

“We’re Off to See the Wizard”
Rev. Julie Denny-Hughes
UUCH – December 14, 2008

It won’t surprise you, I think, to realize that there are as many ways to understand or experience a work of fiction as there are people who read the work. There are just as many ways to understand a movie as there are people in the audience. So over the last 108 years, there will have accumulated lots of ways of hearing The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and since 1930, lots of ways of seeing the “Wizard of Oz” (the MGM version). They’re very similar, but have some important differences.

The publication of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz in 1900 coincided with the publication of Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams. Freudians (I’m sure) have had a wonderful time over the years analyzing Dorothy and her friends on their trek to Oz. It is certainly a rich story, full of fantasy, but also full of real live people and animals and, in the movie, animated creatures that act and think and talk and (oh my), sing like real live people. It doesn’t take us long at all to forget that lions can’t walk on their hind legs and sing. We see the lion and the tinman and the scarecrow for what they are – people just like us with self-esteem problems. Dorothy, however, is different.

Dorothy does not have a problem with her self-esteem. She knows what she wants and there is nothing that can stop her. She is a wonderful modern young woman who has become a hero for young girls throughout the world for all these years. She embodies all the characteristics that make up what R. R. Young calls the “four-cornered morality” of the story. Three of the corners are embodied specifically in each of the major characters as a group, and it is Dorothy that pulls them all together. And they are: [from the tinman] love, [from the scarecrow] intelligence, [from the lion] courage and [from Dorothy’s ability to hold it all together and make sure nobody gets left behind] the sense of community.

T. R. Young suggests that the “Yellow Brick Road” represents the gold standard, the silver slippers (which were ruby slippers in the film version) represent the sixteen-to-one silver ratio (dancing down the road). Many other characters and story lines represent identifiable people or circumstances of the day. The wicked witches of the east and west represented the local banks and the railroad industry, respectively, both of which drove small farmers out of business. The scarecrow represents the farmers of the Populist party, who managed to get out of debt by making more silver coinage. Unfortunately, the farmers did not understand that introducing more coin into circulation reduced its value (Dorothy eventually losing her silver shoes). The tinman represents the factory workers of the industrialized North, whom the Populists saw as being so hard-pressed to work grueling hours for little money that the workers had lost their human hearts and become mechanized themselves. “Toto” was thought to be short for teetotaler.

My question this morning is not what the story is about but rather “why does it remain so popular?” I don’t believe that its popularity depends upon knowing historical facts.

I believe that its ongoing enormous popularity (after having seen it multiple times) has to do YES with what Young called the four-cornered morality and how it is revealed to us. There’s something about revelation here. There’s something about how we know what we know. So there’s something about what we know about ourselves and others and how that might be salvific for us. It’s about a journey – there’s always a journey. And every journey needs a theme song.

Baum didn’t create a new literary form when he wrote about the travelers and all the strange lands they had to get through and challenges they had to face on their way to see the Wizard. This is the classic story of self-discovery, which the Greeks developed into a high art form. It’s the story of Odysseus and of Jason. But with a twist: the hero in this story is a little girl. That makes it new, even today. It was especially important when it was published. Early feminists loved Dorothy with her courage and strong sense of self. It’s the very same reason little girls love her today. Little girls want to have adventures and be heroes just like little boys do in our society, and here’s a model for them who never gets old or out of date.

Michael Patrick Herne, author of The Annotated Wizard of Oz tells us that Dorothy’s character was borrowed from that of Baum’s mother-in-law, who was a radical feminist in her day. So radical in fact, that Elizabeth Cady Stanton dropped her as a colleague at which point her name also dropped out of ever being in the history books. She was also a Theosophist.

So here we have an ancient literary form, the journey of self-discovery, with a new literary hero, the adolescent girl. What is interesting to me is that we also have a new approach to community and to self-differentiation, self-renewal, self-discovery. Baum’s mother-in-law’s Theosophy plays a role in this, but it was Frank, himself, who put in a narrative form that later (more than seventy years later) turns up in psychological theory as something called the “Jo-Hari Window.”

