as “ready for a different kind of life,” and boys change places of residency.⁸ . . .

The loss of a deciduous tooth naturally *separates* the child from babyhood (just as ceremonies of mutilation accompany the separation phase of many initiation rites). Second, the child enters a naturally produced period of *ambiguity*—toothlessness—that embodies (quite literally) the “invisible” qualities often associated with the transition phase. (Jokes and humorous teasing are common at this ambiguous stage—called by dentists and some mothers the “ugly duckling” phase.) Third, the natural eruption of the secondary tooth quite literally

incorporates in the child grown-up qualities. The three-part rite of passage is literally carried out as a bodily code in second dentition. . . .

. . . In the American Tooth Fairy custom: (1) The child *leaves* their tooth under the pillow to be *taken away* by a fairy (a Tinker Bell-like symbol of early childhood); (2) The child then goes to sleep amid dreamlike darkness (which gives effective invisibility and ambiguity); (3) The child awakens to find a gift of money (a symbol of the worldly, adult domain of grown-up people).

Because the Tooth Fairy visits repeatedly as successive teeth are lost, the actual sequence is not definitive and closed in its impact. (In this respect, the Tooth Fairy custom may differ from shed-tooth rituals in other cultures, where it is common to ritually discard only the *first* lost tooth.) Children lose teeth, one by one, over a period of years—in effect, an extended period of being betwixt and between, what dentists call “mixed dentition.”

The child’s belief in the Tooth Fairy also goes through a period of being betwixt and between, as children begin to doubt the Tooth Fairy as a separate figure and perhaps try to stay awake at night to catch the real fairy in the act. At this stage children are apt to vacillate between rational certainty and hopeful belief. One boy who completely discounted the Tooth Fairy’s reality regained his faith entirely when he had to have two teeth pulled. The developmental process is fraught with paradox, reversal, and gradual change.

But eventually the child stops believing in the Tooth Fairy, once and for all. The emergence of disbelief is itself said by mothers to be a rite of passage. As Mrs. Martin expressed it:

Anytime you have a kid that still believes in something magical. It still makes you feel that they’re still little. Because as soon as they stop believing in all that stuff, and they’re not involved in all the fun stuff that you do when you’re little kid, and then you finally realize that, OK, they figured it out, they’re smart enough now, it’s another stepping stone.

Once children become disenchanted with the Tooth Fairy, they have, in effect, embraced adult-defined reality. The quintessential accusation of adult naïveté is the oft-heard comment “If you believe that, I bet you still believe in the Tooth Fairy.” The Tooth Fairy metaphorically provides a kind of reality check, a check to see if one is living in a “childish, fairy-tale” world, or in a “rational, mature” world.

Typically, American mothers are not eager to break the bonds of their child’s tender dependency. The maternal hope, rather, is to slow the rate of separation from their child, to make sure that he/she “doesn’t grow up too fast.” One mother, whose son had started kindergarten the week of my interview with her, became tearful when discussing her son’s lost babyhood. Mothers certainly want their children to feel “special” when they lose a tooth. But they are not anxious for their children to stop believing in the Tooth Fairy, signaling the end of childhood in a fuller sense than losing a tooth. During interviews, mothers nervously double-checked that young believers were out of earshot before explaining, in whispered tones, their deceptive role in acting out the ritual. Mrs. Adams spoke of her warning to older siblings—to “break your neck then and there”—if they told their younger brother there was no Tooth Fairy.

According to mothers’ reasoning, the harsh reality of (adult) society is held at bay as long as the childish world of make-believe (Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy) is maintained. Mrs. O’Connor, explaining why she wished *she* could still be a child, said that, as a child, “I wouldn’t have to worry about anything [because] as a kid, it always seems like it’s such a make-believe world. Then you grow up and there’s reality.” This sentiment was echoed in Mrs. Green’s comment.

I would love him to believe in Santa for long. I want him to believe in everything. I want Danny to believe the whole world's fine, everything's wonderful, and all these great things happen to little kids. . . . I think it's very important that they just let their imagination go and go and go. Because eventually they're going to get older and they're going to realize, and that'll be it.

Maintaining a child's belief gives the mother some force toward extending childhood: Having a role as the Tooth Fairy vividly ensures that the child is "underneath my wings" (to quote the words of Mrs. White):

I'm still known as Tooth Fairy. . . . it's kind of, I've kept them children—even though they do go and get on their bicycles and they ride down the block and see a friend. This is the one thing that keeps them underneath my wings, and I still have them in protection. . . . Even though they think, "i'm old, and my two-wheel bike, and I can cross the alley," . . . yet there's part, they are kids yet. 'Cause they still believe that. I think I might, the day I have to explain about Santa and the Tooth Fairy, I think I'll be a little crushed. Because it's almost like a magic spell I've broken a part of, another sign of growing up when this [ends,] the fairy tale, the imagination. 'Cause you want to cushion your kids. And you'd love to think you can cushion them all their life.

Out of thirty-two mothers interviewed about the Tooth Fairy, twenty-two kept their child's shed primary tooth/teeth after collecting them. The tooth was said to serve as a memento or reminder of the child's babyhood. Often, these dental keepsakes were put in a location signifying special value, such as the mother's jewelry box, a baby book, or, as with Jimmy's note, a wallet. Like bronzed baby shoes, a child's christening dress, or trimmings from a child's first haircut (or even, as true for one mother, a saved pacifier), the retained teeth were valued tokens of their child's first life stage. As best illustrated by their own comments, mothers hesitate to relinquish that first life stage completely.

They just change so quickly, you can't hold on to it. But you can hold on to their teeth or a lock of their hair or something like that.

