

STORIES ON A THEME OF CONFLICT AND PEACE

Note re. Voices Beyond Divisions: These are stories on themes relevant to the project that I already have in written versions, either because they have been recorded on CDs or because I have used them as part of courses etc. on previous occasions (or both). Some additional stories that may be used as the project progresses I don't yet have in written form. Stories are always re-told in performance in ways to suit the particular audience on the day. On the Voices Beyond division project, some of the teaching points have been covered. Versions (or more brief summaries) of stories in print with teaching points like these are provided to teachers for reference after the workshops. Where there are recorded versions, audio files are made available to teachers.

The Red & the Blue

As recorded on Fabulous Fables (Witty and Wise Tales from World Traditions - Imaginary Journeys 2008)

There were these two men in an African village and they always went out to work in their fields together. They'd walk out to their two separate plots at the same hour each day, stoop over their separate crops and weed and hoe, stop at the same time in the heat of the day, rest in the shade and talk together, go home after more work at the same time as the shadows of the evenings spread and lengthened. Late evenings they'd sit and chat in the market place or play cards outside a cafe. So in other words they were good friends and good neighbours.

Now you have to understand something about their two plots, because you see, although they were the one beside the other, they were divided by a kind of bank. And along the top of that bank ran a path and people would walk along that path and call out in a friendly sort of a way to the two men working and they would

smile and talk back, the way people do in Africa in many places. Talk shortens the day, eases things along, brings joy into the work too. What is a day when you don't talk?

Well, on this particular day I want to tell you about, this tricky fellow is watching the two men and he's going to walk along the path. He likes to play tricks, maybe he likes to show people things. Anyway, today he has on this robe, which is very striking, very strange too. Because the one half of it is red, bright, vibrant, flaming red, the kind of red that lights up the day, a powerful red, a striking red, a red to end all reds. All red from head to toe. But the other half, the left half, well that is blue, electric blue, brilliant blue, rich royal blue, an incredible tribute to the dyers skill and art.

So this tricky fellow, he picks his moment and he sets off along that path. And of course the two men are stooped over their work, heads down, backs glistening with sweat. And he walks along, tiptoes along, creeps along very quiet, like a shadow moving along a wall until he is right between them and he calls out something that would be the equivalent of: "Hi there guys." And they both look up, a little startled that someone is there and they see him and they wave back. They don't know this man much - he is from some other place and they only see him sometimes. So they just wave and say some kind of hello and they smile in a friendly way.

When he's gone, the first man, the one who'd seen the tricky fellow from the right says: "Wow, what a robe. Did you see that!"

"Sure thing friend, " says the other who had of course seen things from the left. "Incredible! I never saw a blue like that before!"

"Blue? What do you mean, blue? That was a red robe, red like when the sky is on fire."

“Oh no my friend, you are wrong. It was blue. You must have been dazzled by the sun. Believe me, it was very very blue.”

“So you think I’m a fool then, huh? You think I don’t know red when I see it?”

“Blue! It was blue!”

“Red...”

Well, what began as a disagreement pretty soon became a bit more than that and the long and the short of it was that in the end, they turned back to their work. Just get on with the work, get on down there, forget this talk, forget this fool. People need to use their eyes! They were tight lipped, keeping quiet, bottling it up. In the heat of the day, they sat under different trees, rested in different shade, in silence.

Now around the middle of the afternoon, the tricky fellow comes back again from wherever he’s been. And again he picks his moment to walk between them, making sure they’ll look up just at the right time. But of course this time he’s walking the other way, so now the blue is towards the man who saw red in the morning and the red is towards the man who saw blue. He smiles to himself and he calls out... and they both look up... and their mouths drop open. “Errr...uh....Hi there!” they say weakly.

And when the tricky fellow is gone, they’re over to that bank. “Brother,” says the first one, very meek and mild, “I’m very sorry.”

“So am I,” says to other one. “I should not have been so sure of myself.”

“Why not brother? After all, you were right. It was a blue robe. I don’t know why I saw red.”

“Now wait a minute. I was the one who was wrong. I was just going to say that it really was red after all. You don’t have to try and humour me. I can admit that I was wrong.”

