

## Larping as real magic

By Elge Larsson

The theme I am exploring is: what is the psychological need for believing that our fantasies are real? In practice there is no difference between "reality" and what I believe is reality. Das Ding an sich is forever elusive – we will never get to it. What we've got is sensory impressions coming from nobody knows what and if we believe them, they are "reality". For all we know they might as well be hallucinations.

Evidently we have learned to differentiate between "reality" and "fantasy", at least to the point where we can lead reasonably ordinary lives. And yet we do our very best to create situations where we annihilate the borders between the real world and the world of our dreams. Why is that?

Since we all are larpers, I suppose you suffer from the same yearning as I do: I want there to be magic. There was a time when I stopped reading fantasy literature, it was too painful to return to a world without magic. Now, I want to say that I do not, repeat not, believe in magic or any other religion, but I miss it bitterly. No, not religion, but magic.

But perhaps you also have, like me, wondered about this desperate longing, this urge to believe in magic. From whence does it come? I do not think it is just because we were raised on the Brothers Grimm heritage, Tolkien, Narnia, Belgarion and all this sword and sorcery stuff. Not to forget Moomin, Tove Jansson is actually a better author than Tolkien.

No, I believe there is a much deeper reason to believe in magic. It's because we once lived in a world where magic existed, and we were gods in that world, and our will was done, on earth as if in heaven.

Probably many of you still have one or more of your childhood's teddy bears, dolls, or other kinds of furry friends around in your home. Perhaps you even still talk to them once in a while. Considering that this friend of yours may know your darkest

secrets, would you be prepared to swap it with somebody else, or just give it away to some other person? If not, why is that? Do you have a feeling, or perhaps just an inkling of a feeling, that your secrets may be revealed? If so, you still have a little of the magical touch, and your experience of the world change a little according to your will.

What I wanted to show with this example is that our magic creativity is not lost, it just has to adapt a little to "reality" (whatever that is). But I still haven't said anything about how this kind of magic is constituted. Is it really real, or is it just a way of seeing things? (Preview: It's just a way of seeing things.)

### ***Where it started***

Once upon a time we lived in darkness, but we had neither words nor concepts to understand it as darkness, probably we had not even awareness or consciousness or what you want to call it. We were not born yet. Then we were born, and perhaps it was not an altogether bad experience. There we are, newly born, and I leave it to your imagination to define what the world looks like when you have never seen it before, never felt it, heard it (oh yes, you heard it in your mothers tummy), never smelled it. How do you make sense of something you have never experienced before when you have no frames of reference? Remember that "making sense" means "putting in frames of reference". Is it even remotely possible for us to understand what newborn babies experience?

The person I have been inspired by today is the English child psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott. He has developed a theory of what happens when you are newborn and try to understand the world you have fallen into, Narnia-like, you might say.

The child has needs and the needs make themselves felt in the body, probably as some kind of tension, since the child starts to scream if the needs are not met. Screaming or not, the needs are met, somebody takes care of the child who then can return to sleep. Now I want you to understand that the child – as the psychologists think – has no sense of inside or outside, no sense of this is Me and that is Not Me. For the newborn child there are only sensory impressions, nothing else. Hunger is a sensory impression, food is a sensory impression, lying in bed is a sensory

impression, being in the caretaker's arms is a sensory impression, but they do not come (as for us) from an outside world to an inside ego, to a consciousness. They do not even come, they are indistinguishable from the child, they are the child. That's it, the child is just impressions, there is no one to feel them, there are just feelings that get themselves felt. (Oh, the inadequacy of language!)

This is, parenthetically, a very Buddhist thought: the thinker consists of the thinking. Let me make an analogue: In this world we have this phenomenon of being furry, hunting small rodents, lying lazily in the sun, purring while caressed and so on. We call this bundle of activities "a cat", but the cat is nothing more than this "catting". End of parenthesis.

After a while patterns start to emerge in the child. Impression: hunger, bodily tension, perhaps screaming, and then impression: food, a nice warm bottle or mother's heavenly breast. What happens here, says Winnicott, is that the child *creates the impression* of mother's breast or the bottle. (Winnicott 1974.) Of course, to the objective eye that is not what happens, but there is no objective eye in the child. The child only has wants and gets satisfaction, and evidently – for the child – it is the want that creates the satisfaction. Now I ask you: is that magic or is it not? I want and because I want I get satisfaction. That's magic to me.

