

AESOP'S FABLE: The Bundle of Sticks

A Play Written by Connie Frank



Narrator on the story The Bundle of Sticks: The day was almost done. The sun sat low in the blue Kentucky sky and gathered clouds around it while glowing in a reddish yellow. The chickens were nesting in the hen house and the cows were mooing in the barn munching on hay and quieting down for the evening. A tall, bearded man with rough hands and blue jean overalls locked up the barn, strowed past the hen house and walked toward the big white farmhouse. As he stepped up onto the steps of the front porch, he could hear angry voices within. The man sighed and shrugged his shoulders. It had been this way since his wife had died. It had been almost a century since his forefathers had fought in the American Revolutionary War, and yet here were his three sons fighting a personal war that he could not stop. He was suffering and tired of it. It would be a miracle if he could get these boys to stop fighting each other.

Characters:

Narrator:

Johann the Eldest:

Carl the Youngest:

Franz the Middle:

Father:

Script:

Narrator:	The farmer is a strong man, but he has seen the winds of war stirring up. His sons are fighting each other over which side they would join if they were to go to war. It is the year They live in a border state key importance in the American Civil War. It officially declared its neutrality at the beginning of the war, but after a failed attempt by Confederate General Leonidas Polk to take the state of Kentucky for the Confederacy, the legislature petitioned the Union Army for assistance. Kentucky was ow a Union state, but they have friends who are for the Confederacy. The farmer's sons were forever quarreling among themselves about the state of the country, the pending war, and what would happen to their families when the war ravaged the land. The quarreling had been much more violent than usual and each of the Sons was moping in a surly manner. No words he could say did the least good, so he cast about in his mind for some very striking examples that should make them see that discord would lead them to misfortune.
Johann the Eldest:	I cannot condone your actions. What were you thinking?
Carl the Youngest:	(Crossing his arms in an angry gesture): I thought I was doing the right thing.
Johann the Eldest:	You never do the right thing You are always in the way, stopping us from getting the work done.
Carl the Youngest:	It is not fair! I have just as much right to make decisions on this farm as you do. If I decided to feed the chickens hay and the cows seed, what would it matter to you?
Franz the Middle:	I think you need to stop right now, for Father's sake.
Carl the Youngest:	No! Father expects us to be brave and face up to bullies. Johann, you are a bully!
Johann the Eldest:	Well, you are a cad! Stay out of my business
Franz the Middle:	(Hearing a board creak outside) Father is here! Settle down and stop fighting! You know it upsets Father.
Carl the Youngest:	You cannot join the Union Army. We are a family of Quakers and do not believe in wars.
Narrator:	Carl's voice trailed off as the doorknob turned and Father stepped into the house. The man slowly walked on the wooden floor over to the fireplace in silence and warmed his hands next to the fire. He sighed as he watched his sons move into chairs opposite each other in the living area. After several minutes, Father turned to his sons and looked into the eyes of each one. He demanded respect and got it.

