

A Dozen Fables Stories and Fables for Teacher Development



All
human beings
have
an innate need
to hear
and tell stories
and to have
a story
to live by.



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TO BE HUMAN IS TO LOVE STORIES. IN OUR WORK WITH TEACHERS and teacher educators, we have found stories to be invaluable for many reasons. Listeners enjoy and remember stories, and, through them, remember important principles and concepts we are trying to convey. Often if we try to give direct advice, it may not be taken. However, if that advice is presented through a story and a theme that cause listeners to pause and think, the message is more powerful and memorable. Most cultures have long oral traditions; tapping into those traditions to adapt a story and make it more local helps people to make connections between what we are teaching and their own lives. Finally, in many places storytelling and communicating through metaphor is very common, so using stories and fables is very appealing and makes teaching more effective.

In this article, we present a selection of 12 stories and fables that we have used successfully in pre-service and in-service teacher training workshops around the world. For each of the stories, we have included a suggested theme to connect it to a teaching, training, or staff development situation. Of course, stories can have many interpretations and readers may find a different theme in a story that is more relevant to their own settings. When telling these stories, we frequently asked workshop participants to tell us their interpretations of the theme or moral. These interpretations have sometimes been very different from our own. We are always pleasantly surprised by the range of messages a single story can convey.

We have also offered, when appropriate, some background information on sources or uses of the stories, a brief history of how we've used them, and suggestions about how the stories might serve other teachers' needs in teaching and training. The stories we have used in our workshops come from various sources, for example, books, personal experiences, and other people, including friends, colleagues, and strangers we have encountered through our families, work, and travel.¹

Story 1

The Rocks

A time management specialist was asked to give a presentation on her specialty. She decided to do a demonstration. First she asked her assistants to bring a big bucket and put it on the table in front of the audience. Then she asked for large, grapefruit-sized rocks and filled the bucket with them.

"Is the bucket full," she asked?"

"Yes!" said the crowd, but she asked for more to put in anyway. This time her assistants brought in pebbles. She poured the pebbles in the bucket and it held a surprising number in the space between the big rocks.

"Now is the bucket full?" she asked.

"Yes!" "No!" "Yes!" "No!" said various persons in the crowd. Some people were uncertain; some were getting suspicious. The time management specialist asked for more. This time the assistants brought her sand. She poured sand in the bucket and it filled the spaces between the pebbles.

"Now is the bucket full?" she asked.

"No!" they answered. By now, everyone

was suspicious. So she asked for water and poured in quite a lot. Now no one could think of anything else that could fit in that bucket.

"What does this process demonstrate?" asked the time management specialist.

One member of the audience spoke up: "No matter how busy you are, you can always fit in one more thing."

"I can see how you might think that was my point, but it is not," said the specialist. "I was trying to show you that if you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all!"

Suggested theme: Set your priorities, and do the most important things first.

We've used this story as an inspirational piece with project teams and students about to tackle something large. We've also used it to encourage curriculum planners to look at the big picture before being overcome by the details. An additional way we've used this story is to help workshop participants think about the balance they must achieve between life and work, and to help them focus first on what is most important in their lives.

Story 2

Time to Fish

A rich businessman was on holiday by the beach in Mexico when a small fishing boat docked nearby with just one man on board. Inside the boat were several large tasty-looking fish.

"That's quite a fine catch," noted the businessman. "How long did it take you to pull those in?"

"Only a little while," said the fisherman.

"So why don't you stay out fishing longer and catch more fish?" said the rich man.

"This is enough to take care of the needs of my family," replied the fisherman.

"But what do you do with all the rest of your time?" asked the businessman.

The fisherman said, "I sleep late, I fish a little, I spend time with my wife and play with my children. Then I rest in the afternoon. In the evening, I visit the rest of my family or stroll into the village where I have a drink with my friends. I have a full and busy life."

The rich man scoffed. "I have a business degree from one of the best universities in the world. I can help you. If you spent more time fishing, you could buy a bigger boat with the

profits you make. With the profits from the bigger boat you could buy several more boats until eventually you would own a whole fleet of fishing boats. Then instead of selling the fish to a middleman you could sell the fish directly to the processor and increase your profit margin. Eventually, you could open up your own canning factory and become a wealthy business owner. Of course, you would have to leave this village by the sea where you live and move to the capital and maybe even later to another country to manage your business.”

“How long would all of that take?” the fisherman wanted to know.

“Oh, at least 15 years,” replied the businessman.

