Good afternoon.

First, we invented stories; then, stories changed us. Jerome Bruner wrote that we have an “inherent readiness or predisposition to organize experience into story form: into viewpoints, characters, intentions, sequential plot structures, and the rest” (Acts of Meaning, 45).

For instance, if I say (or read) “Once Upon a Time,” I’m immediately transported into the land of fairy tales. We have been listening to fairy tales since we were kids. We consume them in books; we watch them in movies: Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, Frozen. Fairy tales come from an oral storytelling tradition. They were passed from generation to generation and have been around for thousands of years. Bruno Bettelheim speculated that fairy tales helped us cope with things that were too dangerous to accept consciously...so we repressed these things in our dreams, and we represented them in fairy tales. His interpretation is a bit too Freudian for me; however, fairy tales do have elements in them that represent the reality of humanity. They have:

1) a moral lesson where good always triumphs over evil (slide)
2) a hero, a villain, and a mysterious “friend” who helps out the hero (slide)
3) magic: who doesn’t love a little magic? (slide)
4) the initially insurmountable obstacles that our hero overcomes by using their “good” qualities (slide)
5) leading to the happily-ever-after (slide)

I love fairy tales because they play in a space between fantasy and reality, and because they don’t sugarcoat life. Instead, they delve into the realities of pain and loss and heartache.

They confirm that life isn’t always fair and that sometimes bad things happen to good people.

On the other hand, they also underscore a capacity for change, for transformation, for felling the villains, and overcoming evil: from the monsters hiding in your closet to the evil queen, and the bully [SLIDE 4] who waits to pull your hair when the teacher isn’t looking. That last kind of villain, the one who confronts you or bullies you only when they think they can get away with it, that one can be tough to overcome.

In Snow White, the evil Queen is toxic, malicious, and ruthless. The hero, Snow White, is good and equitable. When the queen is told that Snow White is the fairest of them all, the queen hires a huntsman to kill her stepdaughter. The huntsman pitys Snow White and lets her run away, allowing her to distance herself from the situation. Eventually, the Queen finds out and retaliates by pretending to be a sweet older woman with a yummy apple that, when eaten, causes Snow White to fall into a sleep-like death.
In our everyday lives, the villain, or bully, engages in retaliation in different ways. When confronted with their behavior, they might talk over someone else, or craft a false narrative around the person they are targeting, projecting their own retaliatory acts onto that person by presenting themselves as crusading against corruption. Somehow, they, in their self-righteous indignation, have been wronged. They have positioned themselves as the eternally aggrieved whistleblower. They might even convince others to bully and intimidate their target further on their behalf.

The poet John Mark Green wrote,

The self-righteous
scream judgements
against others
to hide the noise
of skeletons dancing
in their own closets. (30 April 2018)

This real-life villain attempts to create a powerful platform of disinformation because they truly believe they understand better than anyone else, even an expert on such matters, what opinions should be held. They are their own ultimate source of authority and knowledge regardless of what the truth may be. But it is all smoke and mirrors. The tools they use to bully and intimidate might diverge considerably from the evil Queen’s poisonous apple, but these tools are no less effective in serving to demean and diminish the person or persons under attack: verbal barrages behind closed doors, multiple (e.g., more than 20) FOIA submissions so that someone can read through emails for “clues” that support a particular narrative, false claims and innuendo in public forums, persistently asking the same question because the first 15 times this person asked and received answers to that question, they were unhappy with the answer.

So really, in situations like these, what is there to do? What can we learn from fairy tales?

1. SLIDE 8. Well, you set limits: minimize your interactions with this person. Snow White ran away and hid. She was the ultimate “Grey rocker”; you act like a grey rock and you become so uninteresting the person leaves you alone.

2. SLIDE 9: Resist the urge to retaliate: often when we are attacked, we want to defend ourselves. We get locked into some battle where we feel compelled to return attacks on our own character in kind, responding to contempt with contempt, blame with blame. As Snow White did, it can save your sanity to detach from the situation and to find an alternate way in the world.
3. Cultivate compassion – up to a point: this one is hard for me. Abraham Lincoln was said to have remarked “I do not like that man…I must get to know him better.” Finding a way to humanize someone who is an irrational monster can be a tall order, but it is about protecting you.

SLIDE 9: I sometimes imagine that irrational monster as a 3-year-old throwing a tantrum on the grocery store floor because their parent said no to their 300th request for something. You let them tantrum and you ignore them. And you understand that they are upset because that’s where they are developmentally: they are inherently immature and lack the capacity to reason.

4. If these strategies don’t work, disengage. Truth and fairness mean nothing to someone like this unless it aligns with their own distorted perceptions and definitions of truth and fairness. Disengaging means removing yourself from their line of fire.

5. SLIDE 10: I would add a 5th strategy to this list: transformative change. Setting limits, avoiding retaliation, cultivating compassion, and disengaging are all well and good, but sometimes these don’t stop the attacks. So, let’s say that you leave your position and have removed yourself from the line of fire. That’s great for you, but now others who come after you are vulnerable to future attacks. By not addressing the problems and doing what you could when you were in a position to actually do something, you have maintained the status quo and potentially encouraged future attacks and even more outrageous behavior. To disrupt the status quo, we must dismantle the structures that allowed and encouraged this behavior to foment and fester, because this person’s arrogance and self-righteousness prevents them from ever changing themselves.

SLIDE 11: Leo Tolstoy wrote that “an arrogant person considers himself perfect. This is the chief harm of arrogance. It interferes with a person’s main task in life---becoming a better person” (Path of Life, 110). Envisioning a different future involves embracing change and figuring out how to make the world we live in, even the small world here at Purdue, better. Not only better for yourself, but better for everyone who comes after you.

Ultimately, fairy tales are about good and how good wins out in the end. And winning out in the end requires embracing our inner strength, our courage, and our persistence.

[SLIDE 12]

We are almost there! And we can make the changes that need to be made as long as we keep moving forward. As Dory said in Finding Nemo, “just keep swimming.”
I want to thank all of you for your hard work this year. I think we have accomplished a great deal under extraordinary circumstances. I look forward to what the future holds and how we can make our little corner of the world a better place for everyone!

[SLIDE 13]
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Once Upon a Time...

The Power of Stories
The Power of Stories

Who Can Forget This Scene in Bambi?
Fairy Tales and Our Darkest Fears
Indignation
John Mark Green

The self-righteous scream judgments against others to hide the noise of skeletons dancing in their own closets.

- John Mark Green
Set Limits

Grey Rock
Resist the Urge to Retaliate

“Nine years I played jokes on her and she never retaliates!”
Cultivate Compassion – Up To a Point
Transformative Change

https://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/civic-engagement-transformative-guide
“An arrogant person considers himself perfect. This is the chief harm of arrogance. It interferes with a person’s main task in life---becoming a better person.”
Finding Nemo

*Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming*
*What do we do? We swim, swim*
THANK YOU!