

Stories for the lantern festival 2023

All stories reflect the theme of sharing and being kind to others, and not judging them by appearances – not being afraid to bring your light out into the world and into social situations. And unexpected rewards for those who follow these principles. There are four stories in this document, two will be used in school events this week and two are here made available for class teachers and parents to share as they wish over the next few weeks. If children hear the same story more than once this will be enjoyable for them, and aid memory, especially the younger ones.

1) A traditional story from Asia – will be told in assembly 6th November (in summary oral form)

Urashima Taro

Long, long ago there lived on the shore of Japan in the little fishing village of Mizu-no-ye a young fisherman named Urashima Taro. His father had been a fisherman before him, and his skill had more than doubly descended to his son, for Urashima was the most skilful fisher in all that countryside, and could catch more Bonito and Tai in a day than his comrades could in a week.

But in the little fishing village, more than for being a clever fisher of the sea was he known for his kind heart. In his whole life he had never hurt anything, either great or small, and when a boy, his companions had always laughed at him, for he would never join with them in teasing animals, but always tried to keep them from this cruel sport.

One soft summer twilight he was going home at the end of a day's fishing when he came upon a group of children. They were all screaming and talking at the tops of their voices, and seemed to be in a state of great excitement about something, and on his going up to them to see what was the matter he saw that they were tormenting a turtle. First one boy pulled it this way, then another boy pulled it that way, while a third child beat it with a stick, and the fourth hammered its shell with a stone.

Now Urashima felt very sorry for the poor turtle and made up his mind to rescue it. He spoke to the boys:

“Look here, boys, you are treating that poor tortoise so badly that it will soon die!”

The boys, who were all of an age when children seem to delight in being cruel to animals, took no notice of Urashima's gentle reproof, but went on teasing it as before. One of the older boys answered:

“Who cares whether it lives or dies? We do not. Here, boys, go on, go on!”

And they began to treat the poor turtle more cruelly than ever. Urashima waited a moment, turning over in his mind what would be the best way to deal with the boys. He would try to persuade them to give the turtle up to him, so he smiled at them and said:

“I am sure you are all good, kind boys! Now won't you give me the turtle? I should like to have it so much!”

“No, we won’t give you the turtle,” said one of the boys. “Why should we? We caught it ourselves.”

“What you say is true,” said Urashima, “but I do not ask you to give it to me for nothing. I will give you some money for it—in other words, the Ojisan (Uncle) will buy it of you. Won’t that do for you, my boys?” He held up the money to them, strung on a piece of string through a hole in the center of each coin. “Look, boys, you can buy anything you like with this money. You can do much more with this money than you can with that poor turtle. See what good boys you are to listen to me”

The boys were not bad boys at all, they were only mischievous, and as Urashima spoke they were won by his kind smile and gentle words and began “to be of his spirit,” as they say in Japan. Gradually they all came up to him, the ringleader of the little band holding out the turtle to him.

“Very well, Ojisan, we will give you the turtle if you will give us the money!” And Urashima took the turtle and gave the money to the boys, who, calling to each other, scampered away and were soon out of sight.

Then Urashima stroked the turtle’s back, saying as he did so:

“Oh, you poor thing! Poor thing!—there, there! you are safe now! They say that a stork lives for a thousand years, but the turtle for ten thousand years. You have the longest life of any creature in this world, and you were in great danger of having that precious life cut short by those cruel boys. Luckily I was passing by and saved you, and so life is still yours. Now I am going to take you back to your home, the sea, at once. Do not let yourself be caught again, for there might be no one to save you next time!”

All the time that the kind fisherman was speaking he was walking quickly to the shore and out upon the rocks; then putting the turtle into the water he watched the animal disappear, and turned homewards himself, for he was tired and the sun had set.

The next morning Urashima went out as usual in his boat. The weather was fine and the sea and sky were both blue and soft in the tender haze of the summer morning. Urashima got into his boat and dreamily pushed out to sea, throwing his line as he did so. He soon passed the other fishing boats and left them behind him till they were lost to sight in the distance, and his boat drifted further and further out upon the blue waters. Somehow, he knew not why, he felt unusually happy that morning; and he could not help wishing that, like the turtle he set free the day before, he had thousands of years to live instead of his own short span of human life.

He was suddenly startled from his reverie by hearing his own name called:

“Urashima, Urashima!”

Clear as a bell and soft as the summer wind the name floated over the sea.

He stood up and looked in every direction, thinking that one of the other boats had overtaken him, but gaze as he might over the wide expanse of water, near or far there was no sign of a boat, so the voice could not have come from any human being.

