

Activity 9

Fool, trickster, rogue or sage?

– the ways and words of Mullah Nasruddin

Summary

Young people read or enact a number of Mullah Nasruddin stories, and re-tell some of them using modern contexts and references. Which stories show a foolish or ignorant person, which show a trickster, which a rogue, and which a wise person? Do some show all four? Can they summarize the teachings in the stories with pithy sayings of their own devising? Instead or as well, which pithy or proverbial sayings, in a collection provided for them, do they consider most relevant to summarize each story?

Why?

The benefits that young people gain from this exercise include the following. They:

- have fun, since many or most Nasruddin stories are intended in the first instance to raise a smile or a laugh
- are provoked to wonder how and why certain fables, parables and moral tales have survived in oral traditions over many centuries
- develop knowledge and understanding of the teachings, values and wisdom of Islamic traditions, and appreciation of Islam's diversity as well as of its unity
- see the relevance of tradition to the problems and practicalities of everyday life in the modern world
- practise skills in interpreting symbolic material, including metaphors, fables, jokes and parables
- identify what is valuable in the teachings and influences of others and of the past, and make it their own
- develop attitudes of curiosity, openness and generosity towards others

- practise listening skills, skills in understanding views different from their own, and skills in reaching consensus.

Preparation

You need a collection of tales. You may also need to tell young people a bit about Mullah Nasruddin – a legendary Sufi figure who lived, some say, in central Asia in the 13th century of the Common Era. Others say he lived in Turkey at some other time, or else in Iran, or Afghanistan, or one of the Arab countries of the Middle East. There are various spellings of his name in English, including Nasreddin, and in addition to Mullah his titles include Hoca, Hodja, Afandi and Effendi. Stories about him typically show him doing or saying something which people in power find totally mad but which ordinary people find delightful.



Procedure

With stories which are mysterious and ambiguous it's often valuable to concentrate first on the story itself without bothering too much about its possible meanings. It is only after the story has become thoroughly familiar that its meanings can be unravelled. Possible activities in this respect include the following:

Sequencing

Cut the text into separate pieces, and have the young people arrange them in the right order.

Interrupting

Break into the story with questions such as 'What do you think is going to happen next?' or 'If you could speak to the characters in the story at this point, what would you say?' Make up some additional information about some of the characters. Imagine the scene vividly in your mind's eye – what can you see (colours, movements, the background) and what can you hear, what can you smell?

Cloze procedure

Have young people look at the text of a story with some of the words blanked out, and ask them to decide how the blanks should be filled in.

Choosing illustrations

Have young people select from a collection of post-cards in order to illustrate an aspect of the story.

Messages

Ask the young people to make up a pithy saying which encapsulates what the story is about, or to select a proverb which reflects an aspect of the story.

Re-writing

Re-write the story in a modern setting.

The essential question with all Mullah Nasruddin stories is about whether they show him as wise – a sage – or whether he is merely a fool, trickster or rogue. If a sage, what is his message? And why does he communicate his messages with pranks and illogical actions or remarks, rather than directly?

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 18

The Ways and Words of Mullah Nasruddin

Who do you believe?

One day, a neighbour went round to Mullah Nasruddin's compound to ask if he could borrow his donkey. Mullah Nasruddin came up with the excuse that he had already lent his donkey to his brother, who needed it to take some wheat to the local mill.

Just as Mullah Nasruddin uttered these words, his donkey started braying in the backyard. Hearing the sound, the neighbour said: 'Mullah Sahib, you said your donkey wasn't here.' Nasruddin replied: 'Who are you going to believe? Me, or the donkey?'

What do you want?

One day Nasruddin repaired the tiles on the roof of his house. While he was working on the roof, a stranger knocked on the door.

'What do you want?', Nasruddin shouted out.

'Come down, so that I can tell you.'

Nasruddin reluctantly clambered down the ladder.

'Well, what was so important?'

'Could you give me some money? I'm very poor and hungry.'

Nasruddin started to climb back up the ladder, saying 'Follow me up to the roof'.

When both Nasruddin and the beggar were up on the roof, Nasruddin said:

'The answer is no, I cannot help you'.

More idiotic than they are

Mullah Nasruddin used to stand in the street on market-days, to be pointed out as an idiot. No matter how often people offered him a large and a small coin, he always chose the smaller piece.

One day a kindly man said to him: 'Nasruddin, you should take the bigger coin. Then you will have more money and people will no longer be able to make a laughing stock of you'.

'That may be true,' said Mullah Nasruddin, 'but if I always take the larger one, people will stop offering me money to prove that I am more idiotic than they are. Then I would have no money at all'.

The fur coat and the soup

One day Nasruddin went to a banquet. As he was dressed rather shabbily, no one let him in. So he ran home, put on his best robe and fur coat and returned. Immediately, the host came over, greeted him and ushered him to the head of an elaborate banquet table. When the food was served, Nasruddin took some soup with the spoon and pushed it to his fur coat and said, 'Eat my fur coat, eat! It's obvious that you're the real guest of honor today, not me!'

