Bringing Out Their Best: Values Education and Character Development Through Traditional Tales

Norma J. Livo

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Norma J. Livo

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To George. After more than fifty-one years together, our stories demonstrate character and values. Your legacy is rich.

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Introduction

The traditional greeting in the Masai tribe is, "And how are the children?" The traditional answer is, "All the children are well." Meaning that peace and safety prevail, that life is good and that the struggle for existence, even among a poor people, does not preclude proper care for the young.

Beginnings are important; in fact, they are the most challenging part of anything. Many times, "getting started" means creating something from raw material. Nurturing and teaching children certainly provides essential beginnings. Our children are our legacy to the world. That is why it is so important to develop their imaginations and abilities to visualize, and to provide stories that can serve as vaccination against future social pressures.

Violence in America has reached epidemic proportions and that is certainly reflected in our schools. In response, community groups and school systems throughout the country have been urging that more attention be directed to character development and values education. The dictionary defines character as "the aggregate of properties and qualities that distinguishes one person or thing from another, a trait, good qualities." For the discussion of character traits, others often refer to morals, ethics, and values.

School districts throughout our country are presently focused on traits such as perseverance, trustworthiness, self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, and respect. Some character education advocates recommend that a national character education effort should also include citizenship, fairness, punctuality, and cleanliness, as well as manners.

Educators have long held that good character and good citizenship were at the core of the mission of public education. During the 1960s and 1970s, as sensitivity toward religious and

cultural diversity awakened, character education faded and educators became more reluctant to impose values on the children. They left it up to the students to sort out right from wrong. Values were considered concepts that needed to be clarified, not taught. But more recently, President George W. Bush announced during his 2000 election campaign that education is one of his top priorities, and he has called for teaching values in schools.

This trend has influenced current decision making on school efforts. Federal, state, and local education policymakers are involved in the effort. As recently as March 2001, legislation has been enacted in twenty-eight states to integrate character education into the classrooms. Another related trend in public education comes through legislation that introduces teaching units on patriotism, including, but not limited to, a discussion of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities involved in U.S. citizenship. The aftereffects of and response to September 11, 2001 continue to influence education legislation in a variety of ways.

Currently, educators say that we need to encourage civic virtues and share moral values such as honesty and caring in the schools. State congresses are enacting legislation to encourage school districts to come up with classes and programs that, for example, "cultivate honesty, respect, responsibility, courtesy, obedience to the law" and other good-citizen qualities. Some schools promote character education by demonstrating to the students that they should take responsibility for their actions, evaluate their own behavior, and solve problems.

This approach seems to follow in the wake of the Columbine School violence of the late 1990s. One thread common to the current thinking is that schools need to teach students how to work with others and to reduce school violence, as well as substance abuse, vandalism, and teen pregnancy. Bullying is one of the central issues addressed in considering values education. Character and ethics education, it is said, should be in place to help students understand their own behavior and provide a way to frame moral questions.

A local school in Denver, Colorado, has instituted a program in which "students practice organizational skills, support and interact with others, are enthusiastic about learning, take risks, accept challenges, accept responsibility for behavior, listen attentively, follow directions, stay on task and evaluate their own learning." This school encourages these basic activities as a foundation for further values education.

Character education has also been undertaken in the nonprofit sector. For example, actor Andrew Shue heads a nonprofit program, "Kindness and Justice Challenge," cofounded in 1993. It is based on values taught by

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: tolerance, responsibility, compassion, nonviolence, and moral courage. Their goal is to "provide the skills and opportunities to create a better school, community and world." This is just another example of the emphasis on value education for the creation of a better world.

But character education is not just the responsibility of the government or the schools. It is also the business of the family and of the individual. Truly, it is the work of the soul.

It is interesting to refer back to the thoughts of those leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Constitution and the amendments, and to their belief that public education was the important link in connecting the people to the government. They believed that our country could not afford ignorance and that every citizen should be well educated. The citizens, according to Jefferson, should be trusted and should make their own choices.