Theosophists believe that all of life is a journey of self-discovery (which is, of course, a journey to Truth with a capital “T”). They believe that it might take more than one life to learn all we need to know about ourselves, so there is a concept of reincarnation. The road to self-discovery is filled with helpers and challenges and setbacks. The road to self-discovery is filled with others on the same journey. No one get to true self alone. This, for me, is the brilliance of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz – placing that theory on the shoulders of a little girl who only wants to get home to Kansas and be with Uncle Henry and Auntie Em.

This is how the philosophy is played out in the story, and for this I will use the psychological theory I mentioned before, called the Jo-Hari window. It's a way of talking about communication and community and discovery of self.

Imagine a grid with four quadrants, like a window pane. Each quadrant contains a way of being in community based on what you are or are not willing or able to reveal about yourself.

The upper-left quadrant contains those experiences in which you and a person you are in relationship with know something in common about you. For example, someone coming into the church this morning will know that I am wearing my ruby red slippers. I know that too. We share that knowledge in common. I am certainly not hiding the fact that I'm wearing my ruby reds.

The quadrant in the upper right corner contains those experiences in which I know something about myself that you don't know. It may be something I am intentionally hiding or merely something I haven't yet revealed. It doesn't matter. I know it and you don't.

Quadrant 3, on the lower left, contains those experiences in which you know something about me that I don't know. Any suggestions? I had some blackberry jam for breakfast. If I have seeds in my teeth, you know that and I won't. Do I? More seriously, many family secrets fall into categories two and three. In quadrant 2, I might have a secret that I am unable or unwilling to share; in category 3, someone in the family might know a secret about me they are unable or unwilling to share. (Statistically the biggest kept secret in families has to do with parentage, by the way.)

I am not talking about the assumptions we have about each other. I'm talking about what we really know because we are in relationship with the other person. Honest, mutual relationship provides or creates what Henry Nelson Weiman calls "creative interchange" which he places at the very core of process theology.

Quadrant 4, lower right, contains those things that neither of us knows about me. I can't give any examples because I don't know what they are. Using the example of family secrets from above, if I don't know it and you're not a part of the inner circle of the family, you don't know it either. In our on-going relationship, then, this is a blind spot. It's something that will no doubt affect the relationship but neither of us knows what it is.

Now this theory is based on the premise that self-exposure is a good thing. Some of you might not agree with that, but the people who created the "window" do and I agree with them. They suggest that the more information there is in Quadrant 1 (the box labeled "common") the better for our own self-discovery.

This model came to mind as I was reading the book for the first time. It had never struck me so clearly just seeing the movie and that's because in the book Baum makes it clear over and over again that the lion really is brave and the scarecrow really is smart and the tinman is as compassionate as anyone could ever be.

When I realized what was going on, when I realized that Baum had created a situation in which I knew something about these characters that they didn't know about themselves, I thought of the window. But there's another layer to all of this because I'm not a character in the book, but outside it. Baum also created something called "dramatic irony," and dramatic irony when done well always creates a tension or anxiety on the part of the reader or the person in the movie theater. For example, think of times when you were watching a movie or a play and knew that someone was hiding behind that door, getting ready to pounce on the hero or heroine about to open the door. The irony of that situation creates anxiety because there's nothing you can do about it. You have to sit there, powerless with the information you have (powerless because of the information you have) and wait for the heroine to get bonked or whatever is going to happen. The old Abbott and Costello movies did this brilliantly. We always knew what was going to happen before they did. I get queasy just thinking about it. There, I've just revealed something you didn't know about me. Put that in quadrant 1.

So here we are reading this book, and wondering when the scarecrow or lion or tin woodsman will know what we know? How is the wizard going to convince them? And we feel that way every single time. Even when we know the outcome, the irony grabs us and won't let go until the very end. But there's another tension, and that is: what is it that Dorothy doesn't know? What is it that will get her home? (quadrant 4). She doesn't know and neither do we. But who does? Glenda, the good witch. Glenda tells her that she had the power all along, her power resided in the ruby slippers. She just didn't know it.

