



Old Joe and the Carpenter

USA (Appalachians)

Old Joe had a friend with whom he had shared the joys and misfortunes of a lifetime. They had gone to school together, and they had captured and released frogs together at Hickory Creek. And when they became adults and thought of getting married, they bought land together and set up their farms side by side.

But one day something happened that had never happened before: they had an argument.

It was a most foolish argument, over a calf that had disappeared from Joe's land and had reappeared on the land of his friend. Joe knew that the calf was his, because it had the same markings as his favourite cow, but his friend was convinced that the calf was his. The fact is that the discussion grew hotter and hotter, since both men were very stubborn, until, in the end, some rather harsh words were spoken.

It had been seven days since that argument, and they had not talked. But Joe could not stop thinking about it, and his thoughts were feeding his bad feelings against the person who had been his closest friend over his lifetime. That was when someone knocked on his door.

When Joe opened the door, he found a young man in his mid-thirties, with a serene and trustworthy countenance.

'Hi, I'm a carpenter,' the man said, 'I am looking for a job. Do you have anything that needs renovating or building? I will do a good job.'

‘Well ... Yes!’ Joe answered. ‘There is something you can do for me, son.’

Joe invited the young carpenter into his kitchen. He poured him a cup of coffee and cut him a piece of sponge cake. Then, he sat down in front of him, crossed his arms on the table, and said:

‘If you look out the window, you will see a creek that separates my farm from that farm over there. Well, the creek was not there a week ago. My neighbour dug it a couple of days ago to spite me. He hitched his horse to a plow, climbed up that hill, and dug a furrow from the pond, so that now we are separated by that little creek.’

‘I want you to do one thing for me,’ Joe continued. ‘I have to go to town to buy supplies, and I want you to build me a wooden fence up there, high enough so that I when I get back I do not have to see the face of my idiot neighbour never again.’

‘Very good,’ said the carpenter. ‘If you give me the wooden planks and the nails, I have my own good tools and I think I can do a good job; a job you will not regret. I assure you.’

Joe took the carpenter to the warehouse, showed him the wood and nails he could use, and then climbed into his cart and left for town.

The carpenter worked tirelessly all day long, taking measurements, cutting wood, fitting and nailing them, while Joe did his tasks in town, and then went to the tavern for a beer and to play a hand of poker.

When he came back, being the sun over the horizon, Joe stopped his cart, looked in the direction of his friend’s house ... and his jaw dropped as if a spring had broken between his teeth.

The carpenter had not made a fence, but a beautiful wooden bridge, with handrails and everything, spanning the creek from one side to the other!

Just at that moment, his old friend was coming towards his farm, across the bridge, smiling from ear to ear and with his arms open.

‘My old Joe! What a beautiful gesture!’ He said as he finished crossing the bridge. ‘Forgive me, please. I have become a stubborn old

grump. I do not care who the calf is. Keep it. All I want is for us to be friends again.'

Both elders melted into a hug, and Joe whispered to his friend:

'Sorry. It was not my idea, but the carpenter's. That calf is yours. I do not know what I was thinking, old friend. The only thing I want, is that we become friends again. Let's forget this bad dream.'

When they turned to thank the carpenter for what he had done, they saw that he had already picked up his tools and had mounted his horse and was about to leave.

'Hey! Wait a moment!' Joe said. 'My friend and I have a lot of work to give you. Please, stay with us.'

But the carpenter laughed and said:

'It would be fun to spend a few days with you, believe me. But I cannot do it ...'

And pulling the bridles of his horse to turn, he added:

'I have many more bridges to build.' □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2019).

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Comments

This story was recorded in 1951 by Manly Wade Wellman, as told to him by an old man called Green, a bee hunter who lived near Bat Cave, in Henderson County, North Carolina.

Bee hunting is a kind of art that was once practiced to locate colonies of wild bees. For this, three worker bees were captured and marked, and then freed to establish, from the three starting points and trigonometry, the direction in which the hive was located, as well as the distance to it. In the Appalachian area, bee hunting was a serious and

valued job to obtain honey, and even to capture wild hives in order to domesticate them.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 16a: Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.