Sometimes I stop and look at them [the teeth in my jewelry box] and sort of, I'll notice them, and I'll stop. And it's always amazing to me that they're so tiny. I suppose that's what I notice about them if I stop to notice them. Because, you know, adult teeth are really quite large. And these things are just teeny-weeny, teeny-weeny little teeth. Of course, they were teeny-weenier people, too. My older one is almost thirteen, so she thinks she's grown up.

In essence, the Tooth Fairy ritual provides the American mother with symbolic "reverse gears" that decelerate the process of recognizing their son's, or daughter's new age status. By saving the child's primary teeth until feeling ready to discard them and by steadfastly protecting her child's belief in the Tooth Fairy (so much so that telling a child the truth is taboo), the mother makes the child seem, in maternal perception, less grown up.

But what about the child's perspective on the ritual? It is the *growth-enhancing* meaning brought by the Tooth Fairy that motivates children to gladly undergo the discomforts of tooth loss. Children feel that their teeth are put to rest by the Tooth Fairy in a suitably reverent manner: deposited in her ethereal home, which, like heaven, is "up there," in the sky, far away. Many youngsters imagine that the Fairy uses the teeth to make something

valuable—jewelry, flowers, even stars. One child thought that she gives the tooth to a new baby, recycling it.

And children feel that the Tooth Fairy gives them fair compensation, in the form of money, for their shed teeth. Money is a grown-up, empowering entity. In American society, money is a symbolic means to obtain power and independence. No doubt money is made all the more culturally attractive by its early association with the awe-inspiring, supernatural Tooth Fairy: Several young informants felt that the monetary gift was manufactured by the Tooth Fairy with the aid of her magic wand.

Children perceive having money as a way to “buy whatever I want,” to have buying power that is not dependent on parental benefactors. Six-year-old Carson said that, after the Tooth Fairy’s visit, “I feel like I am a new person. . . . I feel like I’m seven”—partly due to the fact that “I lost lots of teeth,” but also because “When you get older you get money.” Eight-year-old Jan told the story of saving her Tooth Fairy money in order to treat her mother and sister to a snack at McDonald’s—a gesture that led her to observe, “I like carrying around my own money. I feel more grown up and special.” When their supply of Tooth Fairy money was kept at home, children were prone to run and fetch their stash of cash and to finger through it, Scrooge-like, while showing it to me. Several children had bank accounts in which to “save for college”—the ultimate training ground for adulthood. Clearly, the possession of money makes children feel independent (since independently wealthy) and empowered. The money received from the Tooth Fairy is a valued treasure connoting a degree of autonomy, escalating the child’s sense that they are older, more grown up. The icons of maturity within the Tooth Fairy ritual are plural: The child gets adult teeth, but also gets money as a symbol of being grown up.

Writing encodes another form of maturity: literacy. Written correspondence between the child and the Tooth Fairy is a common occurrence. Letter writing typically begins out of necessity, such as when the child misplaces the lost tooth (as with Jimmy) or wants to ask the Tooth Fairy if they can keep the tooth. Occasionally, the correspondence starts at the mother’s/Tooth Fairy’s initiative (“Congratulations on losing your first tooth,” or “Keep brushing your teeth”). A few young informants had decided to carry on extensive exchange of notes with the Tooth Fairy, so as to question her about certain facts (“Do you look like the picture in the book we have about you? [] Yes [] No”). In two families, this note writing became so extensive that the Tooth Fairy impersonator developed her own signature and handwriting (in very tiny letters) to use in replies. Ironically, as mothers used correspondence to encourage their daughter’s or son’s belief, all the while children were getting practice in the grown-up skills of reading and writing.

Here, then, is the paradoxical dynamic of the Tooth Fairy ritual, which makes it an apt (yet subtly complex) family rite. Some symbolic elements within this rite of passage, the money, the acquired secondary tooth, and—where applicable—the note writing, serve as accelerators that make a child feel older. Other symbolic elements, such as the belief in fairies and the primary tooth, are counterbalanced decelerators, used by a mother to slow down the growing-up process. Mother and child subconsciously pull and push, respectively, as they jointly determine the degree of social maturity to be attributed to the tooth-losing child. The outcome is gradual, flexible, interactive, and dynamic. The flight toward maturity is not, by any means, straightforward, unidirectional, or mechanical. . . . There are symbolic and human forces of both drag and lift alike.

Considering the experience of children leads to the realization that the Tooth Fairy ritual holds much complexity of meaning. The custom helps the child to undergo unavoidable physical transformation involving some discomfort. At the same time, it helps the family to

work through the child's new status as an older, more independent person. It is a remarkable paradox that the Fairy's delivery of money, the symbolic means that helps a child feel older, simultaneously helps the mother to perceive the child as still young, since still believing. . . .

Children naturally concoct rituals to make themselves feel comfortable at bedtime (stories, stuffed animals, special pillowcases, and so on), and parents willingly participate.⁹ Often, imaginal experience is part and parcel of such rituals sleeping with a special teddy bear friend, saying nighttime prayers, or expecting that the superheros depicted on the pillowcase will give protection. Understanding how such rituals work to ease the experience of all the individuals involved may well reveal dynamics as complex as those in the Tooth Fairy ritual. . . .

Far from trivial, the Tooth Fairy is a being who arrives on the scene during an important juncture in contemporary children's lives and delivers gifts (both tangible and spiritual) that are healing and enabling.

Discussion Questions

1. What purposes does the Tooth Fairy serve for children? For adults?
2. Discuss the role that consumption plays in the tooth fairy ritual.
3. What other rituals offer similar benefits to both children and their parents?
4. Did the Tooth Fairy "visit" you as a child? How did you feel when you learned that this ritual was make-believe?

Notes

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