

**Title: Why Bread Crumbs, Hansel?: Decision-making in the Time of Trauma  
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**Introduction.** Hello, my name is Rebecca Anderson. I'm an Assistant Research Professor with the Applied Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University. Thank you for taking the time to join me as I apply novel perspectives to the familiar tale, *Hansel and Gretel*. I begin with a caution: please be aware the presentation discusses extreme child abuse.

**Presentation Overview.** This presentation interrogates the 1857 Brothers Grimm version of *Hansel and Gretel*, examining the tale through the lenses of fear responses. I begin by defining fear. I then discuss fear responses, differentiating adaptive and maladaptive fear responses. Next, I analyze a portion of the Brothers' Grimm story. Discussion and analysis focuses on exposing 2 maladaptive fear responses obscured by the narrative. Lastly, I leverage my analysis to propose an intermediate trauma-processing step that utilizes fairy tales such as *Hansel and Gretel*. Although time constraints abbreviate my presentation, my in-development research article provides a deeper and more detailed analysis and discussion.

**Fear: What Is It?** Now I begin the presentation by defining fear. Fear is an emotional and physical reaction. Most of us – most humans – are capable of feeling fear. If a lion were to suddenly enter this room, for instance, our brains would register its threat to our safety. That's our emotional fear response. Next, physical changes activate in our bodies that "prepare us to be more efficient" in responding to the threat (Javanbakht and Saab). These changes enable us to behave in ways designed to protect ourselves from threats such as the imaginary lion.

**Fear Responses: Adaptive vs. Maladaptive.** Fear is invaluable when it functions effectively. If Hansel and Gretel can respond appropriately to fear activated by threats in their environment, their fear responses can be called adaptive. When the children's fear is not appropriately activated, their fear responses are maladaptive.

While effectively functioning fear responses protect us, malfunctioning fear responses can endanger us and the people around us. The persistent problem that Hansel and Gretel experience throughout the fairy tale is maladaptive fear responses that endanger them and the people around them.

**Behavioral Responses to Fear: Fight, Flight, and Freeze.** Fight, flight, or freeze is the trio of fear responses that is familiar to many of us. We tend to think of fight as physically fighting a threat. We tend to think of flight as simply running away from a threat. And we tend to think of freeze as becoming physically immobile and being unable to move, perhaps, for instance, as we hide from danger.

What I just described are authentic behavioral responses to fear; however, there is a much broader range of behaviors associated with each of these fear responses. This presentation touches on that broader range, although time limitations restrict my presentation discussion to two: fight and freeze.

**Analysis of Hansel & Gretel.** Now for telling and analyzing the first part of the tale. Hansel and Gretel are the two children of a poor couple, a woodcutter and his wife. The family is in dire straits: a great famine has overtaken the land, depriving the parents of the ability to feed the family. One night, after the family has gone to bed, the father worries aloud to his wife. "How can we feed our children when we can't feed ourselves," he asks. The fully formed plan that his wife details in response indicates she has already given the matter some thought. What she proposes is a trip deep inside the woods. After depositing their children in one location, the parents will leave them alone under the pretext of working elsewhere. Instead of returning to the children later in the day, the parents will return home by themselves.

The wife predicts the children will not be able to find their way home. “We will be rid of them,” she concludes. Her husband frames the outcome differently, and he initially balks at the violence that their children are likely to experience: “Wild animals would soon come and tear them to pieces,” he observes. The woodcutter’s wife berates her husband, evoking his initial lament that began the conversation by declaring his refusal to implement the plan will result in the whole family’s demise as opposed to – only – the demise of their children. The narrator reports that the wife thereafter persists in her efforts to persuade her husband until he acquiesces, convinced by a single conversation to bring about their children’s deaths. He signals his reluctance, however, by remarking, “but I do feel sorry for the poor children.”