And, in this particular case, I think I know something that MGM didn't know (or at least didn't admit at the time). Now Baum, you recall, put Dorothy in silver slippers. MGM said they made the slippers red because red showed up better against the yellow brick road. That is no doubt true. But red, especially in relationship to a young girl, is (and here comes Freud again) a symbol of sexual maturing or maturity, a symbol of a girl coming into her power as a woman. It is very subtle, possibly part of what Jung called the "collective unconscious" – those things that we know without knowing exactly why or how we know – but I believe it to be a very important part of the success of the movie.

These four characters take off to find the wizard because each of them wants something they don't know that they already have, and they believe the wizard can help them because of the wonderful things he does. And what are those wonderful things? Well, they're all those wonderful things. Bells and whistles, smoke and mirrors – it's all humbug, according to the wizard himself. Oh, and where does he fit on the quadrant? He wants to go home too. What quadrant is he in? In the book it is clear that when he

arrived in Oz in the hot air balloon the people of Oz, the munchkins, believed him to be a wizard, and he liked how that felt. So he thought he'd try it out. When he learned about the witches, he feared what they might do to him so he kept on being the wizard, to intimidate them. But he got stuck up there in quadrant 2 because of his fear. And fear is isolating. As long as he kept the truth about himself to himself, he had to stay sequestered. As he said, "Nobody gets in to see the wizard. Not nobody. Not nohow." He was protecting himself from getting what he wanted, and that was to go home.

When he finally was found out (by Toto, you will recall, which shows that everyone on the journey has a role to play) and was forced to reveal his true nature, Dorothy and the others were angry and disappointed, but finally agreed that he was a good man anyway, but a very bad wizard. And when the munchkins found out, they wanted him to stay as their leader because he had been so good to them. He got the recognition he wanted and was able to make the choice to leave, which he did.

I believe we love this story – even as adults – because it can be understood on so many different levels. And because of that, it has become a classic around the world. I don't believe that millions and millions of people read the books and watch the movie because it's a story about the gold standard (although that is clearly there for those who recognize it). I believe it has become a modern classic because underneath it all, this is a story about each of us. We are the lion who wants to be courageous and aren't sure that we can be, we are the tin woodsman who wants to take another chance at being able to love and are afraid of the consequences of being hurt, we are the scarecrow afraid of our own inherent intelligence, and we are Dorothy who is inventive and self-assured. Just like them, we don't recognize any of our gifts because we are overwhelmed and fearful in a foreign land.

Each of us contains the four-cornered morality that will create the more perfect land: courage, intelligence, love, and the ability to create sustaining community. And that's another of the compelling ironies of the story – we have what we need, but it is of no use unless we share our gifts with each other. Our gifts are worthless until and unless we share them in community.

These are truly universal principles: Followers of the Buddha speak of our being lamps unto ourselves (we have the light we need). William Ellery Channing, borrowing from Hindu philosophy, spoke of each of us having the divine spark or divine seed. Walt Whitman and Starhawk remind us that we contain within us all that is. We are creation. It is here, but it takes the help of friends whom we trust for us to realize that. It takes the help of friends for us to release our own power, what people on the earth-centered path to spirituality call "magic". And this speaks directly to our UU principles. When we take inherent worth and dignity to mean rugged individualism, we miss the point. It is community, the interconnected web, that will save us.

“We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid, we need one another when we are in despair, and need to be recalled to our best selves again. All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.” [George Odell]

Others need us. Not just the people, but all the creatures of creation and creation itself – are in need of us. Therein lies the journey home. It’s not magic. It’s a wonderful world!!

Closing Words: T. S. Eliot (from “The Four Quartets”)
What we call a beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

Bibliography

Baum, L. Frank. The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. New York. Dover Publications, Inc.

Herne, Michael Patrick. Interviewed on “Fresh Air” December 4, 2000.

Updike, John. “Oz Is Us.” The New Yorker, September 25, 2000.

Young, T. R. “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and The Populist Politics Upon Which The Story is Grounded!!” www.tryoung.com/trspage/wizard/offtoseethewizard.html

© Rev. Julie Denny-Hughes