

SACRED STORIES: WISDOM FROM WORLD RELIGIONS

A Guide for Parents and Teachers

By

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God has no religion.
- Mahatma Gandhi

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Introduction

Sacred Stories can be experienced on many levels. You can enjoy the book simply as a collection of interesting tales or as a way to learn more about religious beliefs and the stories that sustain them. You might read them for their psychological insights into human attitudes and behavior. You can find in them the secrets of humanity's connection to the sacred. All of these approaches, and more, can take place at once. In this manual, you'll find commentary that will provide some insight into the meanings behind each story and serve as a springboard for group discussion and activities.

While I have provided historical context in some cases, this guide focuses mainly on the themes of the stories and the lessons to be learned from them in order to show their personal, contemporary relevance. My hope is that it will lead to more interest and deeper understanding, and therefore more tolerance, of religious diversity.

All these old stories are steeped in years of tradition and varying interpretations. Some people believe that the stories their religion is based on are historic fact, while others consider them to be purely metaphor, with symbolic meaning. But even those stories which seem improbable or unlikely might be based in reality. Flood stories, for example, are found in virtually every religion, worldwide. This suggests that somewhere in human memory there were catastrophic floods — perhaps the result of an ice age ending, glaciers melting, and water covering the land as the world warmed. (Finding historical realities in myth and legend is called euhemerism, after Euhemerus, a Greek who said 2,300 years ago that myth is “natural history plus human history, disguised by time and distorted by form.”)

Euhemeristic or not, when mythology takes over we move from the world of facts “into the realm of dream and vision,” as the great mythologist Joseph Campbell once said. And this is what gives these stories spiritual meaning to people today.

Rather than the Christian-based time designations A.D. and B.C., this guide uses the terms C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before Common Era), the current usage of scholars and historians.

Suggested classroom use

1. Set the stage. Use maps and pictures of a temple, cave, forest, or other place where the story is set. Help the students to picture themselves in a different time and a different place. For example: “Imagine that you are in a country far away, traveling on a hot, dusty road. Riding your donkey, you are tired after a long trip and you’re eager to get home. You see someone lying on the road who looks ill or wounded.”

2. Read the story aloud. (In the above case, “The Good Samaritan.”)

3. Encourage discussion.

General discussion ideas:

~ Ask what the listeners liked the most about the story and what they liked least. Why? Is the story confusing? Does it touch a memory, bring up pictures and images, arouse feelings? Imagine being one of the characters in the story; how does that feel?

~ Notice the similarities between many stories, such as “The Birth of Jesus” and “The Birth of Krishna.” In both, a male baby is born in a humble setting, the child’s life is threatened by a king, the child escapes to a safer land, and the child grows up to become one who saves humankind. Other examples are “The Good Samaritan” compared with “The Dog at the Well,” and “The Resurrection” compared with “Inanna in the Underworld.” On a chalkboard or easel, you might create a Venn diagram of overlapping circles. In the outer circles, jot story differences brought out by the discussion, and in the overlapping area mark the similarities.

~ Discuss the significance of the Golden Rule appearing in every major religion. What does this say about common human ideals and beliefs?

~ Note the differences between religions and between story messages. A helpful chart comparing the beliefs of Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism can be found in *The Hindu Mind*, by Bansi Pandit (New Age Books, India, 2001).

~ Consider how a story might be applied to life today. (Who in your life is the equivalent of the person rescued by the Good Samaritan? If the Buddha were sitting under a tree today, what would be tempting him away from the path of enlightenment? Does anything now call for the kind of bravery Mella showed when she went to the python healer?)

4. Set up activities.

~ Role-play, with students taking the parts of characters in the stories.

~ Draw or paint imagery suggested by a story and/or its message.

~ Create dioramas or scenes from the story with clay and other materials (eg. branches, flowers, and moss to signify the Garden of Eden).

~ Suggest student storytelling to musical accompaniment. Some students can bring percussion instruments, flutes, or recorders and play them while others retell the story. The rest of the students will be listeners and then discuss their experience of the story.

~ Use world maps to point out where each religion is most prevalent. Students can outline the countries or regions with colored markers or shade them in with different color

5. Visit, describe, or show photographs or films of sacred sites

Each religion has places of special meaning that are considered holy because significant events took place there or they emanate power. People of the faith make pilgrimages to the sites in order to feel closer to their spiritual heritage and sense of the sacred. Those listed in each section here are only a few; there are hundreds more throughout the world. Many of them are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

#

BUDDHISM

“Hurt not others with that which pains yourself”

Buddhism is different from other major religions in several ways. One of the most important is that Buddhists do not worship an omnipotent god, creator of the world. The Buddha insisted that he was a human being, not a god, and others could attain enlightenment just as he had. He said that people should trust their own experience rather than accept on faith. The Buddha’s teachings, intended only as a guide, not as commandments, are called the dharma.

Buddhist teachings begin with the Four Noble Truths. When Prince Siddhartha Gautama rose from his seat under the Bodhi tree as the Awakened One, these are the truths he had learned:

1. Life contains *dukkha*, the suffering and disappointment that everyone experiences.
2. Dukkha arises from clinging to selfish cravings and desires.
3. There is a way to end constant craving and misery.
4. The way is to follow the Eightfold Path.

The steps on the Eightfold Path, or Middle Way, are:

1. Right Understanding. Sometimes called Right View, it means that you see the world just as it is, with no illusions or pretense.
2. Right Intentions. Also called Right Thought, this is the step of persistent honesty, facing every part of yourself while developing compassion toward others.
3. Right Speech. Focus on speaking the truth and speaking kindly.
4. Right Action. This is about behavior, about bringing harmony, generosity, and kindness into all your actions.
5. Right Livelihood. The work you do should be honest and meaningful.
6. Right Effort. Persistent effort leads to detachment from clinging to cravings.
7. Right Mindfulness. Mindfulness means being continually aware of everything you do, and being in the present. Meditation is the way to achieve mindfulness.
8. Right Concentration. The final step is to maintain an intense yet relaxed focus, a deep awareness of the present moment in meditation and in every task.

Sacred Sites:

Lumbini, Nepal, is the place where the Buddha was born. Thousands of pilgrims visit

yearly to pay homage. It has a garden with ponds, trees, monasteries, and shrines.

Bodh Gaya, India, is an international place of pilgrimage because Buddhists believe that here Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment and became the Buddha. There is a Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) said to be descended from the tree where he meditated. There are also monasteries, an immense Buddha figure, and a temple with beautiful Buddha images.

Sarnath, India, is the place where the Buddha taught his first followers the dharma, in a deer park. It now has a stupa, a dome-shaped shrine that is a symbol of enlightenment.

Kushinagar, India, is the city where the Buddha died and was cremated. Near the ruins of ancient monasteries, it has temples built by Buddhists from India, China, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, South Korea, Tibet, and Japan.

Birth of the Buddha

The story of the birth of Prince Siddhartha Gautama, 2,500 years ago in present-day Nepal, may or may not have taken place the way legend tells it. No one can know exactly how it happened historically. Even if we had eyewitnesses, they would have varying views.

The storytellers use fanciful language to highlight the important parts. Saying that Siddhartha's mother dreamed of a white elephant is a way of saying that something significant to the world was about to happen, because in India white elephants are auspicious omens. They represent great good fortune as well as innocence. Some legends say that the baby prince could walk immediately and wherever he stepped a lotus flower grew.

Sometimes people ask if this is a "true story." The answer is yes, it is true. We know a boy was born who grew to become one of the world's greatest and most beloved spiritual leaders. And we know that in the world of the spirit, ordinary facts are not as important as the truth of spiritual insight. It doesn't matter whether or not the queen actually dreamed of a white elephant or the newborn child walked. Such details are ways of showing that the Buddha's birth was such a great gift to the world, it was like a miracle.

When something wonderful happens, we may feel that all the world is smiling, and we're walking on air. In ordinary fact, all the world is not smiling, and our feet are on the ground. But in our hearts we're rejoicing. So it was for the people who knew the Buddha would teach a new way; they felt as if angels were singing and flowers falling from the sky. With the Buddha's birth the world became a richer, happier place.

Discussion:

~ Why was the Buddha's birth so important and an occasion of joy? (A child was born who would grow up to become a spiritual leader, helping others to find enlightenment and peace.)

~ What are some other great gifts to the world?

The Buddha and the Bodhi Tree

Tradition says that when Prince Siddhartha was young he was so protected from the outside world, he was unaware of life's pain and suffering until he became a young man.

When we are infants and properly cared for, we know nothing of sorrow, sickness, and death. Sooner or later, we have to learn how to respond to these aspects of life. Some of us do as the young prince did. We wonder why life is sometimes sad and painful, and we go in search of answers.

Imagine yourself sitting under a tree, waiting and hoping for an understanding of life's deepest meaning. You stay there for a long time, alone. You grow hungry and thirsty. You're tired. You think, "I'm afraid, I could be attacked by an animal or a bad person. Why am I doing this? It can't be worth the trouble." You wish you could just go home and live a more normal life.

