



The Elephant and the Hummingbird

China

Once upon a time, an elephant was walking with weary steps down a road in a great jungle in south-eastern China when, suddenly, he saw a tiny hummingbird in the middle of the road. The bright little bird was absolutely motionless, belly up, with her legs stretched skyward.

'Is she dead?' thought the elephant as he approached the hummingbird.

He gave her a light tap with his trunk, in case she still had some life left.

'Hey! Do not push me!' the hummingbird opened her eyelids.

'I did not know if you were dead,' the elephant said, relieved to see that the bird was fine. 'But, what are you doing here in the middle of the road? Someone could step on you?'

'Precisely, I'm here so everybody can see me,' the hummingbird replied. 'I have heard that sky is going to fall on our heads today and, if that happens, I am here, ready to do my part and help to hold it up.'

The elephant remained motionless for a moment, as if he hadn't heard what the little bird had said.

Then, abruptly, he burst into laughter, a trumpeting guffaw that only an elephant could blow through the strident amplifier of his trunk, a noise that filled the jungle.

‘Have you gone crazy, little bird?’ the elephant asked when he managed to control his hilarity. ‘Do you really think that you will be able to hold up the sky with those slender legs?’

The hummingbird did not like that at all. Looking at the elephant angrily, she raised her head and said:

‘I know perfectly well that I will not be able to hold up the sky by myself. That is precisely why I have placed myself in the middle of the road, in the sight of everyone. Because, then, all creatures can see me and imitate me to do everything in their power to hold up the sky... This is what is in my power to do!’ □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

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Comments

There are a great number of versions and adaptations of this Chinese fable, which some people place in the vicinity of the Yellow River. There are versions where the roles are exchanged, putting the elephant belly up, and there is even a version in which elements from other stories are mixed in. One of these stories is ‘The Brave Parakeet,’ a story pertaining to Buddhism, also in this Collection. This adaptation has been built on the basis of Norma Livo’s version from 2003.

Sources

Livo, N. J. (2003). The hummingbird. In *Bringing Out Their Best: Values Education and Character Development Through Traditional Tales*, p. 105. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Universal responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

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

The Way Forward: This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.