“But you weren’t wrong.”

“Yes I was....”

Well, do I need to tell you that they were soon arguing not about who was right but about who was wrong? They both insisted that they had been mistaken and if the morning’s disagreement had become bitter, this time it was rank sourness itself. They got angry, they shouted, they swore, they vowed not ever to talk to each other again. They worked in seething, furious silence, each muttering about what an idiot the other was. And when it was time to go home, they stomped off separately, ignoring each other.

When evening came, they went to the market place but they sat at opposite sides of the square, looking anywhere but at each other. Why talk to a fool? What’s the point of talking to someone who thinks blue is red and red is blue and who can’t make up their mind about plain facts?

And maybe they’d have gone on like that to this day, but around the middle of the evening, the tricky fellow himself turned up, picking his moment again and jumping right in there between them, huge grin splitting his face as he spun himself around and around and around so that they could see red then blue then red then blue and then stopping so that they could both see the whole cloth and exactly the way it divided.

And those two men smiled and they shook him by the hand and shook each other by the hand too and made it up there and then. Because you see they weren’t going to hold a grudge since he’d showed them something and what’s more they’d the story to tell.

So things worked out well for them in the end. But remember this, the trickster doesn't always come to the market place; you don't always get the chance to see both sides at the same time. Sometimes you just have to use your imagination - properly.

Background information: *This story is a version from oral tradition of a plot that recurs in various cultures. For example, there is a European version about two knights riding from different directions and seeing a statue, half of which is in shadow with the other half golden because of the setting sun.*

- **Teaching Points:**
- *Although it's very easy to recite glib phrases such as 'different people see things differently' or 'both people can be right and both can be wrong', stories like this one get the idea across much better as the image stays within the mind.*
- *Again, you can get children to make up new versions of the story, with disagreements over partial views in more familiar situations.*
- *You can also discuss with children experiences they have had of conflict at home or school when both sides might have been partly wrong and partly right.*
- *Stories such as this can illustrate how familiar situations on the domestic scale can help to understand much larger conflicts. Also how seeing the larger 'picture' can help to resolve them. Again you can tease out some understanding of this with children.*

Hercules & Quarrel

(As recorded on Fabulous Fables (Witty and Wise Tales from World Tradition - Imaginary Journeys 2008) Audio version available for teachers' use.

Heracles – or Hercules as the Romans called him afterwards – was the strongest and boldest of the Greek heroes. People know that – but they don't often realize that even the strength of such a mighty hero has to be used with good sense. And good sense takes time to learn.

Now wherever Hercules was going when he found the plant, I couldn't tell you any more than you could tell me. All I know is that he was on his way somewhere, striding along the road with his ground eating strides, the muscles on him rippling and bulging as he gripped his mighty club. And then he sees it, this plant or whatever it was, growing or rather sprawling or maybe I should say splurging itself out by the wayside. Something about it... some feel... some atmosphere.... Hercules hated it at once. He knew that it was a travesty that should have no place in a just world, so he raised his huge club, swung it around twice and maybe more and then brought it down – SMASH – in the centre of that mess, that excrescence, that...

Well, it should have been the end of it. That should have crushed all the life out of it for good and all, but it didn't. The plant.... the thing... the shape.... whatever it was, it grew bigger, just as if he'd fed it. It all but burped its disgusting thanks and Hercules hated it even more, so he hit it again, this time even harder – a blow that would have flattened an ox to the thinness of a Breton crepe and turned a rock into dust as fine as flour. And the thing grew again... and again... and again. The more he hit, the larger and uglier and grosser and nastier and spiteful and threatening it became, oozing its nasty poisonous self all around the mighty hero.

Quite suddenly Heracles stopped and it was then that he heard a voice from the heavens, the voice of almighty Zeus. 'Heracles, Heracles, strike this thing no

more. It is the spirit of Quarrel and the more you hit it, the more it grows. Leave it and will shrivel and fade away like mist in the morning.'

Reluctantly heeding the god, Heracles put aside his club and sat down. The ugly thing went on seething and boiling around him for a moment and then, just as Zeus had said, it began to shrink. Smaller and smaller until the last wisps of it dissolved into the pure air of the morning.