“But what then?” asked the humble fisherman.

The businessman laughed and said, “That’s the best part. When the time is right, you can sell your company. You would become rich. You could make millions.”

“Millions!” exclaimed the fisherman. “Then what?”

“Then you could retire to a little village by the sea” said the businessman, “where you could sleep late, you could fish a little, spend time with your wife, play with your kids, then rest in the afternoon. In the evening, you could stroll into the village and have a drink with your friends. You see how wonderful things would be!”

Suggested theme: Be sure of your goals before you pursue them.

We have used this story when facilitating project planning to encourage participants to consider what they really want to achieve and whether they need to consider more efficient and effective options for achieving their goals. The story also has obvious lessons for us all, forcing us to consider—as we spend our days busy with work—what we want in life.

Story 3

The Sky is Falling

The Little Sparrow (European version)

This version of the story was first told to us by Teresa McConlogue.

In medieval times, a brave knight, dressed in his shining armor, was riding through the wood on his horse. He had set out to look for adventure—perhaps a joust or a dragon or a damsel in distress needing a rescue. He had

not found a single dragon. As he turned a curve in the road, suddenly the knight saw something. A tiny sparrow was lying in the middle of the road with its spindly little legs waving in the air.

“What are you doing, silly bird, waving your little legs in the air?” the knight asked. “An owl will surely fly down and catch you for dinner.”

“Haven’t you heard?” said the bird. “The sky is falling! I heard it from the little hen on a farm up the road.”

“I don’t think the sky is falling at all,” said the knight. “But even if it is, what are you doing lying in the road waving your little feet around? What good will that do?”

“I’m going to hold the sky up so it won’t hit the earth!” said the sparrow.

“That’s outrageous,” exclaimed the knight. “Your tiny legs can never hold up the sky!”

“Oh, I may be small and weak,” said the sparrow, “but one does what one can, one does what one can.”

The Bee Eater (Southern African version)

Long ago, a Sangoma was traveling through the bush. She was taking herbs to her neighbor who was suffering from malaria. She came to a clearing, and there in the middle of the path was a tiny bee-eater bird lying on its back, waving its little legs in the air.

“Why on earth are you lying there,” said the Sangoma. “I’m sure a kudu or a rhino will come any minute and tromp all over you.”

“Haven’t you heard?” said the bird. “You should know about these things. You’re a wise and magical woman. The sky is falling down on the earth! I heard it from a hoopoe.”

“No, I haven’t heard, but even if it is, what are you doing lying in the road waving your little feet around? What good will that do?”

“I’m going to hold up the sky with my little feet,” said the little bird.

“But your feet are too small and weak to hold up the sky!”

“I may be small and weak,” said the bee eater, “But we must do what we can, we must do what we can.”

Suggested theme: Even if a problem seems hopeless or too big to handle, we should never give up.

We offer two versions of the same story. Often, storytellers can change a few details to make a story more interesting and relevant to

the local culture. We have sometimes told a story and stopped at key points to ask for help in changing details to make it more appropriate for the audience. While Mary Lou was in Southern Africa helping English teachers incorporate AIDS prevention education into their content-based curriculum, she adapted the sparrow story by asking informants from the culture (Kwa Zulu Natal, in this case) about appropriate substitutions for details, for example, "In the story I know, a knight travels through a forest. In your country, a _____ travels along the _____." The story above resulted from this collaboration.

Story 4

The Camel Dances

by *Arnold Lobel*

The Camel had her heart set on becoming a ballet dancer. "To make every movement a thing of grace and beauty," said the Camel. "That is my one and only desire." Again and again she practiced her pirouettes, her relevés, and her arabesques. She repeated the five basic positions a hundred times each day. She worked for months under the hot desert sun. Her feet were blistered, and her body ached with fatigue, but not once did she think of stopping.

At last the camel said, "Now I am a dancer." She announced a recital and danced before an invited group of camel friends and critics. When her dance was over, she made a deep bow. There was no applause.

"I must tell you frankly," said a member of the audience, "as a critic and spokesperson for this group, that you are lumpy and humpy. You are baggy and bumpy. You are, like the rest of us, simply a camel. You are not, and never will be, a ballet dancer!" Chuckling and laughing, the audience left.

"How very wrong they are!" said the Camel. "I have worked hard. There can be no doubt that I am a splendid dancer. I will dance and dance only for myself." That is what she did, and it gave her many years of pleasure.

Suggested theme: Satisfaction will come to those who please themselves.

