

For Ministers, Religious Educators and Leaders



May, 2009 – Celebrating Buddha
A Story for All Ages
from the Tapestry of Faith children's curriculum, Moral Tales

In honor of May, the month in which the birth of the Buddha as the Prince Siddhartha Gautama is traditionally celebrated on the night of the full moon, we present "The Brave Little Parrot," a Buddhist story from our Moral Tales program for grades 2 and 3. The story's themes are courage, perseverance and how doing what you can to help others can inspire more people to join you.

Before you begin, share background to clarify some elements in the story: This story is a Jataka tale, one of hundreds the Buddha told. Born more than 2,000 years ago, he was raised as a Hindu with the belief that we each are reborn many times, as different animals and people. When we die, we come back as another person or animal. All the Jataka tales are about the Buddha in one of his former lives. At one point, the story mentions "gods of a happy realm... floating high overhead in their cloud palaces..." The idea of multiple gods living up above and looking down on Earth is also from the Hindu tradition.

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The Brave Little Parrot: A Jataka Tale from India

Once, long ago, the Buddha was born as a little parrot. One day, a storm broke upon her forest home. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and a dead tree, struck by lightning, burst into flames. Sparks leapt on the wind and soon the forest was ablaze. Terrified animals ran wildly in every direction, seeking safety from the flames and smoke.

"Fire! Fire!" cried the little parrot. "Run! Run to the river!" Flapping her wings, she flung herself out into the fury of the storm, and, rising higher, flew towards the safety of the river. But as she flew she could see that many animals were trapped, surrounded by the flames below, with no chance of escape.

Suddenly, a desperate idea, a way to save them, came to her. She darted to the river, dipped herself in the water, and flew back over the now raging fire.

The heat rising up from the burning forest was like the heat of an oven. The thick smoke made breathing almost unbearable. A wall of flames shot up now on one side, now on the other. Crackling flames leapt and danced before her. Twisting and turning through the mad maze of fire, the little parrot flew bravely on. At last,

over the center of the forest, she shook her wings and released the few drops of water which still clung to her feathers. The tiny drops tumbled like jewels down in the heart of the blaze and vanished with a hsssssssss. Then the little parrot once more flew back through the flames and smoke to the river, dipped herself in the cool water, and flew back again over the burning forest. Back and forth she flew, time and time again, from the river to the forest, from the burning forest to the river. Her feathers were charred. Her feet were scorched. Her lungs ached. Her eyes, stung by smoke, burned red as coals. Her mind spun as dizzily as the spinning sparks. But still the little parrot flew on.

At this time, some of the Devas, gods of a happy realm, were floating high overhead in their cloud palaces of ivory and gold. They happened to look down and they saw the little parrot flying through the flames. They pointed at her with perfect hands. Between mouthfuls of honeyed foods they exclaimed, "Look at that foolish bird!" She's trying to put out a raging forest fire with a few sprinkles of water! How ridiculous! How absurd!" And they laughed.

But one of those gods did not laugh. Strangely moved, he changed himself into a golden eagle and flew down, down towards the little parrot's fiery path.

The little parrot was just nearing the flames again when the great eagle, with eyes like molten gold appeared at her side. "Go back, little bird!" said the eagle in a solemn and majestic voice. "Your task is hopeless! A few drops of water can't put out a forest fire! Cease now and save yourself – before it's too late."

But the little parrot only continued to fly on through the smoke and flames. She could hear the great eagle flying above her as the heat grew fiercer, calling out, "stop, foolish little parrot! Save yourself! Save yourself!"

"I don't need a great, shining eagle" coughed the little parrot, "to give me advice like that. My own mother, the dear bird, might have told me such things long ago. Advice! (cough, cough) I don't need advice. I just (cough) need someone to help"

And the god who was that great eagle, seeing the little parrot flying through the flames, thought suddenly of his own privileged kind. He could see them floating high up above. Yes, there they were, the carefree gods, still laughing and talking while many animals cried out in pain and fear from among the flames below. Seeing that, he grew ashamed, and a single desire was kindled in his heart. God though he was, he just wanted to be like that brave little parrot and to help.

"I will help!" he exclaimed, and flushed with these new feelings, he began to weep. Stream after stream of sparkling tears poured from his eyes. Wave upon wave they washed down like the cooling rain upon the fire, upon the forest, upon the animals, and upon the little parrot herself.

Where those tears fell, the flames died down, and the smoke began to clear. The little parrot, washed and bright, rocketed about the sky laughing for joy. "Now that's more like it!" she exclaimed.

The eagle's tears dripped from burned branches and soaked into the scorched earth. Where those tears glistened, new life pushed quickly forth-shoots, stems, and leaves. Buds unfurled and blossoms opened. Green grass pushed up from among still-glowing cinders.

All the animals looked at one another in amazement. Washed by those tears they were whole and well. Not one had been harmed. Up above, in the clear blue sky, they could see their friend, the little parrot, looping and soaring in delight. When hope was gone, somehow she had saved them. “Hurray!” they cried. “Hurray for the brave little parrot, and for this sudden, miraculous rain!”

Source: Martin, Rafe, *The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Myths, Legends, and Jataka Tales* (Somerville, MA: Yellow Moon Press, 1999). Used with permission of the author (www.rafermartin.com). You may prefer to tell this story using the picture book *The Brave Little Parrot*, retold by Rafe Martin (Putnam and Sons, 1998).

Guidance for Teaching “The Brave Little Parrot”

This story can be simply told without participation or props. As children hear it, they will experience both how difficult and how powerful it can be for one small being to act out of conscience and love, and not to give up, despite the odds. The children will also gain a clearer understanding of what courage and perseverance mean.

Follow the story with a discussion to deepen children's understanding that when we act from our hearts and don't give up, we can help to make change and inspire other people to work with us. Not only do we feel true to ourselves when we persevere, but our connection to others is strengthened as well. Use these questions:

- Why do you think the little parrot turned around and flew back into the fire when she was safely free? (She wanted to help the other animals. She knew she would not be happy until they were safe.)
- Why do think the little parrot continued to try to put out the fire when it was clear that her little drops were not enough? (Sometimes we take action because it feels right, not because it is easy.)
- Why do you think the god who changed into an eagle decided to help the little parrot? (He was moved by the love and dedication of the parrot. He wished to be like her. When we act from our hearts, we are inspiring to others.)
- How do you think the little parrot was changed by this experience? (She felt stronger. She felt a sense of achievement in helping others. She felt connected with the other animals.)

Ask children about their own experiences with working hard and not giving up. Children's examples of perseverance are very concrete. Share some of your own experiences of working toward a goal. Examples: working and saving money to buy a bike, practicing a musical instrument or a sport when other friends were going out to play, helping to tend a garden or take care of a pet. Another example of perseverance would be making something that takes a lot of time such as a sand castle, a snow person, a tree fort, something complicated with Legos, or a sewing or knitting project. Ask, “Why keep at it, when you can only do a little bit at a time and the project will take so long to complete?”

Tell children, “See, you already know how to work hard for something, if it is important to you.” Ask them for examples when they might persevere against odds – a time they might heed the call of love or conscience.