Startled, and wondering who or what it was that had called him so clearly, he looked in all directions round about him and saw that without his knowing it a turtle had come to the side of the boat. Urashima saw with surprise that it was the very turtle he had rescued the day before.

“Well, Mr. Turtle,” said Urashima, “was it you who called my name just now?”

The tortoise nodded its head several times and said:

“Yes, it was I. Yesterday in your honourable shadow (o kage sama de) my life was saved, and I have come to offer you my thanks and to tell you how grateful I am for your kindness to me.”

“Indeed,” said Urashima, “that is very polite of you. Come up into the boat. I would offer you a lemonade, but as you are a turtle doubtless you do not drink that,” and the fisherman laughed at the joke.

“He-he-he-he!” laughed the turtle; “sake (rice wine) is my favorite refreshment, but I do not care for lemonade.”

“Indeed,” said Urashima, “I regret very much that I have no sake in my boat to offer you, but come up and dry your back in the sun—turtles always love to do that.”

So the turtle climbed into the boat, the fisherman helping him, and after an exchange of complimentary speeches the turtle said:

“Have you ever seen Rin Gin, the Palace of the Dragon King of the Sea, Urashima?”

The fisherman shook his head and replied; “No; year after year the sea has been my home, but though I have often heard of the Dragon King’s realm under the sea I have never yet set eyes on that wonderful place. It must be very far away, if it exists at all!”

“Is that really so? You have never seen the Sea King’s Palace? Then you have missed seeing one of the most wonderful sights in the whole universe. It is far away at the bottom of the sea, but if I take you there we shall soon reach the place. If you would like to see the Sea King’s land I will be your guide.”

“I should like to go there, certainly, and you are very kind to think of taking me, but you must remember that I am only a poor mortal and have not the power of swimming like a sea creature such as you are—”

Before the fisherman could say more the turtle stopped him, saying:

“What? You need not swim yourself. If you will ride on my back I will take you without any trouble on your part.”

“But,” said Urashima, “how is it possible for me to ride on your small back?”

“It may seem absurd to you, but I assure you that you can do so. Try at once! Just come and get on my back, and see if it is as impossible as you think!”

As the tortoise finished speaking, Urashima looked at its shell, and strange to say he saw that the creature had suddenly grown so big that a man could easily sit on its back.

“This is strange indeed!” said Urashima; “Mr. Turtle, with your kind permission I will get on your back. Dokoisho!” he exclaimed as he jumped on.

The turtle, with an unmoved face, as if this strange proceeding were quite an ordinary event, said:

“Now we will set out at our leisure,” and with these words he leapt into the sea with Urashima on his back. Down through the water the turtle dived. For a long time these two strange companions rode through the sea. Urashima never grew tired, nor his clothes moist with the water. At last, far away in the distance a magnificent gate appeared, and behind the gate, the long, sloping roofs of a palace on the horizon.

“Ya.” exclaimed Urashima. “that looks like the gate of some large palace just appearing! Mr. Turtle, can you tell what that place is we can now see?”

“That is the great gate of the Rin Gin Palace, the large roof that you see behind the gate is the Sea King’s Palace itself.”

“Then we have at last come to the realm of the Sea King and to his Palace,” said Urashima.

“Yes, indeed,” answered the turtle, “and don’t you think we have come very quickly?” And while he was speaking the turtle reached the side of the gate. “And here we are, and you must please walk from here.”

The turtle now went in front, and speaking to the gatekeeper, said:

“This is Urashima Taro, from the country of Japan. I have had the honor of bringing him as a visitor to this kingdom. Please show him the way.”

Then the gatekeeper, who was a fish, at once led the way through the gate before them.

The red bream, the flounder, the sole, the cuttlefish, and all the chief vassals of the Dragon King of the Sea now came out with courtly bows to welcome the stranger.

“Urashima Sama, Urashima Sama! welcome to the Sea Palace, the home of the Dragon King of the Sea. Thrice welcome are you, having come from such a distant country. And you, Mr. Turtle, we are greatly indebted to you for all your trouble in bringing Urashima here.” Then, turning again to Urashima, they said, “Please follow us this way,” and from here the whole band of fishes became his guides.

Urashima, being only a poor fisher lad, did not know how to behave in a palace; but, strange though it was all to him, he did not feel ashamed or embarrassed, but followed his kind guides quite calmly where they led to the inner palace. When he reached the portals a beautiful Princess with her attendant maidens came out to welcome him. She was more beautiful than any human being, and was robed in flowing garments of red and soft green like the under side of a wave, and golden threads glimmered through the folds of her gown. Her lovely black hair streamed over her shoulders in the fashion of a king’s daughter many hundreds of years ago, and when she spoke her voice sounded like music over the water. Urashima was lost in wonder while he looked upon her, and he could not speak. Then he remembered that he ought to bow, but before he could make a low obeisance the Princess took him by the hand and led him to a beautiful hall, and to the seat of honour at the upper end, and bade him be seated.

