

## **A Little Fool's Play**

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Mulla Nasruddin's students complained to him one day, "You give us teachings with words about truth and falsehood, about ignorance and perfection. Can you not demonstrate it in some other way?" Nasruddin reached in his bag and pulled out an apple. "Here," he said, "This is the perfect apple, the apple from the Garden of Eden." His students looked at it and noticed that it had a rotten spot. "How could this apple be an image of perfection?" they asked. "It takes one to know one," Nasruddin replied. (Kornfield and Feldman, Soul Food, p. 231)

These Mulla Nasruddin stories are great because there are so many levels at which you can contemplate their meaning. Sometimes they impart wisdom, sometimes they just laugh at our strange human customs and language.

Nasruddin was at a football game. He had been shouting until half-time, and felt thirsty. "I'm going to get a drink of water," he told his friend. "And one for me," said the friend. In a few minutes Nasruddin came back. "I tried to have a drink of water for you, but I found after I had had my own drink, that you were not thirsty after all."

I'm guessing this last one was written after the real life of Nasruddin, who is reputed to have been born in Turkey sometime in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Over the centuries the tradition was embellished and today there are literally thousands of Nasurddin tales, and almost as many variations in the spelling of his name.

The anecdotes attributed to Nasruddin reveal his satirical personality and biting tongue that, it is said, he was not afraid to use even against the most tyrannical rulers of his time. He has become a folk-symbol of Middle-Eastern satirical comedy and an acceptable means to express rebellious feelings within a strict Muslim society. He comes out of the Sufi tradition, the mystic branch of Islam, just as the poets Rumi and Hafiz.

Mystic traditions often use jokes, or stories and poetry to express certain ideas that are difficult to comprehend without a means to bypass our normal human discriminative thought patterns. The rationality that confines and objectifies our thinking process is the opposite of the intuitive, gestalt mentality that these stories are attempting to engage. The theory is to preoccupy our rational minds with the surface story, then sneak in the important ideas through paradox and the unexpected events. The fool knows how to slip by our mental defenses. I'd say the humor in Nasruddin stories is like spiritual fiber for our lives. And we know that fiber is good for us.

Here's a little something for your health:

Nasruddin used to stand in the street on market days, to be pointed out as an idiot. No matter how often people offered him a large and a small coin, he always chose the smaller piece. One day a kindly man said to him, "Nasruddin, you should take the bigger coin. Then you will have more money and people will no longer be able to make a laughing stock of you." "That may be true," said Nasruddin, "but if I always take the larger coin, people will stop offering me money to prove that I am more idiotic than they are. Then I would have no money at all."

There are plenty of other fools and tricksters in world cultures besides Mulla Nasruddin. It's the Raven in the Pacific Northwest. Coyote is the best known trickster character from the Southwestern Native American culture. It's a case of myth imitating real life, Coyotes are very hard to outwit and have uncanny survival skills, themes that show up in the tales about him. In just one collection of Coyote stories, Coyote dies of a snake bite, a gunshot, an arrow wound, a broken heart, a rock-fall and a drowning, resembling nothing so much as the cartoon, (<http://members.aol.com/pmichaels/glorantha/trickrid.html>) in which Wile E. Coyote tries to outsmart the Roadrunner, dies, usually in a puff of dust, and then comes back to life every time. I learned that in 1915 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiated a 30-year campaign to kill more than 3 million coyotes in the West, but during those same 30 years the coyotes somehow managed to increase both in their numbers and in their range. Coyotes have been known to follow hunters, dig up their traps, turn them over and mark them, as coyotes do – following which they return to the hills and supposedly laugh at their own joke.

*Two Coyotes were crossing a farmer's field. Both Coyotes were strangers to each other for they had never met. Just as they were about to introduce themselves they heard the farmer yell, "There's a Coyote in the field!" The first Coyote turned to the other and told him to run! They both started to run for the trees when they heard the farmer yell, "And there goes another one!" Finally both Coyotes made it to the cover of the trees and they started to introduce themselves. "I never saw you before, I am Wanderer, I am a Coyote like you." The other Coyote looked at him oddly and said, "I am Sleek, but I am not a Coyote like you."*

*"Yes you are," said Wanderer.*

*"Oh no, I am not," replied Sleek.*

*"Look my friend, you are confused. You have ears like mine, you have a tail like mine, our fur is the same, our snouts are the same, everything is the same, you are just like me and we are both Coyotes," Wanderer tried to explain. "Listen let's run across the field again and you will see," challenged Sleek. So off they ran. First went Wanderer and again the Farmer yelled, "There goes that darn Coyote." Then Sleek took afoot and the Farmer yelled, "And there goes another one... again!"*

*When the two Coyotes reached the other side of the field they ducked into the woods. Wanderer turned to Sleek and said, "There! Didn't you hear the Farmer? He called us both Coyotes." Sleek look disappointed with his new confused friend and said, "Yes I heard the Farmer. He called you a Coyote, but I am an 'Another One'."*

Our problem is, we are listening to the Farmers tell us who we are. Something to talk about. (<http://www.indians.org/welker/coyoanon.htm>)

There are a number of trickster and wisdom characters that have made the journey across the Atlantic from Africa, some with the slave trade, to both the Americas and the Caribbean Islands. Anansi the spider, the hare, and the tortoise are all typical African mythological figures. In the United States the trickster hare became Brer Rabbit in stories supposedly narrated by Uncle Remus. These are the stories of tar baby and briar patch fame. These days the Anansi spider stories are more politically correct than Brer Rabbit stories. Here is an Anansi tale from Jamaica.

