The Moral of the Story

Half a century ago, in France, in the elementary grades of public schools, every Saturday morning (we then had to attend school on Saturday mornings), there was a class called “Morals”. The teacher would pull out a book and read a story from that book. We, the students, did not have a copy of the book. So, we would sit in the assigned position, that is, arms crossed on the table, and quietly listen to the story.

There was always a moral to the story. So, at the end of the story, the teacher would ask us, “What is the moral of the story?” I always dreaded the question, because I wasn’t sure what the moral was, and was afraid the teacher would pick on me. However, I loved these classes, because the stories were always very stimulating to the mind and caused me to have sleepless nights.

One such story has stuck in my mind till today. It goes something like this: A woman in the village loved to spread gossip. Once, she discovered that the gossip she had spread about another woman was untrue. She felt very ashamed and embarrassed and tried to undo the harm she had caused. Not knowing how to do that, she went to the village priest for advice. He said to her, “OK, get a chicken (remember, in those days, one could actually buy a live chicken and have it slaughtered), and take a walk by the seashore. Pluck the chicken while walking along the shore. Make sure to pull off every single feather. Then come back and I’ll tell you the next steps.” So the woman did as she was told, and came back running to the priest with her now naked chicken. “What do I do next?” she asked eagerly. The priest replied, “Well, now take a bag and go back to the seashore. Pick up every single feather you pulled out and put them in the bag and bring them back to me.” The distraught woman exclaimed, “But that’s impossible! The wind has blown them all over the place, and even over the sea! How am I to find all those feathers?” The wise priest nodded his head, “That is exactly the point, madame. All those things you said have spread to the four corners of the earth by now. There is no way you can catch them and bring them back. The deed has been done. The evil has been committed. You cannot undo it.”

Not only did we get a moral a week through these classes, we also had to memorize the fables by Jean de la Fontaine – poems based on Aesop’s fables. These also included a stated moral at the end of the poem. It wasn’t just the French who then taught their children morals through public and private schools. Even here in the US, there were books for children that collected stories such as that of George Washington and the cherry tree, for honesty; or famous sayings such as “early to bed and early to rise, that is the way to be healthy, and wealthy, and wise,” for good habits. In the Middle East, children had to learn about the stories of the prophets or of early Muslims, highlighting their righteousness.

These moralistic stories were usually accompanied by direct discussion of their moral values. In other words, there was some kind of interaction between the adult and the child. As a result, the children grew up with solid character values, despite the fairy tales that made criminals into heroes, taught discrimination, and idolized superficial values. Jack of the famed beanstalk is praised for being a thief and a murderer, while the giant’s wife betrays her husband for a stranger. Most princes decide to marry a girl based on her looks, even though we the reader might know her for being hard-working, kind or honest (Snow White, Cinderella, Donkey Skin). Children and youth who get into all kinds of adventures never remember their parents once they reach success in their lives, not Thumbelina, nor Rapunzel.

Alas, today, schools have taken Morals out of the curriculum. It is not “cool” to give direct instructions to children about what is right and what is wrong. We adults are not supposed to know best any more. But the fairy tales have remained.