

Truth and Parable

(Israel)

Retold by Brian W. Sturm

Sometimes folktales offer us a humorous and charming way to think about reality . . . that is one of the deep powers of story: to help us really SEE!

Once, two beautiful women names Truth and Parable lived together on the outskirts of town. Each thought herself the most attractive, so they quarreled and argued until they finally decided to have a contest: whoever attracted the most attention while walking through the village would be considered the most attractive.

On the appointed day, they walked to the edge of the village and Truth decided to go first. She was confident that everyone seeks Truth and wants to know Truth, so she began to walk through the village, smiling and greeting people as she went. To her chagrin, everyone began to move back inside their houses, glancing suspiciously over their shoulders. As she reached the far side of the village, only a few people still stood outside their houses. Fearing that she would lose the contest, she decided to attract as much attention as possible, so she threw off her clothing and walked back through the town wearing nothing at all. Surely now she would attract lots of attention.

Versions of this folktale can be found in:

Baltuck, Naomi. 1995. *Apples from Heaven: Multicultural Folk Tales about Stories and Storytellers*. North Haven, CT: Linnet, 69-70.

Forest, Heather. 1996. *Wisdom Tales from Around the World*. Little Rock, AR: August House, 1.

The remaining people, however, saw her coming and scuttled into their houses, closed their doors, and closed their shutters, so that when she returned to Parable, the village appeared deserted. Hanging her head in shame, Truth told Parable that it was her turn.

Parable walked quietly into town, and as she passed, people began to come out of their houses, smiling and chatting together. They followed Parable through the streets, talking happily with her. By the time she had returned to Truth, the entire village was in the streets.

Truth looked at Parable in confusion and defeat. “Why is it,” she asked, “that people flock to your side but spurn me? . . . Do people no longer value Truth?”

“Ah,” sighed Parable comfortingly. “People do still love Truth, but they do not like the *naked* truth. If you wish people to accept you, you must clothe yourself in the mantle of story. Only then will people be able to accept and understand you.” And with that, Parable took off her multi-colored robe and draped it around the shoulders of Truth, and when the two returned to the village, the people found that they did, indeed, still love Truth.

Weinreich, Beatrice Silverman, ed. 1988. *Yiddish Folktales*. New York: Pantheon, 7.

The Cracked Water Pot

(India)

Retold by Brian W. Sturm

This story circulates the Internet, but its origin—as with many folktales—is unknown. Most sources list it as “author anonymous,” and it is unclear whether it is actually traditional folklore or an authored story with folkloric motifs and style. Still, it gives us perspective on failure and opportunity, and children and teens quickly grasp the moral.

Many years ago, there lived a servant whose job it was to walk down the hillside from his masters house and fetch water from the stream running at its base. Each morning, just as the sun rose, he would shoulder the harness holding two clay water pots and carry it down to the river to fill. Then he would struggle back up the hillside to bring the morning’s supply of water to his master’s household.

One of the water pots has a slight flaw in its side that let water seep from the pot so that by the time the servant arrived at his master’s house, the pot was only half full. This bothered the little pot immensely, and he felt humiliated by his inability to fulfill his purpose. Finally unable to contain his misery any longer, he spoke to the servant one morning, saying, “Please forgive me! Each day you fill me up with water and I drip away half of the load on the way to the house. I am worthless since I cannot fulfill my mission, and I don’t think I can live with it any longer. Would you please discard me and find another better suited to this work?”

The servant smiled quietly at that, and then he picked up the little pot. “You are so focused on your misery that you notice nothing of the world around you,” he said. “This morning, do not worry about the water, but look around you as we walk up the hill back to the master’s house.”

So the little pot did just that, and when they arrived back at the house, the servant asked, “What did you see?” “The world is full of flowers,” said the pot! “And did you notice where they grew?” asked the servant. “Everywhere,” the pot replied. “No, little pot,” answered the servant. “They grow only on your side of the path. You see, I’ve always known of the hole in your side, and since it could not be changed, I scattered flower seeds and let you water them as we walked up the hill each day. Because you are as you are, the master’s house is filled with color and beauty.” And with that, the servant emptied the water from the two pots, picked a huge bouquet of flowers, and walked into his master’s house to make it beautiful.

Several versions of this story are available online:

www.storiesofwisdom.com/cracked-pots

www.aahbei.org/files/forms/WaterPot.pdf?PHPSESSID=12685bca29ca89b7ecd9cde9cb7857aa

Stonecutter

(Indonesia, Japan, China)

Retold by Brian W. Sturm

This story from many parts of Asia speaks to our true power when we stop trying to be other than we are. This is a wonderful story for children who are struggling with peer pressure or who just need that extra boost of self-confidence.