All these thoughts are Mara's weapons. Sometimes Mara is called the Evil One, but a more accurate name in Buddhist philosophy is the Master of Delusion, which means he is the one who enters our minds and tells us the physical world is the only reality, our hopes and fears are lasting, and external circumstances do control our lives. In this story, Mara's weapons and fearsome army are ways of showing us what is going on in Siddhartha's mind. Yet Siddhartha refuses to allow those thoughts to control him. He watches his thoughts but is not disturbed. He keeps his mind quiet, not allowing fear, hope, anger, or any other emotion to rule. Eventually, when the turmoil subsides, in the quiet he gains understanding. He sees that suffering and dissatisfaction are a part of life; they cannot be escaped but they can be transcended. The way to do this is through quieting the mind and through right thought and action. When Siddhartha understands this, he becomes the Awakened One, the Buddha.

Someone once asked of the Buddha, If you are not a saint, or a madman, who are you?

The Buddha answered, “I am awake.”

Discussion:

~ Detachment is a word for not letting emotions rule your actions. Can you describe a time when you experienced detachment? (Example: starting to feel afraid or angry but not letting that emotion decide how you will act.) Detachment also means not allowing any emotion or desire become so important to you that it rules your life and you base your decisions on it.

~ Why do pictures and images of the Buddha often show him slightly smiling, his eyes closed, and with long ears? (The smile is because he feels a deep peace. The eyes are closed, or partly closed, because he is looking inward, shutting out distractions. The ears are long as a reminder that Prince Siddhartha was once dragged down by the jewels and heavy earrings of material wealth, and he became free of them. The long ears also represent the Buddha’s constant listening with compassion to humanity’s cries of suffering.)

~ Why is the Buddha's right hand held with thumb and forefinger touching? (This is a gesture of blessing, and indicates the connection between body and spirit. The topknot on his head is a sign of his omniscience and wisdom, and the dot on his forehead is a symbol of his renunciation of worldly things.)

The Mustard Seed

Everyone eventually has some experience with sadness. In this story the Buddha was trying to show the old woman that she could not expect to be different from everyone else. The only way to have peace of mind is to fully realize this truth and not allow sadness or despair to take over your life. One of the best ways to understand the connection between everything and everyone is to develop a sense of compassion by helping others and being kind. This is why the Buddha told the woman she was on the road to becoming a Buddha herself. She was gaining compassion and awareness, which are steps toward enlightenment, or spiritual awakening.

Discussion:

~ Do you think it is possible to have a life with no sadness, suffering or grief? Why or why not? What would it be like to live such a life?

~ In the story, the old woman learned to let go of her pain by helping other people. Why does helping others make a difference?

~ What are today's common household examples that compare to the mustard seed? (A grain of sugar, salt or pepper.)

The Enchanted Lake

On one level, this is a moral story about greed and what can happen if you try to take more than your share. It has a bit of mystery, too. Who was the lake spirit? Was the lake golden, or was it a reflection of the moon all along?

Mara, the Master of Delusion, tempts us with the idea that material goods are the most important. When we feel resentment, selfishness, or pride, we see what Mara wants us to see. It may be a lake of gold, or it may be a chance to cheat or steal without getting caught. It may be any opportunity to grab, or lie, or ignore the voice that says this is not your strongest, truest self. When we listen to Mara's voice we aren't listening to our own.

Discussion:

~ If you were in Tashi's place, would you have been tempted to act as he did? What would you have done?

~ Can you think of someone who is rich in material goods (e.g. lots of toys, video games, expensive clothes), yet always wants more? Do you think that person is happier than you are? If yes, is it because of their possessions? Do you think they will ever be satisfied and feel they have enough?

The Golden Elephant

Elephants are very valuable in India, where they are sometimes used as work animals. A living elephant may be worth its weight in gold, but it's obviously not made of actual gold. In this story, we're meant to see the elephant as metaphor or symbol. He is more valuable than gold to the boy because he brings not material wealth, but friendship and love. Yet even friendship, like anything else, can become too strong an attachment. When an attachment is more important than being true to your best self, it is an obstacle on your spiritual path.

The monk has one last tie to his past life and worldly connections. He sees this attachment as his friend who has been good to him but knows he must let that go. Without

judgment, without anger or sorrow, he bids the elephant to go in peace. As soon as he does so, the elephant is at peace too.

Discussion:

~ The question of friendship can raise thorny issues. What does it mean to be loyal to a friend? What if a friend wants you to do something against your principles or won't be your friend if you don't do things their way?

~ Why did the monk have to let his friendship with the elephant go, though the elephant did nothing intentionally against the monk's values? (The elephant was a distraction on the monk's spiritual path. Because the elephant was gold, people were lured to him out of greed and were distracted from their own spiritual needs. The elephant himself was a being with a spirit that needed to be freed from the chains of the material world.)

#

CHRISTIANITY

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”

The most fundamental belief in Christianity is that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, and his resurrection was a promise that humanity could also be saved from death. Christians say that Jesus Christ took on the sins of all humankind when he was crucified, making eternal life possible. They believe that Jesus was the son of God, part of a Trinity: God the father; Jesus the son; and Holy Spirit, God’s presence on Earth.

Shortly after Jesus' death, his followers, convinced that he had risen from the dead and was divine, began to tell others of his teachings and resurrection. They said that belief in him meant releasing fear and finding love, compassion, and forgiveness. The man Jesus and the people around him were Jews, but gradually those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who had come to save humanity, formed a separate religion and called themselves Christians. The word Christ is from the Greek *Christos* , meaning The Anointed One.

Over the course of 2,000 years, the Christian church developed and changed. Today there are numerous branches of Christianity and dozens of interpretations of the Bible and Jesus’ words. The main divisions are Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant, with many subcategories. Each expresses Christian teachings, beliefs, and rituals in its own way.

The Christian goal is to reach eternal life in heaven with God by accepting Christ as savior and following his teachings. Christians believe in the power of prayer and in a loving, merciful God. They go to church, usually on Sundays, at regular times to worship with others. Two important sacraments are baptism, the symbolic use of water when a person is dedicated to the religion; and the sharing of bread and wine or grape juice to represent Christ’s body and blood.

Sacred Sites:

Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the tomb in Jerusalem where Christians believe that Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. It has been a destination for pilgrims since the 4th century.

Church of the Nativity is in Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem in present-day Palestine's West Bank. One of the world's oldest churches, it is built over a cave said to be the birthplace of

Jesus. The spot is marked by a silver star beneath an altar.

Via Dolorosa, the “Way of Sorrows,” is a road in Jerusalem said to be where Jesus walked to reach Golgotha, or Calvary, where he was crucified. Believers come from around the world to walk the same road.

The Birth of Jesus

(*The Bible*; Matthew 2:1-14, Luke 1:26-38, Luke 2:1-20)

Each Biblical account of the Christmas story emphasizes a different aspect of Jesus’ birth. Matthew tells of the visit of the Wise Men and the escape from King Herod into Egypt, while Luke describes angels appearing with a message of joy to shepherds in the fields. *Sacred Stories* combines the two, expressing the Christmas story as it has come to be traditionally understood. .

No one knows the exact date Jesus was born. Some historians say it was probably in the springtime, others in the fall. In the fourth century C.E., the Christian church leaders chose a date in December to celebrate his birth because people had long been accustomed to worshipping gods said to be born at the winter solstice. In Earth’s northern hemisphere the December solstice, shortest day of the year, marks the end of darkness and the turn toward the light of the sun, and so symbolizes a turn toward hope and new beginnings.

The star of the East which the Wise Men followed to Bethlehem may have been a supernova, a constellation, a bright comet, a meteor, or the planet Venus. And who were the Wise Men? They may have been magi, astrologers from the court of Persia who knew they were seeing something unusual in the sky. However, natural explanations are not as significant as the fact that Christians over the centuries have thought of the star of Bethlehem as a sign from God, indicating the birth of one who was more than an ordinary human. He would be hailed by his followers as a savior of humanity. He would grow up to teach about the importance of love, justice, and mercy and to bring everlasting life to those who believe in him.

Discussion:

~ Consider the people who first heard the news of Jesus’ birth: shepherds, who were among the lowest of the laborers at that time and place; foreign astrologers; and a jealous and dangerous king. Why would God have sent a message of great importance to the world to such

unlikely people?

~ Imagine being political refugees, as Joseph and Mary were on their flight to Egypt. How would they have felt? They were like many people today, trying to escape from danger in hostile countries.

The Good Samaritan

(The Bible; Luke 10:29-37)

Here is a clear example of a major part of Jesus' message: be kind to everyone. It is easy to be good to people you love, to your friends and others like you. When they look and sound different, or when they are enemies, as the Jews and Samaritans were, it is much harder. But Jesus said that his followers should help anyone who is in need, whether friend, enemy, or stranger. The story does not say that the Jew and the Samaritan ever became acquainted; the point is to show compassion to all.

