

Theme Three: Great Teachers Long Ago



Theme in Life

We all have big ideas that guide our choices in life.

Theme in Art

Art can help us think about what's important in our lives.

Introduction to the Theme

Life is full of many choices. We each need to figure out how we are going to balance our choices to make a worthwhile, happy life. People have always listened to and watched people they respected and admired in order to learn from them. School teachers, parents, and others set out to teach us. Sometimes we learn from people who do not choose to be teachers, like singers, writers, actors, athletes, and politicians. They may become our “teachers” just because we know a lot about them from television, radio, magazines, or the Internet. We can also learn from people who are no longer alive. Maybe you have heard stories about a clever grandmother or a brave firefighter.

Some of the greatest teachers of all time died long ago, but their teachings are still alive in books about them and in artworks which show us what they thought was important.

Key Inquiry Questions

Questions about Artworks:

SUBJECT MATTER: What people, places, or things does the artwork show?

BALANCE: How are the parts of the artwork balanced against each other?

Question about Artworks in Context:

CULTURAL CONTEXT: What did people think, believe, and do in the culture in which the artwork was made?

Key Cultures

Classical Greek

Sung Dynasty Chinese



GARAMA, THE TEACHER

Garama saw Dassy, nervous and confused, standing in the doorway. Quietly she motioned for the girl to come in and asked, “What path has brought you to my door, young one?”

Dassy tugged at her tunic, shuffled her feet, got up her nerve, and began. “I’m so confused! When I was a child, I played with my friends and pretended to be grown up. I helped my mother and father and learned many things from the people in the village. But soon I will be grown up myself and I don’t know what sort of work I want to do. Mother says learning about food is every woman’s most important job. I’ve helped her in her garden as long as I can remember. She says I should ask Lotta to take me on her next trip so that I can learn all about the wild things that grow in the mountain meadows. I want to please my mother, but I also want to do something that makes me happy. Can you help me?”

Garama invited Dassy to sit on the low stool beside her own and then leaned forward and drew a big circle on the dirt floor at their feet. She set a beautiful wooden box beside the circle and opened the lid. Inside were many little clay animals, each wrapped in a piece of soft cloth. She searched among her little clay animals and found a rabbit, like so many Dassy had seen in her mother’s garden. Garama placed the figure in the circle and then said, “Go on. Tell me more about your confusion,” and Dassy did.

“Father has ideas for me too. He says that if I learn how to work with leather I can make useful and beautiful things that everyone in the village will want. Then I will always have something to trade for all the things I need and I’ll never be hungry. I have watched him in his workshop as he tans the hides and cuts them to make clothes, bags, and belts. If I ask Lasso to teach me how he colors hides and decorates them with beads, bone, and feathers, then maybe I can learn to be a leather worker like him.”

Garama turned back to her animals and found a figure of a tiny bird. Dassy recognized the bird as the builder of intricate nests she had seen in the forest. Garama placed the bird across from the rabbit in the circle and said, “Go on,” and Dassy did.

Dassy told Garama about her girlfriend, Nana, who loved to dance, and Garama delicately placed a deer in the circle near the rabbit and the bird. After Dassy described how much she enjoyed hunting with her brother, Garama pulled a fox from her collection and slid it out to join the rabbit, bird, and deer. By the time Dassy was finished, the circle was crowded with animals. A wildcat, a beaver, an ant, and a hawk found their places among the other animals in the circle. Dassy leaned against the wall and said in a frustrated voice, “I just can’t figure it out, so I’ve come to you to teach me which way is best.”



Garama seemed to ignore Dassy’s request, as she studied her tiny animals

moving first one and then another into the center of the circle. Finally she spoke, “Tell me, Dassy, which is the best of all the animals?”

“That all depends,” answered Dassy, “the fox is the cleverest; the deer the most graceful; the beaver is the hardest worker.”

“Oh,” said Garama, “but the beaver is also awkward; the deer is also stupid; and the fox is also lazy? Right?”

“That’s not fair,” Dassy replied. “You should judge each animal by what it does best, not by what it does worst.”

“Ah, I see,” answered Garama. “Is the cub fox as clever as his father?”

“No,” answered Dassy.

“Does the young beaver work as hard as her mother?”

“No,” answered Dassy.

“Is the baby deer graceful just after it is born?”

“No,” answered Dassy again.

Garama explained that it takes time and practice to do things well. Garama looked up at Dassy and asked, “Tell me, Dassy, what do you do well?”

“I think I’m a pretty good dancer,” answered Dassy.

“Fine. Go to your friend, Nana. She has worked hard learning to dance. Ask her to find out who is the best dancer in the village. Ask that dancer to teach you how to dance even better. When you have worked to improve for one month, you and Nana come to see me, and we shall talk again.”