It was out of these beliefs that our educational system evolved. Thus, the humanities mined the text and stories of the past and the cultural expression became what people could agree upon. This then translated into a philosophy that the humanities are the work of the soul. Under that system of thought, it was purported that people need to be exposed to literature, its ideas and thoughts, and given time to absorb the wealth of it.

Knowledge is power. Today we have amazing access to it. For instance, there are not only school, public, and professional libraries available, but also the Internet possibilities. The Internet has brought the world of knowledge to us with easy access. Again, Jefferson would say that an informed citizen must make his own choices and decisions based on the information that is available. But the amount of information available is sometimes mind-boggling. That's where the soul comes in. We must not rely on legislative decisions alone in education, but apply our own recognition of what is good and true as informed thinkers.

ABOUT STORIES

This book encourages the use of stories in developing character and the life skills imparted by strong values. Why? Stories help us remain true to ourselves on our life journeys. They link the generations and serve as maps and markers left by those who have successfully gone before us.

Stories have the power to reach within, to command emotion, to compel involvement, and to transport us into timelessness. They are a way of thinking, a primary organizer of information and ideas, the soul of a cul-

ture, and the consciousness of a people. Stories are a way in which we can know, remember, and understand.

Lately we hear many loud complaints that we have a whole generation of people who never learned morals and values. In response, storyteller Laura Simms has said, "In Africa, it is said that if you hear stories as a child, then you grow up with an inner strength born of having strong values of relatedness, respect, dignity, and ethics."

Today we certainly have immediate communication through television, cell phones, and e-mail; but are these communications of value? Do they mean anything? Recently while walking on a street in downtown Denver, I heard the fellow ahead of me with a cell phone to his ear say, "I am right in front of the building now." Was this communication full of depth, value, and importance? I think not. If we are to survive and thrive, we need deeper communication.

Television, audiotapes, and even "bedtime story" videotapes often entertain today's children. This reliance on the electronic media would suggest that bedtime cuddling, sharing a book together, and telling stories has been "improved" by or replaced with recorded "bedtime stories."

Exposure to literature should provide enjoyment and help youngsters realize its importance as a mirror of human experiences, reflecting human motives, conflicts, and values. Young story listeners should be able to identify with characters in human situations as a means of relating to others. They also should learn to appreciate the rhythms and beauty of language and develop habits of storytelling and reading that carry over into their adult lives. A story that is shared between two individuals creates a strong bond and is a powerful learning experience.

Throughout human history, folktales have given us models of behavior that is rewarded (after all, modest, well-behaved Cinderella did win the prince) and behavior that is punished (Cinderella's selfish stepsisters got their just deserts). In fact, you might say folktales are recipes for studying human motives, conflicts, and values.

> *One day the gods decided to create the universe. They created stars, the sun and the moon. They created the seas, mountains, flowers, trees, and clouds. They created human beings. After everything in the universe had been created, they created Truth. They weren't sure where they should place Truth. They wanted it to be somewhere where people would not find it right away. They wanted to make sure people had to search for Truth. And so, they considered putting it on the highest mountain, the farthest star, the deepest and darkest abyss or to conceal it on the secret side of the moon. Finally the gods decided to put Truth inside the human heart so peo-*

ple would search throughout the universe for it and only find it when they look within.

(Traditional Far Eastern Story)

What is a story? It depends on who hears it. As listeners we all hear different things in the same story. Some of the deeper truths we are ready for, and some stories we just skim off the top. The same story can leave one listener with a smile and another with tears. And in different times of our lives, we will receive different truths from the same story. Whether we know it or not, we are all guided by voices of our ancestors—they had generations of memory in their heads.

Children are wonderful listeners and observers. They "hear" much more in stories than we give them credit for. As we get older, our expectations fill our minds and we stop trusting what we see and hear. We impart our own adult details into the stories we hear. In some ways we are ready to hear a powerful story, yet we are sometimes too full of our own preconceptions to really hear the message.

