



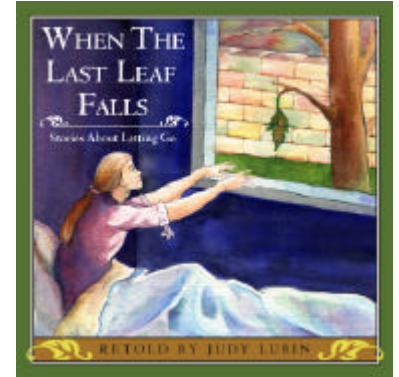
Story Guide

For

When the Last Leaf Falls

Stories About Letting Go
Retold by Judy Lubin

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Story Guides are meant to be used by adults, and teens grades 6 and older, to help choose and use stories. They explain the hidden meaning and symbolism that I give to each of the stories when I tell them. The information in this guide is not meant to be shared with children. Children experience stories through their imaginations as a fun, engaging and concrete experience, nothing like the abstract and intellectual approach taken in the Story Guides. Telling children what we expect them to take from a story is akin to giving away the secret of a magic trick. We take away the fun and the magic! And remember, children relate best to stories when they have a chance to process them. Whenever possible, play the stories one at a time with play or quiet time in between.

The stories told in ***When The Last Leaf Falls*** focus on loss, forgiveness and letting go. While most of the tales deal explicitly with death, they all do so in a way that paints death as a metaphor for the difficult part of change – detaching from the old so as to make room for the new. These stories are perfect for helping children to let go of the stage of early childhood, where children are well nurtured and constantly cared for, and move into the stage of middle childhood where children begin to step away from parents and into their own identities.

When the Last Leaf Falls

When the Last Leaf Falls is the story of a mother's sacrifice. Although the mother does not know at the time that her actions will bring her demise, we get the feeling that, even if she did know, she would still act to save her daughter. Under the surface of this story, the mother's sacrifice symbolizes the passing of the old which must presuppose the growth of the new.



When I first prepared this story, I did so for a class of third graders. For most children, third grade represents a turning point from young childhood to middle childhood. Children will take a noticeable step in separation from parents and look more to peers for their support. While this may bring sadness to parents, the positive side is that a third grader is more self sufficient than a young child and can take on more responsibility for his or her own care.

The way I have crafted my retelling of the *When the Last Leaf Falls*, the mother's death symbolizes the end of a child's need to be constantly mothered. The strong nurturing that her family provides for the daughter before she becomes ill is symbolic of the time in a child's life in which she is constantly nurtured by caregivers who take full responsibility for ensuring the integrity of the child's environment. Yet, still the child becomes ill. The source of her illness is unexplained in the story because it symbolizes the natural need of the child to stand on her own as she grows up. It is not so much an illness, as a change. The identity of the young, dependent child must die in order to make room for the identity of the independent older child.

Similarly, the identity of the parent as constant caregiver must die in order to make room for a new parenting role. The literal death of the mother in the story is symbolic of this metaphorical death in identity. This change leaves room for the child to come into his or her own. The story also helps children to understand that, even though growth may lessen the attachment to caregivers, their parents still care deeply for them and the very separation itself is done for their own good.

The Lost Princess

The Lost Princess is a Jewish folktale attributed to Rebbe Nachman, a famous Hasidic storyteller from the 1600's. In the original tale, a King with seven sons and a daughter curses his daughter and then is too filled with sorrow to rescue her. A minister must go in his stead. Rebbe Nachman's students have claimed that the underlying symbolism of the story has the princess as a representative of the feminine side of God. Although the King, who symbolizes the ruling powers, has caused the exile of the feminine, the people as a group, symbolized by the minister as a representative agent of the population, must seek out the lost feminine and return it to its proper guiding position.

Because I am telling my version of the story primarily to children as a guide to ethical and moral development, I have modified the story to replace the overarching societal implications with more personal implications regarding forgiveness and reconciliation. In my version, a brother wrongs his sister and must himself rescue her. Only he can free her, since he inflicted the harm. The journey that he must make to reconcile with his sister is one whose effort far exceeds the effort exerted in the original harm. This is often the case with anger. It is so easy to act out of anger – the hand is raised and brought down before we can even think - but the hurt that anger can cause may require heroic efforts to undo. Indeed, the prince must go where there are no maps and where nothing is ordinary. Metaphorically, he must go deeply inside himself – an unfamiliar place until he becomes practiced at forgiveness.