Father:	(Turning to look at Johann): Son, are you thinking of joining the Union Army?
Narrator:	(The steady gaze of his father made Johann squirm, but then he sat up straight and looked directly at his father).
Johann the Eldest:	Yes, Father, I am.
Father:	You know we are conscientious objectors. We do not armies and get ourselves in fights.
Johann the Eldest:	(Clearing his throat): I do have an intent in joining the Union army. Yes, Sir.
Father:	Yes, as you are the eldest, you will receive the bulk of my estate. Your brothers will follow you wherever you go and joining the Union army goes against our Quaker upbringing.
Carl the Youngest:	(Standing up in anger) I told him that! I told him he could not join the army!
Franz the Middle Son:	Old Ephraim was out in the streets yelling to the crowds just the other day professing that he would not stand still and let the Union take our lands and our crops. He wants to pull away from our country, and his son, Jack, is saying the same.
Narrator:	Father sat down heavily and looked back at Johann sternly.
Father:	Yes, our friends are deluded. They are bending toward being traitors to our great country. The penalty for treason in America is death.
Narrator:	Until this, his sons were squirming while talking, but when Father said this, the three sons looked at him.
Johann the Eldest:	The harsh reality is that they will probably be hung or shot for treason. (He leaned forward in his chair.) Our country is seeking moderated trying to engage the men in the family. I want to protect our country and keep it safe.
Father:	(Staring at Johann): Then what? Who will protect you from the attacks you will receive from our neighbors who are Confederate followers? Will they destroy everything that I have worked so hard to obtain here in our new country?
Narrator:	The room grew quiet once again. All eyes were on Johann, the oldest. Johann had always been the quiet, sensible one, the next leader in the family, the one that Father had depended on to do the right thing for their investments.
Franz the Middle:	Father, I could take over the inheritance. I could marry and secure a safe marriage with a wealthy family. I have had my eyes on Isabella Pinkney. Sir Pinkney is a very well-known man here in this area, and his influence is felt everywhere.
Narrator:	As all eyes turned to Franz, then to Father, Carl spoke up.
Carl the Youngest:	(Standing up): As the youngest son in the family, I will receive nothing from you but a small fortune, and I know this. Everything is inherited by the oldest soon and it has been this way in our country since the beginning of time, when our ancestors lived in Germany. I cannot in good conscience defend Franz's offer, yet I cannot defend Johann's decision to join the Union army. Johann could bring down the entire family by doing this.
Narrator:	Father looked from one face to the next. Johann was furious. His anger was raking his body. Franz appeared to be calm, almost expecting his father to bend to his logical decision. Carl, on the other hand, appeared angry that the other two brothers would be willing to destroy their family's standing in the community for their own selfish desires.
Father:	It is obvious that all of you have concerns. Each one of you appears to be quite selfish in your quest to do what you want, you want what you desire now but not what is best for you. Johann, you want to join an army. Franz, you are ambitious and jealous of your oldest brother. Carl, you are angry that your lot in life is to be the youngest son. I understand what has happened and how you feel about all of this, but we must find a compromise. Our family cannot survive this way. Carl, bring me that bundle of sticks you see at the fireplace.

Narrator:	Carl walked over to the fireplace and picked up the bundle of sticks, bringing the bundle to his seated father, Carl was sullen and yet, as the youngest, he had certain duties to fulfill for his father.
Franz the Middle:	We watched you bring the bundle of sticks, but I thought it was too small to be firewood.
Father:	I have bundled these sticks together for a reason.
Narrator:	Handing the bundle to Johann, as the oldest, and asked him to break the sticks in the bundle. Johann was a very strong man. Franz and Carl were confident that Johann would break the sticks. Impatiently, they waited for Johann to do it. But no matter how Johann tried to break them, the sticks still stayed firm.
Johann the Eldest:	(Looking at his father and shaking his head angrily): Father, I cannot break them. I cannot believe it!
Narrator:	The farmer looked at his first son and nodded without emotion. He then turned to Franz, who was the second son.
Father:	(Handing the bundle of sticks to his second son) Franz, it is your turn. I want you to break the sticks.
Franz the Middle:	Father, is this some kind of trick? Are you trying to find the one who will inherit everything we own?
Narrator:	All three sons looked at each other. Johann was shocked. He had assumed that, as the oldest, his father would follow the traditional way to passing down the inheritance. Franz began trying to break the sticks. He put his foot on top of the middle of the bundle and bent the sticks upward. Sweat began to drip from his face. But trying with all his might, Franz could not break the sticks, and Johann breathed a sigh of relief. The farmer looked at each of his sons sadly. His wife, Sarah, had passed on several years earlier, and he was lonely. The farmer had thought of marrying again, but he could not do that to his lovely wife who had been everything to him. His sons would have to carry on his legacy. He spoke no words to comfort them. The farmer just turned to his last son, Carl, handing him the bundle of sticks.
Carl the Youngest:	(confidently): I've got this. I can easily break the sticks. Father, watch me prove that I am more worthy than my brothers.
Narrator:	Carl put a tremendous amount of pressure on the sticks. He was determined to outdo his older brothers and prove himself to be the better man. But as hard as he tried, Carl could bend but not break the sticks. All eyes in the room turned to the father.
Father:	(Reaching for the bundle of sticks from his son, Carl): I shall now untie the bundle.
Narrator:	The Father then untied the bundle and gave the sticks to his sons to break one by one. This they did very easily, then looked up at their father.
Father:	My sons, do you not see how certain it is that if you agree with each other and help each other, it will be impossible for your enemies to injure you?
Narrator:	The farmer could see that his sons' eyes were opening, and all were contemplating his words.
Father:	But if you are divided among yourselves, you will be no stronger than a single stick in that bundle.

