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Aesop's Fables: Unity

The Father and His Sons

A father had a family of sons who were perpetually quarreling among themselves. One day, he told them to bring him a bundle of sticks. When they had done so, he placed the bundle into the hands of each of them in succession, and ordered his sons to break the bundle in pieces. They tried with all their strength, but were not able to do it.

He next opened the bundle, took the sticks separately, one by one, and again put them into his sons' hands, upon which they broke the sticks easily.

He then said, "My sons, if you are of one mind, and unite to assist each other, you will be as this bundle, uninjured by all the attempts of your enemies. But if you are divided among yourselves, you will be broken as easily as these sticks."

The Eagle, the Cat, and the Wild Sow

An eagle made her nest at the top of a lofty oak; a cat, having found a convenient hole, moved into the middle of the trunk; and a wild sow, with her young, took shelter in a hollow at its foot. The cat cunningly resolved to destroy this chance-made colony.

To carry out her design, she climbed to the nest of the eagle, and said, "Destruction is preparing for you, and for me too, unfortunately. The wild sow, whom you see daily digging up the earth, wishes to uproot the oak, so she may on its fall seize our families as food for her young."

Having thus frightened the eagle out of her senses, she crept down to the cave of the sow, and said, "Your children are in great danger; for as soon as you go out with your litter to find food, the eagle is prepared to pounce upon one of your little pigs."

Having instilled these fears into the sow, she pretended to hide herself in the hollow of the tree. When night came she went forth with silent foot and obtained food for herself and her kittens, but feigning to be afraid, she kept a lookout all through the day.

Meanwhile, the eagle, full of fear of the sow, sat still on the branches, and the sow, terrified by the eagle, did not dare to go out from her cave. And thus they both, along with their families, perished from hunger, and afforded ample provision for the cat and her kittens.

The Trees and the Axe

A man came into a forest and asked the trees to provide him a handle for his axe. The trees consented to his request and gave him a young ash-tree.

No sooner had the man fitted a new handle to his axe from it, than he began to use it and quickly felled with his strokes the noblest giants of the forest. An old oak, lamenting when too late the destruction of his companions, said to a neighboring cedar, "The first step has lost us all. If we had not given up the rights of the ash, we might yet have retained our own privileges and have stood for ages."

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Exercise A: Learning Strange Words

Does the language of these fables seem old-fashioned? It is.

Aesop was a Greek who lived centuries before Christ. So the earliest copies we have of his fables are written in a Greek which sounds *very* old-fashioned. But this particular translation into English was made in the late 1800s by George Fyler Townsend. Even though Townsend's version is more modern than Aesop's, many of the words and phrases Townsend used probably sound unusual to you. Are there any you haven't heard before?

When you see a new word, you can either look it up in a dictionary, try to pretend it doesn't matter, or guess what it means. You'll make a better guess if you use the rest of the sentence to figure out the meaning.

For each of these phrases or sentences, write what you think each **bold** word or phrase means. Use the rest of the phrase or sentence to help you guess.

1. A father had a family of sons who were **perpetually quarreling** among themselves.
2. He placed the bundle into the hands of each of them **in succession**.
3. The cat **cunningly resolved** to destroy this chance-made colony.
4. She crept down to the cave of the **sow**, and said, "Your children are in great danger; for as soon as you go out with your litter to find food, the eagle is prepared to pounce upon one of your little pigs."
5. And thus they both, along with their families, perished from hunger, and **afforded ample provision** for the cat and her kittens.
6. He began to use it and quickly **felled with his strokes** the noblest giants of the forest.

Now look up the words you don't know. How were your guesses?

What do you think of this different style of writing? On a separate page, write what you like or don't like about it. Include your opinion of which sounded better, Townsend's phrases or your translations.

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Exercise B: Detail Check

1. What did the father ask his sons to bring him?
2. When the sons brought something to their father, he said to break it. Did they?
3. How were they able to break the thing?
4. Who moved into the top of the oak? The middle? The bottom?
5. Why did the sow refuse to leave her cave?
6. When the eagle and sow and their families died, what did the cat and her family do with their bodies?
7. Why did the hunter want a tree?
8. Did the trees give him one? If so, which one?
9. When the old oak "lamented," whom did he lament to?
10. List two concrete details (sights, sounds, smells, etc.) that help these stories come to life.

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Exercise C: Deeper Meanings

1. In the end, the sons broke all the sticks. Why couldn't they break the bundle? What did the father want them to learn from this?

2. If the eagle and the sow had talked to each other, they might have found out how the cat had lied to them. Why didn't they talk to each other?

3. What makes you think the eagle and the sow weren't best friends before they moved into the tree?

4. What do you think the trees hoped to accomplish by giving the man the young ash-tree?

5. Which sentence would Aesop be most likely to agree with? Circle that sentence's letter, then explain your choice.
 - a. Sometimes, you have to sacrifice someone so the rest will stay safe.
 - b. If someone warns you of a danger, never investigate it yourself.
 - c. Unity is important, but not as much as getting your own way.
 - d. To know your neighbor and live in peace is a greater gift than gold.

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Exercise D: Simply Imagine

No correct or incorrect answers here, just interesting or dull. Enjoy yourself.

1. If one of the father's sons had been a smart aleck, how might he have broken the bundle of sticks? Stick to ancient Greek technology here.
2. If you were an animal, where would you want to live in the oak, the branches, the hole in the middle, or the hollow at the foot? Why?
3. What if the cat had had two cats for neighbors instead of an eagle and a pig? How might the story have happened?
4. How could the trees have gotten rid of the man without sacrificing the ash? They couldn't walk, but apparently they could talk. They might even have been able to move a little.
5. Imagine you were "neighboring cedar" whom the old oak lamented to. What would you say back?

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Exercise E: Taking It with You

1. A common theme of these fables is **unity**. Have you ever experienced a greater strength by being united with people? Or are there people in your life you might want to be united with and aren't? Give an example of either, and explain how this unity did or would help you.
2. Are there times when you *should* stand alone? Give an example from your life.
3. The cat warned the eagle and the sow against each other, and used fear to conquer them both. Give an example from history or current news of using fear to divide groups of people and take advantage of them.
4. Give an example from history or your life where an innocent person was sacrificed as protection from an enemy, but the enemy hurt everyone anyway.

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Aesop's Fables: Unity Answer Key:

Exercise A

1. always fighting
2. one after the other
3. cleverly decided
4. pig
5. provided plenty of food
6. cut down

Exercise B

1. A bundle of sticks
2. No, the bundle was too strong for them to break it.
3. They broke each stick separately.
4. Top: Eagle and her young
Middle: Cat and her young
Bottom: Sow and her young
5. She was afraid of the eagle.
6. Eat them.
7. To make a handle for his axe.
8. Yes, the ash.
9. A neighboring cedar.
10. Answers vary.

Exercise C

1. When all the sticks were together, they were too strong for the sons to break. The father hoped his sons would see that they would be hard to break if they stayed together.
2. They were afraid of each other.
3. If they were, they wouldn't have believed the cat so easily.
4. They probably hoped he'd be satisfied and leave the rest of them alone.
5. d. To know your neighbor and live in peace is a greater gift than gold. The other three sentences contradict at least one of the fables. But the father wanted his sons to live in peace, and if the eagle and sow had known each other, they wouldn't have feared each other.

Exercise D

Answers vary.

Exercise E

Answers vary.

A Note on the Text:

The fables used here are a slightly revised version of the translation by George Fyler Townsend, an edition of which was published in 1880. This translation is provided courtesy of Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org).