

Fundamentals

By F. Forrester Church

Riding Hood, revisited: The wolf's perspective

You may be interested to know that the wolves have a different version of Little Red Riding Hood than we do.

It's not that surprising, really. The meaning of a story and even details change according to the teller's perspective.

Because life is filled with stories, this is a useful thing to remember. Another person's version of the truth may seem false, but in fact just be true in a different way.

In any case, here I present (as a scholar might say) the lupine redaction of the Riding Hood tale.

Once upon a time there was a good wolf, always helpful to others, always kind. One day, when walking through the woods on his morning constitutional, he encountered a little girl all dressed in red. At first he was frightened, because we humans have a history of cruelty to wolves, but he overcame his fear and welcomed her to his part of the woods.

"Where are you going little girl?" the wolf asked. "To my grandmother's house on the other side of the forest," the girl replied. "My grandmother is very old and very ill, and I am taking her this picnic basket filled with treats to make her young and well again."

What a sweet little girl, thought the wolf to himself, yet so naive, so unschooled in the ways of the woods, which are the ways of life and death. The more he pondered this, the more worried he became. Perhaps he should have accompanied the little girl, not just to protect her from any who might wish her harm, but also gently to share with her a little of his wisdom, lest, as children often do, she should end up feeling in some way responsible when her grandmother died.

By this time the little girl had quite a head start. Nonetheless, the good wolf put down his walking stick and ran as fast as he could to her grandmother's house, taking a shortcut he knew, hoping perhaps to accompany the little girl home, during which time they could discuss these things at leisure.

When he arrived at the grandmother's house, the wolf knocked on her door, unsure whether the little girl had already arrived. There was no answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. The door was unlatched so he entered the cottage, only to discover the little girl's grandmother lying lifeless in her bed. She had no pulse and was not breathing. Desperately, he attempted artificial respiration, but to no avail.

Just then he heard the little girl singing sweetly in the distance as she approached the cottage. Determined to protect her from the shock of finding her grandmother dead, the wolf had to think fast. Though he had already enjoyed a hearty breakfast and was not in the least bit hungry, he swallowed hard, ate the old woman, tossed on her nightgown, and jumped under the covers.

Despite the good wolf's best intentions, as so often happens, everything went wrong that possibly could. To begin with, his disguise was far from perfect. When the little girl came in, curiosity concerning her grandmother's appearance led her to ask questions—about the length of her nose, for instance, and the unaccustomed depth of her voice. But when she commented upon the size of her grandmother's teeth and the wolf replied as sweetly as possible, "The better to eat with, my dear" (prejudice later added the "you"), the little girl recognized that this was not her grandmother at all, screamed, and ran.

The good wolf pursued her, trying to explain, but before he had the chance, a hunter leapt from the underbrush and shot him dead.

Very sad.

Wolves love this story, I am told, and around the den when Daddy or Mommy are tucking the cubs into bed, it is the one they usually ask to hear, even though they know it by heart. The moral never fails to move them. Even though the good wolf was killed, in a way, he died for all wolves, for through the example of his life, generations of wolves have been inspired to perform unself-regarding deeds of kindness.

There is a second moral as well. Wolves tend to remember events in ways flattering to themselves.

But surely we can forgive them for this. After all, it's only human.