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My Wonderful World (of Disney®)

By: Lauren Galliford

When I was a kid, Disney was my religion. I watched the movies, I read the books, I bought the toys. I aspired to one day be a Disney animator. The fact that I couldn't draw was inconsequential. I was determined to have some part of the "Magic Kingdom" as my very own, determined to become, in the words of a certain mermaid, "part of that world."

I SAW THE WORLD THROUGH BIG, BRIGHT MICKEY MOUSE-SHAPED LENSES. Aladdin, Ariel, and Belle were like the cool older siblings I'd never had, and I was certain that as long as I followed their examples, I'd achieve similar results—adventure, happiness, independence, friendship, love, etc. To sum it up, Disney let me know that as long as you are a good person at heart, you are sure to end up "happily ever after."

This promise of "happily ever after" became a promise of salvation from reality. I was much more interested in memorizing verses of Disney songs than those of Sunday school hymns. I found the fairytale fables of Ariel and Aladdin to be much more accessible and meaningful than any of the (boring!) parables of the Bible. From a very young age, Disney instilled in me morals, inspiration, and an eerily fanatical sense of devotion.

The Little Mermaid premiered on my fourth birthday. To me, seeing that movie was like seeing Jesus. Suddenly, I *knew* what life was all about: life was all about watching Disney movies. By the time my fifth birthday rolled around, I had the movie memorized. The Fischer Price tape deck in my room had *The Little Mermaid* soundtrack playing on a loop for (and this is a conservative estimate) three years straight. It was replaced only by the

Beauty and the Beast tape, then *Aladdin*, then *The Lion King*. I think you get the picture.

It was the same with videos, games, books, and toys. My bedroom was a virtual shrine to Disney. I had a huge collection of *Little Mermaid* toys, and cried for days when the pull-string on my talking Ariel doll snapped after months—or maybe just days—of continuous use. It was the same with *Beauty and the Beast* a couple of years later. I had the dolls, the board game, the light-up drawing kit, and the handheld LCD video game. But it wasn't enough. I wanted more.¹

For one thing, I wanted a subscription to The Disney Channel. I was a Disney fan, after all, so I *needed* the Disney channel—if only to serve as a sign of my devotion to Disney. Back in the day, it was still a “premium” cable channel, and I only got to see glimpses here and there when they'd have a special free preview weekend. I tried to convince my parents to invest the extra few bucks a month to take on the Disney Channel because, well, it was *Disney*. Fun. Magic. Quality. I was enamored; my parents were annoyed.

During one of the more fateful Disney Channel “freeviews,” I saw a special about the making of *The Little Mermaid*. I was amazed at the whole process—storyboarding, character modeling, composing music, and the animation itself. I wanted to be able to do that—I wanted to create life on paper. Not only life, mind you, but *Disney* life, which, as we all know, is far superior to “normal” life. When my first grade teacher asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told her I wanted to be an animator without pause. Some of the kids in my class still thought Ariel was real (after all, many of them had “visited” her in Florida), but I knew the truth: Ariel was nothing more than lines on paper. And I wasn't disillusioned; I was inspired. And since Cinderella had assured me that “the dream that you wish will come true,” I was certain that someday, somehow, I'd be creating Disney characters of my very own.

I went to the Holy Land Disney World a couple of times during my childhood. Both times, my favorite part of the trip was the visit to the animation studio at MGM. My second pilgrimage to Disney World, in the

¹ Namely, I wanted the *Beauty and the Beast* Talk 'n View Magic Mirror™, which my mother *claims* to have given me for Christmas that year. It was the only thing I asked for. And damned if I didn't get it. I hate to call my mother a liar, but ... sorry, mom, disagree all you want, I know for a fact that you *did not* get me this \$20 toy. And I'm still bitter. Thanks.

summer of 1993, was especially memorable. I got to see Disney animators at work, finishing up background paintings for *The Lion King* and developing storyboards for *Pocahontas*. Even though mom and dad were fighting during most of the trip, the environment was so magical that it was easy for me to ignore the fact that my parents' marriage was falling apart right there at Disney World—the happiest place on earth.