Narrator:	The next few days were difficult for the family. Everyone was thinking about their discussion, as well as the bundle of sticks and their love for their father. The house had grown incredibly silent, and the father worked side by side with his sons on the farm. Everyone was polite and worked hard to get along. After three days of this, the farmer asked his sons to meet with him at the end of the day's work. Walking up to the house, the farmer listened carefully. There were no sounds coming from the house. In fact, there had been no fighting or anger in the old farmhouse. I had high hopes for this meeting. As much as the farm meant to him, his sons were so much like his beloved wife, and he could feel her presence in the house when he entered through the door. The smell of cooking beef over the fire made his belly growl.
Father:	(Walking slowly over to his favorite rocking chair): The food smells wonderful!
Narrator:	Looking at each other, the three sons smiled at their father.
Johann the Eldest:	We thought it would be nice to have a good meal tonight.
Franz, the Middle:	I helped him and lit the fire.
Carl the Youngest:	I set the table.
Narrator:	The father was astonished. They had united to work together to make a nice dinner for all of them. The father smiled. He was impressed with how well his three sons had worked together. They had learned to cooperate with each other. As they sat down at the dinner table, Johann served the beef. Franz served the vegetables, and Carl poured the apple cider.
Father:	This looks delicious. Thank you!
Narrator:	After dinner the three sons and their father went to the living room to sit and relax, their bellies full. The fire made the room feel cozy, and the farmer was comforted by the peace that fell over him.
Johann the Eldest:	(Clearing his throat) Father, I would like to speak first on the bundle of sticks.
Father:	(Looking over at his eldest son): Of course, Johann.
Johann the Eldest:	(Clearing his throat again). Father, I would like to apologize. I have been speaking my mind a lot in the past months, and I have realized that the bundle of sticks gave me insight into how important my family is to me. When Mother died, it broke my heart, and I realize it broke the hearts of our entire family. I have been so angry since she died that I thought if I went into the army, I would find myself. I would find out who I am and what I need to be as the future leader and oldest in this family.
Narrator:	Franz and Carl nodded. It was obvious to the farmer that his sons had previously discussed the situation and had come to a decision without him. At first, the farmer was hurt, then he realized that his three sons had united. By some miracle, the experience with the bundle of sticks had inspired his sons. The farmer nodded.
Johann the Eldest:	We have been talking. I have agreed to wait a few years before I enter the Union army. If the war lasts longer than two years, I will join the Union army. By that time, Franz as the second son will be old enough to step in and take my place if anything happens to me. Father, I feel very strongly that I should be there, but I will wait.
Franz, the Middle:	I thought about my ambitions, and I understand the responsibility that Johann has put on me. I promise to make sure that the family investments will be safe with me.
Carl the Youngest:	Father, I know that the third son always leaves home with some financial backing to start a business, but my brothers have asked me to stay here. They are going to help me create a mercantile business that will help me utilize my talents and contribute our investments. I will be very happy to be a useful contributor to the family.
Franz, the Middle:	When Johann returns, I will begin a mercantile business too. I plan to use my talents to help the family succeed. This will make me very happy and contribute to the family.

Johann the Eldest:	(Nodding at his brothers): We are doing as you asked. We are uniting for the sake of our family. And Father, we are all grateful to you for helping us see that we need each other. Our dreams can come true if we work together.
Father:	(Hugging his three sons): I am so proud of you! I had wondered why it was so quiet here in the house. You have made me so happy. Johann, I know how important it is for you to enter the Union army. Franz and Carl, I know how important it is for you to be successful and to be happy. You have made me so happy, my sons. Your Mother would be so proud of you!
Narrator:	The day had ended with a very happy note, but the War Between the States lasted more than two years, so Johann did join the Union army and go to war. Johann wrote many letters home to his father and to his two brothers, but war is ugly. The war ended in Spring of 1865. General Robert E. Lee surrendered the last major Confederate army to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865. Johann had lost weight and was ill, but he did come home to find his father and his brothers grateful for his return. Both Franz and Carl had been successful financially, so all was well, and in time, Johann got his health back.
Narrator:	The Civil War was a war between the Union (Northern US States) and the Confederacy (Southern US States) lasting from 1861-Spring of 1865. Tensions between states and the federal government began to rise, the new government struggled with how exactly to divide powers, and social tensions rose as widespread support for slavery was waning. All these tensions came to a head when Abraham Lincoln, a northerner, was elected president and began taking actions that the south saw as detrimental both economically and socially. After the Southern states' inevitable secession, the war officially started with the Battle of Fort Sumter on April 12th, 1861. The father is right to insist that his sons unite. "If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand".
The moral of the story is:	
<i>"In unity is strength"</i>	