



7th Grade

Stories to Supplement Lessons

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Sample questions

Below are general questions that can be used with the stories.

- What did this story teach us?
- What did this story mean to you?
- What pillar could be tied to this story?
- After hearing this story, is there anything you may do differently from now on?
- Can you relate to the story? In what way?
- Will this story cause you to change your current way of thinking?

Some other thought provoking questions that may apply to the stories are listed below.

- What can happen when we can't control our anger? To other people? To ourselves? How can it affect our life? Our relationships?
- Have you ever been rewarded for a kindness? What did you do?
- Have you ever thanked someone for something kind they did for you?
- Would you help out someone in need? Why? Why not?
- What do you think it means to be a "good person"?
- Was there a time when you made a choice to "do the right thing" instead of something you knew was wrong?
- Describe someone you know who is about getting. Describe someone you know who is about giving. How are they different?
- What can we do to shape our own character/destiny?

I'm Emma: A Story of Self-Control

A frazzled mother entered a grocery store with a crying child. "Emma," she said, "you can do this. We just have to get a few things." Moments later, the child became more upset and the woman said calmly, "It's OK, Emma. Just a couple more items." When the child became hysterical in the checkout line the mom took a deep breath and said, "Emma, hold it together. We'll be in the car in a few minutes." In the parking lot a woman stopped her. "Excuse me, I couldn't help but notice you in the store and I just wanted to compliment you on how patient you are with little Emma." The mother laughed. "Well thank you, but the truth is, I'm Emma."

Self-control is a virtue that doesn't come easily. This mother had to work on it, talking herself through each challenge. According to Dr. Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, controlling impulses like frustration and anger is a crucial aspect of character. In fact, he says, "Those who are at the mercy of impulse – who lack self-control – suffer a moral deficiency."

Today, many people elevate self-indulgence over self-control. Some indulge angry feelings and let them emerge in harmful words and acts. Others ruin their lives and pollute their environment by indulging emotions like spite, hatred, prejudice, jealousy, negativism and cynicism. Rather than starve these negative sentiments with inattention, they feed them with continual thought and talk.

Controlling our attitudes is not easy. It takes character to harness powerful and instinctive feelings and redirect our thoughts toward positive attitudes, but those who do live happier lives in a happier world.

Keep Your Fork: The Best Is Yet to Come

As the American journalist Sydney Harris put it, “A cynic is not merely one who reads bitter lessons from the past; he is one who is prematurely disappointed in the future.” Thus, told that there will be a light at the end of the tunnel, the pessimist agrees, but assumes it will be coming from an onrushing train. I run into plenty of pessimists and they are rarely happy.

I think Samuel Johnson had it right when he observed that hope is itself a species of happiness. So if we want to be happy it only makes sense to discipline ourselves to choose our attitudes, to think positively and to be hopeful.

There’s a story about a woman I’ve named Tilly who lived into her nineties as a positive thinker. When she died her family found explicit instructions for her funeral. She was to be dressed in her finest dinner clothing with a fork in her right hand. When anyone asked about the fork, which most did, the pastor was instructed to hand them an envelope containing the following note from Tilly:

“I’m glad you asked about the fork. I’ve attended hundreds of dinners. I noted that just when the dishes and flatware for the main course were being cleared, someone would always say ‘Keep you fork.’ I loved that part because I knew that I needed my fork because dessert, the best part of dinner, was coming. So the fork in my hand is to remind you what I know and want you to believe: the best is yet to come.”

“I Didn’t Want the Janitor to Lose His Job”

I know outside-the-home character training works because of Jesse.

Jesse was in an alternative school because he had serious behavioral problems, including theft. About a month after his school incorporated explicit character-development strategies into the curriculum, Jesse found the janitor’s keys and, to everyone’s surprise, he voluntarily turned them in. When he was asked why, he said, “I didn’t want the janitor to lose his job.”

According to his teachers, Jesse would not have thought about the janitor just weeks before. Like a lot of young folks, he rarely thought about the likely consequences of his conduct.

What changed was that he was given a simple thinking tool that helped him see the way his choices could affect other people. Jesse was taught to identify “stakeholders” – all the people likely to be affected by a choice – and to think about how they might be affected.