And Heracles sat and watched and thought and learned the way you can sometimes – when you step away from the quarrel.

Background Information: *This is a less well- known fable of Aesop.*

Teaching points:

- *As Greek mythology often comes up in primary education because of the National Curriculum, Heracles may be familiar. If not some background information about his mighty strength, his great club and his vow to rid the world of evil may be useful if you are telling the story orally. The version above builds that into the narrative.*
- *Discussion about how conflicts of all kinds get worse the more you 'hit' them usually resonates with children from home and school. The parallel with what happens in wars is all too real.*
- *It is worth focusing attention on the effort Heracles had to make to leave the Spirit of Quarrel alone, despite feeling 'in the right', the peacefulness he felt in letting go of that and the visual image of the fading away of the ugliness. With encouragement, children can get a sense of this in a kind of guided imagery.*

The Travellers and the Grapes

Five travellers met up on the road and decided they would travel on together and share what they had between them. They were a Persian, a Turk, an Arab, a Greek and an Israeli. Despite their very different backgrounds, they were getting on very well together - most of the time. I don't know what language they were talking – it might have been English or it might have been Urdu or Russian or even Swahili or it might have been something else. All I know is that it wasn't their own and they didn't know all of its words by any means, which did lead to a confusion or two.

Now when they came to a small town and saw that the market was on that day, they decided to buy something they could share, something they could eat, something that would refresh them after their hot and dusty journey. They had only one coin between them however and they disagreed about how they should spend it.

The first one, the Persian, he was a speaker of Farsi and the only word he knew for what he thought they should have was from his own tongue. 'We should buy *angur*,' he announced. 'That's what we need now – *angur*!'

The Turk, who of course spoke Turkish first and foremost, looked at him sourly. 'No,' he said. 'I don't think so. What we need is *uzum*. That would be best.'

'Well I disagree,' the Arab objected. 'We should buy *inab*.' It was an Arabic word he could almost taste as he said it.

'No, no, no!' the Greek insisted, licking his lips and imagining just as strongly. 'It's *stafil*! We really should get *stafil*.'

‘You’re all wrong,’ the Israeli said. The thought of what he wanted made him smile despite trying to sound cross with the others. ‘There is only one thing that would satisfy both our thirst and our hunger and that is *enahv* – nice, fat, juicy *enahv*.’ This was a Hebrew word of course.

They began to argue until another traveller, who had been listening to their conversation, interrupted. ‘Listen!’ he shouted, rather loudly and with a lot of force. There was something about the way he said that one word that made them stop and look at him as he went on, more gently but still with a certain strength that came from knowing what he was talking about. ‘I can satisfy all of you with that one coin!’

They looked at him in disbelief. ‘How ever could you do that? We all want such different things.’

‘Easy,’ said the sixth traveller, who had learned all of their languages and more in his travels. And, before they could object, he took the coin and ran to a stall and bought – grapes. Because of course that’s what each of those words meant in those different languages.

Background information: *This story is from the Sufi tradition though has apparently passed into Middle Eastern folklore in general in different versions.*

Some Teaching Points:

- *If children know languages apart from English, you can discuss different words for common things such as a house or a door and the kinds of confusion that can come up when you don’t know what words in a different languages can mean the same thing.*
- *You can also show how you can use different ways of describing the same things in your own language that lead to disagreement.*
- *Like the Elephant in the Dark, this story stresses that people may be talking about experiences they have in common using different words. In talking to children, you can tease out a number of different levels*

appropriate to their age and understanding. (An obvious example with this project is the different sounds but common sense of words like shalom, salaam and peace.

- *You can invent new stories with confusions of words and realisations of commonality using the pattern of The Travellers and the Grapes.*

The Elephant in the Dark

(As recorded on Powerful Stories - double CD - Uncommon Knowledge 2003)

In ancient times, a certain walled city was guarded by a group of wise men. The king trusted them to judge what should and should not be allowed through the city gate.

