

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Prudence Bostwick

Contributor: Martha Brockman

Wanted: Messengers!

Swifter than horses
Fleeter than men
To carry my messages
A Million Times Ten.

Earth King¹

ACCORDING to legend, this was the first skywriting to appear in the heavens above men. The Earth King was in dire need of reliable messengers to carry words of hope and reassurance to children of the North who were suffering from winter cold and who feared that spring would not come.

The Four Winds responded immediately to his call. The Earth King made clear to them that their mission was to visit the children of the Far North and by a gentle stirring of the air to let them know that winter's icy grip upon their land was beginning to weaken. However, he neglected to brief them on cooperative action. Each was eager to serve well.

¹ The story of the Earth King and his messengers was used by the writer more than twenty years ago in her work with primary children. She has no recollection of the author or the publisher of the "legend" which for purposes of this column she has put into her own words. She is reasonably certain that the verse which introduces the story is in the original. For use of this and of the story itself she wishes to acknowledge her indebtedness.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The original story may have been written by Frank R. Stockton, though a search of his writings has not enabled us to find this particular story.

to gain prestige, to achieve honor in the eyes of the King. East Wind, West Wind, North Wind, South Wind—all rushed forward to carry the promise of spring. Their headlong rush, as is well known, created chaos, confusion, death and destruction. The Earth King finally cornered them and lectured them severely on the perils of pride and impetuous haste.

Once again he advertised across the heavens for messengers. Swifter than horses, fleeter than men came the swallows. They promised faithfully to perform their discreet role as harbingers of spring. No talking about the good days ahead; no false hopes were to be given to children to mislead them into rashness. Off they flew, full of fine intentions.

In due time the tiny do-gooders reached their destination. Such shock as they experienced when they saw the misery, the despair, and the pinched faces of children starved for warmth, sunshine and food! Promptly the swallows forgot caution, prudence, and obedience to the Earth King. They began to chatter quietly among themselves about the good days to come. As the twittering grew more joyous, the secret was out. Spring was coming! The children rushed to their gardens, uncovered the tender plants resting comfortably under a bed



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of leaves and snow. Suddenly without warning came an icy blast to blacken every seedling.

This betrayal of confidence shattered the Earth King's hope of finding messengers of integrity. As he was sinking into despondency, he was roused by an insistent z-z-z-z-z-z, translated freely, "We have come to serve you." He could see nothing, he could touch nothing; but the message kept coming through, "We have come to serve you." It took a long time for the King to recognize the strange voice of his new messengers, the persistent buzzing of electrons. Suddenly the Earth King realized that here were servants who "swifter than horses, fleetier than men"—would carry his message clearly and purely with no need to gain glory for themselves, no need to betray the King's words with undisciplined sentiment. So it was that in good time and with unparalleled accuracy, the Earth King spoke words of hope and reassurance to the children of the North.

A Bright New Star

Of late years the Earth King has again been concerned for the welfare of the children of men. As he considers calling once more his tireless servants, the electrons, his eye catches a bright new star beeping its way across the world. Here is a servant worthy of the Earth King's hire to bear again messages of hope and reassurance to the children of the North, and not to these only, but to the children of the whole world who are in danger from a different kind of cold—the cold of exploitation and manipulation for ends not their own. He sees a technological society imposing pressures, creating anxieties, starving children of their right to childhood happiness. He is aware that the very young today may be as hungry

for freedom to grow and learn at their own rate as were the children long ago, of the Far North for food and warmth and the promise of spring. He regrets the hasty decisions of adults who would expose young children to the strange and foreign symbols of reading, of arithmetic and of foreign languages before they have had an opportunity to experience a wholesome rhythm of living.

But what good will it do for the Earth King to send messages of hope to children in these circumstances? He cannot assure them that the cold will pass. This cold is not subject to the natural law which brings the spring back with the returning sun. To change this threatening atmosphere, the King must influence the minds and hearts of men. He looks over the earth to discover who best among them can keep this frost from deepening and who has the power to redirect the forces that are lessening the chances for children to grow freely. Slowly, carefully he chooses the recipients of his message: those teachers of the world whose thoughts are clear, whose faith is strong; and who have the courage to stand together for what they know to be true about growing and learning.

Suddenly the trackers of Courier 1B are startled to hear a new message coming through. The code for quantitative data no longer applies; clearly the words are made for a different audience:

O, Teachers of the world, do not retreat before the pressures of the day:

Believe in the right of children to enjoy their childhood

Believe that a rich and strong society grows from the diverse talents of individuals

Believe that children must understand their own problems and their own immediate life before they can reach out to understand the problems and lives of others

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Believe that children must be saved from verbalism by giving enough depth of experience and enough time to understand the meanings of which symbols are the outward and visible signs

Believe that children learn for themselves and that much of this learning emerges in exploration freely entered into and freely allowed

Believe that children need guidance from teachers who respect their uniqueness

Believe that children grow best in a climate that provides equally for support, affection, and intellectual stimulation

Believe that a child's school "... should begin in joy and end in wisdom. . . . Certain it is that the way of wisdom is the way of happiness."²

—MARTHA BROCKMAN, Associate Professor of Education, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California.

² Ruby H. Warner. *The Child and His Elementary School World*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. © 1957. p. 126.

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