



The Heaviest Burden

Batak People - Indonesia

‘Everybody has her burden, but the heaviest burden is for the small and the low.’

On the island of Sumatra there was a majestic mango tree. It had heavy branches that rose like arms to the sky and thick foliage from which hung large and fleshy fruits. The tree, which had grown next to a road, attracted the attention of everyone who passed by.

One day, a pitiful voice was heard emerging from the ground at the foot of the tree.

‘I cannot take it anymore! What a burden I have to endure! I have to hold on tightly to the ground and to bear the enormous weight of the trunk and its heavy branches, in addition to the added load of leaves and fruits. Because of all this weight, I am buried alive, unable to enjoy the caresses of the sun, the vision of the starry nights and the moon. I’m dying of curiosity to see how the rest of the creatures that populate the Earth are, our sisters in life who I’ll never know. Why did it come to me to be the root? Nobody knows how much suffering this means for me. If only I could have the idle life of the trunk...!’

‘What ‘idle life’? How can you say that?’ replied the trunk, unable to believe what he heard. ‘My life is not easy at all. I also have to hold up a lot of weight. Have you seen those branches that rise to sky? Have you seen how many fruit hang from them? I carry the food for them all,

up and down, tirelessly, day after day; and the animals scratch their backs on me and tear off my bark. And have you not seen my hard fight against the gales and the hurricane winds? The winds turn and twist my body and I have to make a colossal effort to prevent branches from breaking off, or worse, being cut in half, which would mean that we all die.'

'In addition,' the trunk continued, 'humans cut my branches with axes from time to time, leaving deformed stumps; and they love to engrave their names in my skin with knives. And do they thank me? Humans only thank leaves, which give them a shadow over their heads. Leaves do have a festive life, because they spend the day dancing with the breezes.'

Suddenly, the leaves, referring to the trunk, the branches and the roots, spoke out:

'You are all ungrateful! We protect you from the sun's rays in the summer, and from the monsoon rains in late autumn and winter. We protect you from the winds, and even give our life for you. Many of us are torn and dragged to death by the gales, and those of us who manage to survive by clinging to the branches end up bruised and full of scratches ... if we are not devoured by the animals, like those that hang lowest! And if we are lucky enough to avoid being dragged by the winds, and to finally fall peacefully to the ground, we find ourselves with the sad fate of the fire that humans reserve for dry leaves. How can you say, Trunk, that we have a festive life? Maybe the fruit does have a good life, hanging there and swaying all day.'

'It is sad to hear you talking like that!' the fruit said at once. 'We are the ones that should inspire the most compassion. Do you know what it is to live harassed by fear? The insects eat us, the birds eat us, the animals eat us, and humans come to tear us from the branches to devour us whole. But the most tragic of all is that we have to accept our destiny and preserve our good name, our sweetness, for the sake of all of you. If we were not tasty, humans would cut down the tree because it would be useless for them. If humans plant us and give us all a life, it is thanks to us, because they find us delicious. It is our sacrifice that protects the tree! And we are the ones who make it possible for you to have offspring through our seeds!'

‘Do not argue, do not argue!’ said a seed at the foot of the tree with a conciliatory tone. ‘Arguing weakens us all.’

And she added sensibly:

‘All of you strive to create me and, in this way, we can reproduce and survive. And for me it is not easy either, you know? They bury me alive, and I must open my bowels to make all of you again!’

‘Oh, enough is enough! Shut up now!’ the root shouted. ‘It is true that together we create mangos and that each one plays an important role. But the heaviest burden is on me, because you all depend on me! If I did not exist, none of you would be here. If I get sick, forget about trunk, leaves, fruits and seeds. I feed you all and I have to go into the earth and the darkness to look for your sustenance, while you ignore me and only think of yourselves!’

And so it is also among humans, the Batak people say. Before making a decision, think about the rest of the groups that make up a society. For there to be true democracy, root, trunk, leaves, fruits and seeds have to participate in decisions and collaborate with each other for the common good. However, it is the root, the most numerous layer of society, that sustains and keeps alive the rest of the society. They are the ones who carry the heaviest burden. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

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Comments

The Batak People from northern Sumatra, Indonesia, from whom this story seems to come, are a group of Austronesian peoples with a rich oral tradition. Although their culture has received important influences from India, it has been transformed to a great extent through the impact of Christian missionaries and, to a lesser extent, by the expansion of Islam amongst its members.

The mango is one of the most common trees in Indonesia, although it is a native species from India. Regarding the Americas, it was introduced by the Portuguese into Brazil, from where it spread to all the intertropical zones.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

The Way Forward: As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. Such renewal is the promise of these Earth Charter principles.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways

to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals. Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play. The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership. The partnership of government, civil society, and business is essential for effective governance.

