FABLES FOR OUR TIMES

 © 1994-2018 JANE R. SPEISER

Fables were originally invented to explain the functioning of the universe to their readers. Their didactic scope covered ethics, human relations, physics, cause and effect and combinations of the above. The intent of their authors was to guide the population in its actions, so that it would not succumb to the temptations of the literary models. Of course as time passed and the world became more complex, it was difficult to write a convincing and relevant fable that would simplify the intricacies of modern living into a succinct, easy to understand moral tale; so the genre began to fall out of vogue.

The purpose of this modest collection is to revive the fable as an edifying form, applied to situations confronting us is the post industrial age. In this moment, laden with paradoxes, there is no obvious solution to most problems, therefore it is not an easy task to construct a fable. The subject matter of some of the stories has been `lifted' from much earlier sources, but the author has attempted to look at the original material through the filter of the late twentieth century, which accounts for the unpredictable ending of some of the tales. However it is hoped that they will serve as a useful guide for action in these troubled times.

TECNOLOGICAL FABLE

Once upon a time the lords lived in the manor and ate lobster, and their servants lived in hovels at the bottom of the hill and ate rotten onions. Given this situation it was very easy to tell them apart.

This state of events continued for a very long time, until, after centuries of stagnation, a great event occurred: the invention of the potato. This may not seem to you, dear reader, like the apex of technology, but for its time it was almost as revolutionary as the semi-conductor. The populace was rather suspicious of the potato, but the lords convinced them that its cultivation was destined to produce plenty for all, given all of the wonderful things you could cook with it: French fries, potato pancakes, baked potatoes with sour cream. Therefore it should be worth bending over to plant it and bending over twice as much to dig it out of the ground when it was ripe.

They were finally able to convince their servants, including the grumpy ones, to bend over the hoe for a few more hours a day, (sixteen to be exact) in order to be in the forefront of progress, the high technology of agriculture, those skilled professionals with a future worthy of note.

However the potato proved to be an obstinate and unpredictable vegetable and a lot more difficult to raise than anyone expected. Moreover there was the competition, because after a few generations, the potato spuds got around and more than a few lords went into the business of trying to raise them. Therefore many decades and centuries passed in which the servants hoed sixteen hours a day for the future glory of the potato and the lords calculated the profits and tried to poison the fields of their relatives and neighbors.

Time passed, and after a few thousand years of plagues and wars and other unpleasant events, the lords found themselves to be rather badly off. They had no more lobster to eat and consequently were reduced to eating the wallpaper off the walls of their castles, as an appetizer, for the first course, and often even as dessert. The servants were not much better off, as they had no more rotten onions either. They were aided by the fact of being more used to famines, plagues and wars than their lordships. To make things a little more bearable for everyone, the lords even allowed the servants to sit at the table with them and eat their wallpaper with knives and forks, as if they were real noblemen, almost just like themselves.

But as fate would have it, given that democracy was just taking its first steps, the lords and the servants did not quite eat the same wallpaper: that is the servants were obliged to eat the wallpaper that the lords had already used as toilet paper; all of this in the interests of ecology and recycling. This made

it a little more difficult to tell the two parts of the society apart as they

all ate wallpaper. It was considered rather indelicate and nosey to ask someone directly, or enquire behind his back, if he ate first hand wallpaper, or that which had just been recycled from the rear ends of the lords.

However the servants considered it to be an honor to be given knives and forks and allowed to sit at the table with their masters, in the name of progress and the future glory of the potato. Those who didn't appreciate the honor were banished from the realm and rarely lived to tell about it. With one exception.

The exception was a peasant who was humble but frank. He said to the lords: "When common mortals are invited to sit down at table and eat shit, please excuse me, I meant `recycled wallpaper' they don't consider it to be an honor. They consider it their right and obligation to change the situation in which they find themselves." At this point he left the kingdom. And although this is a fable and you would think that a lightning bolt would have struck him or some other terrible misfortune would have befallen him, nothing of the sort happened. He lived happily ever after at the far edge of the kingdom, without much of a following, but confident that within a few centuries something more useful and less deceptive than the potato would be invented.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Once upon a time there was a frog. No. Fables are more complicated than that.

Once upon a time there was a princess. She was the main character and she did not wish to be upstaged by a mere frog.

The princess was looking for a prince. She looked high and low but no princes were to be found. She was finally informed that due to the scarcity of princes in the realm, by kissing a frog, (the right frog, not just any old frog) it would be turned into a prince. Princesses are often gullible. She went optimistically looking for the frog in question, and on her travels she met and enthusiastically embraced many frogs.

However none of these frogs were transformed into princes.

