

Epilogue: What Does It Mean?

I want to end by circling back to where we started, back to Fixico's report of Russell Means' grandfather story.

Fixico (2003) quotes noted Indian activist Russell Means (who we are sad to say died in 2012):

Grandpa John told me endless stories about young men who had opportunities to live up to their names. One day, he said, "there was a young man named Looks Twice — really, he was more like a boy — who left his village alone to hunt, hoping to bring back some meat. He wanted to prove that he was a man. It was in the springtime. He went without a bow or a lance, and he killed a deer with his knife"...."How did he kill the deer, Grandpa?" I interrupted. "You'd better figure that out," he said. "That's what will make you a man" (Fixico, 2003, p. 88). (See p. 90 in this volume)

Recall that we began this book with the statement: **Wisdom must be sought, not taught.**

What wisdom do we find in this story? To assist those of us not brought up in the kind of context where clues to the meaning of the story would be found if one sought them, we offer some suggestions.

First, we consider the detail that the young brave Looks Twice had an opportunity to live up to his name. What does that mean? Perhaps it means he had an opportunity to look twice, but what was he supposed to be looking at? Let's look further into the story.

In the story, we see that Looks Twice killed a deer without his bow or lance, only with his knife. If you have had the opportunity to see deer in the forest, as I used to do when I went riding through acres of Pennsylvania woodlands, you would know that deer are pretty shy and spooky. When they saw me, they would freeze for a moment, then bound off in an instant. Note here that there is a reason behind the old saying that someone "runs like a deer." Deer are very quick and fast. The ones who venture into suburban neighborhoods have become accustomed to people, and will linger over a tasty shrub much longer than deer in the wild.

So we see that in the wild, it is very difficult to get close to a deer. Therefore, in previous times, a bow or lance would be used to cover the greater distances. Although I am no expert, I have seen (again when riding in the woods) hunters camouflaged in a tree, waiting near a deer trail for the deer to pass by close enough for their bows to find their targets.

How could Looks Twice get close enough to kill a deer with his knife? Here I think of the old saying, "If something looks too good to be true, it probably is (false)." Perhaps this was when Looks Twice should have looked again. Instead, he killed the deer with his knife.

The story tells us it was in the springtime. What happens in the spring? Deer give birth to their young. Could the deer have been in labor? Or could the deer have been old and ill? There must have been some unusual reason for the brave to be able to get so close. If our young brave had looked again, he might have discovered the reason.

Means (in Fixico 2003) reports further details of his grandfather's story, involving heavy spring rains and a flooded stream. When Means asks his grandfather whether the young brave crossed the stream, returned home, and became a man, his grandfather says "You figure it out" (Fixico 2003, p. 89). To find out

what Means learned, the reader is referred to Means with Wolf 1995, p. 18, or Fixico 2003, pp. 88-89. Our purpose here is not to discover someone else's meaning. Rather, this story is repeated to invite you, the reader, to find your own meaning in it.

The young Looks Twice did not look twice. And since he had gone hunting alone, there were no other braves with him who might have seen what he must have missed. We do not know the traditions of this particular tribe, but for many tribes, Rosile, Pepion, and Gladstone (2012) notes that it was forbidden to hunt alone. There were probably reasons of efficiency for such a rule, and also, strategic sustainability-related reasons. The tribe would not want to over-kill and endanger the survival of the entire herd. Instead, they might plan how and when to harvest a scarce resource like deer.

A tribe might also, as a group, decide how to distribute the bounty from hunting. Here again, Rosile et al. (2012) notes that the elders might be given the first portions of food from a hunt. Such difficult choices might not always be free from controversy. However, these kinds of choices routinely arose in tribal cultures.

For details about making such choices, the reader is encouraged to discover the wonderful classic small book "Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival" by Velma Wallis (1993). The book jacket describes this story as follows:

Based on an Athabaskan Indian legend passed along from mothers to daughters for many generations on the upper Yukon River in Alaska, this is the tragic and shocking story — with a surprise ending — of two elderly women abandoned by a migrating tribe that faces starvation brought on by unusually harsh Arctic weather and a shortage of fish and game.

This story of "Two Old Women" demonstrates the importance of survival of the tribe, even if it might mean the abandonment of some individuals. Some perspectives on Euro-Western ethics call this the "greatest good for the greatest number." A virtue-ethics approach might suggest the value of sharing with others.

The Kantian rules-based view of ethics would suggest we should follow the rules our societies have established. For indigenous ethics, relationships are of primary importance.

Regarding Russell Means' grandfather's story, for our young brave Looks Twice, it might not have been in the interest of the tribe for an individual to hunt alone for his family. Sometimes rugged individualism may work to the detriment of the group. In systems theory terms, it is widely accepted that some sub-systems must operate at sub-optimal level for the entire system to achieve optimum performance.

The ethical dilemma remains: How do we know when to take initiative as an individual, and when to "look twice" and consider the group? Both are good, but not always at the same times. Because both are good actions in themselves, we have difficulty choosing which "good" is "best" in a given situation, hence the dilemma.

Ethical dilemmas abound in life. Most cultures have short-hand stories used to convey moral advice. Sometimes we call these "aphorisms" or in the Hispanic culture "dichos" (sayings) to guide our actions. However, for every saying there is usually an opposite one. So, for example, "You snooze, you lose" means don't move too slowly. And "Look before you leap" means don't move too quickly. The dilemma is in choosing which good action will result in the best outcome in a particular situation. Wisdom means being able to decide which advice to follow in the midst of messy real-life experiences.

Like anything else, practice helps. Cajete talks of building "story muscles." In lieu of actual experience, one of the best ways to practice making choices is through stories. Stories allow us to vicariously experience the outcomes of various decisions in life-like situations. We can learn to make better, more ethical choices by observing the outcomes of choices made by characters in our stories.

Let us return to Looks Twice. What lessons were in his story? We find at least six.

1. When something seems too good to be true, look again, because it may not be so good.
2. What appears good to the individual, may not always be good for the group.
3. Traditions (like the taboo on hunting alone) are there for a reason, and based on the wisdom of our elders. Do not discard them lightly.
4. Consider the long-term as well as the short-term effects of your actions (sustainability).
5. Looks Twice, already described as young and more of a boy than a man, wanted to prove he was a man. Some would say that a man would have no need of proving anything.
6. Finally, understand the context. What works in one situation may not work in another. The best way to learn such lessons is through experience, whether first hand or through stories. Then we can take from such experiences the desire to look twice, to reflect on our own decision-making processes and understanding of the situation.

Wisdom comes from the self-awareness of who I am and in what context I find myself. If “The early bird gets the worm,” am I the bird or the worm? Or some other being? As Steven Wright has said: “The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.” In short, we learn how to seek wisdom as we make those difficult choices in life about what advice to follow, and sometimes, the choice is about following no advice except our own inner voice. Wisdom cannot be taught, because I cannot fully know your unique context. Wisdom can be, and must be, sought by each individual for themselves. We hope this volume provides assistance in that search.

Grace Ann Rosile
Editor

References

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