For all Jesse’s other flaws, he had decent instincts, and he didn’t want to do something that would hurt the janitor. His teachers didn’t teach him to care about others, but they did give him a way of thinking that unleashed the caring part of his nature.

“Thanks for Saving My Life”

Mario’s job was to transport juveniles from a temporary detention facility to a longer-term detention center. One day he was transporting John, a 16-year-old charged with setting fire to his own house. Normally, Mario said nothing to his passengers and his passengers said nothing to him, and he liked it that way. But he heard John sobbing quietly in the back. He looked in his rearview mirror and saw a miserably unhappy child, and he thought of his own teenage son. Breaking his normal rule of silence, he said, “Son, it looks bad now but everything will get better.”

John said, “It’s not going to get better because I’m going to kill myself.” Mario knew he could recommend psychiatric assistance as soon as he arrived at the detention center, but his fatherly impulses took over, he spent the rest of the short 18-minute drive listening to John tell of his inability to do anything but disappoint his father, “Look, it may not feel like it now but I promise you, things will get better. Just hang in there.” He then dropped the boy off, made a recommendation that he see a counselor at once and that was the end of it.

Two years later, Mario received an envelope addressed to “Mario, the transportation guy.” Inside was a picture of John, with a girl, in front of a university building. The note said, “You were right. Things got better. Thanks for saving my life.”

Mario framed the picture and the note together and mounted them on the dash of his transportation vehicle. Now, he talks to all the young men he transports.

A General Talks of Moral Courage

Several years ago, Gen. Charles C. Krulak, then commandant of the Marine Corps, addressed a college graduating class. He spoke of character and courage. His insights were profound.

“Success...has always demanded...character,” he declared, adding, “Those who can reach...within themselves and draw upon an inner strength, fortified by strong values, always carry the day against those of lesser character. Moral cowards never win.”

He went on to urge graduates to face up to ethical challenges of their daily lives and “make moral courage a habit so that [you] will be ready for the greater tests of character.”

His conclusion was especially eloquent: “When the test of your character and moral courage comes—regardless of the noise and confusion around you—there will be a moment of inner silence in which you must decide what to do. Your character will be defined by your decision...and it is yours and yours alone to make. When that moment comes, think of this poem by an unknown author. It is called the “The Eagle and the Wolf”:

*There is a great battle that rages inside me.
One side is a soaring eagle.
Everything the eagle stands for is good and true and beautiful.
It soars above the clouds.
Even though it dips down into the valleys, it lays its eggs on the mountain tops.
The other side of me is a howling wolf.
And that raging, howling wolf represents the worst that is in me.
He eats upon my downfalls and justifies himself by his presence in the pack.
Who wins this great battle?
The one I feed.*

The Best Is Yet to Come by Michael Josephson
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Winning the Lottery Won't Bring Happiness

Many philosophers believe that happiness is the sole criterion for a successful life. So it's not surprising that a huge amount of human energy is spent in the pursuit of happiness. And, despite lofty aphorisms to the contrary, many people believe that money buys happiness, and therefore, that cash is more important than character.

The facts belie this shallow philosophy. For example, research shows that while lottery winners gain a temporary jolt of joy from their winnings, generally they are not happier in the long run. The euphoria of new activities and possessions is almost as short-lived as a drug-induced high and, what's worse, the suddenly-rich often experience less pleasure from activities they previously enjoyed.

According to Dr. David G. Myers, it's not just lottery winners who discover the false promise of wealth. One study of Americans worth at least \$100 million showed that even the extremely rich are only slightly more happy than average. Yesterday's luxuries become today's necessities and tomorrow's relics.

But the real shocker is that victims of disabling tragedies resulting in blindness or paralysis, people who must cope every day of their lives with potentially devastating limitations, generally recover emotionally, and in just a few years, their level of happiness is just about the same as their able-bodied contemporaries.

Apparently, humans have an enormous capacity to adapt to fame, fortune and affliction. Adaptation becomes a mechanism that drains the pleasure out of great good fortune and the despair out of horrible misfortune. So if major life events, whether good or bad, have minimal influence on long-term satisfaction, what's a person to do? The answer is simple: stop chasing shadows and realize that the real road to happiness is paved with quality relationships and the sense of worthiness that comes from good character.