

Wisdom v. Garbage: An Ericksonian Analysis of Bombadil's "Is This Danger"

Erik Erikson was a German-American psychoanalyst whose theory of human psychosocial development became one of the hallmark frameworks for understanding what he termed "life-stages" we all must face over the course of our lives. He identified these stages in terms of the binary between healthy, expected outcomes versus pathological mishaps; "Hope," for example, is basic trust v. basic mistrust, and "Competence" is industry v. inferiority. His final stage, "Wisdom," is ego integrity (that is, acceptance of the victories and defeats of life in its fullness) v. despair.

"Is This Danger," from Bombadil's 2017 album *Fences*, asks listeners to consider the binaries associated with navigating the unfamiliar waters of a new romantic relationship. *Is this danger*, they inquire with the opening lyric, *or is this true love?* The song leads us through a process of discernment, one that ironically leads to a conclusion imbued with the same uncertainty with which we started. But in doing so, Bombadil offers guidelines as to how we can ask ourselves the questions that matter.

In addressing the "danger v. true love" binary, Bombadil describes the idea of expectant waiting, and the importance of learning to tap into our instincts. With retrospect, we can "stand at the mountain apex" with a clear vision of the treacherous distance we have traveled. Seeking truth, and doing so with patience, will ultimately bestow the capacity to hone and honor our own instincts. We walk a million miles, Bombadil notes, *just to see what we already knew*.

Bombadil then describes the "sadness v. past us" binary, validating the wounds so many of us have experienced from previous relationships. We have all walked through dark forests of grief, losses none of us chose, betrayals that build walls and blur distinctions between past and present. The resultant confusion leads many of us to seek solace and guidance from spiritual traditions. In doing so, however, we must honor our own doubts, and have the courage to unpack inaccurate lessons we have been taught about what love is supposed to look or feel like.

Indeed, in "wisdom v. garbage," we learn the necessity of sorting through the harder-won lessons -- that is, the adversities that have painted us increasingly detailed pictures of what we want, deserve, and are capable of giving in relationships -- from the baggage that may sometimes lead us to inappropriate assumptions about our current partners based on weak parallels to our egregiously abusive ex-partners. Trauma inevitably triggers some degree of hypervigilance around flags that are even the softest shade of pink. If we are not mindful of the importance of viewing our current partner through the accurate lens of the present, we run the risk of alienating them with our insecurities or accusations. This is why we must tend to our own woundedness before we can fully engage in authentic relationships with others.

In the closing "caution v. springtime" verse, Bombadil leads us, at the end, to *what we already knew*: that is, that none of us know jackshit. Their rhetorical question about whether this season will change points to our folly. Of course, seasons change; springtime passes as surely and solidly as the moon stays put. But this can lead to a dangerous mental trap in which even joyful moments with our new partner whisper their projections for the imminent fall of the so-called other shoe. How can we let ourselves feel gratitude for the beautiful single shoe we are rocking, even while the other shoe is in mid-air? The answer lies in acceptance of the dreadful incredible inevitable impermanence of all things.

We thank our losses for the wisdom they have granted us; we sift through garbage trapped in unhealed wounds; and we embrace uncertainty by experiencing each passing moment in its true fullness. Any other way leads to despair -- the Ericksonian tragedy of having held back so much of what we could be giving, and deprived ourselves and others from the springtime of true love.

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