The story also illustrates the difference between "doing things right" and "doing the right thing." Perhaps the motive of the priest and the Levite who did not stop was that they did not wish to risk violating the law of the priesthood against defiling themselves by touching a body that might be dead. Or maybe they didn't want to be late for their time of service in the temple in Jerusalem. Yet their concern for following the usual rules meant that they did not do the right thing, which would be setting aside their own plans to help someone whose needs were much greater.

Discussion:

~ Who is different from you? Who is the person in your life that people shun? Would you help this person? He or she probably isn't lying on a dusty road, nearly dead, but might be someone new in the neighborhood, someone being treated unfairly, or a person mentally or physically disabled or without friends. Would you help?

~ Have you ever seen a sign or sticker on a car saying "Good Samaritan Club?" This means the people in the car have said they will stop and help someone in trouble, just as the Samaritan did in this story.

~ Hundreds of hospitals are named "Good Samaritan." Why would a hospital have this name?

Loaves and Fishes

(The Bible; Matthew 14:13-21 and 15:32-38, Mark 6:34-44, John 6:5-11)

This is one of several miracles credited to Jesus. From five loaves of bread and two fishes, thousands of people were fed and satisfied. The people who followed Jesus that day were seeking spiritual nourishment, but this story shows that Jesus was concerned with their physical nourishment as well. The message, as in the story of “The Good Samaritan,” is about the importance of kindness, compassion, and faith. Jesus showed the people and his disciples that both body and spirit must be fed.

Another message in the story is that if you give from your heart and have trust, you will be rewarded. Yet another is that sharing what we have is the right way to live.

There is a modern organization named for this miracle. It’s called “Loaves and Fishes,” and members of this group serve and deliver food to older people who need it.

Discussion:

~ Is it possible to think about spiritual matters when the body is hungry? Why or why not?

~ How do you feel about generosity and sharing? Do you give with a generous spirit? The people who had the loaves and fishes could have kept the food to themselves, saying it would be useless to try to share it with so many. Instead, they gave everything they had, and it fed a multitude. Sometimes the miracle lies in the attitude of caring and generous people.

Mary, Martha, & Lazarus

(The Bible; Luke 10: 38-42, John 11: 1-44)

This story from Jesus’ life combines two related stories in the Bible.

Martha’s way of showing her love of Jesus was by serving. It is easy to feel sympathy for Martha, who seems to be working hard with no help, trying to make her visitors comfortable and happy. This work can be a spiritual activity, but only if it is approached that way. Martha, annoyed with her sister, Mary, and fretting over the superficial details, forgot about a higher calling, that of listening to and learning from Jesus. Jesus said to her, “you worry about so many

things.” A modern counterpart to this might be someone who is so overly concerned about preparing for a party she pays no attention to wise words. It could be a person eager to impress or worried about minor details, and so he misses the important message. People like Martha often let themselves become too busy in their daily lives to allow time for contemplation and reflection.

Mary and Martha can also be considered to be two sides of one person, the practical side that deals with day-to-day needs, and the spiritual side that seeks to reach beyond everyday concerns.

In the story of Lazarus raised from the dead, Jesus’ words imply that he was reluctant to use his miraculous powers in this way. He wanted people to hear and believe his message without any seeming magic. Yet these were people he loved; they had been his friends for a long time. He used the occasion in the hope that the people would believe he had been sent by God and that faith can work miracles.

Discussion:

~ Martha was trying to honor Jesus by providing hospitality, while Mary was trying to learn from him by sitting at his feet and listening attentively. Is one way better than another? Why or why not?

~ Have you ever been with someone you admired and treated politely, but didn’t really want to listen to or learn from? (Parents, grandparents, teachers, pastors, leaders) Were you a Martha or a Mary?

~ What is most important about entertaining guests? (Active listening; being fully present with the guest.)

The Resurrection

(The Bible; Matt 28:1-10, Mark 16, Luke 24)

This is the story at the heart of Christianity. Jesus had been condemned to die by the most painful and shameful method of execution known in that culture, and his followers were desolate; yet everything changed with their belief in his resurrection. It meant that goodness conquered evil and hope replaced despair. The Christian church grew from this. Its doctrines and forms have shifted over time, but the basic belief holds: those who believe in Jesus as the son of

God will also rise from the dead and live forever. Mentally accepting the idea of Jesus as God is not enough. A Christian must have faith from the heart and a trust in God's promises and try to be faithful to his requirements. A Christian believes in the saving power of the grace of God.

This is not the first story about a resurrected god. Many religions before this had similar beliefs about a god who was born to a woman or a goddess, lived on earth, and died, only to rise again. It represents the cycle of the year, with a vegetation god who represents the crops that are planted, grow, die, and grow again.

The story of Jesus has some significant differences. His death and resurrection are not seen as part of an ever-renewing cycle but as a single historic event in which a man-god died about 2,000 years ago, rose from the dead, and promised his followers they too would rise again. Then he ascended to heaven to be with his father, never to be on Earth as a man again.

In Biblical times, being a "son" meant three things: a child, a descendant, and a likeness (a quality similar to another). Jesus was all three of these. He was the child of Mary; he was a descendant of Abraham, the Hebrews' patriarch; and he was the likeness of God.

The resurrection itself is not described in the first four books of the New Testament of the Bible. Rather, each writer tells his own version of the followers' encounters with their risen Lord. The one thing they all agree upon is that Jesus was crucified and his body placed in a tomb, and the third day after his death his followers saw him walking and talking, alive and reassuring them that he would be with them always. He told them to preach throughout the world.

To Christians, the resurrection means that goodness conquers evil, hope replaces despair, and Jesus' good news can transform the spirit.

#

HINDUISM

“Treat others as you would yourself be treated”

Hinduism, one of the oldest religions in the world, began in India thousands of years ago. Although it spread to other countries, it is still strongest in India. Hinduism does not credit one central person with its beginning. Rather, the teachings of many wise men and holy books over the centuries have formed the belief system. The sacred books and writings are the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Hindus believe there is one supreme spirit in the universe which exists everywhere and is not bounded by time and space. All the gods and goddesses are aspects of the supreme spirit. In order to understand and experience this spirit, Hindus worship using a combination of prayers, incense, offerings, and meditation. People worship and visit the temples whenever they prefer, and each family keeps a shrine at home. One of the ways in which Hindus find a connection with the divine is through meditation.

Because Hindus believe that all creatures form one interconnected family, they try to harm no living being. This is one reason they are vegetarian and consider the cow a sacred animal. They believe in reincarnation, or *samsara*: the soul never dies but returns in another body, not necessarily human, over and over until it becomes free from the cycle of birth and death.

Hinduism has four aims in life:

1. To follow the *dharma*. Dharma means both instruction for living a good and honest life and a person's duties in life. Children have a duty to respect their elders and to do well in school, and parents are obliged to provide food, clothing, a home, and education. Workers have a duty to do their best, the rich have a duty to help others.
2. To earn money in a proper way and not be greedy.
3. To enjoy oneself while not harming others.
4. To do what is right, so the soul will finally be released from the cycle of reincarnation.

Sacred Sites:

Varanasi (Benares), India, is on the banks of the Ganges River and one of the oldest cities in the world. Hindus believe that dying in Varanasi or bathing in the river

here will end the cycle of continuous rebirth.

Gangotri, the source of the Ganges River high in the Himalaya Mountains, is visited by hundreds of pilgrims and devotees. There is a village with a temple, guest houses, and restaurants.

Badrinath, dedicated to Vishnu, is in northern India near the Tibet border. It has been a holy place for thousands of years. The brightly colored temple here is 50 feet high, with a gilded cupola and intricate carvings.

Mathura, said to be the city where Krishna was born, is surrounded by hundreds of temples.

Allahabad is a holy city in India at the confluence of three sacred rivers. It's famous for its fort, temple, carvings, and images, and as an educational center.

The Birth of Krishna

Hinduism, with its many stories and thousands of gods and goddesses, seems very complicated. But all these stories are ways of expressing what cannot be understood in ordinary language. They take us beyond daily life into the realm of spirit and mystery. The gods and goddesses are representations of the great Oneness, a divine reality that is impossible for the human mind to fully comprehend. Their traits and actions teach people how to live in the world, but they also reveal humanity's true nature, which is not of this world.

In this story, the god Vishnu appears on Earth as Krishna. Vishnu is the god who protects and cares for every living being on Earth, and when people are in great trouble he comes to help, taking on a physical form. Later stories tell about Krishna's miraculous adventures growing up and the effect he had on the people around him. All the stories contain messages important in Hinduism, most of them concerned with learning to control the ego and to understand the law of karma, or cause and effect.

Krishna is said to be the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. His blue skin denotes infinity. His yellow clothes denote wisdom. Together the two colors indicate that Krishna is infinite, eternal consciousness, come to Earth in human form.