But the princess persevered as she was confident that eventually her affectionate quest would turn up the right frog. Princesses are often stubborn.

Finally she stumbled upon what she was sure must be the right frog.

It had large bulging eyes, larger than any frog she had seen. It had bright distinct spots like the best of frogs. It was in fact a great deal larger than

the frogs she had run into previously. In addition it had thick eager lips and long agile legs, that seemed to promise great rewards if she could only convert it to princedom.

She was sure that such a super frog would not disappoint her. After looking at it shyly she embraced it with all of her passionate expectations.

But it did not turn into a prince. For it was not anything close to a super frog despite its bulging eyes its spots and its agile legs.

It was a giraffe. A very ordinary giraffe with no talent for metamorphosis. For the princess it was hard to reconcile herself to the fact that she had confused a giraffe for a frog. It did not occur to her that if no frog was available it was an easy mistake to make. It could happen to anyone. Even to a particularly discerning princess if she was desperate enough.

moral: If you want something that is not available, you must be careful not to choose something similar. It might not be at all what you are looking for.

HOW THE MARBLE LION STATUE, CAME TO SAN LORENZO SQUARE

Once upon a time there was a lion who used to eat gazelles: the attractive and tender kind that gave him the energy to roar. He was actually no more than an oversized lion cub; after having eaten a gazelle he lay out in the sun, stretched himself thoroughly, quite contented and full of energy. In this state he did his roaring exercises in all the major and minor keys, with the diligence of a future king of the jungle. In fact he was really quite talented, his vocal chords produced some extraordinary sounds after a filling dinner of gazelles and antelopes.

As fate would have it the dinner menu that the lion was so fond of was less enjoyable for the gazelle. But as we all know, it is simply in the nature of lions to gobble up gazelles in order to roar with vigor. Given this fact the former was in perfectly good faith. he hunted only those of the species that ran the quickest, the most agile and well built, those with the most tender meat on their ribs and the other appropriate parts of their bodies. He limited himself to the ones who ventured across his stretch of the savanna, reasoning as follows: `they come here on purpose to listen to me roar, they know the danger they are courting, therefore they are capable of choosing and defending themselves; if they were not they would stay in their own part of the jungle.'

Consequently he enjoyed his delicious dinners, after which he relaxed in the sun to digest them well and continued to practice up to become the king of the jungle.

One fine day, following a long chase, he seized upon a splendid gazelle, and beside himself with joy, he set out to devour her. But being a rather ingenuous lion cub, full of good manners, he asked her politely if she had anything to say before allowing herself to be eaten. She answered him explaining patiently that although his diet gave him all the energy he needed to roart phenomenally well, he should try to understand that the situation was a little less enjoyable for the gazelle in question, who had to contribute, in the first person, to the balance of energy in the universe. The lion looked at her with amazement; he answered that honestly he had never considered that aspect of the situation, but in fact she was quite right and he would give it some serious thought.

He set out to study the question with all the good will his lion's heart was capable of.

In order to improve his concentration he devoured a passing antelope

as an appetizer, rolled over a few times and tried his best to put himself in the gazelle's place, but with little success. As said before he was still a cub, and he lacked the experience necessary to immerse himself in the role of another.

She watched him with terror and said softly that he should not have eaten an antelope while he was thinking about the fate of the gazelles, because it was no more enjoyable for an antelope to be eaten alive than for herself. The lion was overcome with embarrassment; he tried to excuse himself; he licked his whiskers with great discretion hoping the gesture would pass unnoticed. Then he let out a couple of spectacular roars, all the while looking at the gazelle out of the corner of his eye and realizing that he was exceedingly hungry. After another couple of roars in minor keys, that shook all the leaves of the jungle, he began to eye her directly, in a state of great concentration as his mouth began to water.

To make a long story short the poor gazelle burst out crying and spurted out that he had never endured the suffering that gazelles go through when they get eaten. The lion admitted that it was true, but in the last analysis he had suffered for many other reasons: for example when his stomach was empty, or when his vocal exercises did not come out well, and that was almost the same as the suffering of the gazelles.

She rebuked that it was not at all the same and overcome by despair at not being able to communicate with him, she burst out crying twice as loudly. The lion observed her uneasily, then with disgust and said to himself: ‘she must be a real fool to think she can make me feel guilty with all her accusations and complaints; I'd better gobble her up right away otherwise I will lose my appetite.' So he gulped her down in one crunch of his jaws despite her shrieks of terror.

