

The Value of Fables

I don't remember when I was first exposed to Aesop's Fables, but it was long before I entered the first grade. My parents were avid readers, and in the evening our living room was usually so quiet you could hear a pin drop until one or the other would come across a passage they deemed worthy of being read aloud. Before I was six, I had been exposed to Grimm's and Andersen's Fairy Tales, Kipling, Frost and of course the before-mentioned Aesop. As a consequence, I have retained some of the truths contained in these writings throughout my lifetime.

No one will ever know exactly who Aesop was; if in fact he ever lived at all is debatable, but the truths that concern humanity remain a constant; they are just as relevant on any continent and in every country on the globe.

Aesop is thought to have been a slave who lived from about 620 to 560 BC and lived on or near the island of Samos in the eastern Aegean Sea near the western coast of Turkey. It is unlikely that he wrote down any of his philosophy, although others are known to have included them in volumes long since lost. The majority of Aesop's Fables use animals, whose actions or their ability to speak reveal human weaknesses or strengths.

Why am I including this information in a column intended to emphasize the historical aspects of a small region in Litchfield, Connecticut? The answer is, of course, that these truths apply to us equally with the rest of the world, whether we are talking about the eighteenth century or the twenty-first. The problem, as I see it, is that we, and our leaders, have either never been exposed to these fables, or else we have forgotten their lessons. This failure has gotten us into diplomatic and military jams that seem to be forever on-going, and indeed the every day interactions we have with our family and neighbors are shaped by our knowledge or ignorance of these basics. Those of us who attended the old two-room schoolhouse at Colebrook Center will remember Mrs. Bushnell either reading, or more likely quoting from memory, Aesop whenever a situation arose calling for his wisdom. Here are some that I feel are relevant to today's world. After reading them, see how many local, regional, national and international situations where this philosophy applies, either to improve or eliminate problems that constantly arise between individuals and groups:

The Wind and the Sun Once upon a time when everything could talk, the North Wind and the Sun fell into an argument as to which was the stronger. Finally they decided to put the matter to a test; they would see which one could make a certain man, who was walking along the road, throw off his cape. The wind tried first. He blew and he blew. The harder and colder he blew, the tighter the traveler wrapped his cape about him. The North Wind finally gave up and told the Sun to try. The Sun began to smile and as it grew warmer and warmer, the traveler was comfortable once more. But the Sun shone brighter and brighter until the man grew so hot, the sweat poured out of his face, he became weary, and seating himself on a stone, he quickly threw his cape to the ground. You see gentleness had accomplished what force could not.

A Lion and a Mouse A mouse one day happened to run across the paws of a sleeping lion and wakened him. The lion, angry at being disturbed, grabbed the mouse, and was about to swallow him, when the mouse cried out, "Please, kind sir, I didn't mean it; if you will let me go, I shall always be grateful; and, perhaps, I can help you some

day.” The idea such a little thing as a mouse could help him so amused the lion that he let the mouse go. A week later the mouse heard a lion roaring loudly. He went closer to see what the trouble was and found his lion caught in a hunter’s net. Remembering his promise, the mouse began to gnaw the ropes of the net and kept it up until the lion could get free. The lion then acknowledged that little friends might prove great friends.

The Lark and Its Young A mother lark had a nest of young birds in a field of ripe grain. One day when she came home, she found the little birds much excited. They reported that they had heard the owners of the field say it was time to call the neighbors to help them gather the grain, and they begged the mother lark to take them away. “Do not worry”, she said, “if he is depending upon his neighbors, the work won’t begin today. But listen carefully to what the farmer says each time he comes and report to me.” The next day, again while their mother was getting their food, the farmer came and exclaimed, “This field needs cutting badly, I’ll call my relatives over to help me. We’ll get them here tomorrow.” The excited young birds reported this news to their mother upon her return. “Never mind,” she said, “I happen to know these relatives are busy with their own grain; they won’t come. But continue to keep your ears open and tell me what you hear.” The third day, when the farmer came, he saw the grain was getting overripe, and turning to his son, said, “We can’t wait longer; we’ll hire some men tonight, and tomorrow we’ll begin cutting.” When the mother lark heard these words, she said to her children, “Now we’ll have to move; when people decide to do things themselves instead of leaving such work to others, you may know they mean business.”

Belling the Cat One time the mice were greatly bothered by a cat; therefore, they decided to hold a meeting to talk over what could be done about the matter. During the meeting, a young mouse arose and suggested that a bell be put upon the cat so they could hear him coming. The suggestion was received with great applause, when an old mouse arose to speak. “That’s all right,” he said, “but who of us would dare to hang a bell around the cat’s neck?” Seeing their looks of fear, he added, “You know it is often much easier to suggest a plan than to carry it out.”

The Goose with the Golden Eggs Once upon a time a man had a goose that laid a golden egg every day. Although he was gradually becoming rich, he grew impatient. He wanted to get all his treasure at once; therefore he killed the goose. Cutting her open, he found her – just like any other goose, and he learned to his sorrow that it takes time to win success.

There are many others, spanning the spectrum of human traits; The dog and his shadow, where the dog, carrying a piece of meat sees his reflection in the water and thinking it larger than his own, makes a grab for the reflection, thus losing what he already had. The dog in the manger and the shepard boy who called wolf when there was no wolf are no doubt familiar with most people as well. The point is that rather than think of these stories as children’s fare, they should be applied to everyday situations. Don’t think of kindness as a sign of weakness, and the expression “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” is not to be found only in the Christian Bible, it also appears in cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia, in the Indian writings of at least three thousand years ago as well as the writings of Confucius; in other words, it applies to and is understood by all humanity.

Let us continue to understand history so that we do not have to repeat past mistakes.