Again, we have a story in which a few small changes can make it more relevant to an audience from a different culture. We found an anonymous version of this story on the World Wide Web in which the camel was an Oriental dancer who practiced "her turns, her belly

rolls, and her shimmies. She repeated the six basic rhythms a hundred times a day." She was told by her critics, "You are not, and never will be, a true artist of the Danse Oriental." She decides, as the ballet dancer did in the original story, to dance to make herself happy.

In addition to its adaptability to every culture that dances, this story inspires us, along with our participants and students, to make sure to choose goals that give us pleasure and satisfaction, and not to focus exclusively on others' opinions of our performance.

Story 5

Perspectives

One day, I was traveling by car from Cairo to Alexandria. I stopped at a rest area and met a woman who was traveling back the other way. Curious about the city I was to visit for the first time, I asked, "How is Alexandria?"

"Alexandria is just like Cairo," replied the woman. "It's a miserable place. It's hot and dusty, the people are unfriendly and will steal from you if you don't watch them, and the roads are as crowded as the markets!"

I was discouraged and a little fearful about my destination. I wondered whether to turn back, but I thought it would be best to get another opinion, so I traveled on a little further. I drove on, all the time wondering whether I was doing the right thing, until I came to the next rest stop. Here I met another woman who was also traveling from Alexandria to Cairo, and I asked the same question, "How is Alexandria?"

"Alexandria is just like Cairo," she answered. "The sun always shines, the people are warm and friendly, the markets are full of nice things to buy, and the ancient monuments are spectacular!"

Suggested theme: One sees what one looks for.

It seems that every class, every workshop, every team has its naysayers, individuals who see the dangers, problems, and troubles of whatever is proposed. Sometimes people find themselves in a situation such as the narrator of this story and can consider taking another, more positive look at the situation.

Story 6

Not My Home

The salesman knocked on the door of the big house. A little boy answered.

“Is your mummy at home?” asked the salesman.

“Yes,” said the little boy, and he slammed the door. The salesman was perplexed and a little annoyed. He knocked again, and the boy opened the door.

“Can I speak to her?” asked the salesman.

“This is not my home,” replied the little boy closing the door again.

Suggested themes: Ask the right question if you want to get the right answer. Don't automatically assume that you share the same background information with your audience.

The above “story” is also a well-known joke. Workshop participants can find themes or morals in almost any story, and we usually use them to present messages. However on some occasions, we use stories and jokes simply for humor, especially after a period of hard concentration. Sometimes in classes and workshops, when the tasks have been difficult and the concentration high, we have found it useful to be lighthearted for a moment and to simply enjoy a laugh together.

Story 7

Feed Your Horses

Once there was a rabbi famous for his wise and long sermons. One day the rabbi went to temple, and there was only one person in the congregation. He was badly dressed and dirty—obviously not an influential person. The rabbi felt that he needed at least ten people to hold a proper service, and he wondered aloud what to do. “You’re the only one here today,” he said to the man. “Should I give a sermon or not?”

The man replied, “If you had a stable full of horses and all of them ran away but one, wouldn’t you still feed that horse?”

“Of course,” said the rabbi.

“Then, of course, you should give your sermon to me,” said the man.

“He is right,” thought the rabbi, feeling embarrassed. “I should teach one as well as I teach many.” So the rabbi began to speak. He made his best effort and spoke beautifully and powerfully. He tried to include all his wisdom in that single sermon. He went on and on, and was so engrossed in his teaching that he did not stop for two hours. When he finally stopped and looked up, the humble man looked completely shocked and exhausted.

“Oh, dear!” said the rabbi. “What’s the mat-

ter? Didn’t you find my sermon interesting?”

The man said, “If you had a stable full of horses and all of them ran away but one, would you feed that one all the food you had saved to feed all the horses for a year?”

Suggested themes: Don't over-do, and don't try to impress. Give people only as much information as they need.

We have found this a useful story when training trainers who, like the rabbi, often want to let their audiences have all the benefit of all their wisdom at once. The story helps people to focus on the fact that learners can absorb only a limited amount of information at one time. A short and concise presentation might be more effective in the long run than a lengthy and detailed one.

Story 8

A Participant's Story

Mohammed Abu Rahma, from Ismailaia, Egypt, tells this story about an event that happened when he was studying for his Ph.D. in London. He had brought his family to live with him in England, and often he would take them to the park to enjoy the flowers, fresh air, and some Egyptian food.

