

IMPOSTER SYNDROME: THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

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Perhaps I should spend less time reading fairy tales.

The woods are still around me; all I hear is the sound of my breathing and my footsteps crunching in the snow. My breath mists the air. I wander along the trail, seeing these familiar woods for the first time again, and I imagine that somewhere in the woods is a wolf.

Clearly I should have skipped those Scandinavian fairy tales.

I continue to wander along the trail, senses heightened, eyes tracking for movement.

As though I would see it coming.

The silence is suddenly overwhelming, and I take a side trail that leads out of the woods. As I step out into the open, I can once again hear the traffic noise from the nearby road. It is as if I am stepping back into the world, a place where wolves are not of concern.

After a moment, I take a deep breath and return to the woods. The tree line forms the divide between the world and the fairy tale, and the traffic noise fades as I step across.

Maybe the wolf will come and rescue me from my thesis.

I continue along the path, so familiar. I have hiked this trail in rain, sun, and now snow, yet it is new each time. I pause on the bridge over the river, and I am suddenly looking down into Tuonela—the underworld¹. Idly, I hope that I am not the unfortunate Lemminkainen of this story, facing many impossible tasks in order to reach the goal of graduation. Growing up, I listened to the story of Lemminkainen's journey² until the tape wore out. I loved the way

¹ Also, "death's dark river"

² The Kalevala: Or the Land of Heroes, translation by Keith Bosley, foreword by Albert B. Lord (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), ISBN 0-19-283570-X

the narrator described his mother, determinedly combing Tuonela with Ilmarinen's magic rake, painstakingly stitching her dismembered son back to life. I fear my own mother would not have as much luck bargaining with Ilmarinen, though her sewing skills are not in doubt.

I cross the bridge and round a bend in the trail, until the path opens up to a clearing and I can view the growing waves of hills rolling toward the mountains in the distance. As I walk through the snow, I think about my research and my place in the world. My hike, like my path through graduate school, is my own. I doubt any of my contemporaries would find parallels with Scandinavian mythology on a hike through the woods, but I can still meet them along the way. Our paths may be different but they still intersect.

As I amble along, my mind wanders where it will. My thoughts flow from a wolf to my grandmother, to the sound of the door harp at her house. Music is such a part of Scandinavian culture that even the house itself makes music as visitors enter or leave. My grandmother's favorite saying was "Some people sing loud, and some people sing good, but everybody sings." Not only do her words reflect the musical emphasis of her culture, they have also gotten me through tough times. It is as if she was saying "you don't have to always sing the best, but you do have to get out there and try your best."

Easy to say when you aren't desperately hoping for approval on a project you've sacrificed two years of your life for!

Fairy tales are stories of everyday lives viewed in a new way. We all want to change the world. We start with a great vision, but wake to find that we are merely ordinary. Suddenly uncertain, we struggle on alone, hoping that no one will notice the very small sheep speaking from beneath the wolf's pelt. Like all of us, Lemminkainen can be either ordinary or extraordinary, depending on how we choose to see him. We must each face the impossible tasks inherent in our path, much like every other fairy tale hero.

Lemminkainen may not be the best hero to relate graduate work to: Preparing to capture his swan, a rival has killed him and thrown the pieces of his body into Tuonela. Then again, the pieces of my thesis have been rent by scissors and "sewn" with tape, so perhaps the metaphor works, after all.

We must hope the end is worth the endeavor.

We must speak with our own voice.