



The Wise Old Man

Myanmar / Turkish Sufism / Judaism

The young prince did not like palace life, so he took advantage of every chance he had to sneak out and take the path that led to the green fields and forests of the region. Only there did he feel at peace, listening to the singing of the farmers plowing the land, absorbing himself with the reflections of the sun in the streams and watching the crickets rattling their wings like violinists.

One day, passing by a farm when he was going back to the palace, he observed an old man planting some cherry saplings in the orchard near the house. It was a considerable effort for the man to dig the earth in order to plant the saplings, so the prince, intrigued, stopped by the stone wall that separated the farm from the road.

‘Old man!’ said the prince, calling the old farmer’s attention. ‘Can I ask you how old you are?’

‘Of course, my young friend,’ said the old man, who, although he had not recognised the young prince, had deduced that he must be a cultivated youth. ‘I am eighty-one years old.’

The prince opened his eyes in amazement.

‘And, with your age,’ said the prince, ‘do not you think that the work you are doing is futile, since, most likely, you will never get to taste the cherries of those saplings?’

The old man left the hoe and approached the stone wall to talk better with the young man.

‘Do you see those cherry trees that extend to the left of the house?’ said the man pointing beyond the walls of the farmhouse. ‘Those trees were planted by my grandfather. And do you see those other cherry trees on the hill?’ he turned to point to the other side. ‘Those were planted by my father.’

‘I’ve been eating delicious cherries from those trees all my life,’ the old man continued, ‘and I did not even have the chance to thank my grandfather for it. Is it not fair that I plant these cherry trees, even knowing that I will never taste their fruits?’

The prince was deeply moved by the old man’s reasoning.

‘The cherries from these saplings are not for me to eat,’ said the farmer. ‘They are for my daughters, their husbands and the children of my daughters, my grandchildren, to eat long after I have gone from this world.’

When, many years later, the prince became king, he always paid special attention to the care of the rural areas of his kingdom, since he knew that they were the ones that supplied food and resources to the cities. They gave their wealth to the whole country. But, in addition, in all political and state issues, he always kept in mind in his decisions not only the population that existed in his kingdom in that moment, but also future generations, even those which would only arrive after his own death. With these priorities, the once young prince ended up going down in history as the best king his people had ever had. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

I have found versions of this particular story in traditions and places in the world as distant as the Jewish tradition (Schram, 2012), Turkish Sufism (MacDonald, 2005) and Myanmar (APCIEU, SEAMEO, SEMEO INNOTECH & SEAMEO SPAFA, 2010). However, I have not found many other stories that, like this one, convey the importance of diachronic

responsibility; that is, assuming our responsibility now for future generations. Perhaps that is why this story has spread such long distances.

In The Earth Stories Collection I have taken advantage of the reformulation and adaptation of stories to include the diachronic responsibility component, to lead the reader, the listener, to take future generations into account in every decision.

Sources

APCIEU, SEAMEO, SEMEO INNOTECH & SEAMEO SPAFA (2010). The Old Wise Man. In *Telling Tales from Southeast Asia and Korea*, pp. 81-82. Bangkok: Advanced Printing Service.

MacDonald, M. R. (2005). Planting for the next generation. In *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About*, p. 118. Little Rock: August House.

Schram, P. (2012). Honi and the Carob Tree. Spirit of Trees: Educational resources website. Retrieved from <http://spiritoftrees.org/honi-and-the-carob-tree>.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 4: Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

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.

Principle 4a: Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.

Principle 4b: Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

