

Campfire Stories

As a foreword, I would suggest to an aspiring storyteller, to listen to other storytellers whenever you can and read widely. The best narrators sometimes learn how to include their listeners in various ways. When you have a willing audience, telling your story becomes easier. I would also suggest that while original tales can be as interesting as old favorites, don't hesitate to take stories you have heard or read, and retell them in your own way to suit the audience and/or the situation in which you are now weaving the magic of the spoken word. Another idea is to encourage students to write stories of their own, and some of them could be selected to also use at a campfire.

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This first story was usually told the first night of a three to five day outdoor experience for a school group. It was used to help set a good atmosphere for learning:

The Wisdom of the Three Sons

Once, as it was told many years ago, and handed down to me, was the wisdom of an old Indian chieftain. He was getting along in years, and he was aware of the changes that people experience as they age. The time had come for him to begin to consider who would best be the one to follow him as tribal leader. Now it so happened that this chief had three fine sons who had grown into strong braves and were well respected for their bravery and leadership.

The old chief was uncertain which would be the most qualified to lead after he had gone to his reward in the great hunting grounds in the heavens. Each had certain special talents and skills and the chief would think from time to time who should be selected to lead. Finally he devised a plan he felt would help him choose wisely.

Spring was at hand. Winter had lost its grip on the woods, and at last, the sun shone a little brighter, the air was a little warmer, and color began to show in the forests. This was the time for action as the chief began to weave his plans.

He called his sons into his lodge one evening and after visiting and socializing in the usual manner he told his sons that he was about to take a trip and he had a gift for each one of them. As he handed each son a buckskin pouch, he advised

him to care for it wisely. He said that he would return at the time of the harvest moon, and he would ask them to return his pouch to him.

By the next morning the entire village had learned the chief would be going off alone and they all escorted him down to the river's edge. When he appeared as only a distant dot on the river, the tribe returned to the village and resumed daily activities.

Within a few more weeks, winter had given up and retreated to the lands of the far north. By then each son, while alone in his own lodge, had decided to take notice of the pouch he had been given and selected his own course of action.

Spring spent its days in reawakening all of nature, and in its time was replaced by the hot days of summer. And life continued in the village as it had for generations.

Eventually, summer began to loosen its grip on the land and the people, and cool mornings and the appearance of colors on the dogwoods, maples and sweet gums and an occasional early morning fog reminded the people that another autumn was again at hand. Now the great square of Pegasus appeared in the evening sky also foretold the arrival of a new autumn and this year would be no different as the people began to look forward to the return of their respected leader. As the days grew shorter, the people's concern was noticeable and whenever someone was near the river, they searched for any sign that their chief was returning.

Late in the season, when the days had shortened and the nights were cool, many had become concerned that perhaps some misfortune had caused the chief harm. Some began to fear that he would not return at all.

Yet, one day when several of the tribe was at the river, one child whose eyesight seemed unusually dependable, became aware of an object far down stream. Before long they knew their chief was returning and the children ran back to the village to announce the news and many of the braves got into their canoes and paddled down to accompany him back. Everyone in the village was at the river by the time the canoes all returned and a great celebration was held that night in the grand lodge.

After sharing tales of adventures and news of the village, a great feast was enjoyed, and late in the evening when all had eventually retired to their own lodges, and they were now alone, the chief called his three sons to his side and enquired about the buckskin pouch and asked for its return.

The first son gave him the pouch and spoke thusly: Father, I felt a great trust and responsibility was placed on me when you entrusted me with something as valuable as this pouch. Therefore I return it to you, just as you gave it to me,

unopened and safe. His father was pleased to know of his son's faithfulness and loyalty.

The chief then turned to the second son as asked about the pouch. This son spoke: Father, I opened the pouch and found that it contained kernels of maize (corn) so my wife ground it into cornmeal just last week and here is the bread she made for you. His father was pleased with this son as he, too had used his trust wisely. After all, grain is intended to be eaten.

As he turned to his third son, the young man arose and told his father that he needed to accompany him to find out about his pouch. They crossed the grounds of the village, now deep in slumber, and entered the lodge, which served as storage for the village. This son took him to a large sack and he spoke: When I saw the grain, I felt I should plant it. I did so, and we had a good growing season this year. So, here in this sack is the grain you gave to me for safe keeping. It is yours.

Now the chief was even more pleased as each son had acted honestly and with honor. Each was worthy of praise. However, the son who planted and harvested was indeed the one wise enough to become the next chieftain.