An effective storyteller is a person who has a good memory and hopes other people don't. In olden days, the real power of the wizards was their magic of words. Finns believed their old wizard Vainomoinen from the *Kalavela* epic could win battles, restore victims of battle, and solve problems with his words and songs. Imagining and believing are the only forms of magic left in the world today. The stories we hear nurture our imaginations and beliefs, and can sustain us in our lives.

It is said that through the ages there have been those who agitate and drum up the people to a cause. Then there is the warrior who goes forward and fights. The storyteller recounts events; and this is the one who survives and outlives all the others. The storyteller creates and communicates history. He gives us the shared memory that the survivors must have—otherwise their surviving would have no meaning. Memory is necessary if survival is going to be more than just a technical thing.

Of all the inanimate objects, of all people's creations, stories are the nearest to us, for they contain our very thoughts, our ambitions, our indignations, our illusions, our fidelity to truth, and our persistent leaning toward error. But most of all, stories resemble us in their precarious hold on life.

The people who can tell the best stories will shape the next century. Stories, not just facts and data, animate people and stir families, organizations, and even nations, moving them to bigger and better things. Good stories inspire. They convey knowledge, create heroes, heroines, and role models. They instill values. Our stories are simply part of creation's ongoing conversation. They are also the punctuation marks in our lives.

"Story" is a way of organizing language and thinking. It has archetypal dimensions. An archetype is a model, prototype, or pattern for the construction or recognition of other like things. In the Jungian definition, archetypal patterns are subconscious images, ideas, or patterns of thought universally present in memory in all individuals within a culture and, presumably, inherited from the ancestors of the race. Characters within stories, thematic content of stories, common patterns of story structure, and even "story" itself are archetypal. Due to this nature, there is a more profound and "real" truth in "story" than in the common reality of daily experience.

For instance, in stories, archetypes include these characters recognized for their universal traits: the youngest sister or brother (representing innocence, humility, honesty, and good), the fool (illogic and fate), the old woman/man (death), the mistreated child or stepchild, the uncaring parent or stepparent, the witch or stepmother-witch (evil), and the fearsome beast.

Animals as story characters are also important, and not simply because they are so darn cute. There is much more to it than that. Maybe it is because animals are just a bit different from real people so that the dramatic events of a folktale are a little easier to handle. Animals help us follow the story with a little bit of distance to it, that is, they impart enough psychological distance to keep a frightening story from being truly terrifying. Sometimes we need the disguise or symbolism of animals to talk about what is important. Animals are neuter. They aren't specific, like crazy Aunt Gertrude or cruel Uncle Horatio. Animals can represent us in fur, feather, or fin, but as characters they make the story medicine a little easier to take. Stories are rehearsals for the future, and as such animals make this easier.

Animals can also be symbols: the sly fox, the clever wolf, or the powerful bear. In fact, we often describe people with references to animals, such as: gentle as a dove, cheerful as a lark, timid as a rabbit, fierce as a tiger, brave as a lion, proud as a peacock, innocent as a lamb, faithful as a dog, henpecked, birdlike, a lone wolf, a real hog, and stubborn as a mule.

Sometimes it is beneficial for children to see a helpless animal such as a rabbit outsmart an animal that is big and strong. After all, aren't children relatively helpless in the world of adults? Wouldn't it be easy for them to unconsciously relate to Br'er Rabbit as he outwits the other animals? Doesn't that give readers and listeners a sense of power, an "I can do it too" spirit?

The fables have colored our attitudes toward moral and ethical problems. They are part of our everyday life and speech. Fables are brief narratives that take abstract ideas of good or bad, wise or foolish behavior and attempt to make them concrete and striking enough to be understood and remembered. The characters are usually beasts that behave like human

beings and have one dominant trait. They remain coldly impersonal and engage in a single significant act that teaches a moral lesson.