As soon as he had finished he licked his whiskers, stretched out of the grass to digest her well and began his roaring exercises. But he realized that he had a very bitter taste in his mouth. He thought to himself: `the ones that are so agile and attractive lose all their taste when they start to cry about their lot; I'll have to avoid them in the future. He then opened his mouth to produce the first roar of the afternoon, but what came out was the croak of a frog and then nothing: total silence. The tears of the gazelle had turned to acid and corroded the lion's vocal chords.

Shortly thereafter his ears began to calcify, then his whole body froze and turned to marble, with a beautiful smooth white surface that glowed in the late afternoon sun stretching over the savanna. Some years later it was discovered by a safari and transported to Genova, where it was set on the steps of cathedral. There the lion's expression, so sad and wise and immobile, was admired by all who passed. But the quality of his voice was never spoken of again.

moral: If you stumble upon a gazelle in tears don't eat her up right away; wait at least a half hour, otherwise she will give you indigestion or something worse.

corollary to the moral: justice exists only in fables.

ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON:

a cinematic fable,

retold in two voices

Albert: Once upon a time there was a producer who had the bright idea to make a film. In order to put together the cash for the production he robbed the neighborhood bank, so that...

Henry: Albert! no! We're telling this story on the radio; you can't say that sort of thing on the air!

Albert: You're right, it slipped my mind. In this case, the producer was also the bank's president, so he didn't have to rob it...

Henry: Much better, you can go on from there.

Albert: After having rounded up the funds he called in the members of the board of the production company, in order to decide on the story. They wanted the subject to be extravagant, spectacular, full of adventure, violence, sex, life, death, hope, terror, with ties to the past and a profetic vision of

the future; a story in which the good guy, the cowboy always wins....

Henry: Please, Albert, we're no longer in the fifties, it's the Indian who is supposed to win.

Albert: Correction: where the Indian always wins...excuse me Henry, but there are no more Indians, they did them all in before they got onto the Hollywood screens...In any case they decided to film the legend of St. George and the Dragon.

Henry: Who ever heard of these guys?

Albert: The film producers were not much more up to date on the ancient legends than my colleague here. Therefore they sent the screenplay writers off to the library to do research on the matter.

Henry: I just happen to have here their latest press release; it says that they will have to do a little reworking of the story to adapt it to the expectations of today's public...change the place, the century, the unraveling of the plot, a few characters, the story's message. Aside from that it's an excellent commercial property. But they didn't mention what it's all about.

Albert: It seems that the main character is a dragon, who was about to eat up all of the inhabitants of a village, one by one, until he got to the king's daughter. She gets saved at the last minute by this George character who kills the dragon and converts the population to Christianity.

Henry: If the population had to convert, it didn't get such a good deal. Wouldn't it have been better off safe in the belly of the dragon?

Albert: It's the script writer's job to take care of these philosophical problems. They aren't things you have to worry about; we're supposed to just tell the story impartially.

Henry: You're right; the radio doesn't make value judgments, go ahead...

Albert: As I was saying, after they settled on the plot; they put together the film crew which included an assistant director, a director of photography, a sound technician, a production secretary, a cameraman, a lighting tecnician, a gaffer, a gofer, a boom man, a gal Friday....

Henry: And what do all these foreign job descriptions mean?

Albert: They're professions that they have only in Hollywood, you can't make a film without a full crew. There's more of them...

Henry: Go on...

Albert: Where was I...a make-up man, a hairdresser, a make-up man for the dragon, a nail specialist for the claws of the dragon, the assistant in charge of moving the director's chair, a assistant to clean the director's sun glasses, the specialist for smoothing the scales of the dragon's tail, and so on until they had a production crew of 123 technicians, 372 assistants, 3 main actors: George, the princess and the dragon, plus 6428 extras of which 4275 get eaten by the dragon.

Henry: You can tell that it's a serious production...

Albert: They then set up the shooting schedule: on Monday the tenth, they could not begin because of the lighting technician's strike, same with Tuesday. The twelfth was when the make-up men went on strike, Thursday it was the turn of the technicians in charge of the dragon's flames; Friday was the birthday of the dragon's nephew; Saturday the director had to make an urgent trip to Katmandu to go to the dentist--the trip lasted for four months--then it rained for three weeks and the actors had to get sun-tanned again; the public relations assistant got pregnant, the dragon lost his voice because he had breathed too much fire. Finally the strike schedulers went on strike, and as there were no strikes scheduled, everyone worked for three days straight, one right after another; then they collapsed after this tremendous effort. After that the princess had to go into psychoanalysis in order to make sure that her role was not going to intensify her death instinct; George began to study transcendental meditation and parapsychology in order to conquer the dragon via his will power without resorting to weapons; the dragon took up the study of kung-fu in order to resist against transcendental meditation and look good on the screen. Then the extras all went to Formentera in order to get suntanned like the actors...