“Urashima Taro, it gives me the highest pleasure to welcome you to my father’s kingdom,” said the Princess. “Yesterday you set free a turtle, and I have sent for you to thank you for saving my life, for I

was that turtle. Now if you like you shall live here forever in the land of eternal youth, where summer never dies and where sorrow never comes, and I will be your bride if you will, and we will live together happily forever afterwards!"

And as Urashima listened to her sweet words and gazed upon her lovely face his heart was filled with a great wonder and joy, and he answered her, wondering if it was not all a dream:

"Thank you a thousand times for your kind speech. There is nothing I could wish for more than to be permitted to stay here with you in this beautiful land, of which I have often heard, but have never seen to this day. Beyond all words, this is the most wonderful place I have ever seen."

While he was speaking a train of fishes appeared, all dressed in ceremonial, trailing garments. One by one, silently and with stately steps, they entered the hall, bearing on coral trays delicacies of fish and seaweed, such as no one can dream of, and this wondrous feast was set before the bride and bridegroom. The bridal was celebrated with dazzling splendour, and in the Sea King's realm there was great rejoicing. As soon as the young pair had pledged themselves in the wedding cup of wine, three times three, music was played, and songs were sung, and fishes with silver scales and golden tails stepped in from the waves and danced. Urashima enjoyed himself with all his heart. Never in his whole life had he sat down to such a marvellous feast.

When the feast was over the Princess asked the bridegroom if he would like to walk through the palace and see all there was to be seen. Then the happy fisherman, following his bride, the Sea King's daughter, was shown all the wonders of that enchanted land where youth and joy go hand in hand and neither time nor age can touch them. The palace was built of coral and adorned with pearls, and the beauties and wonders of the place were so great that the tongue fails to describe them.

But, to Urashima, more wonderful than the palace was the garden that surrounded it. Here was to be seen at one time the scenery of the four different seasons; the beauties of summer and winter, spring and autumn, were displayed to the wondering visitor at once.

First, when he looked to the east, the plum and cherry trees were seen in full bloom, the nightingales sang in the pink avenues, and butterflies flitted from flower to flower.

Looking to the south all the trees were green in the fullness of summer, and the day cicada and the night cricket chirruped loudly.

Looking to the west the autumn maples were ablaze like a sunset sky, and the chrysanthemums were in perfection.

Looking to the north the change made Urashima start, for the ground was silver white with snow, and trees and bamboos were also covered with snow and the pond was thick with ice.

And each day there were new joys and new wonders for Urashima and he thought himself the happiest person ever. What happened next is a story for another year – if you want any more you can make it up yourself.

2) Additional story – for class teachers and parents

Abu Nasr As-Sayyad – a story from Middle Eastern Muslim tradition

Abu Nasr As-Sayyad was a very poor fisherman. One day he had no food for his wife and son so went to the mosque and started crying. The Imam knew his situation so took him to a river bank and told him to offer 2 units of prayer and throw the fishing net with the name of Allah. He caught a large fish and went to the market to sell it for a small loaf of bread. He left for home but on his way he met a destitute woman and her son. They were starving like his own wife and son, and they started looking at his loaf in hunger.

He thought of them and then his own family, and remembered that Allah would not forsake him. So he gave the small loaf of bread to the destitute woman and child. The child smiled and the woman started weeping in gratitude. He returned home distressed, but soon after he heard a knock on the door. Someone said “Is this the house of Abu Nasr As-Sayyad?” and he replied “Yes”. The man gave him some money that he had borrowed from his late father. He took the money, struck with astonishment and happiness.

After this, As-Sayyad became a merchant and was so rich with a large fortune that he was able to give a thousand dirhams in charity in one go! But he got conceited and started showing off. One night he went to sleep and saw in a dream that it was Judgement Day, and names were being called out to measure their good and bad deeds. His turn came and angels put his evil deeds against his good ones.

His evil deeds were as heavy as a mountain and his good deeds as light as a bundle of cotton, because even though he had given thousands in charity it was in vain because of showing off and lack of sincerity. So the angel asked “Is there anything left?” And there was only one thing left – the small loaf of bread he had given the poor woman. It was added to the good deeds which got heavier with more weight than the thousands of dirhams given after, but the evil deeds still outweighed them. So the angel asked again if there was anything left. There turned out to be still something left, which was the smile of the child. It was added and the good deeds became equal to the evil ones. Again the angel asked and the last thing left were the tears of the woman, which were as heavy as a sea of tears when added. This outweighed the evil deeds and he heard the angel saying that he was saved! He woke up that night and glorified Allah for that small loaf of bread.