After Dassy left, Garama carefully rewrapped her tiny animals. They reminded her of her aunt, the potter, who had given them to her to play with when she was a little girl. She placed the wrapped animals back in their carved wooden box. The box always reminded Garama of the day her father gave it to her and told her that now she was grown up and could choose her own way in the world. Her father had traded many animal skins for the box. The wood worker who made the box was an excellent craftsman and people came from far and wide to trade for his wood work.

In the following weeks, Dassy did as she was told. She and Nana visited with the best dancers they could find and practiced dancing every day. After a month, she returned with her friend to Garama’s house. When Garama saw Dassy and Nana at her door she welcomed them both and asked them to dance.

After several dances, Garama clapped her hands and said, “How well you two dance!”





They came back into the little house and sat down. Garama smoothed a space on the floor between them, drew a circle, and placed her clay deer in the center. “My dear Dassy,” she asked, “have you learned to be graceful like the deer?”

Dassy looked at Nana and answered slowly, “Well yes, I have learned to move more gracefully, but Nana is still much better than I, and there is a great deal I could learn from the village dancers. It would take years to learn it all and I’m still not sure I could ever dance as well as Nana,”

“Do you enjoy dancing?” Garama asked.

“Oh yes!” answered Dassy, “very much!” “Then you may always choose the ways of the deer, even if you are not the best.”

“I’m glad to know that I do not have to be the best to go on enjoying dancing, but I’m still not sure what work is best for me to do.”

Garama looked at all the animals in her box. Gently unwrapping a tiny fox, she said, “Next you will follow the path of the fox.”

For the next month, Dassy followed her brother when he went hunting and returned to Garama to tell of what she’d learned. Month after month, Dassy tried her hand at gardening, pottery, cooking, working in the storage house, and other village activities. Each time she talked to her teacher, Garama added another animal to her circle. Some, like the rabbit, she placed near the center, for Dassy learned that she had a natural ability with plants and enjoyed working in the soil under the warm sun. Others, like the tiny ant, Garama moved to the edge of the circle, for Dassy had tried to learn from the man who keeps records of the food, cloth, and other things stored in the village storage house, but keeping records had not been easy for her.

After many visits, Garama asked, “Is there something you wish you could do well, but you’re afraid you can’t? You have not tried leather working yet. Are you afraid you can’t do it well?”

By now Dassy was comfortable with Garama and answered honestly, “I wish I could work with leather, but everything I’ve ever made is ugly.”

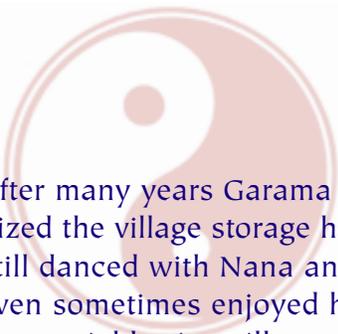
“All right,” said Garama, “this time you will try something you think you cannot do well. Work with your father and with Lasso. Work twice as much as you did dancing and gardening, and return in a month with a piece of leather work.”

Dassy did as she was told. With the hardworking, little nest-building bird sitting in the center of the circle, Garama turned Dassy’s belt in her hand. She noticed the interesting beaded pattern as well as the awkwardly finished edges. “Is this a good belt, Dassy?” she asked.

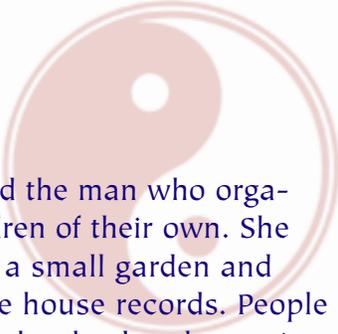
“No, not really. I’m still having trouble with my edges, but I like the bead work. I think it’s almost pretty. I thought I was no good with leather. I have found that with practice

I get better and better with each piece. I know I've worked more with leather than with anything else, and I know I'm still not very good, but, please, can't I try again for another month? It may take me longer, but one day, I may make truly beautiful things."

"Yes, you may and you should," Garama answered, "Sometimes it is not the easiest work, but the hardest which gives the greatest reward. But remember one thing. Your life is like the world of animals. It has many parts. There are many rabbits and birds and not so many foxes and hawks. Yet each animal has its place in the balance of nature. If there were too many hawks and foxes, they would kill off all the smaller animals. But if there were too many rabbits and birds, there would not be enough plants and insects for them to eat and many would die. Nature needs more of some things than of others and so does your life. As you make choices you create balance in your life."



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After many years Garama died. By that time Dassy had married the man who organized the village storage house and they had three young children of their own. She still danced with Nana and the others of the village. She kept a small garden and even sometimes enjoyed helping her husband with his storage house records. People from neighboring villages saw the beautiful clothing and belts her husband wore in the storage house and came to Dassy's home to buy her leather work. Dassy sold everything she could make.