Looking back, I realize that the whole trip was probably a last-ditch effort on the part of my parents to A) save their marriage, and B) give the kids one last family vacation to remember in case objective A failed. It did. My parents had a lovely argument at the Disney World Polynesian Resort, which, like all great marital battles, was about absolutely nothing. I'm convinced that this episode, as trivial as it may seem, must have been one of the deciding factors in their eventual decision to divorce.

Despite this unhappy association with my vacation, I was still able to find sanctuary in Disney. The movies, the music, the theme parks ... they were all wonderful distractions from the drama of my dysfunctional family. *Pocahontas* got me through the rough summer when my parents finally split; she was my friend when my other friends stopped associating with me. Like a strange sort of saint, *Pocahontas* offered me hope and solace when others had shunned me.

Even though *Pocahontas* was there to see me through the darkness, she and the others were starting to fade away. I was entering middle school with practically no friends, and, as I found out, the other kids were all “too cool” to watch Disney movies. At summer camp that year, my roommate laughed at me for listening to Disney soundtracks on my Walkman.² Humiliated by her teasing, I (publicly) renounced my love for Disney. I became a closet Disney fan, never again to sing *A Whole New World* on a bus, or wear a *Pocahontas* t-shirt, or play with *The Lion King* action figures.

After that summer, I stopped going to the movies and I stopped buying the toys. I felt like a hypocrite. I felt terrible for being disloyal to my “religion”—Disney had been such a significant part of my life that it was difficult to pretend that I'd outgrown it, or that it meant nothing to me. Sadly, I took down my Disney posters and condemned my once-beloved Belle and Ariel dolls to the depths of the basement. My Disney videos were moved from out-in-the-open to out-of-the-way, stored in the closet

² Because the boy band music *she* was listening to was *so* much better, so much more mature.

in hopes that a visiting friend wouldn't discover my childish taste in movies.

Occasionally, I would still listen to the soundtracks, but I'd *never* admit it to my peers. It was okay to listen to 98°; it was *not* okay to listen to *Under the Sea*. I unlearned what I had spent my entire childhood learning, and forced myself to move on. G-rated movies were for kids, and I was totally ready for PG-13.

Within a few years, the Internet was all the rage, and I was happy to have something so fun and exciting to fill the gaping void that Disney had left in my soul. One day, while surfing the Web, I stumbled upon a link to a message board for Disney fans. I certainly wasn't expecting much—I figured it was probably a bunch of annoying little kids, and/or a bunch of creepy pedophiles trying to *stalk* a bunch of annoying little kids. Such was my cynicism and disdain for the Church of Disney. My interest had been piqued, however, so I decided to investigate.

After several hours of reading through posts and getting to know the members of the message board, I was pleasantly surprised. There were no annoying 10-year-olds or pedophiles to be found. The discussion was solely Disney-oriented, and most of the conversations were very interesting. Rather than blindly worshipping Disney, these discussions criticized and analyzed the films, providing a whole new level of fascination. “Did you know that *Aladdin* was originally being developed before *Beauty and the Beast*, but Disney put the project on hold when the Gulf War broke out? They thought it would be a bad idea to make a movie with Middle-Eastern characters at the time ... the story was originally going to take place in Baghdad, by the way ... ”

At first, some of the discussions seemed a bit wacky.

“If Mufasa and Scar are the only male lions around, wouldn't that mean that Nala is probably Simba's sister?!?”

Other discussions seemed a bit crazy.

“Is there a hidden dirty image on *The Little Mermaid* video case?”

But, to my astonishment, most of these “crazy” theories were based on valid observations.³ I was interested in this community, a community that loved

³ Yep, Simba ends up with his sister, and yep, it is widely acknowledged that something isn't quite right on the cover of *The Little Mermaid*.