In the meantime, because hunger has prevented Hansel and Gretel from sleeping, they have overheard their parents’ conversation. In functional families, when children encounter threats, it is from their parents that they seek comfort, protection, and guidance. Of course, in response to this existential threat, Hansel and Gretel do not seek out their parents. They can’t because the threat is their parents. The children’s behavior in reaction to what they have overheard indicates this night-time conversation is probably not an anomaly; instead, it is likely consistent with a broader pattern of parental dysfunction. For instance, they don’t attempt to implement a straightforward fight response by confronting their parents with what they’ve heard or by talking to their parents to determine if perhaps they have misunderstood the conversation or else by attempting to persuade their parents to spare their lives. Instead, Hansel comforts his terrified sister and then immediately takes secretive action to thwart his parents’ plan. After his parents fall asleep, Hansel goes outside to collect glittering white pebbles that he will drop as the family journeys into the forest the next day. The children will use the pebbles as markers to retrace the steps to their home.

In other words, Hansel’s plan is to return to the home where an active threat to the children’s lives resides. Hansel’s response to this threat is a freeze response. Freeze responses are often used to buy time, and when they are deployed as adaptive responses to a threat, they can be effective. With an adaptive freeze response, the individual essentially lays low within the dangerous situation and assesses their resources and constraints before implementing a response based on what their assessment indicates is most effective. In Hansel’s case, his freeze response will return him and his sister to the unchanged danger residing in their home. The famine is ongoing and therefore the identified reason for the parents’ decision to lead the children to their deaths is unchanged. Hansel’s freeze response is maladaptive because the unchanged threat means if the children return home, the most likely outcome is that the parents will design and implement a more efficient plan to kill them. Indeed, ultimately, that is what occurs.

The next day, the parents carry out their plan. The mother demonstrates her callousness and lack of remorse for the harm she plans to inflict on her children by abruptly waking them with an insult – “Get up, you lie-abeds” – and the family journeys into the forest. Hansel drops the shining pebbles along the way and at night, the abandoned children successfully retrace their steps home.

The father is described as overjoyed at the children’s re-appearance, “for his conscience,” the narrator reports, “had reproached him for leaving his children behind by themselves.” The narrator implies the children encounter a temporary reprieve from their death sentence that is later interrupted by “again great dearth in the land” that occurs not long afterward. Subsequently, the children once again overhear their mother propose the same plan to lead them to their deaths. This time, Hansel is unable to slip outside to collect pebbles because – the narrator reports – “the woman had barred the door.” In other words, she had quite predictably implemented a more efficient plan to kill them.

Hansel deploys his freeze strategy a second time. This time, Hansel replaces the pebbles with bread crumbs. What is interesting here is that Hansel, a child who has grown up in the countryside, has cast bread crumbs on the

ground in the expectation that they will (1) remain uneaten by wildlife, and (2) serve as markers that will somehow guide the two children through a dark forest at night. My point here is that these expectations are not only unrealistic, they are not a match for a child of Hansel's background and experience.

Hansel's act of tossing the bread crumbs that he needs for sustenance signals the starving young boy is suffering from cognitive impairment. This cognitive impairment is yet another predictable result from Hansel's first implementation of his freeze response. While the woodcutter was relieved to see his children again, the evidence provided by the narrative indicates it is unlikely that the children's callous and overtly hostile mother responded well to their re-appearance after the parents' first abandonment attempt. What is most likely is that the children's return subjected them to more extreme abuse and neglect at the hands of their mother than they had previously experienced. Thus, through the narrative thread depicting Hansel's attempt to repurpose bread crumbs, the narrator provides evidence that the children's return to their parents has had a debilitating effect, rendering them less able to survive a second attempt to eliminate them. This concludes my analysis of a portion of the fairy tale.