The story could end here, but as I mentioned at the start, I often used this as an opening campfire on the first night. Therefore, I would continue to express the moral of the story as it suits my campers:

Now, campers this story was selected because it is about you. You see, each one of you is one of the chieftain's sons. Which one are you? Some of you will return home without even opening your pouch. You will have had a good time, and done all that was asked of you, and we will be pleased that you were here with us. You will have fun tales of your own to spin once you return home.

Some of you are like the second son. You took what was available to you and made good use of it while you were here. You will have learned many new things and discovered much. You will have added much to enrich our stay and we will be pleased with you, too.

Then, there will be some who are like the third son. You will take these three days and you will plant ideas and will grow all sorts of new things, which will be useful to you for many years, perhaps, even for the rest of your life as you make special memories and stronger friendships.

So, which shall it be? Only you can tell.

At the time of our school camps, stories based upon Native Americans were in style, particularly as most of the children had never been away from home in a camp setting and many would begin to relate to those people whose lives were based on their relationship with nature, and perhaps, some even lived and hunted near this campsite in the years of long ago.

The Answer is in Your Hands

In an ancient tribe, whose name has long been forgotten, comes a story about a leadership challenge based on mental sharpness. How do you think you would you handle this situation?

The main chief had accumulated many years. That was true, and that was obvious to all but the most inattentive. Despite of his years of leadership, the tribe was, nevertheless doing well. They had been at peace now with all of the neighboring tribes. Their fields produced sufficiently well that they had not known hunger for many years, and their storehouse had already an adequate supply for the winter and the growing season was not yet over.

Nevertheless, it seems to be human nature that for some individuals or groups, nothing is as good as it could be. There always people who thought that if *they* were in charge, everything would be even better. Have you ever known people like that? Does that happen now? We know that there are some who cannot seem to handle good times, and that proved true in this tribe as well.

Of course, the discontent started small, Perhaps an individual unhappy with a small matter. And, you know, people talk to their friends. After a while, this small talk began to be more commonplace and spread to a few others, but it was all quiet and whispered.

With the passage of time, there emerged a small group of boys who seemed determined to criticize each of the chief's decisions. Before long these boys had grown to be young warriors and knew they had a place in their tribe's actions. So, they began to think how they could take over and embarrass their chief so he would feel he need to step down and let one of their group step into the leadership role.

They understood how revered and respected the old chief was. They were wise enough to understand that they could not win the support of the tribe if they were to kill him, so they discussed their options. They finally came to the conclusion that the only way they could take over was by embarrassing the chief and showing that he was no longer wise enough to lead.

As time passed many ideas were suggested and for one reason or another, discarded, until finally, one of the group hit upon what they all agreed was the

perfect way to trap their leader into making an obvious mistake from which they could show the tribe it was time for new leadership.

Now, I can tell you their scheme. See how you like it. One of the young braves would approach the chief, while in open council where all would see and hear. He would have hidden in his hand a small chick. He would challenge the chief by saying, "In my hand is a bird. Show us your wisdom by telling me if this bird is alive or dead".

How do you think the chief should reply? If the chief said, "I think that bird is alive," then the brave could crush it before opening his hand. But if the chief said, "I think it must be dead," then the brave would open his hand and show everyone the fledgling was alive. Either way the challenger would win.

Finally, the time came for the council to assemble to discuss tribal concerns. At last it came to be the warrior's turn to address his chief. And he proposed the choice I just told you about. He spoke loudly for all to hear, and he said, "In my hand I hold a young bird. You are known for your wisdom. Tell me, is this bird dead or alive."

This chief wasn't exactly stupid, you know, so he thought about it before he answered. Now, you have had a chance to think about it, what would you say? (Perhaps, even take a quick show of hands.)

Now, I will tell you what this chief said. After thinking about the situation and the way the choice was presented, he calmly said, "Young man, you know the choice is in *your* hands. You tell me *your* decision."

This was not the response the young Indian expected and he became flustered as he realized that although his chief was advanced in years, his wisdom was still young and strong. Thus ended that attempt to replace the chief. However as more time passed, the chief knew when it was time for him to be replaced by a younger, stronger leader, and so, as in the past, leadership changes with the times and new people get their chance to display and use their wisdom for the betterment of others.

King Arthur's Most Deadly Challenge

There are perhaps, hundreds of stories surrounding the legends of a kingdom lost long ago in the distant past. Who knows of such a kingdom with a wise and good king; one whose reign is often used as an example of how a good kingdom should be? If anyone suggested Camelot or Merlin or King Arthur, you have guessed well.

So here is another story attributed to that time and place: It is said that Arthur would leave the protection of his castle and knights from time to time, and unannounced, dressed as a common traveler, wander throughout his realm and see for himself how his people were doing.