Disney as much as I (still, apparently) did, and was just as interested in the stories *behind* the stories as in the movies themselves. Their energy and enthusiasm allowed me, although older and wiser, to dive back into my Disney obsession—not as a wide-eyed “sheep” of a fan, but as a dedicated scholar, detective, and theorist.

When I was in high school, I decided to put my Disney expertise and research to good use. I created a website focusing on early “drafts” of Disney songs, as well as songs that had never been released. It was a pretty popular site, actually, since it was the only place on the Web with recordings of many of these “forgotten” songs. This was a rather large operation, so I had to organize and recruit. Accomplices around the world helped to find rare laserdiscs with additional “forgotten” songs to add to the website’s repertoire. I became a strange sort of guru; the people on the message board practically worshipped me and thanked me for providing music that they’d been searching for, in some cases, for over a decade.⁴

Needless to say, my site wasn’t around for long. Because of its popularity, Disney found out about the site pretty quickly, and ordered my web host to take it down. All of the fans were absolutely crushed, since the songs weren’t available *anywhere* else—the only laserdiscs and CDs that they’d ever been released on were long since out of print, and all but impossible to find. Yes, I understood that Disney “owned” the songs and that sharing the songs could be seen as “stealing.” But I just couldn’t understand why they’d slap the fans in the face, reprimanding us for “stealing” something we couldn’t have *bought* to begin with.⁵

It was obvious that Disney wasn’t what it used to be. Or, at least, it wasn’t what it had *appeared* to be. Instead of a fun, exciting fantasy land, it was just a company: uninterested in righting the wrongs of the world or promoting happy endings, like Walt Disney himself. When I was a kid, he was “Uncle Walt, bringer of magic and happiness.” After reading his biography, he seemed like something of a crotchety egomaniac. I suppose I can’t hold it against Disney that they *need to make money*, but ... that just seems so cynical, so materialistic, so mundane. So *un-Disney*.

So here I am, left to think about what Disney has meant to me, what Disney has done for me over the course of my life. I suppose my childhood love of Disney could have been seen as a form of hero worship, an admiration so immeasurable that it made me altogether blind to Disney’s flaws. But now

⁴ I got in touch with Stephen Schwartz, the lyricist of *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and found out that even *he* didn’t have access to these rare recordings.

⁵ I’m pretty sure this mentality comes from watching *Robin Hood* as a child. (Yes, the Disney version.)

that I'm older, I suppose that any hero has the right to a few flaws—Ariel, after all, could be seen as a whiny little brat, Belle as an enabler, Aladdin as a gold-digger. Maybe I'm pushing it a bit, but you get my point. These characters I had blindly idolized in my youth with religious fervor, whom I'd seen as perfect, almost God-like beings ... weren't. In that regard Ariel, Belle, and Aladdin—those amazing creations of pencil, ink, and paint—suddenly seem rather human.

Disney provided me with the things that every good religion should offer—a moral code, a set of deities, role models, and a promise of salvation. There were drawbacks too, as there are with many fundamentalist religious organizations. At first, my adoration was blind—it seemed that Disney could do no wrong, and I bought countless “sacred” knick-knacks to prove my status as a devout fan. It wasn't until I was older, when I started to study, criticize, and analyze Disney—to separate the “scripture” from the “church,” as they say—that I truly understood what Disney has really *taught* me over the years.

So, what has Disney really taught me? No amount of good deeds can guarantee a happy ending. Cinderella was wrong—wish as I might, my childhood dream of becoming an animator never came true. I'll never have the artistic ability, or the patience, required for that line of work. But dreams ebb and wane over time. Dreaming is a *process*, not just an end result, not just a happy ending. So go ahead, sing along with *Under the Sea*—whether or not they admit it, the “cool kids” probably love that song too. It's great to analyze these movies—to question and critique them—as long as you don't forget to enjoy yourself and find a little bit of inspiration along the way. You know, there's a lot to be said for “*Hakuna Matata.*” §