Fables praise not the heroic virtues, but rather the peasant virtues of discretion, prudence, moderation, and forethought. They are pieces of literature found in any culture story collection that the ordinary people can identify with. Fables slipped in among warmly appealing folktales and modern realistic stories provide abstractions to consider, and are pithy maxims passed down to us by our wise predecessors throughout the ages.

Archetypal needs are basic human needs or requirements—love, security, understanding, acceptance, success, community and companionship, happiness, and knowledge. Archetypal story features recall truths embedded deep in memory. This is a tool that can be used to expand and extend human knowing and human awareness. Through the use of archetypes, we find ourselves within the story. We become the story, in a sense, and its truth lives in us.

Today, perhaps more than ever, we need to see ourselves in story, through which we can transcend human differences and technological changes and understand our culture, religion, and language. This is our inheritance. It binds us together in recognition of our universal commonalities at a rich level of humanness. As W.R.S. Ralston (1873) expressed it, "One touch of storytelling may, in some instances, make the whole world kin."

In traditional Navajo belief, a person's worth is determined by the stories and songs she or he knows, because it is by this knowledge that an individual is linked to the history of the entire group. Author Isak Dinesen said, "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." Joseph Campbell stated, "Fairytales represent psychological, not physical triumphs."

We know the same stories, and when we retell them, we do more than keep departed people alive; we keep ourselves alive as well. The Japanese claim that a person is not dead until people stop using his name.

With stories we can focus on our commonalities along with our differences. The high school cliques of today feed upon discrimination, encouraging bullies and ridiculing others. There is always the wish that these behaviors can be addressed in a meaningful way. They can be—through stories! Starting at the beginning and continuing throughout our children's lives, stories can help serve as vaccination against social pressures.

If we want our youngsters to grow up with tolerance, we must recognize one another's differences and not only accept them, but also celebrate them. This requires respect and understanding. May the following stories help nurture humanity and compassion, linking adults and children everywhere.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is a collection of stories that demonstrate and impart profound truths about character and values. Some of the stories are ancient, predating written history, and some are more recent. They come from diverse cultures and regions that span the continents. There are stories from Zen Buddhists in Asia, from Paiute Indians of North America, and from the Maoris of New Zealand. Some are folktales, some are fables, and others are sacred literature or true stories from history.

The tales are arranged in broad categories under specific themes of character traits, values, and related issues. These categories are intentionally broad because the specific terminology for values is continually evolving, and because for each user, the needs may be different. It is important to keep in mind that a story in the section on perseverance, for example, may be equally appropriate and applicable to studies on patience, or, with some creativity, even to additional themes.

Who is this book intended for? Like folktales throughout history, this collection of stories is for people of all ages. It is made up of the tales that have lasted to today in the efforts of people to teach and provide examples of behavior—behavior that develops good community people and strong citizens.

Teachers who are beginning a unit on a particular value or character trait may want to introduce the lesson with one of these stories, then use the activity ideas to help enhance the lesson. Librarians will find this collection useful for story hours and may also want to add it to the teacher bookshelf. They can also recommend it to students who are researching character education issues.

Parents may reach for this collection when a specific issue comes up with a child—these stories are great launches for family discussions.

Activities and discussion questions provided with the stories are meant to help educators and parents extend learning through a variety of ways and varied use of the senses. This is not material for preaching, but instead provided so individuals can make their own connections—connections that they recognize and appreciate.

Students, parents, teachers, librarians, and all professionals who are looking for solutions to some of our modern problems will find answers in these stories of old. Times may change, but people, their needs, and problems remain the same.

A *final word:* the author encourages a sharing of these stories through storytelling, just as they have been passed down to us, as well as by reading the text. Try it, you'll like it!

Love

The Bamboo Princess

(Japan)

Once upon a time in Japan, a gentle old couple lived deep in a bamboo forest. The couple was lonely because they were childless and had always wanted a family of their own to love and care for. This old couple was quite poor. The old man earned money by cutting bamboo and selling the pieces that his wife made into baskets, tableware, hats, and other things. As so often is the case, the man was referred to by his occupation, Bamboo-cutter, and his wife was called Weaver of Bamboo.