Henry: Albert, all of this is becoming ridiculous! You were talking about a serious production, in the hands of a group of professionals! What gave you the idea to spout off all of this nonsense about the film industry, that will only confuse the public. Who is going to go to the movies after having heard all of this?

Alberto: O.K. I'll start over. The naked truth was that they could not convince the dragon to sacrifice himself for the cause, for the eternal glory of the screen. It was the princess who discovered that the dragon wasn't too happy about his fate: that of having to actually die in front of the cameras. He said: "Listen, I'm not a martyr; I'm the shyest and least carnivorous dragon in the swamp, I'd rather not be sacrificed. I wasn't cut out for this profession: all of my studies dealt with impressionist films, I'm not made for neo-realism.

Henry: Then the technicians tried to convince the dragon that they weren't dealing with a mediocre science fiction film with paper maché monsters, but rather with a story with serious implications; therefore it would be incumbent upon him to make this small effort and let himself be killed just for this once. But the dragon was stubborn and said: "It's true that I have a passion for the cinema, I've made every effort for this industry but there are limits; you can't let yourself die for the film industry."

Albert: The director tried to win him over him: "You wouldn't be completely dead, because you would live forever on the silver screen. How can you pass up such an offer?"

Henry: The dragon's answer was unequivocal: "I'll tell you straight off: I'm a coward, a pacifist, eternal glory doesn't interest me; I want tranquility; I want to go back to my swamp, look at the moon, do some fire breathing exercises every once in a while to keep in shape; but I never liked to eat people. I'm a vegetarian, I'm ashamed to say so but it's the truth. If you want something spectacular you could set up an earthquake or a flood, that sort of stuff is quite fashionable these days. I could pretend to die with a lot of ruckus; maybe knock over a couple of skyscrapers with my tail. The public will be just as satisfied."

Albert: The technicians and the director began to lose patience with the dragon: but there was nothing that they could do; he just didn't want to die and they did not have the heart to kill him against this will. But in any case they kept rehearsing the crucial moment, and they imagined what his last minutes of agony would be like after George dealt him the final blow; as that was the instant of voyeurism, of blood and gore that the public had shelled out the price of a ticket to witness.

Henry: You can't talk that way about the public; our listeners are part of that public. I have a letter from one of them that says: "I don't go to the movies in order to see killing, violence, sadism and destruction. If it's there, so

much the better, but I don't go there for that alone."....a loyal listener, but

to come back to our story. Finally the day came around when they threatened to expel the dragon from the union if he wouldn't let himself be killed; but it was to no effect.

Albert: "Better an unemployed dragon than a dead one," he said thoroughly exasperated, and he breathed great flames the color of the sunset, which filled the set with orange and purple smoke until nobody could see anything at all. They had to evacuate the studio and warn the dragon to breathe exclusively colorless and innocuous fire. This last humiliation was too much for him: "If I can't practice my craft, and breathe fire that's every color under the rainbow, I might as well be dead. Go ahead and kill me if it means so much to you; without my art my life if worth nothing..."

Henry: This story is becoming pretty mushy, we're not supposed to take the place of the soap operas.

Albert: Alright, a bit of sentiment never hurt anyone...

Henry: I bet you don't know how the end the story. You haven't figured out how to get the dragon off the hook and you don't want to let him die.

Albert: This time you're right, I've become attached to the dragon. You know he has these nice soft paws, a yard long, he waddles a bit like a goose, but he has such a kind expression; every time they give him a couple of extras to practice eating he hides them under the hay and just eats the hay. He's a dragon with a sense of fair play; he doesn't want to die and he doesn't kill. If you saw him you would understand. It's not fair that such a sweet and humble dragon should die for the sake of the movie industry.

Henry: Come off of it! Thousands of people die each day for the glory of various industries. They die from pollution, cancer, ulcers, heart attacks, they even kill themselves. All for the sake of modern industry. If people don't die, industry won't be able to survive, not even our radio station. If you let the dragon live, industrial civilization will disappear.

Albert: Precisely.

Henry: What do you mean? That can't be what you're getting at.

Albert: That's just exactly what I mean. At the last moment when the dragon was about to be killed, he closed his eyes and breathed his last breath without taking his cue from the assistant director. As it happened he exhaled three seconds before George was to thrust his sword into his stomach, and with his last premature breath he set the whole studio on fire. The cameramen continued to shoot for as long as they were able to; while all of the other 7683 technicians and extras fled the premises. The director escaped the disaster in his private plane and forty-eight hours later they all came back to see the rushes of the fire that the dragon had set off.

