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## At the Crossroads: On Fairytales, Firebirds, and Real Life Choices

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Honors Convocation 2008  
The Pantagraph Award for Teaching Excellence

Marina Balina “At the Crossroads: On Fairytales, Firebirds, and Real Life Choices”

Marina Balina: I can start by saying that this outfit doesn't provide you with a lot of space to talk, so if you don't understand me, if you don't hear me, just wave at me, okay? Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to all my colleagues here at Illinois Wesleyan who honor me today with this award and with the opportunity to speak on this special occasion. I know one thing for certain, I would not be here without your friendship and your collegiality, which I truly appreciate and cherish. Thank you so much. I would also like to thank my students. A career in teaching is a two-way street which constantly requires learning, and I continue to learn more and more while I teach you. Your curiosity constantly inspires me to look for new avenues in my scholarship and teaching. I'd also like to thank the IWU administration, President Wilson, Provost Cunningham, and the Board of Trustees for their ongoing support of our university and our profession. Thank you to Dick Johnson, the publisher of the *Pantagraph*, for keeping this good, wonderful tradition of recognizing our faculty alive. Lastly, I'd like to thank my family. There are two important men in my life, my husband, Misha, and my son, Dima, who cannot be here today because he is in Kentucky waiting for his second child to be born.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: I have always been able to lean on both of them when I needed to and for this I am forever grateful. To my husband I give special thanks for being my best friend, my devoted cheerleader, and my harshest critic. [Sentiments in Russian expressing her love and gratitude.] Our attraction to the fairytales is fatal. They simply stick to us. From childhood into adulthood, we read and view fairytales with a particular pleasure. They are part of high culture. Literary fairytales by Charles Perrault, Wilhelm Hauff, and Oscar Wilde—they are widely employed by mass culture. How many book culture versions and film or text of Cinderella do you all know? From the films *Working Girl* to *Pretty Woman*, the Cinderella story is repeated in front of our eyes. We even have a Cinderella man portrayed in the 2005 film so brilliantly by the actor Russell Crowe, and we love all those versions of fairytales because—because all these stories give us hope that one day, just you wait, the magic transformation might be even part of your life. How do the fairytale usually start?

Audience: ‘Once upon a time.’

Marina Balina: Thank you. ‘Once upon a time.’ What a magic uncertainty—no location, no temporal reference. Isn't it great to leave all worries behind and be transported into a world that does not have any schedules and business lunches, job interviews and final papers?

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: “Krible Krable Booms” as the little magician, Ole Lukoie, in Hans Christian’s fairytale says, and instead of your beaten up Ford with slipping transmission and bad brakes, you could fly away on a magic carpet, visit exotic lands, and embrace new adventures. Show me a person who does not like fairytales.

But maybe, maybe there is something more to a fairytale that its ability to create for us an alternative reality of success and provide that much-needed relaxation. Modern German literary critic and philosopher, Walter Benjamin, whose own fairytale world was destroyed in the turmoil of World War II, called the fairytale the first educator of mankind. He placed on the genre the very important task of providing readers with different models of social behavior. The fairytale tells us about do’s and don’ts in our life. Thus, it teaches us that kindness should be rewarded and evil punished, that fools are quite often much smarter than so-called wise people, that riches can come and go but the good and the loyal heart always remains with you. What a perfect world! Why should we leave it behind when we finally grow up? And we all try to remain in these fairytale surroundings, thus, some of us (like me) make a profession out of teaching the stuff to students.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: And others, like you, continue to revisit the fairytale world, sneaking into it through computer games and Halloween parties, but I believe that Benjamin meant something different when he appointed the fairytale to be our first educator. I believe he meant to stress that the fairytale teaches us how to make right choices, how on our way to a happy end to ultimate success, we can choose a path that will bring us there. The fairytale path usually leads its traveling characters who, for some reason or another, had to leave home to a crossroads where a decision needs to be made—where to go next. Usually the protagonists have the choice to leave the straight path and turn right or left and both his choices could promise riches, marriage, or success. In Russian fairytales, it is always Ivan the Fool who faces the fatal choice. On his way he comes to a crossroads where there is a stone with peculiar direction written on it—turn right and you will become mighty, turn left and you will become rich, go straight and you will find your death. For whatever strange reason, he always takes path straight ahead. He is a fool after all. It is the road straight ahead that promises a lot of trouble! And the character is pushing to choose this one because only by living through difficult times, by falling out of grace, however temporarily, can our heroes and heroines mature and become rightful recipients of fairytale happiness. The story as old as the world teaches us that sacrifice and loss, hard times and obstacles, are equal and genuine parts of the human experience. This is the most important lesson that the fairytale shares with us, its contemporary readers.