Now one evening, a man brought an elephant to that city. No one had ever seen an elephant in those parts and the man felt that the elephant would both a curiosity and a blessing since there are many things an elephant can do. The shadows were already gathering when he arrived. Uncertain of how it would be received to begin with, the man decided to leave the elephant outside behind a rock whilst he went in to explain to the wise men what he had brought and why. All that took a lot of time, since the wise men had evolved quite a lot of what we would call red tape by this time, so when it came to inspecting the elephant, it was completely dark. "Never mind," said the wise men. "We are very wise, so can rely on other senses than mere sight!"

They all went out with the man who led them to where the elephant was and they each set about feeling part of the beast, to establish what it was. Then they went back to their gatehouse to discuss their findings.

"Gentlemen," said their leader, "it is quite clear that this creature is large and flat and fan-like." He had only felt the elephant's ear, you see.

"I disagree," said one of the others, "it's much more like a tree trunk or a pillar." He had touched the elephant's front legs."

"That's absurd!" said a third. "It's obviously a kind of snake." Of course, he had had hold of the elephant's trunk.

So it went on. Each of them defined the elephant in terms of the separate part he had touched and felt, and not one of them realized that they were all right and all wrong, that there was one creature with many attributes.

In the morning, they came to the conclusion that the elephant was a dangerous thing which simply caused arguments and they went out to tell the elephant keeper that, but he had already gone away. And so an elephant was never seen in that city, though the wise men passed on their separate stories of it and the people of the city took those bits and pieces of the tale and made a wonderful, imaginative and completely misleading myth about the creature. If you travel in that part of the world, you might hear some of the stories, which are told to this day.

Background Information: *This very famous story is claimed by more than one religious/spiritual tradition. It is famously told by Sufi poets like Jalaludin Rumi, Hakim Sinai and others but the Buddhists regard it as one of the Jataka Tales (stories told by Gautama the Buddha) whilst many Hindus and Sikhs regard it as belonging to their own religious backgrounds.*

Teaching Points:

- *As a prelude to talking about this story with children, you can pretend you've never seen an elephant and get them to describe it to you, making sure to take their answers too literally and to jump to wrong conclusions, which illustrates the elephant in the dark syndrome nicely. (I may already have done this with your children)*
- *Some versions children may know involve blind men rather than ordinary people in the dark. The version above avoids suggesting that the 'wise men' are visually handicapped, other than by a kind of stupidity a lot of listeners of all ages recognise.*
- *The metaphor in this story can be applied to a lot of things that are essentially one, but that people 'grasp' differently - from simple experiences in ordinary life to more profound things such as peace or truth or indeed God. Children can't be expected to see the more abstract levels of the tale in sophisticated*

ways but seem to 'get' the comparisons with (for example) the idea of peaceful feelings, especially when you get them to describe how they might experience those and adopt the same stance as for the elephant.

Essential Elements: *situation in which elephant (or similar) has not been seen - arrival of elephant - judges/guards/scholars/scientists who will assess it in the dark (or in other ways without the benefit of sight) - wrong conclusions based on partial experience*

Peace in the House

Four Chasidim were talking about how life was for them at home. They were very keen to show that they practised peaceful values of Jewish teaching.

‘You know,’ said the first of them, ‘in my house we all get on so well. We only have an argument maybe once in a week or two.’

‘That’s not so very good,’ the second boasted. ‘We can beat that in our house. Why, I reckon we might have a falling out only once a month, no more than that.’

The third one looked rather pleased with himself. He could go one better than that. ‘Hmm... well in our house it’s only a couple of times in a whole year!’

But the fourth said quietly, ‘My house is always peaceful. There is never a single argument and no one ever shouts at all.’

The others looked at him in amazement. ‘How ever do you manage that? You must be truly holy.’

‘No,’ the fourth man confessed. ‘It’s just that I have no family at all. I wish I had but I live alone.’

Jewish tradition

Background information: *Chasidim are pious Jews who follow their religious texts closely. This story is a typically succinct Jewish tale that makes a profound point quickly.*

Teaching points:

- *This story can be used to point out that conflict of one kind or another between human beings is natural enough, however hard you try.*
- *The fourth man may have peace but he also might be rather lonely - this is a point children can see quite easily.*
- *Discussion can include why living with other people and finding ways to get on with them might be better than living alone or falling out with each other all the time.*

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