Discussion:

~ What are the qualities and attributes of a god? How does this image of a god compare with others? Does giving human attributes to spiritual concepts make them easier to understand and talk about? Why or why not? (Krishna can represent a way for humans to approach incomprehensible divinity and the place that is beyond the reach of the mind.)

~ Meditation is a special form of concentration in which the mind is freed from restlessness. People who meditate sit quietly in a relaxed and comfortable position, breathe slowly and deeply, look inward, and set their day-to-day thoughts aside. They may focus on a particular word or phrase (mantra) that has meaning for them, such as “Peace,” “Love,” or the sacred Sanskrit “Om.” Meditation can create feelings of peace, inner strength, and connection. (If appropriate, a few minutes of group meditation may provide a sense of this important aspect of Hinduism.)

Shiva, Parvati & The Elephant God Ganesh

Ganesh, sometimes called Ganesha or Ganapati, is one of the most-loved gods in India. Every home and place of business has a picture or statue of the gentle, elephant-headed god who overcomes obstacles and brings good fortune. Hindus seek Ganesh’s blessing for spiritual and worldly success. Therefore they worship him before beginning any new venture, and he is the first honored in religious ceremonies. Ganesh is a representation of spiritual consciousness and a reminder of the qualities human beings should strive for. Each of his parts is symbolic. His elephant head, what he holds in his four arms, his broken tusk — there is a reason for each part of him.

The large elephant head symbolizes wisdom and understanding. Large ears indicate a capacity to listen to others. The elephant trunk, strong enough to uproot trees and sensitive enough to pick up a single peanut, shows that the human mind should be strong, able to face the difficulties of the world, but at the same time attentive to the quiet voice of the inner self.

The right tusk represents wisdom; the left, emotion. The left tusk is broken, representing the need for wisdom to conquer emotion. Statues and pictures of Ganesh show him carrying various items in his four arms. He may hold a small axe or sword to symbolize the cutting of worldly attachments, a rope which pulls the believer away from temptation, and a bowl of sweets

or fruit indicating that he bestows peace and prosperity. His fourth hand often faces forward in a blessing pose. Sometimes he is shown with arms holding a shell, a discus, a sweet cake, pen and ink, or a water lily. Ganesh's human body indicates that he has a heart, the symbol of kindness and compassion.

Finally, there is usually a rat (sometimes a mouse or shrew) under the god's feet. The rodent represents the ego, which sits beneath him because control of the ego is necessary for spiritual growth. It is also a reminder that just as rodents can gnaw through almost any wall, so Ganesh can overcome any obstacle. As an elephant he can pass through thick forest, and by riding on a small animal he can pass through a tiny opening.

This story tells one version of how Ganesh came to be and how he got an elephant head. There are several other versions, just as there are many ways of expressing truth, because each of us gains understanding in our own way.

Discussion:

~ Ganesh is a god with features that symbolize the qualities a human being must try to possess in order to perform worldly activities with purity, peace and truthfulness. What are some examples of those activities, and how could Ganesh show the right ways to perform them?

~ Ganesh holds various items in his hands. If you were placing things in his hands, what would they be? (Coins, jewelry, food, songs, hearts, sacred books (a cell phone?) — anything symbolizing wisdom, wealth, love, and joy.)

~ Have you ever thought of animals having special powers and meaning? What animals represent wisdom, and why?

Rama, Sita & The Ten Thousand Monkeys

This story tells a part of the *Ramayana*, the oldest epic of Hinduism. The original version contains 24,000 Sanskrit verses and was composed between 500 and 200 B.C.E. Like many myths, the *Ramayana* changes continually over the centuries to meet the needs and understanding of believers. Like all myths, it has many levels of meaning.

According to Hindu belief, the *Ramayana* shows how the divine plan of the universe is accomplished through human karma. Karma is the law of consequences; every action has consequences, and they can extend through more than one lifetime.

King Dasharatha grieves when his son Rama leaves for the forest, and his grief is so strong it kills him. This is the inescapable fruit of his actions -- his karma -- from a previous life. In that life he went hunting and thought he heard an elephant. He shot an arrow toward the sound and killed not an elephant, but a boy who was pouring water for his blind, elderly parents. The parents cursed Dasharatha and said that he too would lose a son and die of grief. The boy and the parents were also acting according to their karma.

Rama, the seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu, the preserver and protector, is the symbol of the ideal man. He's a good son, devoted brother, true husband, and noble adversary. Sita is the ideal daughter, wife, mother, queen, and noble woman. Hanuman, a loved and popular god, is the symbol of humbleness and total devotion. He represents what human beings should strive for: admiration of friends, respect from foes, sympathy, hope, intelligence, physical strength and, most of all, mastery over the ego. Hanuman never seeks credit for his deeds; he does them without desire for reward and has therefore conquered the ego.

Each part of the tale illustrates the effects of karma. Everything that happens is due to this law of cause and effect.

On another level of the *Ramayana*, each character represents some aspect of a human life. Rama is the spirit and Sita is the mind, and they must be united to have a life of proper balance. Rama's brother, Lakshman, symbolizes the dharma, the spiritual teachings that protect Rama in the forest. The magic circle line which Sita is told not to cross is the limit of the dharma. If a person is drawn away from the dharma, forgetting the teachings, trouble is sure to follow. Sugriva, the monkey king, represents wisdom and Hanuman the intellect. Ravan, the strong demon, is the ego, the part of ourselves that we see as different from and usually better than everyone else. The battle signifies the struggle on the spiritual path to curb the senses and control the ego.

Discussion:

~ Where and how do we see karma in everyday life? Do we have control over our karma, or is everything that happens unchangeable fate?

~ Have you ever done something that was brave or strong (or unkind and weak) that had a long-lasting effect?

~ What can we learn from the spiritual teaching of this story?

Devi & The Buffalo Demon

In other versions of this story, Durga is shown with eight arms, and sometimes with sixteen. Such details are less important than the message, told in colorful language that is set apart from everyday life.

The Divine Mother, the very life force of the universe, has many names and manifestations. She pervades all life and is throughout the universe. Durga is her warrior side, appearing when forces of evil must be controlled. Durga protects humankind from misery by confronting the forces of selfishness, jealousy, prejudice, anger, hatred, and ego. None of these are external demons or enemies. They are enemies within. The weapons for controlling them are letting go of craving, learning detachment, and finding self-knowledge. When those forces are faced with courage, the fiery demon loses his power. Once the demon within the buffalo is conquered, he is no longer a threat to the spirit. His death is considered a boon, a blessing, releasing him from evil and from the form in which his soul is imprisoned.

Discussion:

~ What are your inner enemies? How do they get in the way of being your best self? Hindus say that Durga will conquer or control those inner enemies. What does that mean to you?

~ In India, Durga is honored with an important festival, Durga Puja, that lasts ten days. Hindus decorate their homes, buy gifts for friends and relatives, shop for new clothes, prepare special foods, and organize dance and music performances. It's a huge social event, but the underlying theme is worship of the mother goddess. How is this similar to or different from festivals and holidays you celebrate?

The Birth of The Ganges

To Hindus, the Ganges River is more than a mighty stretch of water. The river, which begins in the cold glaciers of the Himalaya Mountains and flows down to the plains and on to the Bay of Bengal, is a divine goddess. She is "Ganga Ma," which means Mother Ganges. Like a mother she nourishes, providing water to the land so the crops will grow. She sustains and enriches life, and when a Hindu believer dies, the ashes of the dead are given to her. Bathing in the Ganges is a

sacred rite, cleansing not only the body but the soul. People gather by the thousands to float candles and flowers on the river as a way to show their love for Mother Ganges.

In this story, Ganga Ma came to the world because she was needed. In Hindu belief, dead souls cannot be released to the next life without proper funeral ceremonies, and these require water. Answering prayers, Ganga came to earth so that the ashes of the sixty thousand sons of Sagara could be purified with her holy waters.

The story illustrates a Hindu view of cosmological cycles too large for human understanding. The first sentence tells us we are in a setting not of this world, for no ordinary people, even royalty, could have sixty thousand children. The myth swarms with strange images: demons, elephants holding up the world, a divine bird, flying porpoises. We're in the realm of sacred mystery.

By accepting these things in the story framework, we also accept other parts that defy explaining. For example, Vishnu came in the form of a demon and stole the king's horse, which had been brought out to honor the gods. We are not told why. When the king's sons went in search of the horse, they were punished. Again we can wonder why, but the only answer we get is from the god Brahma, who says all of this is fated to happen. It fits with the Hindu outlook on life, which is to follow your dharma, accepting that you may not be given explanations in this life.

Discussion:

~ The entire Ganges River is sacred to Hindus. What are some other important rivers? Perhaps you can find legends and stories about how they came to be and how they are honored. Maybe one is near you. (A few: Amazon, Nile, Zambezi, Columbia, Yangtze.)

#

ISLAM

“Do unto all men as you would wish to have done unto you”

Almost a fifth of the world’s population follows Islamic belief and practices, especially in the Middle East, parts of Asia, and North Africa. Some Muslims live in North America and Europe. There are two main branches of Islam, the Sunni and the Shi’ite. Most Muslims are Sunnis.