Forgiveness is at the heart of letting go. Until we forgive and reconcile, we cannot put away the past. We may think that we have moved on, but there will be a disorder, a shadow or an absence of something important until we have fully righted all wrongs. When children listen to this story, they can begin to imagine both the importance of forgiveness and the difficulty of this heroic act.

Godmother Death

Godmother Death is a tale from the collection of the Brothers Grimm, although it is titled Godfather Death in Grimm's. The portrayal of Death as feminine helps to bring an understanding of death as both giver and taker of life. This reminds listeners that death, as it is portrayed here, is not the end of a process, but the start of the process of change and renewal.

The literal death in this story is clearly a metaphor for change. Before we can become new, we must let the old die. When the expectant father chooses Death as his child's godparent, he is choosing to raise his child with this understanding. As he approaches the choice of a godparent, we see that his life is already full – so full that he will need a new home to accommodate the new child. In other words, he is at a point of change in his life. Thus, the story speaks to us most directly when we face a point of change in our own lives – a growing up of any sort.

The man can choose to raise his child – a metaphor for the new identity we will take on once we go through this change – under the guidance of an angel, the devil or death. This symbolizes the choice of guiding principles that we can live under. We can choose to live as if the world is wholly good, wholly bad, or something in between. Choosing Death as the guiding principles under which to raise his son, the father is symbolically stating that he will raise his son to see the wholeness of life, to see that all of life has both good and bad sides to it and to accept that death, and all the bad aspects of life, are necessary parts to the whole. Because the child is raised under this belief, he has the power to heal. And in real life, the acceptance of death does give us the ability to heal emotional wounds. But the healer forgets the true source of his power and attempts to prolong something that has past its time.

Symbolically, the story tells us that we kill our own selves when we fail to let die that which should die. As an example, imagine a person who fails to let go of a failed marriage or a failed job and continues to pretend that it will all work out until stagnation and bitterness have buried all chances of a happy life. This story reminds us a well lived life requires the acceptance of death.

The Two Brides

The Two Brides is a Jewish folktale from Eastern Europe. The main punchline of the story is originally credited to Rabbi Isaac Luria. I often use this as a Halloween story. It is scary, and therefore better for slightly older children, but the fear is used to teach important lessons about living a fulfilled life.

The bride who rises as a corpse from the ground symbolically represents our dead "identities" or dead dreams. The disheartened employee who is trying to follow his parents plan for his career while secretly longing to do something else with his life will metaphorically recognize the corpse bride as a tragic companion in his life. The point of the story, told in the Rabbi's words, is a clear lesson in happiness – these dead dreams have no place in our lives. We must let them die and choose to live for today.

The version of the story contained on this CD has been adapted most directly for a third grade audience. I have added the pre-death story of the bride who rises from ground, the details which are not found in the original folk tale. In doing this, I have adapted the story's symbolism to speak directly to the growing child leaving the realm of young childhood and moving into a more self-sufficient stage of his or her life.

The pre-death corpse is an adult who still acts like a child and who is not able to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. Because of this, she loses her dreams and will hang like dead weight on anyone who attaches to her. She sends a message to growing children

that life will stagnate if a child continues to expect that parents will do everything for him. To live our living dreams, including the dream of growing into a self-sufficient adult, we must be willing to take responsibility for the achievement of these dreams. The groom has moments of understanding both points of view, but ultimately comes to choose life, with all its responsibilities.

The Selkie

The Selkie is a compilation of various similar tales coming from the Orkney Islands in the north of Scotland. When using this tale as a microcosm of an individual, with all characters representing an archetypal side of ourselves, the Selkie represents the soul life. She is a creature of the ocean which, because of its depth and its dark, unknown characteristics, often represents our deep sub-conscious life, or deep emotional life. The Selkie knows this world, and can bring its life and vitality up to the surface to cure a chronic cynicism.

But, she cannot be owned and controlled. When we access our own soul life to bring vitality to our everyday life, we must remember to respect the wisdom of the depths and to not try to force the inner life to conform to the demands of the outer life. If we try to control the inner life, we will wither it, just as the Selkie withers on dry land. Instead, we must make continual trips into ourselves, each time using the knowledge to learn and to grow.

The young child understands this and is willing to accept his mother as she is and to help her live the way she is meant to live. In doing this, he gains great wisdom, just as we gain wisdom when we understand that our own emotional life must be taken as it is, without attachment.