STORIES TO TELL YOUR STUDENTS

TRANSFORMING TOWARD ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

EDITED BY
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Stories to Tell Your Students
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Transforming toward Organizational Growth

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Joan Marques, Satinder Dhiman, and Jerry Biberman
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Foreword

Fables, myths, and stories reach back to the dawn of civilization itself. Long before humans learned to write and invented history, they told stories to make sense of the seasons, marriages, births, deaths, and any one of a thousand incidents and events.

Everyone is familiar with fables of one kind or another. Nearly everyone has heard one or more of Aesop’s fables. The fable of “The Tortoise and the Hare” is so familiar that it’s a part of our everyday vocabulary. It is so popular that there are even cartoon versions for young children. Similarly, the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen are also part of our general makeup, so much so that we take them for granted. And, of course, every culture has its own special myths and stories as well.

In spite of the immense variation among them, fables, myths, and stories share a number of common features. One, they generally take place in magical realms that are deliberately far removed from the constraints of the ordinary world. As a result, the characters can say and do things that they would never do in everyday life. In this way, they teach us lessons unencumbered by everyday realities. Two, they employ animals and mythic and superhuman characters. The characters are deliberate, larger-than-life exaggerations of human qualities such that we can see both their good and bad sides, often simultaneously. Three, unlike in real life, things generally get resolved in happy, clear-cut endings. The “good guys” are rewarded and the “bad guys” are punished. And typically, there is a clear distinction between the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” Four, the resolutions generally come in the form of clear moral lessons or principles. In other words, there is little, if any, ambiguity.

As you read the fables in this book, listen carefully to the feelings that each of the characters and the stories raise in you. Do you instinctively like or dislike any of the characters or situations? Why? What aspects of the fables remind you of your organization and why? Do the characters do a better or worse job of solving problems than either you or your organization?

More often than not, we remember stories long after we have forgotten theories or eloquent statement, no matter how good they are. If everything were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten! For this reason, I applaud this initiative of Joan, Satinder, and Jerry, and the selfless collaboration of more than twenty other professors of Organizational Behavior from all over the world. They have given their colleagues a truly powerful tool in improving the effectiveness of education. I want to express my enthusiasm by ending with a fable of my own!
The Problem of the Kindly Old King

Once upon a time, an old and kindly king by the name of Whispo lived in a strange and far-off land called Meum. The king had three sons: Meso, Mineso, and Soso.

Whispo lived a long and fruitful life. He had a beautiful wife by the name of Ohso with whom he had the pleasure of growing old. They loved one another more and more with every passing day.

The king was very good to his people. He knew every one of them by name. He even knew the names of all their pets.

Whispo loved his people as if each and every one of them was a member of his own family. In turn, they loved him back just as much.

There was of course one problem, and it was a big one at that. The day was fast approaching when the king could no longer rule. He had to appoint one of his sons to succeed him.

The problem was that none of his sons seemed right for the job. Meso, the first born, was intelligent enough; indeed, he was very bright. He consistently bagged the first prize in every one’s of Meum’s math and science contests. But there was something missing that Whispo couldn’t quite put his finger on. Meso seemed to be lacking something essential that allowed him to connect deeply and sincerely with Meum’s people. It was as if one couldn’t really trust Meso with matters of the heart, spirit, and conscience.

Mineso, the second born, was also very intelligent, although it was of a very different kind than that of Meso. There wasn’t a practical problem, such as determining the exact number of berries in a field without counting them one-by-one, that Mineso couldn’t solve. Similarly, there wasn’t a broken machine that Mineso couldn’t fix. But as with Meso, Mineso also appeared to be lacking in an essential human quality that would make the people trust and love him.

The last son Soso was frankly a dolt. To say he was a disappointment to the king was putting it mildly. Soso appeared to be lacking in intelligence of any kind. However, he did seem to draw small animals and young children to him. Perhaps it was because he couldn’t or wouldn’t speak. Nonetheless, as if by magic, there was a sparkle in his eyes and a smile on his face that somehow drew everyone around to him.

The king decided to put each of his three sons to a test. The one who solved it successfully would become king.

In a deep forest in the middle of Meum lived an old witch by the name of Bebil. Bebil was very old indeed; she was rumored to be over 800 years old.

In the middle of the thatched cottage in which she lived was an exotic bird that laid silver and gold eggs. Once in a very long while, the bird also laid eggs that were made of rubies and other precious stones.