When strangers came, many wanted to buy the leather bag that always hung on Dassy's chair. It was a beautiful bag decorated with a fascinating mixture of birds, deer, wildcats, beavers, foxes, rabbits, and other animals. But Dassy would never sell. Whenever a child was excited or worried about making a choice, Dassy laid her bag on the table before the child and taught the lessons she had learned from her teacher, Garama. She pointed to each animal in turn as she told how each has its own abilities and that each person's life is like nature, a fascinating balance of many parts. As she thought of the many choices she continued to make in her own life, she remembered one of Garama's lessons, "You create the balance of your life with the choices you make."



Activities

Introduction

Introduce students to the Theme Title, the Theme in Life, the Theme in Art, and the Key Inquiry Questions to help focus their attention as you (or they) read the story.

Story

Present the Story:

- Read or ask students to read *Garama the Teacher*.

Discussion of Theme and Key Questions

Discussion of the Story's Theme:

Discuss how the story relates to the theme.

- What choice was Dassy struggling with, that brought her to Garama for advice?
- What lesson did Dassy learn from Garama?
- Besides Garama, who were Dassy's other teachers?
- How did Dassy pass on Garama's lesson about balance after Garama's death?

Students' Experience with the Theme:

Help students identify how the theme relates to their own lives.

- What important choices do you think about?
- What choices will you face in the future?
- Who can you look to as models and teachers?
- What lessons have you learned to guide your choices (proverbs, mottos, wise sayings)?

Inquiry into the Story:

Use the key questions to further analyze the story.

- What animals did Garama and Dassy use to teach their lessons?
- How do you imagine that Garama balanced the animals against each other in her circle? Can you think of more than one way they could be balanced?
- How do you imagine that the animals on Dassy's leather bag were balanced?

Inquiry into Students' Experience:

Use the key questions to help students make connections to their own experiences.

- Can you think of other teaching stories (fables or parables) that have involved animals? Why do you suppose particular animals were selected for particular stories?
- Have you ever arranged things to balance how they look (your desk, a table

setting, or the clothes you wear)?

- Can you describe something that is balanced bilaterally (both sides are mirror images of each other)?
- Can you describe something that is balanced radially (things repeat around and across a circle from a central point)?
- Can you describe something with asymmetrical balance (something in one area is balanced by something quite different in another area)?

Transfer to Diverse Cultures



The following instructions are written for students who are able to work independently. If you teach younger students, the instructions offer helpful guidelines as you gather and present information in order to optimize transfer potential for your students. Depending on the grade level of your students and their access to appropriate library and Internet sources, you can choose to build transfer across cultures either 1) through student investigation or 2) through your own investigations and presentations to students.

Inquiry about Artworks:

- Assign a team of students to locate reproductions of artworks (sculptures, temples, and decorated ceramic vessels) made in Classical Greece. Have them display the reproductions, point out subject matter details, and explain how the parts in the artwork are balanced to their classmates. Assign other teams to similarly investigate landscape paintings from Sung Dynasty China.

Inquiry about Artworks in Context:

- Assign a team of students to research ancient Classic Greek culture. Ask them to focus specifically on the myths and beliefs that help explain the relationship between people and nature and on big ideas in Greek philosophy. Ask them to share their findings and, when possible, explain how those findings relate to the art made in Classical Greece. Assign other teams to similarly investigate the culture and beliefs of Sung Dynasty China, focusing especially on the beliefs of Daoism and how the Sung Dynasty paintings express Daoist ideas about people and nature.

Transfer to Studio



Review the unit themes and key questions to help students transfer what they have learned to their own art making.

Thematic artwork:

- Challenge students to relate the theme to their own experiences or an imaginary experience to develop an idea for their own artwork. For example, students can experiment with balance by constructing mobiles with hanging items that symbolize important parts of their lives.



They can cut out magazine images illustrating important aspects of their lives and create a collage that illustrates a principle of balance (bilateral, radial, and asymmetrical).

Story Illustration:

- Since *Garama the Teacher* is not illustrated, you might consider asking students to use their imaginations to make their own illustrations, focusing on Garama's animals in their box or balanced in a circle, scenes of Dassy trying different choices of work and enjoyment, or Dassy's decorated leather bag.

Exhibition:

- Display student artwork with Unit Information (Theme Title, Theme in Life, Theme in Art, and Key Questions), sample student reports, and reproductions of artworks from diverse cultures. If your students make story illustrations, display a copy of *Garama the Teacher*.

Interdisciplinary Transfer



Science:

- How gravity, weight, and mass affect balance

Literature:

- Aesop's fables, Bible parables, traditional Native American stories

World Religions:

- Comparison of basic beliefs of world religions (Daoism, Greek mythology, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, animism, and other indigenous religions or belief systems)

Government:

- Basic beliefs in political history (Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, motto of the French Revolution, Communist Manifesto, Mao Tse Tung's Little Red Book, Nelson Mandela's teachings, or Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech)