

PARABLES IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

as told on Thursday 27 June 2013 in Governor's Cafe, George Street, Dunedin

1. Joel and the Lakota People

told by *Claire Amos*

Rosemary is a successful New York Publisher. Her marriage broke up three years ago and she has custody of her 11 year old son, Joel. Despite Rosemary's determination to provide him with every material and emotional advantage, Joel is clearly having a hard time growing up as a lone child of a single parent. He has long had behavioural problems at school, has become truant, and is truculent when challenged about this at home. He has never shown much affection for his caregiver, Joanne, though she is highly trained and does everything she can to win the boy's trust and regard.

Rosemary has decided the situation is now so serious that she must tackle it more systematically. She tells Joanne to keep a list of Joel's misdemeanours and to make sure to ask his teacher every day how he has behaved when she picks him up from school.

"He has to learn," says Rosemary. "I will go through the list with him every evening – quietly, methodically, thoroughly, explaining why what he has done is wrong or unacceptable. We will soon see a big improvement. He's a bright enough youngster; he just needs to have things pointed out to him in a consistent way. Once he sees that we're on to him, he'll change..."

Joel's behaviour has gotten no better; in some important respects, it has become worse since this list-and-tell regime was begun.

Two thousand miles to the South West, the Lakota people in New Mexico also have a troubled youngster. He has been seen damaging people's cars and trucks in the car lot outside the store. When challenged, he has been rude and dismissive of the authority of the elders. The whole clan is called together one evening and forms a large circle. The young man's father walks with him into the middle of the circle and then joins the other adults on the perimeter. The father begins to speak first.

"You are our first born, our most precious one. Your mother and I rejoiced the first time we felt you kick in her stomach. We ran from house to house, telling all these people that you were alive and well and strong. And so you were. You were born crying with a shout so loud they heard it three hundred yards away above the radio. How proud we were! How happy! You have always made us happy. Your first few steps – oh, how you fell over into a puddle. The look on your face! How we laughed...."

On and on, the father recounts, sharing the happiest memories of his son's life. No word of criticism is uttered. The father's task is to remind the young man of all that he means to the

family, the clan, the people: of all the joy and happiness he has brought; of the delight his wider family have in him.

When he is finished, it is the uncle's turn. He is followed by the two grandfathers. The sky is darkening, the stars plainly visible. It will be long past midnight before they have finished. After the men, the women speak, in gentler tones, in softer cadence – for it is on them that much of the work, from first labour pains to saving enough for school books, has fallen.

Finally, the clan chief speaks. He summarises all that has been said. He speaks slowly, with long pauses, as though searching for the deepest ways of saying what has to be said. His theme, from which he never deviates, is the same: the pride and pleasure this young man has brought to the Lakota people; the living, the departed, and those not yet born. Like all the earlier speakers, he never mentions the vandalism and the malicious damage, the shame, the anger, the futility, the mindlessness. All that is left unsaid, unhinted. The sole refrain is that this young man is a beautiful gift to the whole people, one of inexpressible value.

When the old man has finished speaking, he makes a small sign. The ring of people stands still, almost at attention, looking ahead of them at the young man in the centre of the circle. Then they melt wordlessly into the night.

2. The Parable of the Mexican Fisherman

told by Lynne Bower

A boat docked in a tiny Mexican village. An American tourist complimented the Mexican fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took him to catch them.

"Not very long," answered the Mexican.

"But then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?" asked the American.

The Mexican explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family.

The American asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

"I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the evenings, I go into the village to see my friends, have a few drinks, play the guitar, and sing a few songs... I have a full life."

The American interrupted, "I have an MBA from Harvard and I can help you! You should start by fishing longer every day. You can then sell the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue, you can buy a bigger boat.

"And after that?" asked the Mexican.

With the extra money the larger boat will bring, you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet of trawlers. Instead of selling your fish to a middle man, you can then negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move to Mexico City, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge new enterprise."

"How long would that take?" asked the Mexican.

"Twenty, perhaps 25 years," replied the American.

"And after that?" the Mexican asked.

"Afterwards? That's when it gets really interesting," answered the American, laughing.

"When your business gets really big, you can start selling stocks and make millions!"

"Millions? Really? And after that?"

"After that you'll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take a siesta with your wife and spend your evenings drinking and enjoying your friends."

3. Taking turns at conversing

*told by **Claire Carey***

My friend lived in a big city in Australia but her family had originally come from Poland. Her elderly grandmother was living with them, but that was problematic in the sense that the grandmother spoke no English, so outside of the immediate family it was difficult for her to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness.

In the apartment next door lived a woman from another country in a similar predicament. Every morning the two of them would meet for a cup of coffee on the apartment steps. Neither spoke the other's language but they would sit there taking turns at conversing.

4. Payment in Full

*told by **Grant Gillett***

Eldon was a deerhunter. He was a crack shot and never came home empty handed. He lived with Fiona his wife and had two children. His daytime job was in a small factory making fisherman's fly boxes in his local town. The small factory was taken over by a large sports goods manufacturing enterprise. The CEO of the enterprise was George who had a reputation as a ruthless and uncompromising corporate executive. He examined the small

factory where Eldon worked and decided its profits were not delivering the return on investment his company wanted so he shut it down.

The decision put 12 families out of work and some of the men did not cope so well. The newspapers ran the story and George read it but all he said was, "They have got no case against me. I will not pay." Eldon was Ok because he sold game meat to city folk at city prices.

His best friend Hank was not so good. He hit the bottle so his wife left him and then he shot himself. The newspapers ran the story and George said, "they have got no case against me. I will not pay."

Next the local school had to shut so Eldon's children had to travel by bus to the area school in a rough neighbourhood in the local big market town. One day in winter the bus slipped off the road and the children were killed. The newspapers ran the story. George said, "They have got no case against me. I will not pay."

George became so rich he decided to run for Governor. He visited all the towns in the state. George went missing. He was found dead in his car at the bottom of the cliff that the school bus had fallen down. Curiously there was a bullet hole in the windscreen that the police thought was made by a high powered hunting rifle. Even curiouser there was a note under the windscreen wiper with just three words written on it, "I will repay."

5. The Parable of the Ups and Downs

told by Margaret Hay

He who has ears to hear, let him hear the parable of the ups and downs.

What makes an up an up, and a down a down is that an up can do more to a down than a down can do to an up. That's what keeps an up up and a down down. The ups tend to talk to each other and study the downs, asking the downs what's up, or what's coming down, for that matter. The downs spend a fair bit of time talking to the ups, trying to explain their downness. The ups listen attentively, often in amazement, to the experience of being a down, and contrast one down's experience with another's. Of course, the ups never have to explain their upness; that's why they're ups rather than downs.

The good news about this is that we're all both ups and downs. There's no such thing as a perfect up or a perfect down. The bad news is that when we're up it often makes us daft. We call that dumb upness. It's not because ups aren't smart, it's because ups don't have to pay attention to downs the way downs have to pay attention to ups. Downs always have to figure out what ups are up to. The only times ups worry about downs is when downs get uppity, at which time they're put down by the ups. The ups believe that downs are over-

sensitive; they have an attitude problem. It is rarely understood that ups are under-sensitive and have an attitude problem.

6. A Parable

told by **David Kitchingman**

There was once a master parable-teller. He made up stories based on how people lived and how things happened. Many of his parables were short and simple snapshots of real life. Who hasn't lost something, found it again, and celebrated? Others were short short stories and some took surprising twists or offended natural justice. Why should a lot be paid for a little? Even his longest parable began in simple, trademark style: "There was a man who had two sons..." His earthy mix of fact and fiction made his parables memorable and gained him many followers and not a few enemies. Finally he was killed and his life, death, and reported resurrection became perhaps the greatest parable of all time. "There was once a god who had one son..."

7. Moses and the Wise Man (from the Holy Quran, Chapter 18 (The Cave): 60-82)

told by **Najibullah Lafraie**

Moses said to his servant, 'I will not rest until I reach the place where the two seas meet, even if it takes me years!' but when they reached the place where the two seas meet, they had forgotten all about their fish, which made its way into the sea and swam away. They journeyed on, and then Moses said to his servant, 'Give us our lunch! This journey of ours is very tiring,' and [the servant] said, 'Remember when we were resting by the rock? I forgot the fish—Satan made me forget to pay attention to it—and it [must have] made its way into the sea.' 'How strange!' Moses said, 'Then that was the place we were looking for.' So the two turned back, retraced their footsteps, and *found one of Our servants—a man to whom We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge of Our own. Moses said to him, 'May I follow you so that you can teach me some of the right guidance you have been taught?' The man said, 'You will not be able to bear with me patiently. How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?' Moses said, 'God willing, you will find me patient. I will not disobey you in any way.'* The man said, 'If you follow me then, do not query anything I do before I mention it to you myself.'

They travelled on. Later, when they got into a boat, and the man made a hole in it, Moses said, 'How could you make a hole in it? Do you want to drown its passengers? What a strange thing to do!' He replied, 'Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?' Moses said, 'Forgive me for forgetting. Do not make it too hard for me to follow you.' And so they travelled on. Then, when they met a young boy and the man killed

him, Moses said, 'How could you kill an innocent person? He has not killed anyone! What a terrible thing to do!' He replied, 'Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?' Moses said, 'From now on, if I query anything you do, banish me from your company— you have put up with enough from me.' And so they travelled on. Then, when they came to a town and asked the inhabitants for food but were refused hospitality, they saw a wall there that was on the point of falling down and the man repaired it. Moses said, 'But if you had wished you could have taken payment for doing that.' He said, 'This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patiently: the boat belonged to some needy people who made their living from the sea and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every [serviceable] boat by force. The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and so, fearing he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief, we wished that their Lord should give them another child—purer and more compassionate—in his place. The wall belonged to two young orphans in the town and there was buried treasure beneath it belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man, so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. I did not do [these things] of my own accord: these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience.'

8. The Villagers' Tree

told by Robin Smith

In a little Welsh village there was once a giant oak tree which over the centuries the villagers had come to love. With them it had endured many disasters – storm, battle, fire and flood – yet still supplied them with firewood and timber to repair their buildings, and still keep on growing. As it aged, it developed a huge hollow at its base where children loved to play, or sheep found shelter, and occasionally some villagers would bring their table and share a meal inside their tree.

Then one storm too many toppled their tree and left it lying flat on the ground. That evening the villagers gathered there in a wake to mourn the loss of their tree.

Was that the end of its story and the community's story too? What do you think? Two acorns had taken root, so nearby two young saplings were standing up reaching for the sky.

9. The Hypocritical Cat

told by Elaine Webster

Once upon a time there was a troop of Rats that used to live in holes by a river side. A certain Cat often saw them going to and fro, and longed to have them to eat. But he was not

strong enough to attack them all together; besides, that would not have suited his purpose, because most of them would have run away.

So he used to stand early in the morning, not far from their holes, with his face towards the sun, snuffing up the air, and standing on one leg.

The Rats wondered why he did that, so one day they all trooped up to him in a body, and asked the reason.

‘What is your name, sir?’ they began.

‘Holy is my name,’ said the Cat.

‘Why do you stand on one leg?’

‘Because if I stood on all four, the earth could not bear my weight.’

‘And why do you keep your mouth open?’

‘Because I feed on the air, and never eat anything else.’

‘And why do you face the sun?’

‘Because I worship the sun.’

‘What a pious Cat!’ the Rats all thought. Ever after that, when they started out in the morning, they did not fail first to make their bow to the Cat one by one, and to show thus their respect for his piety.

This was just what our Cat wanted. Every day, as they filed past, he waited till the tail of the strong came up; then like lightning pounced upon the hindmost, and gobbled him up in a trice; after which he stood on one leg as before, licking his lips greedily.

For a while all went well for the Cat’s plan; but at last the Chief of the Rats noticed that the troop seemed to grow smaller. Here and there he missed some familiar face. He could not make it out; but at last a thought came into his mind, that perhaps the pious Cat might know more about it than he chose to tell.

Next day accordingly, he posted himself at the tail of the troop, where he could see everything that went on; and as the Rats one by one bowed before the Cat, he watched the Cat out of the end of his eye.

As he came up, the Cat prepared for his pounce. But our Rat was ready for him, and dodged out of the way.

‘Aha!’ says the Rat, ‘so that is your piety! Feeds on the air, does he! And worships the sun – eh? What a humbug!’ And with one spring he was at the Cat’s throat, and his sharp teeth fast. The other Rats heard the scuffle, and came trooping back; and it was crunch and munch, till not a vestige remained of the hypocritical Cat. Those who came first had cat to eat, and those who came last went sniffing about at the mouths of their friends, and asking what was the taste of catsmeat. And ever after the Rats lived in peace and happiness.