*Once upon a time, Anansi thought to himself that if he could collect all the common sense in the world and keep it for himself, then he was bound to get plenty of money and plenty of power, for everybody would have to come to him with their worries, and he would charge them a whole lot when he advised them.*

*Anansi started to collect up and collect up all the common sense he could find and put it all into one huge calabash. [That's a large hollowed out gourd.] When he had searched and searched and couldn't find any more common sense, Anansi decided to hide his calabash on the top of a very tall tree so that nobody else could reach it.*

*So Anansi tied a rope around the neck of the calabash and tied the two ends of the rope together and hung the rope around his neck so that the calabash was on his belly. He started up the tall tree, but he couldn't climb very well or very fast because the calabash kept getting in his way. He was trying and trying so hard when all of a sudden he heard a voice burst out laughing in back of him. And when he looked he saw a little boy standing on the tree's root. "What a foolish man. If you want to climb the tree frontways, why don't you put the calabash behind you?"*

*Well, Anansi was so angry to hear that big piece of common sense coming out of the mouth of such a little boy after he had thought he had collected all the common sense in the world that Anansi took off the calabash, broke it into pieces, and the common sense scattered out in the breeze all over the world. Everybody got a little bit of it, but no one got it all. It was Anansi who made it happen that way.*

Even Buddhism has its own form of the trickster stories, in the form of the Zen Koan or Koan riddle. Many of these, and other wisdom tales, are about discovering multiple layers of truth, or conversely the non-truth of everything. Let me read you a couple of examples of Koan wisdom, very few of which, I have to admit, I understand in the least!

*A Master who lived as a hermit on a mountain was asked by a monk, "What is the Way?"*

*"What a fine mountain this is," the master said in reply.*

*"I am not asking you about the mountain, but about the Way."*

*"So long as you cannot go beyond the mountain, my son, you cannot reach the Way," replied the master.*

And another:

*Bodhidharma left his robe and bowl to his chosen successor; and each patriarch thereafter handed it down to the monk that, in his wisdom, he had chosen as the next successor. Gunin was the fifth such Zen patriarch. One day he announced that his successor would be he who wrote the best verse expressing the truth of their sect. The learned chief monk of Gunin's monastery thereupon took brush and ink, and wrote in elegant characters:*

*The body is a Bodhi-tree, the soul a shining mirror; Polish it with study, or dust will dull the image.*

*No other monk dared compete with the chief monk. But at twilight Yeno, a lowly disciple who had been working in the kitchen, passed through the hall where the poem was hanging. Having read it, he picked up a brush that was lying nearby, and below the other poem he wrote in his crude hand:*

*Bodhi is not a tree, there is no shining mirror. Since All begins with Nothing, where can dust collect?*

*Later that night Gunin, the fifth patriarch, called Yeno to his room. "I have read your poem," said he, "and have chosen you as my successor. Here, take my robe and my bowl. But our chief monk and the others will be jealous of you and may do you harm. Therefore I want you to leave the monastery tonight, while the others are asleep."*

*In the morning the chief monk learned the news, and immediately rushed out, following the path Yeno had taken. At midday he overtook him, and without a word tried to pull the robe and bowl out of Yeno's hands.*

*Yeno put down the robe and the bowl on a rock by the path. "These are only things which are symbols," he said to the monk. "If you want the things so much, please take them."*

*The monk eagerly reached down and seized the objects. But he could not budge them. They had become heavy as a mountain.*

*"Forgive me," he said at last, "I really want the teaching, not the things. Will you teach me?"*

*Yeno replied, "Stop thinking this is mine and stop thinking this is not mine. Then tell me, where are you? Tell me also, what did your face look like, before your parents were born?"*

Some have identified, as modern tricksters, Bart Simpson, Friar Tuck, Woody Woodpecker, among others, and my favorite, The Cat in the Hat. Challenging the status quo – that's what much of trickery is all about. Speaking truth to power, as in the little boy who said "The Emperor is naked!"

Sometimes we take ourselves, and our spiritual lives, much too seriously. We think we must be solemn in this room, as if thinking about religious questions is like having to take medicine that tastes really bad. We know it will be good for us, but no one is going to convince us that it tastes good, too. Lightening up a little isn't just about laughing, it's about finding other paths to enlightenment than the serious words of religious tradition. Stories are fun – and they're also easy to remember and easy to relate to. They're about us.

Today is April Fools Day, a good day to take ourselves, our strengths and our weaknesses, and our absurdities, lightly.