A year ago when Provost Cunningham had announced my name as the 2008 recipient of the Pantagraph Excellency and Teaching Award, she stated that my life is like a fairytale. In many ways it was a true evaluation of my experience in this country, having immigrated to the United States in 1988. I am the embodiment of the Cinderella story. Twenty years ago, my family and I—my husband and my then twelve-year-old son—landed in Boston at Logan Airport without a job, no place to live, six suitcases, and \$450 in our pockets. Is my personal experience an illustration of a beloved fairytale? This

is for you to decide, but I should warn you, I never lost a slipper and my prince charming was always on my side.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: Let me preface my personal story by stating the obvious. Immigration is a hot topic today in American politics and society. The complicated debates regarding legal/illegal immigration leave out discussion of the actual human experience. Those who have never had to leave their home country for another land rarely understand the implications of this change that takes enormous emotional strength and courage. April 16, as President Wilson already told you, is a historic day in our family memory. Twenty years ago on this very day, we were told we could leave Russia. At that time it was still Soviet Union, which for many indicates—embodied the concepts of totalitarianism and dictatorship to the rest of the free world. Even today, twenty years later on this day, I vividly remember the words and the tone of an official who spoke with me on the phone. You must understand that at that time if a Soviet official called you and—to inform that you *could* leave the country, it meant that you *had* to leave the country or suffer the consequences. Unlike the fairytale character, at my crossroads, I had no choice to turn right or left but go straight ahead: that choice I made when I decided to immigrate. My path was straight ahead and like every straight path, it was not easy. It took all three of us first to Vienna, Austria where we spent some time as refugees and then to a little village near Rome, Italy. Back then in the 1980s, it was an established immigration road for Jewish families from the former Soviet Republic with different points of final destination—Germany, Canada, Australia, and the United States. We all knew what we left behind, but we all didn't know what kind of future was ahead of us. We lived off charities of different international organizations, money was tight, and our future uncertain. What kept us all going without being depressed and falling apart? Those were the fairytales!! In the best tradition of Disney and Hollywood, we were rewriting the Cinderella story according to our own emigre canon. We were never tired of sharing and listening to the 'Once upon a time' stories repeated to us about some immigrant, a talented engineer or a physicist, whose first job was as a custodian sweeping floors in a huge grocery store, but who could not stop working on the scientific project he/she had began in the USSR but only in his/her head of course because Soviet officials didn't allow any paper to leave the country when one immigrated. At some point of the difficult working day, this person would accidentally drop a piece of his/her calculations out of a pocket and a customer who was passing by would find it on the floor. This customer would be either a physicist or the owner of a big company who would become a magic helper and in a matter of days, this poor and unknown immigrant would have an office in a skyscraper, a secretary since English was still a problem, and every other symbol of happiness that this magic transformation only could promise. You could, of course, argue that, with certain variations, this is a typical dream of every generation of immigrants. Very true, but our wave of immigration in the 1980s was represented by well-educated people and we still wanted to believe in this kind of magic and we did it willingly, blocking all our traditional—rational sense by believing in the magic of the unreal. But let me ask you, how unreal were all those dreams if I'm standing in front of you here today?

The obstacles of the straight path were numerous and one of the most challenging ones was the mastery of the English language. In one well-known folktale, a servant of a magician eats mysterious food prepared for his master and begins to understand birds and animals, humans and nature. For the fulfillment of a magic wish such as this, to understand and communicate easily with everyone, all of us would no doubt be ready to make an enormous sacrifice. Just imagine the most embarrassing situation—people around you laugh and you don't know if they are laughing at you or with you, but when you yourself start laughing, they have already stopped, or a phone conversation—what a torture. The phone rings and the whole family just sits there waiting for a brave volunteer to pick it up.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: Usually it's the child that grabs the phone and the inevitable, "Mom, Dad, it's for you." It is for you—would catch you on your way to the bathroom, a traditional place of hiding, and with a tremendous effort, you start putting words together and the rest of the family are whispering to you the proper vocabulary, simultaneously trying to correct your sentence structure.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: Do you know this expression: Languages come easy to you? Never believe it. [laughs]