Searching in the darkness

One day Mullah Nasruddin lost his ring down in the basement of his house, where it was very dark. There being no chance of his finding it in that darkness, he went out on the street and started looking for it there. Somebody passing by stopped and enquired: 'What are you looking for, Mullah Nasruddin? Have you lost something?'

'Yes, I've lost my ring down in the basement.'

'But Mullah Nasruddin, why don't you look for it down in the basement where you have lost it?' asked the man in surprise.

'Don't be silly, man! How do you expect me to find anything in that darkness!'

The recipe

One day Mullah Nasruddin went to the market and bought a fine piece of meat. On the way home he met a friend who gave him a special recipe for the meat. Mullah Nasruddin was very happy. But then, before he got home, a large crow stole the meat from Mullah Nasruddin's hands and flew off with it.

'You thief!', Mullah Nasruddin called angrily after the departing crow. 'You have stolen my meat! But you won't enjoy it; I've got the recipe!'

Lessons

Mullah Nasruddin wished to learn how to play the guitar. He went to a teacher. 'How much does it cost to learn?', he asked.

'A hundred dirhams for the first lesson and ten dirhams for each of the others.'

'That's OK,' replied Mullah Nasruddin, 'but we'll skip the first lesson.'

In your hands

One day two boys decided to play a trick on Mullah Nasruddin. With a tiny bird cupped in their hands they would ask him whether it was alive or dead. If he said it was alive they would crush it to show him he was wrong. If he said it was dead they would let it fly away and still fool him. When they found the wise old man they said, 'Mullah Nasruddin, this bird we're holding, is it alive or dead?'

Mullah Nasruddin thought for a moment and then replied: 'Ah, my young friends, that is in your hands!'

Questions

'Mullah Nasruddin, why do you always answer a question with another question?'

'Do I?'

The sermon

Once, Nasruddin was invited to deliver a *khutba* (sermon). When he got on the *minbar* (pulpit), he asked 'Do you know what I am going to say?' The audience replied 'No'. So he announced 'I have no desire to speak to people who don't even know what I will be talking about' and he left.

The people felt embarrassed and called him back again the next week. This time when he asked the same question, the people replied 'Yes'. So Nasruddin said, 'Well, since you already know what I am going to say, I won't waste any more of your time' and he left.

Now the people were really perplexed. They decided to try one more time and once again invited the Mullah to speak the following week. Once again he asked the same question: 'Do you know what I am going to say?' Now the people were prepared and so half of them answered 'Yes' while the other half replied 'No'. So Nasruddin said 'The half who know what I am going to say, tell it to the other half' and he left.

Effective

Mullah Nasruddin was throwing bits of bread all around his house. 'What are you doing?' someone asked.

'Keeping the tigers away.'

'But there are no tigers around here'.

'Exactly. Effective, isn't it?'

Insha Allah

Nasruddin had saved up to buy a new shirt. He went to a tailor's shop, full of excitement. The tailor measured him and said: 'Come back in a week, and if God wills - your shirt will be ready'.

Nasruddin contained himself for a week and then went back to the shop. 'There has been a delay. But - if God wills - your shirt will be ready tomorrow.'

The following day Nasruddin returned.

'I am sorry,' said the tailor, 'but it is not quite finished. Try tomorrow, and - if God wills - it will be ready'.

'How long will it take,' asked the exasperated Nasruddin, 'if you leave God out of it?'

The two teachers

One day, a teacher working at Selfbury School got a new job at Otherham School. During the holiday, before taking up her new post, she happened to meet Mullah Nasruddin. He mentioned, to her surprise, that he knew Otherham School. 'What's it like there?' she asked.

'Well,' said Mullah Nasruddin, 'what's it like at Selfbury School?'

'Terrible,' said the teacher. 'The head's a little Hitler, the children are savages, my colleagues were for ever stabbing me in the back and the local authority officers and advisers were a pack of lifeless grey suits. I'll be glad to get away, I can tell you. But anyway, what's it like at Otherham?'

'I'm sorry to have to tell you,' said Mullah Nasruddin, 'that you'll find the school you are going to is very similar to the school you are coming from'.

The teacher went on her way lamenting. The next stage of her career would consist of one battle and defeat after another.

During that same school holiday there was another teacher moving from Selfbury School to Otherham. She too happened to meet Mullah Nasruddin. 'What's it like at Otherham?' she asked.

'Well,' he said, 'what's it like at Selfbury?'

'Wonderful,' said the teacher, 'The head was unfailingly supportive, the children were keen to learn, my colleagues couldn't be more helpful and the local authority officers and advisers always knew what to say, and what not to say. I'm really sorry to be leaving, I can tell you. But anyway, what's it like at Otherham?'

'I'm pleased to be able to tell you,' said Mullah Nasruddin, 'that you'll find the school you are going to is very similar to the school you are coming from.'

The teacher went on her way rejoicing. The next stage of her life would consist of one fruitful encounter and exchange after another.

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