So, we lived in a world where magic was real, and then one day nobody came when we were hungry or wet. But if the time before had been good enough, we had a memory of our happiness, of our satisfaction, and for a while we could live in this happy memory even though nobody came to care for us. And then it happened again! The world, the caretaker, materialized! Now this magic is even greater, because we had been "thinking of" or "remembering" something and then it was created. Wow! Am I God or what?

At the same time this is the beginning of the expulsion from paradise. Sooner or later the time between need and satisfaction will be too great and our happy memories cannot save us anymore. We have to realize that the world will not come to us, no matter how strong our needs are, no matter how strong our wants are. But

we can still create the memory, we can still give ourself the feeling of satisfaction, and we can invest this feeling in a toy, a blanket, a teddy bear or anything else.

What is happening here is that we project our feelings of happiness into the object, and when we contact the object we get those feelings "back". In reality we are creating conditionings so that the object elicits our memories of happiness – I am my own Pavlovian dog. It goes like this: I am happy, I cuddle my teddy bear, the teddy bear gets connected in my mind with happiness. Now I can do it the other way around: I cuddle my teddy bear, which in my mind is connected to happiness, and then I get happy.

This is done in a place that is neither reality in the "objective" sense – out there – nor is it psychic, "inner" reality. It is called the transition area or intermediate zone by Winnicott. This is the place where playing starts.

This is the place I wanted you to remember and revisit by thinking of your furry friends at home.

### ***Playing as the basis of everything***

Now I want to quote Winnicott: *"Into this play area the child gathers objects ... from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from personal or inner reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream material and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality"*. Do you see the parallels to larping?

*"In playing the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling."*

*"There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences"*. That is, playing (e.g. larping) is the base upon which culture is built.

*"This intermediate area of experience ... constitutes the greater part of the infants experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts, and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work"*. Here we may ask ourselves: if art, science and the like just are more evolved forms of

playing, are we retarded who do not leave the playing ground, or are we holding on to the source in order to be forever young and creative?

Then Winnicott says something I first found rather curious: *"...the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, ...no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, ...relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play."* (All quotations from Winnicott 1974.)

To me this means that we never will be completely happy in the world, because the world is never up to our dreams, but that we can find some kind of happiness in art, religion, or science, or any other cultural phenomena since they are the continuation of our happy playing in childhood.

### ***What is larping then?***

Now let's talk about us. We are evidently still playing, we even make big conferences around our playing, write books about it, plan to conquer the world with it. What's going on here?

I can think of some hypotheses, you may invent more of them.

- We are so discontented with reality that we want to play all the time.
- We realize that the world will not live up to our expectations – ok, so we create our own world according to our criteria for happiness.
- If we expand the intermediate zone to incorporate the whole world, then everybody can live in happiness all the time.
- We don't want to grow up.
- We want to grow up – without losing our creativity.
- We want to be playing, making art, religion and science at the same time.

Winnicott has also been thinking of what happens when we have to adapt to an external reality that is not optimal. He says that then we have to create a False Self which is the one person we have been allowed to be. The False Self is that personality your upbringing, education, and other peoples' expectations wanted/forced you to be.

Then he says: *"Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real. Whereas the True Self feels real, the existence of a False Self results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility."* (Winnicott 1965.)

I'm not completely convinced; I'm fairly neurotic and I regard myself as pretty creative, but perhaps it is just the true part of me that is creative, not the false part of me – I really have difficulties telling them apart.

Anyhow, if Winnicott is right, then we can put forward some more hypotheses:

- We are larping because we want to feel real.
- We are larping because we want to leave the False Self and get to the True Self.

Larping as therapy, that is. Is that really bad?

But you can also say larping as revolution. In my opinion we live in a predefined world, a world where rules, expectations, and behaviours are more or less constructed for us, but not by us. When we create our transition areas, our intermediate zones where we define the rules of reality, we are actually saying NO to the powers that be.

I want to end this paper with all these hypotheses, and I want to ask you again: What is it that we actually are doing while we are larping?

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### **Elge Larsson**

Elge Larsson is 60 years young and lives in Stockholm, Sweden. He is a kind of academic scholar with wide interests in most form of humanistic studies. A translator by profession and larper by interest, he divides his life between books and larping, which he has been doing since 1994. He's pet projects is convincing everybody

larping is the noblest of arts. Being very serious-minded, he writes verbose articles and give deep lectures where he proposes radical ways of looking at larp. He thinks reality sucks, and that it could be made better conscious larpers dedicated to improve the world.