Bamboo-cutter was at work one dreary day deep in a dark bamboo thicket. He was carefully selecting straight bamboo to cut because his wife had requested some that would be easy to work with. Deep in the thicket, Bamboo-cutter noticed something that was unlike anything he had ever seen before. There seemed to be one slender bamboo plant that had a golden glow. After carefully examining the special bamboo, he cut it open to see if he could discover what was causing its eerie glow.

What he found inside the hollow bamboo stem was amazing! There was a perfect tiny baby girl who was about three inches high. Bamboo-cutter held her gently in the palm of one of his callused hands. He hurried home to Weaver of Bamboo as carefully as he could. When he arrived and opened the door, he called out, "Weaver of Bamboo, come see what I have found. Come see this special gift. We have at last our very own daughter!"

Weaver of Bamboo looked into his hand and saw the tiny golden girl. "Isn't she the most beautiful thing you have ever

seen?" she gasped. Bamboo-cutter told her all about how he had seen the eerie bamboo stalk, cut it carefully, opened it, and found this tiny person. After discussing what they should name this miracle child, the couple finally decided to call her Bamboo Princess.

As if having Bamboo Princess wasn't unique enough, from that day on, Bamboo-cutter came upon bamboo that had the same eerie glow. When he cut these stalks, though, he found piles of gold coins inside each of them. Before long, the old couple was very wealthy indeed and able to provide luxuries for their Bamboo Princess.

Bamboo Princess grew as much as an inch each day, not only bigger, but also lovelier. She seemed to radiate joy and filled their lives with great happiness. Bamboo-cutter enjoyed nothing more than watching Bamboo Princess chase dragonflies as they flew from flower to flower. His heart was filled with joy. "Little Bamboo Princess," he told her one day as he held her in his arms, "there is nothing in this world that I wouldn't do for you. You are my special joy."

As she grew each day, Bamboo Princess soon became a beautiful young maiden. Mere mortal young men who chanced to see her of course fell hopelessly in love. Word spread about this beauty, and young noblemen were soon courting her and begging for her hand in marriage.

"I shall never marry," Bamboo Princess would tell one and all. "Dear mother and father, I will never leave your side." Of course, Bamboo-cutter was pleased to hear her say this because he never wanted her to leave them alone and lonely again. There were five suitors of great wealth and noble bearing that stood out from the others and were persistent. They were outside her home every day, begging for a chance to visit with her.

Bamboo-cutter tried to discourage these five young men, but in time he began to feel sorry for them. If he were young again and saw Bamboo Princess, he too would be most earnest in wooing her. Taking pity on them, he decided to ask Bamboo Princess to choose one of them for a husband. "I have thought about it," he told her, "and decided that you should marry the one who is able to bring you a golden bough laden with fruit of living amber, an animal skin with fur of purest gold, a necklace made of dragons' eyes, paper that lights up the darkness, and a fan that shines like the rising sun."

When Bamboo-cutter told the five suitors what tasks they were to perform, the young men set off immediately, promising to return with the gifts. Of course, these tasks were easier said than done. "Maybe, Weaver of Bamboo, these will be impossible things for them to obtain and they will give up their dreams of marrying our Bamboo Princess," he told his wife.

Months later, to Bamboo-cutter's great surprise, all five young men returned with the fabulous treasures. Each of them held out marvels of the

amber fruit, the golden fur, the shining fan, the dragons'-eye necklace, and the luminous paper as they bowed quite low to Bamboo Princess. But her natural beauty outshone the glittering baubles, and the five guilty men were forced to admit that their marvels were fakes. The young noblemen left heartbroken and never gazed upon their beloved princess again.

The old couple was secretly pleased that their daughter would not marry and move away, leaving them to be lonely again. But such peace didn't last long because in the eighth month of that year, Bamboo Princess would sit each night and stare at the moon waxing fuller in the sky. As the moon grew brighter, Bamboo Princess's eyes grew more wistful and melancholy. "What makes you look so sad, daughter?" Weaver of Bamboo asked.

