

Iona and Peter Opie’s anthology of classic fairy tales traces the long history of the tale of the three wishes. Versions of this tale are found in medieval Persian texts, eighteenth-century French volumes of fairy tales, and in a collection of fables attributed to the ninth-century Saxon king, Alfred the Great.

What these tales have in common are characters who can’t decide what they want when they can have anything they want. In one version, a man and his wife are poor and wish they were happier and better off, especially compared to their neighbors. At that moment a fairy appears and says, “I will grant you your next three wishes, but no more.”

After the fairy disappears, the husband and wife mull over their wishes. The wife says it makes sense to wish to be handsome, rich, and of good character. The husband replies: you can be good-looking and rich but still sick, full of worry, and end up dying young. So it is better to ask for good health, happiness, and a long life.

The wife responds: but what use is a long life in poverty? They decide to sleep on it, and go about their tasks at home. As the wife is tending the fire she says, “I wish we had a giant bit of black pudding over the fire, as that would be a treat.” In an instant black pudding appears.

The husband, seeing his wife wasted a wish, yells, “You fool, I wish that black pudding was stuck to your stupid nose.” In an instant it was stuck fast. The husband curses himself for being even more foolish.

The couple agrees to wish for something sensible for their third and final wish. They realize all the gold in the world will do no good if the pudding remains stuck to the wife’s nose, so . . . In this version of the tale, the couple concludes that from now on they should wish for nothing and be happy with what they have.

The human heart is a theater of longings. Behind even the most cynical heart lies disappointed longing. Beneath the shell of every hardened heart, says John O’Donohue, lies a region of longing that dreams as surely of awakening to a new life of freedom and love as winter does of the springtime.

Herodias dances for her father at a birthday party he throws for himself. Papa Herod is pleased: “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.”

Mark takes liberties with history, I suppose, to enhance the story. Herod Antipas is not a king. He is one of the surviving sons of Herod the Great, and is appointed tetrarch, ruler of one-fourth of his father’s former kingdom. Antipas serves at the pleasure of Rome. Half of his “kingdom” (1/8 of his father’s former kingdom) is not his to give, but Rome’s to bestow.

What drunken ruler, or man for that matter, hasn’t promised more than he can deliver? In any case, it appears Herodias does not know her own heart. We can imagine her thinking, “I don’t know what I want, so I look to other people to tell me. Then the other person tells me what he or she would like my feelings to be. This is ok with me, since I don’t know what my feelings are anyway. I like being agreeable.”

The other person is mom, who is very much in touch with her feelings. Mom has nursed a grudge against John for some time, waiting for an opportunity to kill him.

Herod's offer has the potential to change the course of his daughter's life in ways unimaginable to most, if not all, young women of the era. What will the daughter get from John's death? Mom's approval? Talk about a story with myriad incarnations: a child sacrificing her heart's desire, if only she knew what it was, to placate a parent!

Mark says Herod was intrigued by John and was deeply grieved by Herodias' request. He was, however, more distressed at the prospect of losing face, so John must lose his head. Another story with myriad incarnations: sacrificing what is good and true on the altar of political expediency.

Out of the theater of the heart's longings, how can we know which is deepest? In Dostoyevsky's "Parable of the Grand Inquisitor," the Inquisitor knows that the passion for freedom in human hearts is balanced by the passion for security. The Inquisitor accuses Christ of offering a freedom which no human being can bear.

The road to freedom passes through the wilderness. The Israelite's initial joy at being liberated from Egyptian slavery turns to regret amidst the deprivations of the wilderness. They long to return to Egypt. They imagine the fleshpots of Egypt, the security of slavery, as preferable to the challenges of freedom.

The story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, reprises the Israelites' experience. The Devil offers Jesus security in exchange for his freedom. What Jesus knows, what any free people must know, is that security is an illusion every much a prison as Guantanamo. That doesn't, of course, stop us from seeking security above all else.

What would you want if you could have anything you wanted? The heart is moved, drawn, tossed about by impulse and desire. We are subject to a vast structure of forces whose operation is entirely obscure to reason. We are acted upon at least as much as we act.

St. Augustine confronted and accepted the unpalatable truth that rationality is not the most important factor in human experience. The will has less to do with reason than with passion. In fact, Augustine believed will and desire are synonymous. When an opportunity arises to fulfill a desire, reason supplies justification for acting.

This is why Martin Luther called reason a whore. Reason serves desire. We cannot reason our way out of destructive desires. Until an alcoholic admits he loves booze more than his family, reason is powerless. The only thing that keeps Herodias' desire for revenge in check is fear of Herod. When Herod opens the door for Herodias, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and all the Stoics of Athens could not slam it shut.

Knowing what we want and wanting what is worthy of our lives is the beginning of the spiritual life. Learning to love what is true, what is good, what is beautiful, learning to love the virtues more than the vices, is the work of spiritual formation.

When our desire for freedom is greater than our desire for security, we will find reasons to do whatever it takes to reach the promised land.