The teachings of Islam come from three books: the Koran (or Qur'an), considered to be the direct message from Allah; the hadiths, which are sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; and the shari’a, commandments on how to live a good life. Muslims also have five duties, which are called pillars because these duties support the structure of the religion just as pillars hold up a building. The Five Pillars of Islam are:

1. *Shahadah*. This is an Arabic word for the declaration of faith that there is only one God and Muhammad was his messenger. Muslims say the shahadah when they get up in the morning and when they go to bed at night.

2. *Salah*. Five times a day, prayers must be said while kneeling toward the Kaaba in Mecca, the city in Saudi Arabia where Muhammad was born.

3. *Sawm*. During the month of Ramadan, adults may not eat or drink anything between sunrise and sunset. Young children, sick people, and pregnant women are not required to fast.

4. *Zakah*. Giving money to help the poor is a way of showing gratitude to Allah..

5. *Hajj*. Muslims who are physically able are expected to travel to Mecca at least once in a lifetime to worship Allah and to honor Abraham and Muhammad.

The two most important festivals of Islam are holidays celebrating the end of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca. On the 27th day of Ramadan, the Night of Power remembers Muhammad’s first revelation from Allah.

Sacred Sites:

Mecca, Muhammad's birthplace, is the holiest city in the Islamic world. Located in western Saudi Arabia, it is the direction Muslims face when they pray. Every Muslim tries to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, which is forbidden to non-Muslims.

Medina, “City of the Prophet,” is the place where Muhammad lived before he and his

followers marched to Mecca. A mosque stands on the site of his home, and he was buried here. Medina also has Islam's first mosque.

Jerusalem has two places holy to Islam. One is the *Dome of the Rock*, an octagonal building with walls 60 feet high, many windows and mosaic tiles, and a gold dome. The other is *Al Aqsa mosque*, part of a complex of religious buildings on Majed Mount (also called Temple Mount, and sacred to Jews). Al Aqsa is the largest mosque in Jerusalem.

Adam, Abraham & The Sacred Stone

The Kaaba is extremely important to Muslims. They believe the cube-like one-story building, originally built by Adam and later rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael, is the first house ever constructed for the sole purpose of the worship of Allah. In it is the sacred black stone. The Kaaba stands in Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad, and all Muslims try to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca. This journey, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, is taken during the twelfth month of the Islamic lunar calendar.

When a Muslim man arrives in Mecca he puts on a pilgrim's white robe, made from two sheets of unsewn white cloth. Every man dresses the same as every other, representing equality before Allah. Women wear plain white dresses and scarves. Once they are dressed in this way, pilgrims agree to certain restrictions: they may not wear perfume, kill or harm animals or plants, be in a wedding, carry weapons, do anything dishonest, or even cut hair and fingernails. All these restrictions are to help the person focus only on Allah.

When the pilgrims arrive, they take several actions, each an important symbol to Islam. They run back and forth between two hills seven times, symbolizing Hagar's search for water. They throw rocks at a particular stone that represents Satan. This is a reminder of how the prophet Abraham refused to listen when Satan tried to tempt him to disobey Allah's command. Allah had told Abraham to sacrifice his son, and Abraham was willing to obey.

A Hajj pilgrim slaughters a sheep, or appoints someone to do it for him, in recognition of Allah's mercy in providing a sheep for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son. The slaughtered animal is divided into thirds. One-third is donated to the poor, one-third is a gift, and one-third may be kept to eat.

The pilgrims walk around the Kaaba seven times, stopping to kiss or touch the black

stone.

Discussion:

~ Why is Abraham such a revered prophet in Islam? (Abraham established monotheism, the belief in one God. He was willing to sacrifice his son, as Allah commanded, and Islam is based on surrender to the will of Allah.)

~ What is the point of having a ceremony as elaborate as the Hajj? What is the benefit? (A few: the Hajj bonds Muslims worldwide; it represents the unity and equality of all Muslims; it's something to work toward and be proud of; it helps keep the history and significance of the religion alive in the hearts of believers; it's an expression of faith; and the sacrifice in time and money shows a commitment to Islam and Allah.)

~ You will never see a picture of Abraham or any other person in Islamic art, because Islam forbids the imagery of people. Instead, Muslims have created elaborate designs in carvings, tile work, calligraphy, and architecture. Why do you think this rule was made? (Religious leaders believed that artists creating human images would be imitating Allah; and people might worship the images as idols or be distracted by them.)

Muhammad, Messenger of God

The story of the life of Muhammad is a significant part of the legacy of Islam. Muhammad, an orphan who had no money and could not read or write, grew up to become one of the most important spiritual leaders of the world.

When Muhammad heard the angel's voice he was surprised and troubled. How could he obey the command when he didn't know how to read? But he listened, and the voice told him to recite the words the angel said. Because he listened, he could preach Allah's messages and they could be written by others into a holy book, the Koran.

Muhammad also paid attention to people he respected. When he wasn't sure what the first messages meant, he talked to his wife, Khadija. She was the one who told him to trust the angel and to believe that the messages were truly from Allah. According to tradition, Khadija's cousin, Waraqa ibn Qusayy, also played an important role. A Christian, he was trusted as a pious, wise man, and he too believed that Muhammad had received messages from Allah.

As time went on, Muhammad received many revelations from Allah, memorized them, and taught them to others, starting with his own family and friends. In this way, the messages could be learned and discussed and passed on.. Later, people who could write recorded the words on paper, leather, or whatever material was available. Muslims say the Koran as it stands today is exactly as it was long ago, the unchanged word of Allah.

Muslims revere the great prophet Muhammad, and when they say his name they always say, "Peace be upon him." But they do not worship him. Only Allah is to be worshiped.

Discussion:

~ How does the Koran compare to the Judeo-Christian Bible? (The Koran was written during Muhammad's lifetime, while much of the Bible was written long after the stories took place. The Koran is still read in the original Arabic. Muslims believe the Koran is the direct word of Allah, while the Bible is a mixture of God's revelations and a history written by numerous prophets and believers.)

~ Do you know of any other prophets who have had revelations or messages from beyond the physical world? (Abraham; Moses; St. Paul; Black Elk)

~ If you thought you'd had a miraculous revelation or saw an angel who gave you a message, how would you feel? Who would you tell, and what would you do about it?

A Boy Of Courage

Salamah showed great courage and resourcefulness in his quick actions to save Muhammad's camels. He was in personal danger, but he didn't hesitate. The story is one of hundreds in Islamic tradition that tell of devout Muslims who defended their faith or acted according to Allah's will.

Not everyone can run like Salamah. But anyone can try to be a good person and defend a cause or a person you believe in.

Discussion:

~ Who or what cause would you defend if it were threatened? How would you do this?

~ Do you have a belief as important to you as Islam was to Salamah?

- ~ What do you think of a belief so strong its followers would die to defend it?
- ~ What about beliefs that are different, perhaps opposed to each other, but people on both sides feel equally strongly?

The Dog At The Well

Note the similarities between this story and the Christian story of the Good Samaritan. In each of these, a person of compassion reaches out to help another living being. Dogs are considered to be of very low status in many cultures. One of the worst insults is to call another person a dog. Yet here was a man on a long journey, probably tired and wishing he were safely home, stopping to help.

The sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad are given in a collection called the Hadith. One of those sayings is: “Those who are kind and considerate to Allah’s creatures, Allah bestows His kindness and affection on them. Show kindness to the creatures on the earth so that Allah may be kind to you.”

Discussion:

- ~ What creature would you stop to help? Are there any you would not help? Why or why not?

The Miraculous Night Ride

Muhammad sometimes said the worst day of his life was the day he went to Ta’if, a town 60 miles from Mecca, to tell the people about Islam and was cruelly spurned by them. He longed for comfort, and Allah provided it with the Night Ride, called Al-Mi’raj in Arabic. This amazing ride on a horse with wings allowed him to see with his own eyes the glory of Allah’s creations, and it strengthened his faith even further. The ride took him from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he met the prophets and led them in prayer. Because Muhammad stood in front of the other prophets while they prayed, Muslims believe this was a sign that he was the last prophet sent by Allah. After praying, Muhammad ascended from the rock where he was standing up to the heavens; later a mosque was built on the rock. Called the Dome of the Rock, the shrine for pilgrims still stands.

The morning after the Night Ride, when Muhammad related his experience, some of the

people of Mecca laughed at him and said he must be crazy. Muhammad was well-known for being honest and trustworthy, but they said he could not have gone to Jerusalem in a night, as it took two months to get there from Mecca. They challenged him to prove he was there by describing it. Muhammad described it exactly, and they knew he spoke the truth.

Discussion:

- ~ What is a miracle? Why was Muhammad's Night Ride miraculous?
- ~ How does this miracle compare with miracle stories in other religions? (Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead; David killed a giant with one stone)
- ~ What is the significance of miracle stories; why are they important and what do they tell us?