Bamboo Princess looked at her old mother and burst into tears. "Oh, dear mother, I wish I could stay with you forever," she cried. "Soon I must return though."

"Return?" asked Bamboo-cutter. "Return where?"

She looked at him and, with tears in her eyes, replied, "to the city of the moon where I was born."

Her mother and father asked in unison, "The city of the moon?"

"Yes," she answered. "Now that I am grown, they will be coming for me."

"Who will be coming for you?" Bamboo-cutter asked.

"When will they be coming for you?" implored her mother.

"On the fifteenth night of this month, when the moon is full, the moon people will come for me," was her quiet answer.

"Oh no!" screamed the old mother. "That is tomorrow! I won't allow it!"

Bamboo-cutter added, "You are our daughter. No one can take you from us!" The old couple embraced her and wept. "Mark our words, Bamboo Princess, we will never let you leave us," they sobbed.

Bamboo-cutter decided to make sure no one would come and take his daughter away. The very next day he hired more than a thousand strong samurai to protect her. They stood shoulder to shoulder and made a circle around the house. They even formed a column on the roof. When the moon began to rise over the mountains that evening, the samurai lifted their bows and pointed their arrows at the sky. Inside the house, Bamboo-cutter, Weaver of Bamboo, and Bamboo Princess sat together.

The full moon rose and cast a glow of light upon the samurai, who let their arrows fly toward the moon. The arrows vanished in the sky and the moonbeams pierced the warriors' armor. Each and every warrior stood paralyzed.

Two moon maidens with a winged horse and chariot appeared from out of the unearthly light of the moon. At the same time, Bamboo Princess silently walked outside, as if under a spell. The old couple knew that there was nothing they could do to keep her from leaving them. They ran out of the house after her and cried, "If you must go, take us with you."

"Oh how I wish I could. You have no idea how much I will miss you. As a token of my gratitude for the care and love you have showed me, take this as a reminder." As she said this, she dropped a pouch to the ground. "Take this medicine. It will keep you from growing older. You will never grow older. May you always be healthy and happy and remember me. Goodbye!"

With this, Bamboo Princess stepped into the waiting silver chariot and the winged horse leaped upward to the sky. The old couple watched the horse and chariot and the heavenly maidens fade away to the light of the moon.

Later that night, they built a small fire outside and sat beside it. The old man was holding the magic pouch that Bamboo Princess had given them. "With this medicine we can live forever," they sighed. They looked up at the bright full moon and said, "But without you, our wonderful Bamboo Princess, we can never be happy again. What good would our lives be without such happiness?" Their eyes met and with these words, Bamboo-cutter tossed the pouch into the fire where the flames caught it and spewed forth sparks and showers of light.

Lovers in the Sky

(China)

If you look to the heavens on the seventh night of the seventh month, you will see some very special stars. One of the stars is called Herding Boy Star and the other is called Weaving Girl Star.

Many turns of the earth ago, a silver river separated the heavens and the earth. In the celestial heavens lived a girl called Weaving Girl. She was the most beloved grandchild of the Queen Mother. Weaving Girl was not only lovely, but also very gentle. Her hands were slender, and she could weave the most beautiful cloth. She had six sisters who also could weave, and each day they would make different patterns of cloth. Sometimes they would weave a cloud for the heavens.

At this same time, on Earth, there lived a young orphan boy whose parents had died when he was very young. His name was Herding Boy and he lived with his older brother and his brother's wife. They were very poor.

One day, the elder brother decided to divide their property. Naturally, he kept everything for himself and gave Herding Boy only a very old ox. Herding Boy did not complain, and took very good care of his ox, bringing the animal to a lovely plain to eat grass and then to a watering hole. The ox somehow seemed to understand the boy's problems.

The ox worked diligently for his new master, tilling and plowing the earth. Soon after, the area where the ox had plowed became extremely fertile ground so that anything Herding Boy planted grew abundantly. With the money that the boy saved from selling the crops, he bought a house and built a large corral for his ox.

