

Words of Wisdom ... a parable

Along time ago, there once was a young man who desired to become a teacher. The remote village in which he lived was far from anywhere important, and he knew that he would need help to achieve his dream.

He went to his father, and asked him if he knew of someone who could give him the wisdom he knew he needed. His father loved his son, and was hesitant to speak, but upon being pressed, he consented to tell his son what he knew.

“I have heard it said that there is a very old man, wise in his years, who lives in a cave high in the mountains, far from here. He was once a teacher, and a very good one. Perhaps he can give you the advice you seek”.

“He was a teacher?”

“Yes, son. But I must warn you, the trip will be arduous, and fraught with danger. You must be careful”.

The son agreed that he would take every precaution. The next morning he set out.

The trip up into the mountains was indeed a difficult one. The way was steep, and the path was treacherous. Many lesser men would have despaired of ever reaching the summit. But the young man was fit and healthy, and he was confident that he could complete the journey.

After many days, the young man came to the crest of a ridge, and spotted a cave hidden among some rocks. He made his way to the mouth of the cave, and with some fearfulness, announced his presence.

“Hello! Old man! Are you in there? I wish to speak with you!”

He could hear shuffling noises, and then a grunt. “Come if you must”.

The young man made his way to the back of the cave. There, seated next to a small fire, was the oldest man he had ever laid eyes on. The man was clothed in a filthy robe, and his ancient lined face was creased and dirty. He was almost bald, but a large and rather unkempt beard hung down over his frail, emaciated chest. He beckoned for the young man to sit down and join him at the fire.

“Wise one, I come to seek your help. I have been told that you were once a respected teacher”.

“That is true. I know much. I even know of you, and why you have come”.

“What? How is that possible? Do you then know everything?”

“No, my son, not everything. If that were true, I would know how to get running water into this accursed cave. Then perhaps I could bathe more frequently ...”

The young man had noticed a definite odor about the old man, but being polite, had chosen to say nothing. And wait ... was that a cockroach scuttling about in the old man's beard ...?

Suppressing a shudder, the young man continued.

"Do you know then that I too wish to become a teacher, like yourself? I would ask you to help me. What advice can you give?"

The old man said nothing for a few minutes. He scratched at his beard. The young man shuddered again, and looked away.

Finally the old man spoke.

"What is it you wish to learn?"

"It is my wish to become a teacher, the very best teacher I can be. I need to know your secret for being so successful".

"Have you no skills of your own?"

"Yes, old one, I do. I have studied hard, for I know that I must be knowledgeable myself before I can teach others. But I am confident that I have the knowledge I will need".

"That is good. What else do you know?"

"I know many things about being a good teacher already. I know to speak in a firm voice, and allow no disruptions when I am instructing ..."

"But surely there is more than that!"

"Yes, of course. I know that I will care about my students, ruffians that some of them may be, and will treat them with kindness and respect. I am sure I will be good at that."

"Yes, you seem very sure of yourself. And what else?"

"I am not proud, old man. I know that to be a good teacher, I must always be willing to learn new things. I'm confident that I can ask others for assistance when I need to. As I am asking for your advice now".

"What is it exactly that you wish me to tell you?" The old man poked at the fire for a moment, and then settled back against a log. He had just the faintest trace of a smile on his lips.

"I want to know your secret! I want you to tell me the one thing I need to become a good teacher, like yourself".

The old man cackled to himself. "You are so unsure of your own abilities, then, that you need some magic word from one like me? How extraordinary!"

"Please, sir. I can be a good teacher, I know it. I have the skills and the knowledge, and I know in my heart I will be a caring and dedicated teacher. But I want you to tell me your secret, so I can be sure!"

The old man leaned forward, narrowly avoiding setting his beard on fire from the flames that flickered between them. He took no notice, but addressed the young man.

“Alas, my son, I am afraid your journey has been in vain. There is nothing I can do to help you”.

“But ... you are a wise and respected teacher. You must know the one thing I need to be successful ...”

“I do indeed”. The old man scratched again, and sighed. “But, you see, you already have it! You don’t need me to tell you what it is you must have, when it is an attribute you already possess!”

“And what is this attribute, old man?”

The ancient one met his gaze, and smiled. “Confidence!”