

Learning from the Best Stories

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“The Best Gardener in the Village”

I recently read a Chinese folktale about a boy who had a gift for growing beautiful things. He loved growing beautiful things. Anything he planted flourished.

“He was already considered the best gardener in the village. His neighbors fought over the [vegetables] that flourished from his garden. Anyone looking for [this gifted boy] would probably find him bobbing between his rows, pulling out new weeds, moving one sapling over to catch more morning sun, transplanting another to the shade.”

One day the emperor announced that he was going to select a new heir to the throne. The emperor was growing old. He did not have a son and needed to find someone to take his place. The emperor loved beautiful plants. So he decided that he would have a contest involving plants. He would give a seed to any boy who wished to be the next emperor. The boy who was able to grow the most beautiful plant from the provided seed

in the allotted amount of time would win the contest.

Imagine the excitement that this announcement brought to the village! On the appointed day, all the boys who wanted to be the next emperor—along with their parents, who “imagined living in splendor at the palace”—lined up to receive the seed that would win them the prize. Can you imagine the excitement that this announcement brought to the boy who was “considered the best gardener in the village”? When this boy received his seed from the emperor, he “carefully carried [it] home, sealing it securely in his hands so it wouldn’t fall, but not so tightly that it might crush.”

He immediately began to prepare the flowerpot in which his valued seed would be transformed into the winning plant. He carefully placed the rocks and soil required to grow a beautiful plant. Then he gently placed the seed into the rich soil and sprinkled the necessary amount of water over

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the soil to keep it moist. He watered the plant every day and waited with great anticipation for the sprout to emerge from the soil.

The days passed. Pretty soon this young boy started to hear about the success that the other boys in the village were having with their seeds. Every time someone's seed sprouted through the soil, it was announced throughout the village. There was so much excitement, and congratulations were given to the successful boys. Naturally everyone assumed that the boy who was considered the best gardener in the village was having great success himself. However, this was not the case. His seed had not sprouted! He "was puzzled—none of these boys could grow plants as well as he!"

It didn't take long for others to realize that the boy was not having success, and they began to laugh and to mock him. While the other boys were moving "their plants outside so the baby leaves could bask in the warmth of the sun [and building] stone fences around their pots and zealously guard[ing] them from mischievous children who might accidentally—or not so accidentally—topple them over," the boy's "seed did not grow."

This boy could not imagine why his pot was empty. He "carefully repotted his seed into a new pot with the very best and richest black [soil] from his garden. He crumbled every ball of soil into tiny particles. He gently pressed in the seed and kept the top moist and watched the pot every day. Still [his] seed did not grow."

He repotted his plant again, trying everything he knew, and it still did not grow.

The day came when the emperor was to judge the plants. Everyone was dressed in their finest, all the pots were sparkling clean, and the leaves on the plants were gently wiped "till the green veins glistened." It was a dazzling sight!

"As he gazed out the window at the other boys joyfully preparing their triumphant return to the palace," the boy wailed to his parents, "What will I do?" Up until now he had been considered the best gardener in the village. He exclaimed, "My seed wouldn't grow! My pot is empty!"

His mother and father, with encouragement, reminded him that he had done the very best he

could and told him to join the others, even though his pot was empty. Embarrassed, the boy "carried his empty pot on the road to the palace, while gleeful boys carrying pots tottering with huge plants strode to his right and left."

As they all lined up at the palace to be judged by the emperor, the boy with the empty pot hung his head, very ashamed. The emperor frowned as he walked past each boy with their beautiful plants. When he came to the boy with the empty pot, he frowned even more and said, "What is this? You brought me an empty pot?"

The boy told the emperor that he had done his best and that he had tried everything he could do to make his plant grow. He then said he was sorry and hung his head.

"'Hmm,' said the emperor. [Then,] turning so everyone could hear, [the emperor] thundered, 'I don't know where all these other boys got their seeds. There is no way anything could grow from the seeds we passed out for the contest, because those seeds had all been cooked!'"

The emperor then smiled at the boy who was considered the best gardener in the village and announced that the boy would be the next emperor.¹

There Is Great Power in Stories

While this simple story is set in a time, distance, and culture far removed from our own, I believe it contains lessons that may be of value to you as you begin this new semester. It can remind you that the most important purpose of the many tests you face this semester has less to do with the subject matter you are studying than with the skills and character you are developing. You may think that the tests are about chemistry, history, or accounting, just as the villagers thought the emperor's contest was about gardening skills. However, the real purpose of your education is to help you become more like your Heavenly Parents, just as the real purpose of the emperor's contest was to test the honesty and courage of his possible heirs.

I am confident that, regardless of your chosen major, each of you will face situations in which your honesty, perseverance, and courage will be

tested in ways that are not immediately obvious. Stories like the tale of the empty pot can help you recognize the real purpose of the tests you will face and give you the strength to pass them.

There is great power in stories. They can help us learn important truths at many levels. The Savior taught important principles through parables that teach and enrich our lives, if we will read and learn from them. Such stories expand our learning and memory. Similarly, scriptural accounts that are not just stories but actual events can enhance our learning, if we will “liken [them] unto us” (1 Nephi 19:23).

Elder D. Todd Christofferson stated that the scriptures can

expand our memory . . . by teaching us about epochs, people, and events that we did not experience personally. None of us was present to see the Red Sea part and cross with Moses between walls of water to the other side. We were not there to hear the Sermon on the Mount, to see Lazarus raised from the dead, to see the suffering Savior in Gethsemane and on the cross, and

we did not, with Mary, hear the two angels testify at the empty tomb that Jesus was risen from the dead. . . . Yet we know all these things and much, much more because we have the scriptural record to enlarge our memory, to teach us what we did not know.²

I hope that you will not only remember the lessons from the story of the empty pot but that you will also daily draw on the lessons found in the teachings and experiences recorded in sacred scriptures. I promise that as you do, you will find the true meaning of your education and pass the ultimate examination of life with great joy. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. From one of several versions: Elaine L. Lindy, “The Next Emperor of China: The Story of the Empty Pot,” *Folktales, Stories for Kids, Stories to Grow By*, 2006, storiestogrowby.org/story/empty-pot.

2. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Blessing of Scripture,” *Ensign*, May 2010.