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: I tell you that as a professional with thirty years of experience and as someone who lived through learning language as an adult. If language comes easy to you, it could leave you the same way.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: Work, hard work, everyday work—this is the path to learn the language. The entire configuration of your face changes. First your ears grow to an enormous proportion to your face because all you want to do is listen and memorize. Your lips are swollen because they constantly move since they repeat everything you hear. You change the style of your clothing because the most important part of your outfit is your pocket. When Hamlet was posing his eternal question of 'To be or not to be?', he didn't know that your entire well-being depends on having or not having a dictionary [with you].

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: But soon enough you understand that every dictionary is at least five years behind the actual language usage and no dictionary, especially the one you are trying to keep in your pocket, will help you with idioms. I, personally, cried bitterly at the word "awesome" when I first read it in my students' evaluations. I checked the

dictionary, the two-volume one that rode with me from Russia, and it explained to me that my students felt that I was horrifying.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: And I [could not understand why].

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: Help came from my twelve-year-old son who had already mastered contemporary slang. New words obtain specific flavor depending on where you learn them. It took all of us centuries to finally understand that “How are you?” is a greeting and not a sincere desire to know how you are.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: But hard work, sleepless nights, flash cards that cover your refrigerator—this all pays off when you finally realize that you did master this long “I” in the word like “sheet” for example and you can finally go to the store and buy a linens for your new bed without being afraid to say a curse word instead.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: Magic transformation is truly a part of our collective experience, but it didn’t come in a fairytale fashion overnight. It required work, everyday mundane work. When we were building our new house, not from straw like Nif-Nif in *The Three Little Pigs*, but like his brother, Naf-Naf, brick by brick in order for it to last. What is the fairytale formula for success? Russian Formalist scholar, Vladimir Propp, who provided literary scholarship with many formula analyses of different fairytale types, defined temporary falling out of grace as an important element of the fairytale didactics. Don’t be afraid of falling from grace. Remember to focus on the word “temporary”. Continue to build your brick house. Every day of the month, add to it piece by piece, and your fairytale will not abandon you. Remember fairytales do not reward lazy people; these are the ones who are usually punished at the end. Hard work, endurance, patience, and a little bit of luck—this is the advice that the fairytale provides to its readers. “And what about luck?” you might ask. A firebird is a fairytale creature that is difficult to catch. To catch a firebird in Russian means to obtain your luck and your happiness, but your luck, your happiness, embodied by a firebird is not only difficult to catch; it is also difficult to keep. It really burns your fingers. One is constantly changing hands—left, right, left, right—trying to avoid being severely burned. Thus, the fairytale teaches us that happiness is not for the weak. One has to be strong to sustain happiness. In a way, the fairytale challenges even the American Constitution with its pursuit of happiness, but remember it is only the pursuit of happiness that this great democracy guarantees its citizens. The rest is up to you. You have to be able to hold onto your firebird and move on, healing your burned fingers while on the path of life.

I’m standing in front of you today and we are celebrating our huge achievements,

yours and mine, and instead of talking about the harsh reality that awaits you outside of these protective walls, I'm encouraging you to entrust your future to the fairytale magic. I'm truly convinced that you are smart enough and you know that life's path is not covered with roses. Why then did I spend twenty minutes of your time and leave you without a recipe for success? First of all, because I don't have one and I believe that nobody does. Second, I believe that the measurement for success is highly individual. It ranges from the happy stay-at-home parent to the President of the United States, but I can tell you one thing for certain. During your four years here, you have obtained a gift that is truly magic. This is your education. And please do not measure it by the size of your student loans.

[Laughter]

Marina Balina: This gift does not have any money to its equivalent, no matter what the bank statement says. This is your magic object that will lead you into your fairytale future. The question remains: Can you follow it, can you build your own fairytale, brick by brick, sometimes being frustrated at the speed of its construction, sometimes losing hope? Those questions are for you to answer. There will be many crossroads in your life: don't compromise. Go for the straight path and never lose hope. I wish you all a wonderful and adventurous life beyond this wall and let us live happily [in unison with the audience] ever after. Thank you.

[Applause]