It was on one such trip that he passed through a section of strange forest never seen by him. As he was about to emerge from the darkest part of the woods, he reached a deep stream, which had a simple, narrow footbridge as the only span across. It was there that he was stopped by a strange knight who was mounted on a large, black horse as both King Arthur and the dark knight had each reached opposite ends of this footbridge at the same time.

Arthur called out to this stranger to yield, to stand down and let him pass. The knight remained in place silently, and would not back away. They remained at an impasse until, finally, Arthur challenged the stranger to a fight to determine who should cross first.

The dark knight accepted the challenge and they joined in combat using whatever weapons they had. This skirmish lasted for half a day, and finally, it was Arthur who made a mistake that cost him the battle. The dark knight prepared to strike Arthur a mortal blow, when he lowered his sword and for the first time spoke.

“I know who you are even though you are dressed as a commoner. But I offer you one chance to save your life and your reputation. I will allow you to leave here, but you must return in exactly one year with the answer to a riddle.” King Arthur agreed to the offer. “What is it that is most wanted by women? If you cannot give me the correct answer, I have your life as forfeit. If you can guess correctly, you are free to return to Camelot.”

The knight further stated, “I know that you are honorable and that you cherish your pledge. I will accept your promise that you will return in one year and you will be alone. At that time I will hear your answer. If you cannot supply the correct response, then your life will be forfeited to me in one year instead of my taking it today.”

Arthur had little choice but to accept this strange challenge and deep in thought, he returned to Camelot. He spent the year combing his brain for what seemed to be a logical answer. He spoke to many wise men and women and made a lengthy list of what he heard, yet he was still uncertain. He still sought more ideas.

Finally, the day arrived when he must return to that narrow footbridge in the darkest part of the forest, and he traveled slowly, deep in further thought, and he traveled alone as he tried to conjure up more ideas.

Just as he was about to reach the path leading into the forest, he became aware of some sort of commotion in the distance, and it seemed to be headed his way. Since he was in no hurry, he thought he'd dally a few more moments and see what this was. As it got closer, it got louder and wilder. For a while, it even appeared to be some sort of dust storm. All too soon this disturbance reached where he was waiting. There, in front of him was the ugliest old hag he had ever seen. She was filthy and wore dirty, old clothing and a cape. She looked very much like a condemned dump, and smelled even worse!

When she spoke the sound very much resembled the strained motion of rusty gears. "Arthur, " she croaked, "I know where you are going and the challenge which awaits you. I know that if you fail to give the right answer to the riddle you will die. I have the only answer that is correct and I will share it with you for a price."

The king responded, "I have searched for a year. I have sought the knowledge of magicians and the wisest men. I have confided in the many ladies in my court and in our villages. How could you know what so many others do not?"

The old hag only repeated her offer. King Arthur realized that it was possible that this excuse for a creature could possibly have that one tidbit of wisdom which had eluded all the others, so he asked, "What is the price for your thought?"

"When you give this answer, you will be released by your enemy. You must come back this very path, and I will be waiting here. Do not try to trick me by using another way back for your word is your honor. When you see me, you will know that I saved your life and you must take me with you back to Camelot. As we travel together, I will reveal the price for saving your life."

All of this was far too strange to seem like anything more than a bad nightmare, however he did realize the importance of supplying the dark knight with the right answer, so he chose to take a chance. Besides, he already had a scroll full of other answers, and perhaps anyone of them may actually be right, and he wouldn't even need her suggestion, so, reluctantly, he finally agreed and she confided her response.

After the strange encounter, King Arthur continued on his way, and entered the forest as he had exactly one year ago. He eventually found his way to the deep stream with the narrow footbridge. As soon as he stopped, he looked around and was surprised to discover that the dark knight was not there. Now, if it had been any other human, he would have said to himself, "I am here, he is not, so I now can go with a clear conscience as I have upheld my part of the bargain."

However, since he was not any other human; he was King Arthur, and his word was his bond, so he waited for half a day. As he began to think about returning to

Camelot, he heard the sound of an approaching horse beyond the other side of the bridge. It was the dark knight. And so they began to talk.

The dark knight asked his riddle again, "What is it that is most wanted by women?" Arthur removed the first scroll and began to read. He said things like, "Wealth." "Power," and "Eternal life." The dark knight accepted none of them. Arthur opened the second scroll and listed things like, "A large home," "a strong and brave husband," and "the ability to tell fortunes". The dark knight just waited.

So Arthur unfurled his third (and last) scroll and continued reading. "Many servants", "A large estate", "Never to feel pain or be sick", "To be respected throughout the country for her vast wisdom", "to have many strong and wonderful children," and the knight waited and asked, "Is that really all? Is that the best you could do? I have waited patiently, listening to all of your drivel. I will hear only one final idea."