Henry: "It wasn't like that in the script" the director remarked "but it doesn't

matter, you can modify anything in the editing room; a real film is put together on the moviola. After the scene of the fire we'll build a big skeleton to show the public that the dragon was really dead." As soon as he said this the set designers began to measure the distance between the dragon's ribs in order to construct the skeleton to order. The dragon began to laugh because the set designers were tickling him. The crew began to laugh as well, out of relief that no one had to drop dead to facilitate the production of another film.

Albert: All's well that ends well; the dragon returned to the swamp; George went back to his accountant's office, the princess went back to her cashier's job at the supermarket; the director made a pile of dough and built himself an indoor swimming pool; and the producer smoked a big cigar and fell asleep on opening night, snoring loudly, which added to the impression of the dragon's ferocity. And the public was fully satisfied.

Albert and Henry: And the public was fully satisfied. Good night dear listeners.

A SHORT HISTORY OF HIGHWAY ROBBERY

Back in the old days the first highway robbers were somewhat at a disadvantage as there were very few roads; as a result they had to resort to the high seas. Among the most successful at the profession were the Pheonecians. It took a great deal of skill to jump aboard somebody else's ship and make off with the goods fast enough, before the winds changed.

It only took about a thousand years of Roman industriousness to provide the continent with enough roads so that the highway robbers could practice their profession on land as well as at sea. But in exchange they had to go out in the wind and the rain to stop the carriages and often risk their lives, in case the horses that pulled the carriages got nervous and charged after them. Daniel Defoe recounts the extra added inconvenience that robbery was punishable by hanging and the food was never very good at Newgate prison while they were awaiting trial.

A mere century or so later the profession took a great leap forward with the invention of banks. This was a much more comfortable form of highway robbery, because the rich merchants came to the banks directly to bestow upon them their money to look after, and nobody knew enough about inflation and interest rates to notice that their stores were being depleted. However a bank, particularly the Banco di San Giorgio of Genoa, was a very complicated operation to run. It took a great deal of stone and high quality marble to build a bank that would be impressive enough to reassure the merchants that their money was being well cared for. In fact the banks always had to look better than the palaces that even the noblest families lived in. The banks were so comfortable, well lit, well heated and furnished with such elegant armchairs that it took many guards to discourage the poor from intrusting their bodies to the bank's care as opposed to their money.

However given that all ranks of the population used to congregate around the banks, before long the governments of various countries came up with the idea of centralized taxes. This was a very cumbersome operation, for they had to grab each member of the population individually and convince him that the politicians were working in their best interests for the betterment of society. Sometimes the tax collectors barely made off with their lives, in times of famine or plague or wars, as the general population was always skeptical of the use that the politicians purported to make of their money. It was a low point in the profession of highway robbery.

Finally some of the more ingenious members of the trade decided to renovate their activity and came up with venture capitalism, phony real estate scams for land that was supposed to be spongy with oil wells, cut backs and graft, and other schemes that took a lot less physical energy than the activities of the earlier generation. In short they invented the soft sell, with which they attracted quite naturally their appropriate clients among the more trusting members of the population.

The latest advance in highway robbery is in the area of new technology and in particular microchips. In the near future we can expect computerized toothbrushes that will retail for only two thousand dollars apiece, and computerized shoelaces at cut rate prices of seven hundred dollars per shoe. However it does seem that the trade has come down a ways from their original forefathers, the pirates of the Mediterranean.

TRUST:

a short fable

at that time

trust

was a word

lost in the sands,

a word meant for people with sand in their eyes.

it was the kind of word

invented by philosophers

and tended in arid gardens

of ink on parchment,

watered by truisms

and watched over by suspicious servants

for whom, (given their station in life)

this word

was of no use to them.

but despite it all,

notwithstanding centuries of neglect

the word survived,

as a scrawny plant.

when the ivory towers crumbled

and the flower pots fell from the balconies

the word tried to put roots in the fields.

the other flowers and the farmers

looked at it with curiosity

mixed with terror.

some of the peasants said

that the plant was edible.

others with more experience

contended that it was obviously poisonous.

in any case the dogs ate it

and a few children and the village idiot.

two of the elders approached it,

given that they had survived wars

plagues and uncountable calamities,

they could well afford to risk

tasting the plant.

they concluded that

it could not do them much harm.

and then,

 very slowly, the village

began to change,

until one day

the philosophers returned

proclaiming that the survival of the species

was too important to let fall

into the hands of the common folk.

it was clear to them

that certain plants could not

be allowed to grow wild,

otherwise they would overwhelm

the entire community.

therefore they hacked down

every visible example of the plant

and kept only

a few dry leaves

to illustrate their botanical encycloped