#

JUDAISM

“What you yourself hate, do to no man”

About 4,000 years ago, in the Middle East, at a time when people worshiped many different gods, a man named Abraham believed there was only one god. He felt called by God to move with his family to a new land, where God said his descendants would become a great nation. Abraham and his family did leave their home and go to Canaan, which later was called Israel.

In Canaan, Abraham’s people were called Hebrews, a name that indicated they had come from another place. Abraham’s faith and actions founded the religion that became known as Judaism, a religion based on worshiping God and obeying his commandments.

The main rules Jewish people live by are called the Ten Commandments, which Jews and Christians alike believe were revealed by God to Moses. The stone tablets inscribed with the Commandments were kept in a chest called the Ark of the Covenant. The Commandments are:

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make any graven image or likeness or bow down to it.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not kill.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor’s possessions.

Over the centuries, even through times of suffering and oppression, Jews have kept their faith in one everlasting, omnipotent god who claims them as his chosen people. They believe that they can demonstrate God’s will and teachings by the way they live, loving him and keeping his commandments.

Sacred Sites:

Temple Mount (Mount Moriah), Jerusalem, is said to be where God gathered dust to create the first man and where Abraham offered his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. It is also the site of

Solomon's Temple and, after it was destroyed, the Second Temple. Jews turn toward it when they pray.

Western Wall is believed to be the last remnant of the Second Temple, which was built about 20 B.C.E. and destroyed in 70 C.E. Jews came to the wall to weep over the temple's destruction and so it was called the Wailing Wall. They still go there to place written prayers in crevices of the immense wall.

Mount Sinai, in barren, rocky land in Egypt, is where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. The inscribed tablets are called the Ark of the Covenant.

Cave of the Patriarchs (Cave of Machpelah) is the burial place of Abraham and other early Jewish leaders. It is a shrine complex south of Jerusalem in Hebron, West Bank. There is a mosque here as well, because it's also a sacred site for Muslims.

Adam & Eve In The Garden Of Eden

(The Bible; Genesis 1-3)

This is a well known story in the Western world, part of the Judeo-Christian belief system, and it is more complicated than it appears. Some people believe that every word of the Adam and Eve story is literal fact — that is, a Supreme Being created light, dark, the world and humanity in six 24-hour days. They believe an actual garden exists (or existed) with angels at the gate guarding it. Others see the creation story as a poetic metaphor for a long process in which Earth and life, male and female, were created by God and gradually evolved.

One theory says the story reflects a piece of history, showing how the religion of the Hebrew god conquered the older Earth-based religions which worshiped female goddesses. The serpent was a symbol of some goddess-worshipping religions.

The Garden of Eden story differs from other creation stories in several ways. One is its insistence on only one god. Another is the absence of any explanation for God's existence. In "Genesis," God does not come into being; rather, he has always existed, not as a part of nature but as its creator, separate from and over it. God also endowed human beings with free will, enabling them to make their own choices, which implies personal responsibility and accountability for one's own actions. This ethical instruction for people is not a part of most creation myths in other world cultures. All these facets of the story reflect the Hebrews' search

for a religious and moral vision and are departures from the myths of other cultures and lands.

Discussion:

- ~ What would it be like to be the first and only human being on Earth?
- ~ If Adam and Eve had not disobeyed their god, how might the world be different today?
- ~ What does the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represent to you?

The Great Flood

(The Bible; Genesis 6-9)

In this story, the creator becomes the destroyer. God has decided that humans are too wicked to live and he is going to drown them all, except for the animals and the few good people left: Noah and his family. God orders Noah to build an immense ark which will save him from the flood, and then tells him to gather two of all living creatures and put them into the ark. When the flood waters recede, God places a rainbow in the sky to remind him of his promise to never send such a devastating flood again.

For centuries, people have wondered what happened to the ark. Some have gone to Mount Ararat, in Turkey, to search for its remains.

Almost every culture has a myth about an ancient, devastating flood. From Sumer to Scandinavia, from the Mayans to the Australians, stories abound of gods who sent water to overwhelm the land, allowing a new people to come forth. These myths may be euhemerist, which means they are based on significant historical events. There is evidence of a deluge that occurred in the Middle East 7,000 years ago, when glaciers melted and one sea flooded into another. This predates Noah's story, which is said to have happened 4,300 years ago.

One personal message to take from the story is to have faith in what you believe is the right thing to do, even if others think you are strange or foolish.

Discussion:

~ Do you think this story is factual history? Why or why not? Do you think one man and his family saved two of every living creature? Was it possible? Was it a miracle?

~ The Bible says that Noah was "a righteous man, blameless in his generation." What does this mean? (Perhaps it indicates that Noah, like all people, was a man of his own time and

culture, doing the best he could.)

~ If you know the right thing to do, will you do it no matter what others may think? What if they make fun of you or shun you, as Noah's acquaintances may have done when he was building the ark?

~ Why did Noah send out a dove to search for dry land, and why did she return on the second try with an olive branch? Is there a special significance to the dove and the olive branch? (the dove and the olive branch are both symbols of peace; in this case, of the enduring promised peace between God and man). For young children, a charming picture book to show and read is *Why Noah Chose the Dove*, by Isaac Balshevis Singer, with illustrations by Eric Carle.

Moses In The Bulrushes

(The Bible; Exodus 1 and 2:1-10)

The pharaoh who gave the order that all Hebrew baby boys be killed was probably Ramses II, who reigned at that time, about 1290 B.C.E. The princess who found and rescued Moses was one of his 59 daughters.

Because the pharaoh feared the growing numbers of Hebrews, he used the excuse that in case of war they might join the enemy in battle against Egypt and against him. So he enslaved the Hebrews, putting them to work building cities and then working in the fields. When their numbers continued to increase, he resorted to murder. The story of Moses is one of courage, love, and faith. The Hebrew midwives, at risk of their own lives, refused to kill the babies. Moses' mother bravely tried to save her child, knowing that if he were discovered by an Egyptian soldier he would be killed and she probably would be too. His sister Miriam acted with courage, watching over the baby and then speaking to a royal princess. Even the princess made a brave choice when she ordered that a Hebrew baby be saved.

One of the messages in this story is that one person can make a difference in the world. Moses' mother acted, and his sister acted, and their courageous actions changed the course of history. Moses grew up to become a great leader who is revered today by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic people.

Discussion:

- ~ Imagine yourself in Miriam's place. How would you feel and what would you do?
- ~ Moses' mother and sister acted with courage. Can you think of actions people do today that take courage?
- ~ Have you ever tried to defend something or someone helpless? Did you stand up for someone younger or smaller, or protect a pet? If so, was it hard to do? Would you do it again?

David & Goliath

(*The Bible*; I Samuel: 17)

This is a story children love. The little guy, quick of wit and filled with confidence, defeats the bully who often seems like a giant of strength and power. Many of us have felt small and weak at times. David reminds us that with courage and faith we can overcome huge obstacles. And it's another example of one person's action making a big difference.

The episode described in this story is only one piece of David's long, eventful life. He grew up to become one of the most important kings of Israel. He was a warrior but also a musician who played the harp and wrote most of the *Psalms*, songs of adoration to God; he established Jerusalem as Israel's capital; and he was the father of Solomon, a great and wise king.

Discussion:

- ~ Have you ever encountered a bully, someone who picks on smaller, weaker people? How did you deal with it?

Joseph & The Coat Of Many Colors

(*The Bible*; Genesis 37:1-28, Genesis 41:14-57, Genesis 42-45)

This is a story of high drama, filled with human emotions — jealousy, hatred, revenge, love, and forgiveness. It includes prophetic dreams, slavery, power, and finally redemption with a family reunited. It's also a story that describes how the Hebrew people came from Canaan to live in Egypt, a major event in Jewish history. It probably took place about 1700 B.C.E.

Almost everyone knows what jealousy and envy feel like. When one brother or sister is a parent's favorite, strong emotions arise. Because Jacob loved Joseph the most, Joseph's brothers

grew to hate the favored one so much they were willing to sell him into slavery. Very few people would go that far, but we all recognize the feeling of anger when we think we've been treated unfairly. It may be because someone else is given a nice present or gets a reward they don't deserve. In the classroom, the teacher may give the most attention to one person; at home a parent may lavish praise on one child. Whatever it is, favoritism often causes trouble, as it did in Joseph's family.

It doesn't help when the favored one brags about it, as Joseph did. His dreams told him that his brothers would bow down to him, and he told them so. Another issue here is sibling rivalry. Many stories in the Bible deal with brothers who treated each other badly. In this case, when Joseph's brothers saw him years later they were filled with repentance and begged forgiveness. Joseph forgave them and the family was united again.

Discussion:

~ Joseph was gifted in unusual, sometimes puzzling ways. How are family relationships affected when one person has special talents?

~ What are some other ways Joseph's brothers could have dealt with their anger and jealousy? Did they grow wiser? How can you tell?