Even though Herding Boy was happy, he was lonely because he had no one to talk with. One day, he remarked to the ox, "I wish I had a companion." To Herding Boy's surprise, the ox answered, "That's not such a difficult task." The ox continued, "There are seven fairies now swimming in the river. Their clothes are on the banks of the river. If you quickly go to the river unseen and gather up the clothes of one of the fairies, she will have to remain and be your wife. Quickly now, get on my back and I will take you to the river."

It was just as the ox had said. There in the river, seven beautiful fairies were playing. It was Weaving Girl and her six sisters having a bath. Seven garments, all of different colors, lay on the riverbank—red, green, blue, purple, pink, yellow, and white. Herding Boy decided to take the garment that was all white.

As he ran away, the fairies saw him and were frightened. They ran onto the shore and put their clothes on, but Weaving Girl could not find hers. She started sobbing and begged the young man to return her clothes. Herding Boy answered, "Only if you will be my wife will I return your clothes." There was nothing Weaving Girl could do but nod "yes." After receiving her clothes and putting them on, she returned with Herding Boy to his home and became his wife.

Ten years passed and the couple now had two beautiful children: a girl, age five; and a boy, age six. The ox had been very old when Herding Boy received it, and by now it was about to die. The ox said to Herding Boy, "When I die, skin my hide and put the hide on whenever you have any troubles." With that, the animal died. The couple mourned the ox and was filled with grief. Herding Boy skinned the hide of the ox just as he had been told to do.

In heaven, ten years was like only ten days. Since Weaving Girl had disappeared, no more clouds were woven. The Queen Mother was very upset and ordered, "Weaving Girl must be brought back to the heavens."

At that very moment on Earth, Weaving Girl was busy weaving some very beautiful cloth. Her children were at her side when suddenly it became very dark, lightning flashed across the sky, and the thunder was horrendous. The children started to cry, when a magpie flew down from the heavens. "You must return to the heavens," said the magpie. "The Queen Mother says you must come back."

Weaving Girl's face turned white and she blurted, "I will not return. I will not return."

"If you do not return, your whole family here on Earth will be punished," cautioned the magpie.

As the thunder continued to boom, heavenly soldiers came down to Earth and started to take Weaving Girl to heaven. Her children sobbed, "Don't take our mother away." At the same time, Herding Boy chased the heavenly soldiers, shouting, "Return my wife!" He put his children in a basket and carried them with him. He ran hard and fast and chased the soldiers to the silver river.

The Queen Mother, seeing that Herding Boy was close to her soldiers, quickly removed the silver river and threw it into the sky. With this act, he could no longer give chase. Suddenly, Herding Boy remembered the hide of the ox. When he threw it onto his back, he was able to run into the heavens. He was almost near the silver river, now in the sky, when the Queen Mother tossed a golden hairpin into the river. At once the river became very wide, so wide, in fact, that Herding Boy could not get across it. The expression on his face was filled with despair. Weaving Girl tried to express her love for him. They both showed their anguish about being kept apart.

Seeing all of this, the Queen Mother was deeply moved. She then agreed that once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month, the two could cross the silver river and meet again. She asked the magpies to stretch their wings to make a bridge on that day so the couple could meet.

Now, when you look into the sky on the seventh day of the seventh month, you will see a very bright star and two little stars. These are Herding Boy and his two children. The other star, separated by the Milky Way, is Weaving Girl. At a certain time of the night, the Milky Way, which is the silver river, will appear. Then in an instant, you will see the star of Herding Boy and the star of Weaving Girl meet, only to be separated again by daylight.

Today, children often make seven flowers, chairs, and dresses in miniature for the seven fairies. It is considered a time when young girls pray for the right husband-to-be. Everyone looks into the sky trying to find the stars of Herding Boy and Weaving Girl. Do you think you can find them in the night sky?

Note: This story is a variation on the legend of the Blue Willow dinnerware pattern.