One sunny day as they were eating in the park, a dog smelled the food and came up to the family. “Imshi! Imshi!” said Mohammed. (Imshi means “go away” in Arabic.) But the dog came closer to him to beg. “Imshi! Imshi!” said Mohammed again, but the dog would not go away.

Then Mohammed’s seven-year-old son spoke up, “Papi, that dog won’t go away if you say ‘imshi.’ It’s an English dog.” The boy turned to the dog and said, “Go away! Go away!” The dog then turned around and ran away.

“Perhaps my son knows English better than his father,” thought Mohammed.

When Mohammed returned to Egypt, he told the amusing story to his father.

“Amazing!” said the grandfather. “Even their dogs speak English!”

Suggested themes: Tailor what you say to your audience. Children sometimes are wiser than adults.

We have found that our own experiences and those of people with whom we work are very useful sources of stories about actual events. Sometimes they are funny stories;

sometimes they have a serious point to make. Sharing a humorous or profound personal experience with the audience, and having one or two members of the audience tell of their own such experiences, helps establish group rapport and enables participants to get to know one another.

We use several techniques to encourage this type of sharing. We have randomly given the jokers from a deck of cards to individual participants who are told that their role is to tell a joke or story sometime during the day. On other occasions, we have required the last person back from a break to tell the entire group a story. We have also asked participants to come prepared with a one-minute joke or story to share with the entire group. Then, when we need a short break or a rest from intense concentration, we can call on individual participants to tell their story or joke. This is the source of the story above.

Story 9

A Piece of Rope

The Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) was walking down the road one day carrying a piece of rope. A hungry man approached him from the other direction and asked for food. Instead of food, Mohammed offered the man his piece of rope and this advice:

“Here you are. Go to the mountains that you can see in the distance, pick up some wood, and tie it with this rope. Then take it to the market and sell it!” The man did as Mohammed told him and soon was able to make enough money to feed himself and his family.

Suggested theme: Helping people help themselves is sometimes the best way to assist them.

The theme of this story is similar to the well-known adage: Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.

Religious tales often carry messages. In addition to the story above, we have made use of Sufi stories. Using local religious stories is often a very helpful way to communicate values shared by the audience. Ask your participants for examples.

Story 10

Building a Cathedral

With thanks to Linda New Levine!

A consultant was sent to check on worker satisfaction at a construction site where a cathedral was being built. She walked up to one worker and asked what he was doing and if he was satisfied with his work. He snapped, “Satisfied? I’m cutting blocks out of boulders with these simple, primitive tools. I’m sweating in the hot sun doing boring, backbreaking work. I’m miserable!”

The consultant went to another worker and asked him what he was doing and if he found satisfaction in his work. He said, “I’m shaping these blocks into forms and arranging them in the architect’s design. It’s slow and sometimes boring, but I make a living for my family. Things could be worse.”

The consultant, slightly encouraged, then went inside the structure, where an old woman was sweeping the floor, cleaning up after the construction crew. When asked what she was doing, the woman replied, “Can’t you see? I’m building a magnificent cathedral!”

Suggested theme: Appreciate the importance of your work.

Our colleague, Linda New Levine, who told us this story, uses it to illustrate the crucial role teachers play in their students’ lives: teachers, too, are building magnificent cathedrals. This story often leads to a very personalized discussion of the importance of teachers and how they can either inspire or ruin the lives of children. Some of our participants who are teacher educators have envisioned themselves as the consultant in this story; they check if teachers are aware of the weighty, yet lofty, responsibility placed on them in their day-to-day work.

Story 11

Why Dogs Hate Cats

by Julius Lester

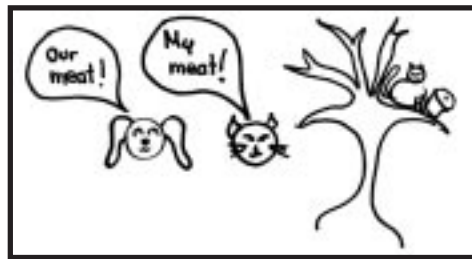
Long ago, dogs and cats were great friends. They were always together, going for walks, playing games, and telling stories and jokes. But their favorite thing to do together was to eat. Once in a while, they found enough money to buy some meat to share, and they had a wonderful time bringing it home and sitting down to eat it together.

One day, the dog and cat managed to scrape up a few coins, and they happily set off for town. They bought a large piece of meat, and because the meat was so heavy, they decided to

take turns carrying it back to their village. First it was the dog's turn, and he sang a happy tune as he carried the meat down the road.

