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EnSights: Fairy Tale Lessons

“Lions and Tigers and Bears! Oh, My!”

Dorothy from the **Wizard of Oz**.

I grew up on fairy tales. The characters often spoke to the fear and anxiety that I grew up with as the oldest child in a large family. I read a lot during my childhood, with fairy tales by far my favorite genre. The story always had a happy ending and since I assumed the role of the heroine, I often learned something about how I should handle my own difficulties in the face of those annoying critical voices in my head. As creatives we call our saboteurs inner critics. These voices so easily get into our studio mind and cause havoc. In preparation for this edition of EnSights, I wondered if my favorite story, *The Wizard of Oz*, had something to say to all of us this week as we focus on our well-honed inner judging mechanism.



“Lions and Tigers and Bears! Oh, My!”

The most memorable moment in **The Wizard of Oz** comes near the end when the terrifying voice behind the formidable Wizard becomes unmasked, revealing a little man in a control room of flashing lights and deafening sounds. Dorothy is at first incensed that she and her traveling companions have been duped into believing that the Great Wizard could solve their predicaments. But before long she takes back her power and transforms before our eyes from a frightened, tentative girl to a take charge person, self-assured and independent.

Our own Yellow Brick Artistic Road is fraught with detours and road blocks, most of our own making. When we are alone in our studios, our inner critics can have a larger and more debilitating presence than they deserve. If left unmasked **resistance** morphs into **judgement** and ends in **paralysis** as witnessed by far too many unfinished canvases in my studio.

The *Wizard of Oz* teaches us that we also have allies on this journey that we can claim (*or reclaim*) to ward off and convert the “wicked witches” who sit behind us whispering messages that can destroy our spirit.

Taking a Lesson from the Scarecrow

The first character that Dorothy meets on her journey is the Scarecrow, a floppy construction of straw who feels inadequate because he thinks that because he “doesn’t have a brain,” he is stupid. Dorothy takes him on, helping him to understand that while he might not have a brain, he does have heart... And *heart* can get you far.

How many times has the inner voice of inadequacy crept up when you are asked to step out of your comfort zone by entering a juried show or speaking about your work? Old fears of being in the spotlight unprepared by education or experience puts a stop sign in the way of moving forward. It is so easy to translate “brain” into *Art Degree, or Solo Show, or Awards*. What we forget, is that our heart is the essence of who we are as artists. It is that heart that challenged us to first admit, “*I am an artist.*” Degrees are not necessary. Awards are best suited to a resume. But the passion for our work is integral to what we do.

Taking a Lesson from the Tin Man

The next character that Dorothy takes under her wing is the Tin Man, an assemblage, if you will, of oil cans and sheet metal held together by cold connecting rivets. The Tin Man holds up well because he has a strong will and a good constitution, but his inflexibility doesn’t allow him to make changes easily. Once he gets something in his head, he has a hard time letting go of what is safe or prestigious.

If this Inner Driver takes up residence in your studio, you will find yourself working harder, but with much less joy. You might even begin to believe the lie, “*You are only an artist when your work sells.*” He (or she) demands perfection and down plays curiosity and pleasure. Inner work such as journaling or reflective reading are seen as wastes of time. What our Tin Man-self forgets is that our brain is a powerful tool for critique and the protective metal comes in handy when we face rejection and criticism of our work. It’s best to keep him away from your easel though, rather put his skills to work in handling the more mundane elements of studio life—categorizing, organizing, reporting and marketing where these qualities are well suited.

Taking a Lesson from the Lion

The lion comes on the stage with an ear-splitting roar, but he is easily reduced to tears at the slightest harsh word or negative comment. He is my favorite character in the story with his softly huggable fur coat and his sad eyes. But the Lion lacks courage, a trait that as artists, we need in abundance. When we work authentically, the art comes from a deep place and is often very personal. It is difficult for most of us to, as they say, “put it out there.” In my studio this inner critic speaks in whispers, reminding me that “*This won’t sell,*” or “*That’s too different or dark or weird.*” When I do create work that is exactly true to my intent, the critic tempts me to mute the emotional content. “*Add a little color. No one likes art that is dark or shocking.*”

When Dorothy was caught in the tornado and was thrust into a new world, the vibrant and slightly mischievous girl we met at the opening of the film becomes lost and scared of her own shadow. Her journey to find her way home is the journey of all of us, becoming our authentic self and creating our authentic work. When the cowardly lion finally lets out a mighty roar, we know he has found his authentic voice and has come home to himself.

Exercise

Look back at the story you wrote in preparation for reading this week’s EnSights. What did you discover about your Inner Critic and your Inner Allies?