~ What could Joseph have done differently?

~ How does being chosen as the favorite affect the one chosen? Could it make the person feel lonely or unhappy?

#

NATIVE AMERICAN

“Live in harmony, for we are all related”

Native American tribes, spread over a vast country, express their spirituality in many different ways. They have complex rituals and ceremonies based upon their particular ancestral traditions and environment, whether it is eastern woodland, the dry Southwest, the grassy plains or the far western ocean. What they share is a profound reverence for the land and the spirit that dwells in all creatures, including plants, rocks, rivers, and animals. Everything on Earth, as well as the moon, sun, stars, and planets, is interconnected in a great web of life.

That is not to say that all Native Americans today believe in or practice the ways of their ancestors. Many are staunch Christians or have combined the old ways with Christianity. The significance of Native American spirituality to those who are from a different heritage is that many are coming to believe its fundamental perspective on nature has a message for the modern world. All people, not only Native Americans, can try to live in harmony with their environment.

Native American stories come from an oral tradition, when tales were told around the fire at night in the cold part of the year. They entertain, and they often teach a lesson about the right way to live.

Sacred Sites:

Bighorn Medicine Wheel, Wyoming is a sacred site for its history and legends to many tribes. The huge wheel, about 80 feet in diameter, is made of limestone rocks, with 28 spokes radiating from the center. This is a place for vision quests.

San Francisco Peaks, Arizona, are mountains dedicated by the Hopi people to the kachinas, or spiritual beings. Hopis make pilgrimages to leave offerings in an area that has been a shrine for centuries.

Bear Butte, South Dakota, is called Noahvose by the Cheyenne people and is considered their most sacred site.

Sweetgrass Hills, Montana, are holy to a number of tribes. The area is used for ceremonies, vision quests, and the sun dance.

Grandmother Spider Brings The Sun

(Cherokee, Muscogee)

Many Native American stories provide mythic explanations for the traits of different animals. This one, which may remind readers of the Rudyard Kipling “Just-So Stories,” entertains with imaginative ideas on why the various creatures look as they do. But it also carries a message. It implies that every creature, no matter how small, has a place in the world and a job to do. The tiny spider is as important as the bear, and the buzzard, often reviled, can be a hero. All of nature deserves respect. Other lessons include the value of persistence, group cooperation, and creative solutions to problems.

Discussion:

~ Grandmother Spider had a clever solution to the animals’ problem. Can you think of other things they might have done? What could have happened to other animals? (A few possibilities: Crow might have flown so close to the Sun his entire body was burnt black; Deer leaped close and got a black nose; Blue Jay got so hot he dove into an icy lake and turned blue; the skin on Frog’s feet stuck together and gave him webbed feet.)

~ Have you ever been in a group that solved a problem together? (Finding something that was lost, settling an argument, organizing a game . . .) How did the group solve the problem? Or what did each person contribute to the solution?

How Coyote Got His Name

(Okanagan, Walla Walla, Lake, Karok)

This is one of dozens of Coyote stories. Coyote is boastful and mischievous; he wants the reward without doing the work. He gets into trouble and never admits he was wrong. In other words, he’s a lot like human beings, full of pride and self-importance. He is also creative, exuberant, and willing to help. Coyote is an example of how bad behavior can bring you trouble, but in this story he also shows how everyone has a place. Coyote should not try to be someone else; he is who he is and his work is important.

Native American tradition says that if you get lucky, it was due to Coyote; and if something goes wrong, that is also due to Coyote.

Tricksters and troublemakers like Coyote are found in stories all over the world. In some Native American tribes, Raven, Hare, or Spider plays the Coyote role. We need the Trickster for balance. He's the character who rebels against authority, who doesn't always obey the rules. He allows us to laugh at our own foolishness.

Discussion:

- ~ Was Coyote treated fairly in this story? If not, does it matter?
- ~ What are some of Coyote's traits that show up in this story?
- ~ Can you identify some traits that humans share with Coyote?

Buffalo Woman's Gift

(Lakota, Sioux)

The sacred pipe is a symbol of significance in many ways. Tradition says that when White Buffalo Woman brought the pipe she held it up for all to see and sang a song. Then she filled the pipe with red willow bark, lighted it, and told the people that the rising smoke was the breath of the Great Spirit. She taught the people to pray by lifting the pipe up to the sky, down to the earth, and to each of the four directions. She said that the pipe joins the people with all other living beings.

White Buffalo Woman explained that each part of the pipe has meaning. The bowl of the pipe represents Earth and its wood stem is all of Earth's growing things. The bison calf carved on the side stands for the four-legged creatures, while the twelve eagle feathers hanging from the stem and tied with grass that never breaks are the winged creatures, the sky, and the twelve moons (months). A sacred pipe is still used in council today, passed from hand to hand as a sign of peace or agreement. The rising smoke carries prayers and reverence up to the sky.

It is said that White Buffalo Woman also promised to return near the time of the birth of a white buffalo calf, and when she does she will purify the world, bringing back harmony and spiritual balance.

On August 20, 1994, a rare white buffalo calf was born on a farm near Janesville, Wisconsin. Many Native Americans and other visitors came to the farm to see the calf, perhaps the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Discussion:

~ Can you name significant symbols of other religions and spiritual traditions? What meaning does each symbol hold? (Examples: Christian cross, Jewish Star of David, Buddhist lotus, Hindu OM, Islam star and crescent.)

Turtle Island

(Onondaga, Seneca, Iroquois, Ojibway)

Many Native American creation myths are “earth-diver” stories. That is, they involve a creature who dives into the water’s murky depths and brings up earth so that life on land can begin. It has been said that this is in part a recognition of the origins of life, which came from the seas, and land that rose from beneath the waters. Even referring to the planet as an island is accurate, for Earth floats like an island in a sea of space.

The turtle is an appropriate symbol for the planet’s foundation; as an animal that can live to be older than almost any other, it represents age and endurance.

There’s a life lesson in this myth, as well. It shows that a small and ordinary creature like the muskrat can do a great deed.

Discussion:

~ For thousands of years people have wondered how the world began and looked for stories to explain it. Do you know other creation stories? How do these stories fit with what we learn from science today? (Some reflect scientific discoveries. For example, Turtle Island shows that living creatures existed in water before they did on land.)

Raven & Fog Woman

(Tlingit, Tsimshian)

This is one version of a Tlingit tale, a story from the coast of the land we now call Alaska. In some tribes, Raven is the trickster. Like Coyote, and like humans, he can be greedy, selfish, and prideful; and he is also very important to the people. One of the best-known Raven stories tells of how he created the world and brought the sun.

Native American belief says that all aspects of the natural world have spirit. Fog, which can drift in and obscure everything, is a part of nature, and in this story reminds us that she too commands respect.

One message in this story: don't let your pride ruin what is more important. If Raven hadn't been busy admiring his own feathers and his skill at catching salmon, he wouldn't have knocked the salmon onto the ground. And if he had not claimed all the credit for catching the salmon, Fog Woman might have been more helpful to him.

Fog Woman listened to him and granted his request, and he gave her no thanks or respect. And so he lost his salmon, but he learned his lesson. From then on he honored Fog Woman and he always gave her the first fish caught.

Discussion:

~ Raven, like other tricksters, is a mixed blessing. He causes lots of trouble, but he also brings gifts. Are tricksters good or bad, neither or both? Why?

~ Does this story say anything about being respectful of the natural world? If so, what is it telling us?

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SACRED EARTH

“Do as you will, as long as you harm no one”

Sacred Earth is not the name of a particular religion, it is a term that covers a diversity of beliefs. These beliefs have in common a profound respect for the natural cycles of sun, stars, moon, planets and seasons, and a belief that a divine spirit exists in everything. In this it is similar to Native American spirituality.

Those who call themselves Pagans, or Neo-Pagans, practice what some label the “old religion,” the beliefs that preceded Christianity. There is no set dogma, and the practices are based more on personal experience than on faith or revelation. Most Pagans live in North America, the United Kingdom, and western Europe. One branch of Paganism is Wicca, or Witchcraft. Wicca is the preferred term to many modern Wiccans, because Witchcraft has become a negative, even frightening word and has no spiritual meaning. Wicca comes from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning “wise one” and in earlier times referred to healers and wise folk. Witch did not mean someone who was old, ugly, or fearsome, but a person, female or male, with strong personal powers.

Followers of the Sacred Earth path have a reverence for nature and fertility. Most honor the creative force of the universe as the Great Mother Goddess, but they also recognize a balance between male and female forces; both are essential. They see the sacred not as domination from above but as power that comes from within.

Since these people usually believe that after death the individual does not go to heaven or hell but lives on, in a different, invisible realm, they feel a strong bond with their ancestors and all who came before.

Sacred Sites:

Planet Earth and the entire natural world are considered sacred. Some places hold special energy and power, such as Mount Shasta, California, and Uluru, an enormous, 986-foot red rock, formerly called Ayers Rock, in Australia. These are only a couple of examples of places with great spiritual significance.

