



# Human Nature Has Not Changed

*The collection of fables attributed to Aesop, but having other numerous origins, find application in many of today's working environments. The old adage "some things never change" holds true.*

Fables have long been used to reflect the truths around us. Kenneth Grahame suggests fables have their "roots in the fixed and firm refusal of the community from its very beginning, to allow any of its members to go about calling any other one a fool or a rough, 'of his own mere notion'" [1]. Considering the popularity of Dilbert, for better or worse this attribute is not characteristic of present culture. However, these same fables provide us with vivid metaphors of the things we experience.

Little about Aesop's history is known. He was a slave, was eventually given his freedom, and may have spent time in the court of King Croesus (500-600 B.C.). It seems probable Aesop was not the author of all the fables commonly attributed to him. He most likely told versions of stories already in existence and may have added his own. History indicates the name Aesop became synonymous with the allegorical stories found in many cultures and societies.

Following are several Aesopian fables. In each, there are applications to software engineering, process improvement, project management and other environments. The more frequently we see and hear the messages, the more we are able to remember and apply the messages.

## The Fox and the Hare

One day a hound, out hunting by himself, flushed a hare from a thicket and gave chase. The frightened hare gave the dog a long run and escaped. As the disappointed hound turned back toward home, a passing goat herd jeered, "You are a fine hunter! Are you not you ashamed to let a little hare one-tenth your size give you the best of it?"

"You forget," replied the hound, "that I was only running for my supper, but the hare was running for his life!"

**Application:** Organizational and personal survival is the greatest motivator. We must avoid developing a crisis environment. However, clearly communicating the relationship between individual actions and survival is a powerful tool.

## The Mice in Council

For many years the mice had lived in constant dread of their enemy, the cat. They decided to call a meeting to determine the best way to handle the situation. Many plans were discussed and rejected.

At last a young mouse got up.

"I propose," said he, looking very important, "that a bell be hung around the cat's neck. Whenever the cat approaches, we always shall have notice, and so be able to escape."

The young mouse sat down amidst tremendous applause. The suggestion was put to a motion and passed almost unanimously.

Just then an old mouse, who had sat silently all the while, rose to his feet. "My friends, it takes a young mouse to think of a plan so ingenious and yet so simple. With a bell about the cat's neck to warn us we shall all be safe. I have but one ques-

tion to put to the supporters of the plan—which one of you is going to bell the cat?"

**Application:** Planning is one thing, execution is another. Plans must be based on realistic expectations.

## The Birds, the Beasts, and the Bat

Once upon a time, war broke out between the birds and the beasts of the earth. For a long while the issue of the battle was uncertain. The bat, taking advantage of the fact that he had certain characteristics of both, kept aloof and remained neutral.

The birds said, "Come with us." But he shook his head and said, "I am a beast." Later some of the beasts of the earth approached him and asked him to join their side. He refused. "I am a bird," said he.

In due course, peace was concluded between the embattled birds and beasts. The bat flew blithely up to the birds to join them in their rejoicing. But the birds gave him the cold shoulder and flew away. The beasts did the same. Condemned by both sides and acknowledged by neither, the unhappy bat skulked away to live in holes and corners, never caring to show his face except in the dusk of twilight.

**Application:** Playing both sides against the middle often leaves you with nothing. A lack of commitment is a primary cause of failure. Failing to commit is committing to fail.

## The Three Tradesmen

The enemy stood outside the walls of a certain city. As the soldiers brought up their siege weapons and arranged their forces for the attack, the desperate defenders within held a council of war to determine the best means of holding the city.

A bricklayer arose,

"Sirs," said he, "it is my opinion that the best material for the purpose is brick." Then he sat down.

A carpenter asked to be recognized.

"I beg to differ with the bricklayer. The material that best serves our desperate needs is wood. Let timber be our defense!"

Then the tanner jumped to his feet.

"Citizens," he cried, "when you all have had your say, I wish to remind you that there is nothing in the world like leather!"

**Application:** Sometimes we are so in love with our way of doing things, we can not see beyond our noses.

## The Fisherman Piping

There once was a fisherman who enjoyed playing the bagpipes as much as he did fishing. He sat down on the riverbank and played a merry tune, hoping that the fish would be attracted and jump ashore.

When nothing happened, he took a casting net, threw it into the water, and soon drew it forth filled with fish. As the fish danced and flopped about in the net, the fisherman shook his head.

"Since you would not dance when I piped, I will have none of your dancing now."

**Application:** Doing the right thing at the right time is a great art. Someone has said knowledge is knowing what to say. Wisdom is knowing when to say it.

## So What?

These parables show that in the history of mankind, human nature has not changed much. The issues, problems, and challenges people have historically confronted are still our nemeses today. However, if we are mindful of the pitfalls that are capable of ensnaring us, we may better avoid them.

## References

1. *Fables from Aesop*, Ennis Rees, Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y., 1966.
2. *Aesop's Fables*, Grosset and Dunlap, New York, N.Y., 1963.

## About the Author



**Jeremiah Smedra** is a Proposal Manager with General Electric Energy Services. He manages the bid process for field service supplied to power providers in the western United States. As a former consultant with the Software Technology Support Center, he provided support to Department of Defense organizations pursuing process improvement and project management education. Smedra has a bachelor's degree in Marine engineering systems from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, N.Y. He is a registered EIT and a Project Management Institute-certified Project Management Professional.

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# Coming Events

March 6-8

*13th Conference on Software Engineering Education and Training*

<http://www.se.cs.ttu.edu/CSEET2000>



March 6-10

*Software Management/Applications of Software Measurement*

<http://www.sqe.com/smasm/2000/>



March 13-17

*6th International Conference on Practical Software Techniques*

<http://www.softdim.com>

March 20-22

*5th Annual Association for Configuration & Data Management Technical Conference*

<http://www.acdm.org>

March 20-23

*12th Software Engineering Process Group Conference*

<http://www.sei.cmu.edu/products/events/sep/>



April 11-14

*Infosecurity 2000*

<http://www.infosec.co.uk/page.cfm>

April 15-18

*ACM International Conference on Management of Data*

<http://www.seas.smu.edu/sigmod2000>

April 18-20

*FOSE: Leading-Edge Technology for Leaders in Government*



<http://www.fedimaging.com/conferences>

April 24-28

*SEA 2000*

E-mail for information: [johnl@sea-act.com.au](mailto:johnl@sea-act.com.au)

**See p. 30 for information on STC 2000, April 30-May 5**

## Quote Marks

"The real question is not whether machines think but whether men do. The mystery which surrounds a thinking machine already surrounds a thinking man."  
— B.F. Skinner, *Contingencies of Reinforcement*

"Technology makes it possible to gain control over everything, except over technology."  
— John Tudor

"Of all software products, the highest percentage of reuse is in the proposal."  
— Samuel T. Redwine Jr.

"Man is a game-playing animal and a computer is another way to play games."  
— Dilbert cartoonist Scott Adams

"A computer terminal is not some clunky old television with a typewriter in front of it. It is an interface where the mind and body can connect with the universe and move bits of it about."  
— author Douglas Adams, *Mostly Harmless*

"Software. These programs give instruction to the CPU, which processes billions of tiny facts called bytes, and within a fraction of a second send you an error message that requires you to call the customer-support hot line and be placed on hold for approximately the life span of a caribou."  
— Dave Barry, "Get With the Program," *Reader's Digest*