Thanks to Sarah, Zaynab and Basmah’s mum, for this story

3) A further additional story – animals and humans working together to make good prevail

Rama, Sita and the Festival of Lights – the Diwali story from Indian Hindu culture

The Diwali story revolves around the Hindu deities, Rama and Sita, and their triumph over evil, in the form of the demon king, Ravana. In the Hindu religion, Rama is the god of virtue and the embodiment of Lord Vishnu. His wife, Sita, is also the embodiment of the goddess Lakshmi.

After being banished by the king, Prince Rama, a being of supreme goodness, and his wife Sita, who was deeply loving and kind beyond that which you can imagine, left their kingdom to live in the forest.

One day, king Ravana, a demon king with ten heads and twenty arms kidnapped Sita. She left a trail of her jewellery for Rama to follow, which led him to the monkey King Hanuman. The two became friends, and Hanuman agreed to help find Sita, sending out messages to all the monkeys in the world.

After a very long search, Hanuman found Sita trapped on the island of Lanka. The monkeys built a bridge to reach the island, and soon all the animals of the world offered to help. Rama killed Ravana with a magic arrow and the whole world celebrated!

Once reunited, Rama and Sita began their journey home, with people lighting lamps to help them on their way. Today, people light lamps called diyas at Diwali to celebrate good triumphing over evil and light winning over darkness.

4) Martin – a story from Western European Christian culture – to be told at the Lantern festival 8th November.

These weeks, around our autumn lantern festival, we have been sharing stories from different religions and cultures around the world that are all about...sharing the light in your heart with others, especially when times are cold and dark.

This story is from western European Christian culture and is the traditional inspiration for Autumn lantern festivals across Germany and many other European countries this week. New beginnings are also celebrated with lanterns in Thailand at this time, and of course the massive and beautiful festival of light, Diwali, starts this Friday.

Here is the European story, Let's listen:

Martin was born around the year 316 in what is now the country of Hungary.

He was forced to join the Roman army at 15 years old. (His father had fought in the army, and it was a law that if your father had fought in it, sons must too.) Martin wanted to find a way of life to do with peaceful living and helping people. Quite a few religions and ways of life are about peaceful living and helping people, but Martin didn't know about any of them. Martin's Dad followed Mars, the Roman god of War and most of his way of life was about being a really efficient soldier. When he told his Dad about his interest in a path to peaceful living and helping people his Dad said he was a bit soft for a soldier and should be more manly and strong. Martin wondered if he could be a strong man *and* live peacefully and help people.

Martin took the oath required of soldiers to closely obey any order by the emperor, to never run away from the army and to lay down their lives for the Rome if required. Once he had pledged the

oath, he felt he must obey it and stayed in the army, eventually becoming an officer. Fortunately for him, his job was to guard the Emperor and thus he rarely, if ever, saw battle.

Even while living the life of a soldier, Martin tried to live a life of sharing and peace, and share the warm light he felt in his heart with others. As an officer, he had a servant. But instead of letting the servant clean his boots, Martin cleaned the servant's! The other officers thought he was a bit eccentric.

One very cold day, Martin was in France, wearing a warm cloak and walking along a street to check it was safe for the Emperor, when he met a very poor beggar shivering with cold. Quickly, Martin took off his cloak, slashed it in half, and gave the beggar one half of his cloak to warm himself. Many people nearby laughed at Martin for ruining his beautiful cloak.

That night, Martin dreamed that a different person he had never seen before was the beggar now wearing his half cloak. This person seemed so kind and had angels all around him and spoke in a gentle but loud voice, "See! This is the cloak that Martin, who has not even properly started on his way here, gave me."

In the morning, Martin remembered the dream, and it bothered him that the person in the cloak had referred to him as "not even properly started." He decided there and then that he would try to find a spiritual path that valued peace and sharing. At that time in the empire a new religion had just been made legal, it was called Christianity and talked about showing love for people near you and so Martin joined a small group of Christians. Martin kept on sharing with others, and encouraging others to do so. In the end he set up multiple communities to help the poor and sick and became a famous saint. Throughout Europe he is remembered at this time of the year for his first friendly act that helped keep the beggar warm.

Today we show our sharing hearts are shining brightly as we take our lanterns out into the world, we have many cultures and religions in our home lives, and they all place a high value on being kind to others. Lanterns represent this and, like the people and animals did for Rama and Sita in the Diwali story, they can show our friends the way back home.