Standing stones and burial sites from prehistoric times, which are claimed to hold strong Earth energy, draw pilgrims for meditation, reflection, and ceremonies. Examples are Stonehenge, England, a circle of megaliths topped by lintels, and Newgrange, Ireland, a tomb or

worship site that is astronomically aligned. There are hundreds of ancient stone structures in Britain, Ireland, and western Europe.

Osun-Osogbo Grove, Nigeria, is a sacred forest considered the home of Osun, goddess of fertility to the Yoruba people. Shrines, sculptures, and carvings are dedicated to her.

Valley of the Temples, Sicily, is an archeological site outside the town of Agrigento. It has the ruins of eight temples honoring Greek gods and goddesses, including Demeter.

Gaia Creates Herself

Every culture has a creation story, a myth that explains how the world and people came to be. People who follow the Sacred Earth path often picture the power that creates life as a loving, joyous mother who provides her children with overflowing abundance. Since female humans and other animals are the ones who give birth to new life, they imagine the creative force to be feminine. A spark of this power exists in everyone, men and women alike, as a part of the greater force that flared out billions of years ago to make the universe and Earth.

Many myths, including this one, call the creative force Gaia, which in ancient Greece was the name of the Goddess of Earth. From her and her husband Uranus, God of the Sky, came the mountains, seas, and all the Greek gods and goddesses.

Today, some people use the term Gaia to refer to Earth as an ecosystem, an interconnected and interdependent web of life. They say the planet is not an inanimate rock but a living organism, with every part of the global environment important to its health and survival.

Discussion:

~ Imagine the planet as if it were human. What would be the parts of her body?
(Examples might be roots and rocks as her flesh and bones, rivers and streams her veins and blood, mountains her curves and angles, and soil and grass her skin and hair.)

The Wheel of The Year

This description of ancient ways of following the turn of the year symbolizes the seasonal changes and life changes. Through birth, growth, fading, death, and birth again, the wheel keeps

turning. This is true for every aspect of life. Eventually everything, including ideas, cities, buildings, and books fades and changes. The people who celebrate this continual cycle have special holidays to honor each change. Those days recognize particular times in the natural cycle rather than historical events, as in some other religions. Traditional celebrations include dancing, bonfires, crafts, rituals, and music.

The story in *Sacred Stories* is based on British and European tradition, but the same cycles are honored in similar ways around the world. Sometimes people bring in elements of other traditions as part of a celebration, with the belief that all have wisdom and can enrich each other.

Discussion:

~ It is important to remember that the goddess and god are not human; they are metaphors, or symbols, used to help imagine the mystery of life. In this mythology, the god's birth celebrates the end of winter, with the promise of warmth and new crops. His death represents the harvest and dying of vegetation so life may continue.

~ If the Wheel of the Year is an unfamiliar story, it can raise questions about the relationship between the god and goddess (e.g., can a mom marry her child?). To the Great Mother Goddess, the god is both son and lover, which in humans would be considered impermissible. But this is symbolism. Describing the cycle of the natural world in human terms is a way of understanding through imagery that our minds can grasp.

~ Christian holidays were set to coincide with Wheel of the Year holidays already in existence. What are those holidays and their earlier counterparts? (Easter= Ostara; Halloween=All Hallow's Eve, or Samhain; Christmas=Yule.)

Mella & The Python Healer

This story of courage, integrity, and perseverance may come from a tale in the oral history of the Buhera Ba Rowzi people of Zimbabwe, according to Merlin Stone, the author of *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*. Bomu Rambu is one of hundreds of moon goddesses worshiped in different parts of the world. Mella is remembered as a great queen.

Most of us don't think of snakes as personalities with great powers of healing. They can

be dangerous, as Mella knew. But her love was stronger than her fear, and so the wise python was willing to help her. She came to him from love rather than selfishness or greed, but she had to be tested first. This was not easy. She had to enter a dark cave, make her request, and then walk for miles with an immense and dangerous serpent wrapped around her body. Yet she not only walked, she sang along the way. Anyone who has faced a test of courage and perseverance can understand and admire what Mella went through.

Discussion:

~ What tests of courage are required of us today? What is the equivalent of the helpful snake?

~ Snakes are honored, even worshiped in some cultures, but in others they are hated and feared. Some people are terrified of them. Why do snakes evoke such strong feelings and reactions?

Inanna In The Underworld

In *Sacred Stories*, one part of Inanna's mythology is told, though hers is a longer and complicated story, rich with meaning on several levels. It comes from ancient Sumer, a country that once existed on the Euphrates River in the Near East. Today the region is in the country of Iraq. In Sumer, the Goddess was worshiped for thousands of years under many names; now we know her best as Inanna.

The aspect that is easiest to grasp in this story about life, death, loyalty, love, and balance, is the symbolic changes in the seasons, growth and harvest. Date palm trees provided an important crop. Dumuzi represented the life power of springtime, when the dates grew. Inanna, "Lady of the Date Palms," was also the "Goddess of the Storehouse" or harvest, and autumn. (Dumuzi's sister, Geshtinanna, is associated with the grape harvest.) When Dumuzi and Geshtinanna go to the Underworld at different times of year, they reflect the seasonal change.

Inanna also symbolizes Venus, the bright evening and morning planet which seems to disappear from the sky for a period of time; and the moon. She gives life as the moon waxes and withdraws it as the moon wanes..

Discussion:

~ Do you recognize the planet Venus? It is the third-brightest object in the sky, after the sun and moon. Can you see how the myth may have arisen, with people watching the planet that appears in the morning or evening, depending upon the cycling of the planets? Venus has been important in many cultures for centuries.

~ (For older students) Inanna's descent also represents a mental and emotional journey into the unconscious self. To learn about your innermost self, you must surrender your defenses and be willing to let go of worldly things and attitudes, just as Inanna surrenders her royal trappings to the guard at the gates. When Inanna enters the darkness, she finds pain. Her sister strikes her down. Erishkegal might be considered Inanna's hidden identity, the part of herself that feels left in the dark, neglected and lonely. She has not been given attention, and she strikes out. But Inanna has left Ninshubar, yet another part of her self, on guard, and Ninshubar finds a way to bring her back. When we do as Inanna did, taking a journey to the hidden parts of the soul to seek knowledge, like Inanna we will return to daily life wiser and with more self-understanding. We learn to accept the need for balance and for recognizing all the different parts of ourselves.

Demeter & Persephone

The goddess Demeter was worshiped for many centuries. From the island of Crete she was brought to Greece about 1500 B.C.E. In the commonly told classical Greek myth, Persephone did not choose to go to the Underworld but was kidnapped by the god Hades and forced to go. Demeter mourned, and finally Zeus agreed to insist that Hades allow her to return; but Persephone had eaten pomegranate seeds in the Underworld. Pomegranates were the food of the dead, and so she had to return for part of each year. The *Sacred Stories* version predates the Greek and comes from a time when the female force was worshiped and powerful. But there is no one "correct" telling, no original version. It probably began thousands of years ago, with the beginning of agriculture, and developed over time.

The story has numerous aspects. One is the obvious change of seasons. When Persephone goes to the Underworld, her mother the grain goddess mourns and allows nothing to grow, and so it is winter. When Persephone returns in the spring, the fields are green again and the crops grow to summer's abundance before they die and the cycle continues.

Another aspect is the bond between parent and child. Separation is difficult for both mother and child, yet the time inevitably arrives. Even when Persephone returns Demeter knows that her daughter has changed, because of her new experiences. She will go away again. Persephone missed her mother but has her own work to do, and Demeter understands this even as she mourns.

Demeter and Persephone are two aspects of one divine triple goddess. Persephone is the maiden and Demeter the mother, which are also two stages of a woman's life. The third stage is the crone, or old woman, and she is the goddess too and has a part in some versions of the myth.

Discussion:

~ If you live in a region of seasonal changes, do you sense the wonder in each season? From the colorful leaves of autumn to winter's snow; from the green buds of spring to full summer, each appears in its own time and happens every year.

~ Are there times when you feel it is important to do something, even if it pains a parent? Can you be sure it is not because your friends are doing it, or it seems exciting, but because deep in your soul it touches your values? Examples might be when you want to participate in a particular sport, play a musical instrument, explore a different religion, learn about a career that seems scary or chancy, or go to a college different from the one your parents favor.

~ Have you ever grieved over a loss, like Demeter? Maybe you know someone who died, or you lost a beloved pet. Then you felt as shriveled and cold as winter, when nothing grows. But finally something happened that made your spirit flower again. What was it that gave you hope? (Passage of time, encouraging words from others, supportive friends or family, return of what was lost?) Was everything then exactly as it was before, or was there a change?

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Further Resources

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- The World's Religions (Plus)*, Huston Smith. HarperOne, 2009

Many stories and references are available on the Internet, and numerous films are based on

sacred stories, myths, legends, and history.

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