**Telling Tales: Fictionalizing Unbearable Experiences.** Cultures around the world tell tales about trauma. And many of those tales contain fantastical details. Audiences for these tales – at least the adult audiences – know the details are fantastical. But it's these details that make the traumatic core of our cultural tales so bearable – and not only bearable, but even pleasant and entertaining enough to pass on from generation to generation.

We wouldn't be telling the tale of Hansel and Gretel to children today if the story were (1) stripped of those fantastical details and (2) if the traumatic elements were developed in more realistic detail. Such revisions would convert Hansel and Gretel into a terrible tale about harm inflicted on vulnerable and suffering people by other vulnerable and suffering people.

**Real-world Trauma Survivors: Perspective-Taking as an Intermediate Step to Recovery.** Now I am going to talk about real-world trauma survivors. For any trauma survivor, gaining the kind of deep and nuanced perspectives on a traumatic event that lead to healing can often be extremely difficult to achieve. This difficulty is not entirely due to the terrible pain of the trauma and trauma's aftermath.

The path to trauma recovery is blocked not just by pain but also by confusion. Whether confusion rises to the level of conscious awareness or not, it tends to figure in many survivors' post-trauma experiences. Why confusion? Life is full of trauma. Many survivors experience so much trauma that life seems to be trauma. Yet whether trauma figures as a microscopic fracture or a series of Grand Canyons in our personal landscapes, when it occurs, we experience trauma as a disruptive force. As much as trauma is a part of life, it is felt as something different from the way life should be. -And that makes trauma, when it occurs, not just painful, but confusing. Interpersonal trauma is especially confusing. Our communities are not only built on our ability to share and care, they endure because of our visceral understanding, inclination, and value for sharing and caring. This is one of the reasons why, when someone victimizes one of us, we experience that victimization as confusing – and, again, I qualify: whether that confusion rises to the level of conscious awareness or not. Victim blaming is a maladaptive strategy that community members may use to ease their confusion about trauma's disruptions. Childhood trauma, in particular, frequently comes packaged in blame, shame, and invalidation, preventing many survivors of childhood trauma from being able to even acknowledge their traumas. For adult and child survivors of trauma, blame, shame, and invalidation are confusing because they are not consistent with reality.

The confusion that infiltrates the experiences of trauma survivors also permeates fairy tales, and for the same reasons. Fairy tales are about human experience and trauma is the human experience that is the focus of many of these tales. Fairy tales present trauma in a uniquely human way when they obscure and obfuscate trauma. They employ the avoidance mechanisms that survivors use to prevent themselves from having to deal with the pain of

trauma. Elements of the narratives, from their emphasis on fantastical details about dazzling riches and magical transformations to the de-emphasis of human experience that reduces emotions to superficial descriptions and the story's characters to flat, two-dimensional cartoons, function like misdirection distracting us, the audience, from the suffering, sadness, and distorted thinking that is the core meaning of the tale. The misdirection of fairy tales mirrors the misdirection that real-life survivors often use to manage the burdens of their traumas.

To mitigate their suffering while advancing them along their trauma-processing journey, I propose the following strategy for trauma survivors, whether they are actively seeking to avoid or confront their traumas. Select a familiar fairy tale that has a positive emotional resonance. Investigate and reflect about the mechanics of the fairy tale's traumas. Zero in on the parts of the tale that are the most subject to misdirection and distortion: the fear responses. Consider answering questions such as the following: What is the context that activates characters' fear responses? What are the fear responses displayed by each character? Whose fear responses are adaptive? What makes them adaptive? Whose fear responses are maladaptive? What makes them maladaptive? How does the fairy tale distract from or obfuscate the traumas?

The trauma of the selected tale doesn't need to neatly align with the survivor's real-life trauma. It's the resonance of the tale that matters. Choose what resonates, analyze as tolerated, step away when it's not. Survivors can use this strategy to support their ability to strengthen the emotional perspectives they need for trauma healing when they are able to confront the traumas built into their own personal landscapes.

Thank you for taking the time to join me today! I welcome your questions and comments.