There once lived a poor stonecutter who spent each day chiseling blocks of stone from the base of a huge mountain. It was hot and tiring work, but he struggled valiantly each day to wrest his living from the base of the mountain. One day as he was working, he saw the prince being carried along by his servants, and he thought to himself, “That’s the life for me. I want to be cool and pampered. The prince is strongest thing in the world, and I wish, oh I wish, I were the prince.” No sooner had he wished it than *huuuuahhhh*, he transformed into the prince. Then he felt powerful. He could command life and death, and people bowed to him when he passed.

As he was carried along, he noticed that the sun was very hot that day, so hot that he found himself having to remove some of his intricate garments to cool off. “That sun is more powerful than I,” he thought, “and I wish to be the most powerful of all. I wish, oh I wish I were the sun.” *Huuuaahhhh*, and he became the sun. He sent his strongest rays down and scorched the earth. He reached down and touched the earth and forced seeds to grow, and he felt immensely powerful until. . .

He noticed something white and fluffy come between him and the earth, blocking his rays. “That cloud is more powerful than I,” he grumbled. “I wish, I wish I were a cloud,” and *huuuuahhhh*, he became a cloud. He roiled

himself into a huge thunderhead and lightning flashed from his body. He drenched the earth with his rain, flooding the fields and ruining people’s crops. He washed away entire villages and roared his thunderous wrath across the heavens, until . . .

He felt a gentle push and found himself forced through the sky against his will. “The wind is stronger than I,” he cried, billowing high. “I wish I were the wind,” and *huuuuahhhh*, he changed again. Now he was truly powerful. He roared across the plains, and the grass bowed their heads before him. He raced through the forests, and the trees groaned and fell before his might. Cyclones swirled to his bidding, and the oceans danced in frenzy before him. “This is power,” and he seethed across the world, until . . .

He ran into something that did not bow before him. Looking up, he saw an enormous mountain, and, try as he might, he could not move it. “This mountain is stronger than I,” he raged. “I wish, I wish I were a mountain,” and *huuuuahhhh*, he became one. He reared his snow-capped head high and defied the sun, the wind and the clouds. He felt his feet dig deep into the earth and knew that nothing could move him. “NOW I am the most powerful thing in the whole world,” he shouted, and so he was, until...

He heard a small sound coming from near his feet: *clink, clink*. Looking down, he saw an old stonecutter chiseling away at his base and carving out blocks of stone to sell in the market. One last time, he voiced his wish, “I wish, oh I wish I were a stonecutter,” and finally he became the strongest thing of all. He became himself!

This folktale can be found in many collections, including:

Demi. 1995. *The Stonecutter*. New York: Crown.
Courlander, Harold. 1970. *Kantchil's Lime Pit and Other Stories from Indonesia*. New York: Harcourt, 96–100.

McNeil, James. 1964. *The Double Knights: More Tales from Around the World*. New York: Walck, 37–40.

Argument Over Geese (China)

Retold by Brian W. Sturm

“Make hay while the sun shines,” goes the old aphorism. As this story from the Ming Dynasty explains, in life we often lose ourselves in the details and routines of making a living and awake one morning to realize we have forgotten life.

Once in China two hunters who had not caught anything to eat in several days decided to try their skill at catching geese. They took their bows and arrows down to the marshes early one morning and crouched down behind a tuft of reeds. It was cold and wet, and they were ravenously hungry. They waited anxiously as the sun rose red on the horizon, hung in splendor, then dipped toward nightfall. They were about to give up and return home, when in the distance they heard it, the soft honking of geese in flight.

Quickly they each knocked an arrow and waited for the geese to draw near. “Oh, I can already taste it,” whispered one. “Succulent goose plucked and roasted until the skin is crispy and brown and the meat drips with juices. Just a touch of plum sauce beside it to enhance the flavor...” and he paused to swallow the saliva building in his mouth.

“Roasted in plum sauce?” exclaimed the second hunter. “Why that’s no way to cook a goose! You must stew it slowly

in soy sauce until the meat falls from the bone and the fragrance of the soy sauce lingers like good luck.”

“Soy sauce?” cried the first hunter, turning to face the second. “You’ll ruin it if you cook it that way; it must be roasted with plum sauce!”

“Stewed in soy sauce,” cried the second angrily pointing his arrow at his companion.

“Roasted!”

“Stewed!”

“Plum sauce!”

“Soy sauce!”

“Stubborn as a goat!”

“Ignorant as a mule!”

And as they argued over how to cook them, the geese flew steadily on and disappeared into the setting sun.

This story can be found in:

Kendall, Carol and Yao-wen Li. 1978. *Sweet and Sour: Tales from China*. New York: Clarion, 98–99.