"Our meat! Our meat!" sang the dog. Then it was the cat's turn, and she sang her tune. "My meat! My meat!" sang the cat.

Then the dog took another turn: "Our meat! Our meat!" And then the cat: "My meat! My meat!" They continued taking turns, each animal singing its own song until they were almost home. It was the cat's turn to carry the meat last. The cat took the meat and climbed up a tall tree and lay down and slowly proceeded to eat it. The dog leapt at the bottom of the tree and barked and barked, but to no avail. While the dog watched helplessly, the cat ate every bite of the meat and then smugly sat and licked itself clean. That cat had its way, but to this day, every time a dog sees a cat, the dog remembers the meat and chases after the cat.



Suggested themes: An old wrong may never be forgotten. When planning projects, remember the importance of getting people on your side.

We have placed this story next to last, because strictly speaking the moral is not related exclusively to teacher development. However, we have found that when we use stories in teacher education workshops we lead, the teacher participants often become interested and want to use stories with their own learners. This is a good story for younger learners. When telling it, we often illustrate hands-on storytelling techniques, either by drawing easy-to-copy pictures to go along with the story (see above) or by asking our participants to take the roles of the dog and the cat, using some prop as the meat.

Story 12

The Right Tool

by Aesop

Once there was some very hard steel. All the tools wanted to change the steel and mold

it into something useful. First, Ax gave it a try, throwing its sharp blade against the steel over and over again. But nothing happened, other than the blade became dull and chipped. Then Saw tried. Saw chewed back and forth on the steel, but the only thing that happened was that Saw's teeth became dull and bent. Then Hammer had a go, but the first time it hit the steel, its head broke off. Finally, Flame stepped up. Flame wrapped itself around the steel, holding it close and stroking it until the steel began to respond to its heat by softening and bending itself and taking the shape that Flame desired.

Suggested theme: When managing change, gentleness and persistence win over brute force.

We have told this story near the end of workshops when we were encouraging participants to return to their home settings and put what they had learned to use. We hoped it would help them find useful ways to face the inevitable resistance to change from those who weren't with them during the training.

The Unlucky Thirteenth Story

A Book Report

Once, a little girl was assigned to do a book report on a thick book about camels. She took the book home, read it carefully, and brought her report to school a week later. When she was asked to read the report to the class, she was very brief. "This was a very good book about camels," she said. "In fact, it told me more about camels than I really cared to know."

A teacher's dozen, like a "baker's dozen," includes an extra! This brief story comes from the personal experience of a third grade teacher. We've often used it to introduce brief workshops. We thought the theme was obvious: less is more.

We once told this story to a group of dignitaries in the Middle East. It was meant to be a brief and amusing introduction to tell our audience that we would talk only about what was relevant and not take up too much of their time. The resulting comments and questions took almost all the presentation time. We were asked:

"What is a book report?"

"Why do foreigners always think about camels when they talk about our country?"

"But we don't have any books in our classrooms. Will you provide them?"

“Our children aren’t so interested in camels. They’d rather learn about computers.”

“Do you think it is a good idea to let children take books home?”

Our final suggestion for using stories and fables is make sure that the story is relevant and comprehensible to your audience. Provide necessary cultural background, if you must, before telling the story. Better yet, choose a story that doesn’t require a lot of cultural translation.

Conclusion

We started writing down these stories when we found how powerful they were in teacher development. We realized specific stories would be useful for various purposes, including opening and closing sessions. Of course, we also use stories to teach specific language points, to establish a special atmosphere at our workshops (such as to create a positive affective training climate), to reinforce group cohesion, and to welcome new people into a group. We tell stories for inspiration, such as to influence attitudes and behavior change and to stimulate critical thinking. Finally, we use stories and jokes to provide light, comic relief when necessary.

Stories are easily remembered but also easily forgotten. We found that we would discover new stories, use them very effectively a few times in our training, and then forget them. We started writing down our stories, so we could have them readily available to use when they fit into our courses and workshops. We

hope these selections from the collection will also be useful to you—to tell, to adapt, and to discuss with the teachers and students with whom you work.²


Notes:

1. We have tried to give credit to the original storytellers when we could, but some sources have escaped us. Some stories are traditional or told so often that no original source can be found. If we have missed crediting anyone for a story, we will make every effort to make corrections in any future use.
2. Perhaps this article might inspire you to write down and share your own stories. We would love to hear them!

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