In desperation, now King Arthur knew he had only one more response to give, and it was the one told to him by the old hag. This was the one that he hoped would never be said, as he remembered that he didn't know what the rest of her demand would be, but this was the only guess he had left so he spoke the words of that horrid creature, "What a woman wants most is the power to make her own decisions on those matters which are important to her."

With that, the dark knight said "As you have kept your word to me and returned here of your own free will as you pledged to me one year ago, I now keep my word to you and release you as you have indeed found the wisdom needed." And he turned his horse and rode back into the forest from whence he had come.

Arthur was momentarily relieved, as he was no longer facing death at the hand of that strange and powerful knight. I said 'momentarily' for as he turned his horse to return to Camelot he knew what awaited him where the path came out of the woods. And so it was, the hag waited for him and as they rode back to the castle together she explained the rest of her terms. Terms which horrified Arthur so greatly he had begun to wish he had been killed back at the footbridge for what she demanded, how could he possibly provide?

Her demand was simple: "You must ask Sir Lancelot to ask my hand in marriage!"

"I cannot do that!!" he roared. How can I commit another man to marry someone like you; someone he doesn't even know, someone totally lacking in even the basic skills of cleanliness and a human appearance?"

She told the king, "Your Sir Lancelot is a devoted and loyal member of your court. He will do anything to save your life, for if you do not tell him of this, you will die! You must tell him and ask him to propose to me."

The rest of the way back was in silence as the king worried about his predicament. She did not make things easy for him for her behavior when they entered the castle grounds was disgusting. She was loud. Her language was insulting and her smell got worse, if that were possible. Within moments of arriving, no one would have anything to do with her. She offended everyone she came into contact with.

This didn't help the king as he tried to find a way to explain the situation to his loyal friend and companion, Sir Lancelot. He finally did so. Her behavior was so destructive, he had no choice but to tell Lancelot the whole story and how his life was the price.

Lancelot told Arthur, "Your life is more important to our country than my happiness. Yes, if that is the price, I am willing to pay it" and following her trail of destruction, he found the old hag and asked her to marry him.

Such a situation had never been known before. No one in the king's court knew the background or the reason, but all were absolutely shocked to learn of the engagement and plans were made at once for the wedding.

It was a wedding like no one had ever experienced in human history. Even dressed in white, she was dirty, and unkempt. The dingy, dusty wedding gown didn't improve her smell or her nasty temperament but the ceremony proceeded. Now I've got to try to explain how bad the wedding banquet was; well, I'm not sure I can, but it was worse than our lunch room back at school.

The ugly hag old threw food everywhere. She jumped up on the table and poured wine on the ladies' gowns, and, but you get the idea. Poor King Arthur, what had he gotten his best friend into? Poor, miserable Sir Lancelot how embarrassed he was, and how could he live with this creature as a wife? But, the worst was yet to come.

After the banquet fiasco, it was time for the newly wedded couple to retire to the privacy of their quarters. No one envied Lancelot. Many said prayers on his behalf. The court was in disarray as they awaited the couple's entry into their private quarters.

Lancelot delayed as long as he could, but with a heavy heart, he approached the room in which his bride awaited. It was strangely quiet in there, so perhaps, he thought, she had already gone to sleep.

However, when he approached the bed, and drew back the curtains, he found a lovely and attractive bride awaiting him. Lancelot was beyond understanding. He asked who she was, and where was his new bride. She replied, "I am really your bride, the woman you willingly married. You see I was bewitched. I was under a most powerful spell which could only be broken by having a knight willingly propose marriage, so here I am, your new wife."

Lancelot was of course relieved and figured that this wasn't going to be the kiss of death that he had come to expect, but then she continued, "You see, the rest of the story is that I can be, as you see me now, only half a day. If you want me like this at night, then during the day I must revert to the shape and behavior you and everyone here hates. On the other hand, if you want me to make a favorable impression upon your friends and everyone in the kingdom, then, I must spend the night as the disgusting old hag everyone fears and hates. Lancelot." She asked, "Which do you prefer? When should I be pretty and well behaved, and when should I be that disaster everyone finds so disgusting?"

Lancelot thought about this with great sincerity and finally said, "Which do **you** prefer?
Why don't you decide?"

With that reply, she smiled warmly and gently clapped her hands and said, "You just broke the rest of the enchantment! By giving me the power to decide for myself how I want to be, you have released me from this horrid spell. As you see me now, I will be all the time."

And, I can tell you, this was truly one situation where they really did live happily ever after!