The test involved slaying the witch and bringing the bird to the king. This had been attempted by many before but none had succeeded. In fact, all who had tried had suffered horrible deaths.
The first son set out at a quick gallop. He felt supremely confident, if not arrogant, that with his great knowledge and intelligence, he could trick the witch into giving him the bird.

Meso decided to make a costume that would make him look every bit as real and like the bird he was trying to trick the witch into giving him. He also invented a very clever and smaller mechanical bird that would produce eggs that looked even more beautiful than the eggs that Bebil’s bird laid.

Meso traveled for many days and months. At last, he reached the clearing in the forest where Bebil lived. As soon as he appeared, Bebil came rushing out of her house, her face bursting with anger. “Who dares to intrude in my home? Answer me quickly or I will strip the meat from your bones and devour you instantly!”

Meso replied, “Oh great witch! I am just a humble creature that has come to make you a present of another bird. It lays eggs even more precious and beautiful than the ones you already have.”

Meso walked slowly but steadily closer and closer toward Bebil. His hope was that Bebil would become so mesmerized and taken in by his trick bird that he could slip inside her house and take her bird for his own.

Finally, Meso got to within an arm’s reach of Bebil. He could see her ugly red eyes. He could smell the foul stench on her breath.

Meso very carefully laid his small mechanical bird in front of the witch. Bebil was as entranced by Meso’s contraption as he hoped she would be. It seemed perfectly real, and it laid the most beautiful eggs that Bebil had ever seen.

There was no doubt whatsoever that Bebil was completely drawn to Meso’s mechanical bird. She showered all of her attention on it. In this way, Meso was able to walk directly into Bebil’s cottage, pick up the magic bird, place it in a sack and walk out to the edge of the clearing and beyond.

Meso thought to himself, “That stupid old witch; she was easier to fool than I thought. She was no match at all for my brains and intelligence.” At that very instant, Bebil appeared directly in front of him. As a matter of fact, a circle of Bebils surrounded him completely. There was no escape whatsoever.

“Foolish creature,” she shouted. “You think you could fool me! Don’t you know that I have the ability to read thoughts? If you hadn’t thought you were smarter than me, you could have escaped. But now you are mine!” And with one gulp, she completely devoured Meso such that there was no trace left of him whatsoever except for his belt buckle.

The belt buckle was all that remained of Meso. It was brought back immediately to the king when it was discovered. Upon seeing the buckle, the king was greatly saddened for he knew instantly that his first-born had not only failed, but was killed. He would never see Meso again.

Whispo worried that his second son would fail as well, but there was no choice. If Mineso wanted to become king, then he had to undertake the test. There was no other way.
Mineso tried a totally different approach. He had always scoffed at Meso’s overly impractical thinking. Meso’s downfall was thinking that he could outthink the witch. Mineso knew better.

Mineso sent out teams of experts to learn of the witch’s dwelling. They found out that the clearing upon which Bebil’s cottage stood was really a swamp. In reality, the witch was actually a fish that depended upon water for its sustenance and very existence. Therefore, Mineso reasoned, if he could drain the swamp, he could kill the witch, and hence get her magic bird.

Mineso cleverly surrounded the witch’s swamp with hundreds of workers that were loyal to him. They built scores of tiny straws that slowly but surely sucked the water out of Bebil’s clearing.

As a result, Mineso was able to walk straight up to Bebil’s cottage, grab the bird, stuff it in a sack, and casually walk out of the forest.

“That stupid witch was no match for me!” Mineso exclaimed. At that exact moment, Bebil appeared and said, “So you think you are smarter than me, do you! Don’t you know that I don’t need water for my existence? I am water. I carry it with me wherever I go!” With that, Bebil quickly devoured Mineso.

News of Mineso’s death also reached the king. As before, he was greatly saddened. Yet, he had no choice but to send his youngest, and last, son to meet the test.

Unlike his two brothers before him, Soso made no elaborate plans. He merely walked into the forest, and when he finally reached the edge of the clearing, he just sat down. The numerous small animals and birds that had been following him sat down as well.

With that, Bebil charged out of her cottage shouting, “Who’s there? What do you want? Don’t you know who I am and what I can do to you?”

