



The Cracked Pot

China, Morocco, India, Zen Buddhism

In the mountains of Mongolia there once lived an old woman in a yurt. She lived all by herself and did not own much. Inside the yurt there was a simple bedstead, a table with a vase, and in the vase there were fresh flowers.

There was also a little shelf on the wall, and on that shelf there were two pots. One of them was shiny and new with a golden rim. The other one was old and battered with a dent here and a scratch there, a crack in the rim and, altogether, worse for wear.

Every day, the old woman took the pots down from the shelf, fastened them to a pole which she laid across her shoulders and went to the nearby lake to fetch water. But, when she returned the new pot would still be full to the brim (and very proud of it) while the old, cracked pot would be half empty, its contents having spilled out and leaked out through the crack.

This went on for two years or more. And the cracked pot grew more and more ashamed. Finally, it plucked up all its courage and spoke to the old woman.

‘Excuse me,’ it said. ‘I want to apologise. I feel so useless, losing all my water like that. I beg you, please leave me at home next time you go out to fetch the water. I’m no good at all to you.’

The old woman, a kind and wise being, replied:

‘Tell you what, little pot. Come out with me one last time. And, while we’re out, observe closely what happens.’

And so it was done.

The old woman fastened the pots to the pole and went out. And, as the cracked pot looked on, she reached into her apron pocket and after every few steps threw a handful of seeds on the ground. And, as the pot looked closer, it saw flowers growing on the side of the road where the seeds had fallen whereas, on the other side, the earth was bare, brown and dusty.

When the old woman had filled both pots and walked back, the pot looked again. And what did it notice? It saw that the water, which was trickling down its side, fell to the ground, gently watering all the beautiful flowers by the roadside.

‘You see,’ the old woman said. ‘I knew that you were special, that you had some qualities that the other pot does not. And I used that to an advantage, placing you exactly where you could do an abundance of good. Have you not noticed that there are always some fresh flowers in the vase on our little table? They’re there only because of you.’

From that day on, the little cracked pot was proud to travel to the lake and back. And every morning it was full of joy because the first thing it saw was the vase on the table with beautiful flowers in it. □

Adapted by Catriona Blanke and Swantje Oetjen (2022).

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Comments

It is striking that a tale can be attributed equally to Indian, Chinese or Moroccan lore, even to the spiritual tradition of Zen Buddhism. This is often the case with stories which have a lasting impact on people, stories which are endlessly reproduced over the centuries and take on different landscapes, while their characters are dressed in clothes adapted to different climates and cultures.

'The Cracked Pot' is an example of this as it is a story whose origins and cultural background might be impossible to establish precisely. If we could trace its roots, it would be at the cost of lengthy research work that could involve years of inquiry.

But why are there stories that are retold across cultures and pass down through the centuries as immortal tales of humanity?

One possible answer to this question involves something as fundamental as the survival of our species.

As we have argued elsewhere in this Collection and, as theorised by cultural anthropologist and evolutionary biologist Kathryn Coe and her colleagues (Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy, 2005) in their evolutionary analysis of traditional storytelling, the behaviour of telling and listening to particular stories may be subject to natural selection. Specifically, they say:

A traditional story that influences the behaviour of those who hear and repeat it in a way that increases their fitness will tend to become more frequent in future generations, while a traditional story that has the effect of lowering fitness will tend to die out over the generations. This effect will be particularly pronounced when the stories influence behaviour crucial to human survival and reproduction. (pp. 20-21)

Given that this is so, the fact that 'The Cracked Pot' has been able to spread throughout the world and survive the passing of centuries, perhaps millennia, would indicate that its teachings are essential to human survival. These are teachings which are focused on non-discrimination and respect for differences, and with the need for diversity in all aspects of existence.

Sources

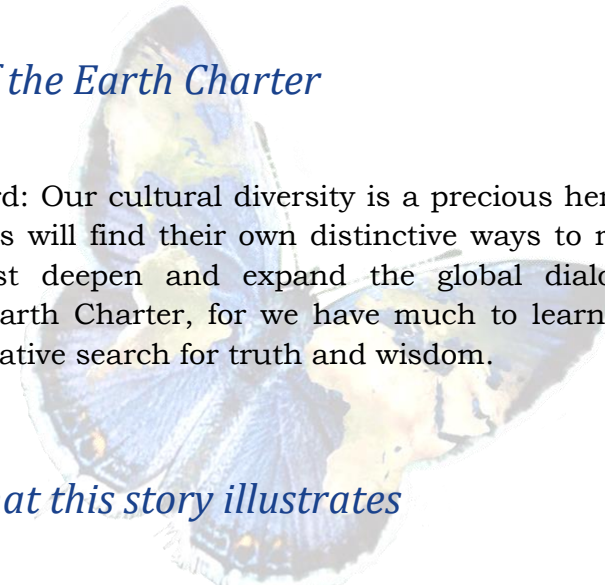
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Associated text of the Earth Charter



The Way Forward: Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.

Other passages that this story illustrates

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

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.