Soso merely smiled and said, “Yes, I know who you are. I have come to ask you if I can borrow your bird so that I can bring it to my father so that I can become king. I promise you with all my heart and soul that I will bring the bird back to you once my father has seen it. I do not want the bird for myself, or the eggs that it produces, for I know that under your care and protection, the bird has brought great happiness and prosperity to my father’s kingdom.”

With that, Bebil said, “No one has ever spoken truthfully and from the heart to me as you have. Yes, you can take the bird because I know you will bring it back. I grant you a long and happy life.”

And this is the story of how Soso, supposedly the dullest of the king’s three sons, became the greatest ruler of them all.

The moral of the story: Brains alone will not succeed where the heart and soul are lacking.

I wish you lasting pleasure in reading and learning from the fables in this book.
From the Editors

If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.
—Rudyard Kipling

Stories to Tell Your Students is the result of a series of events that started with a resounding call from our students to tailor the way we were facilitating organizational behavior courses to the preferences of today’s students and tomorrow’s workforce members. It was not difficult to relate to this wish: we too were students at one time, and the most memorable lessons we received were shared through stories. Stories are timeless, and they always fascinate us. A good story can mean different things to us at different stages of our lives, but it sticks like the fragrance of a good perfume: light, and not always apparent, but every so often noticeable.

We decided to try the concept out with fellow OB faculty from all over the world, and submitted workshops based on storytelling to major conferences for OB facilitators. Over the course of three years of formal and informal brainstorming, presenting, and gathering feedback, we decided to take our intentions to the implementation level: we approached colleagues from all over the world to create a storybook, and ensure that it would not only convey the OB message in story form, but also have global appeal. In a world that is now truly a global village, we felt that we needed to consider organizational behavior in as broad a perspective as possible. That explains why this book entails stories that pertain to formal work settings, and others, which are set in more exotic parts of the world. The purpose is dual: we want to enhance the user’s familiarity with multiple cultures, but we also want to demonstrate that, aside from the obvious differences, there are some human traits that remain intact, wherever the stage may be set.

We thank the authors who have made this book possible by submitting their stories, whether experiential, fictitious, reflective, metaphoric, case-based, long, short, reality-based or fairy-tale like. Together we have created an OB text, twenty-first-century style, which we proudly present to you. We invite you to use it to your own and your students’ advantage—to elevate your students’ awareness, increase their tolerance, raise their understanding and appreciation for other cultures, expand their horizons, and help prepare them for the challenges of working and living in the twenty-first century.

Joan Marques, Satinder Dhiman, and Jerry Biberman
Teaching Story Methodology

Teaching stories have frequently been used in the wisdom traditions of the past for their entertainment, moral, and developmental value. Most teaching stories contain an element of humor that ensures their longevity. The humor is also used as a cloak to conceal the profounder meaning. As Plato has pointed out, “Serious things cannot be understood without laughable things.” But to stop only at the humor level is to miss their real meaning. Robert Anton Wilson explains: “If you don’t laugh, you’ve missed the point. If you only laugh, you’ve missed your chance for illumination.”

Psychologically speaking, stories have the following dimensions 1:

1. **Intuitive.** The moment the speaker says “let me tell you a story,” the listener shifts gears (figuratively speaking) and a different faculty of comprehension is brought into play. In scientific terms, a better harmony between the left and right hemispheres of our brain is established.

2. **Participative.** A story is a sort of invitation that prods the listener to participate in its proceedings by identifying himself/herself as one of its characters. And it is common knowledge that participation enhances the quality of learning.

3. **Multiplicity of impacts.** A good story carries a constellation of impacts within its fold and thereby creates multiple impacts on the listener’s mind. This enables us to view things from several perspectives, which, in turn, facilitates holistic thinking.

4. **Tip of the iceberg phenomenon.** At a deeper level, there are several underlying messages. The listener/reader receives the nourishment for which he/she is ready. Like the skins of an onion, one will peel off one depth after another. Thus, a story offers something to all levels of experience. This is the reality behind the concept that we cannot really exhaust the entire meaning of a tale. And probably this is the reason that all great teachers choose to speak in parables.

5. **Element of shock.** A good story also contains an element of “shock”—an unexpected incongruity to wake the reader from the slumber of habitual thought patterns. By an unexpected turn or twist, the story teases a greater attention span out of the reader, besides preparing a way to a deeper understanding of the intended message. To quote Harvey Cox, “A parable is a story that draws the listener’s attention to the normal events of ordinary life, but then introduces an unexpected twist, a