

Dragons and Giants

A story from *Frog and Toad Together*

by Arnold Lobel

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Story summary

This is an amusing and thought-provoking story in which Frog and Toad are impressed by brave characters in a book of fairy tales. Frog says: 'They fight dragons and giants and they are never afraid.'

Inspired by Frog's definition, which Toad does not question, they go outside to find a suitable challenge that will test their bravery. They decide to climb a mountain. It is not easy going and they encounter threats and dangers. They jump away from a predatory snake, an avalanche and a hawk. Each time, they shake or tremble but shout that they are 'not afraid!' They reached the top of the mountain and then run all the way down to Toad's house. Frog jumped into the closet and Toad into bed, where they stayed 'for a long time feeling very brave together'.

Preparation: questions and considerations

Children might be drawn to the concept of bravery after reading the story so I try to prepare my thoughts on this concept. I try to think of questions and related concepts that might flow from the idea of bravery as Toad and Frog see it -- as something admirable. I would not plan to give the questions to pupils for them to answer but, in considering the questions myself, I would be preparing to respond to the ideas that pupils might raise in the discussion around their questions.

Bravery fear and challenge

One consideration seems to be the relationship between bravery and fear. Should we admire people who are 'never afraid'? Some people might argue that fearlessness (never being afraid) is the mark of a maniac. An alternative notion of bravery might be something like: 'conquering fear and risking harm to oneself in order to achieve a goal?' By this definition, would Frog and Toad be brave?

Worthy challenges

- Why would people want to fight dragons and giants?
- Are there *good reasons* to admire, as Frog and Toad do, people who fight dragons and giants?

These questions lead on to considerations about whether bravery is a virtue and whether the overcoming of fear is a sufficient criterion for bravery. Frog and Toad don't mention why the people in the book fight dragons and giants. Perhaps the dragons and giants are preying on 'innocent people'. Are the brave ones those who try to 'do the right thing' and control their fear so they are not incapacitated by it? Are they brave because they care about others and they do something? Is controlling one's fear admirable then (a virtue) only when people try to *do the right thing* in the face of dangers and risks.

Do we want to limit the notion of bravery only to this virtuous sense of bravery? Would a person who acts, not in order to do the right thing but only to prove their bravery, really be brave? Should we accept that people can be brave but not for good and sensible ends? If so, do we need to use other words like 'admirable bravery' or 'virtuous bravery' to register our approval of certain kinds of brave acts. Aristotle, writing about courage in the 'The Ethics' (Book 3) puts forward the view that:

'The man who faces and fears (or similarly feels confident about) the right things for the right reason and in the right way at the right time is courageous (for the courageous man acts duly, and as principle directs) ... thus it is for a right and noble motive that the courageous man faces the danger and performs actions appropriate to his courage.'

So when Frog and Toad test their bravery by climbing the mountain, are they trying to be brave for the right reasons -- are they putting themselves in danger wisely? We might answer 'no'. On the other hand, Frog and Toad may be worried that they do not have 'the right stuff' to do the right thing at the right time, in the right way, if the right situation arose. Perhaps they want to test or even train themselves -- to develop their confidence and determination to achieve goals. Is that silly or admirable? Can people be trained, or train themselves, to be brave?

Question menus

These questions were useful for my own thinking but also could be put to children (in appropriate language) during the course of a whole-group discussion. You could also select some for children to discuss in small groups.

Bravery

1. Is bravery important and common?
2. What are different ways of being brave?

Fear and challenge

1. Were Frog's criteria for judging the bravery of people in the book a good one? ('they fight dragons and giants and they are never afraid')
2. Let's substitute 'face challenges' for 'fight dragons and giants' in Frog's criteria of people who are brave, *ie*, 'they face challenges and are never afraid.' Were Frog and Toad brave according to this new definition?
3. Were Frog and Toad brave according to the any part of this new definition?
4. If you are never afraid (of anything), are you a brave person or a maniac?
5. Is it possible to be both brave and afraid?

Worthy challenges and virtue

1. Should only those people who overcome fear to achieve *worthy goals* be called brave?
2. Can an act be brave but not virtuous or virtuous but not brave?
3. Should you be called brave if you take risks and overcome fears for unworthy or trivial goals?
4. Is the goal Frog and Toad set themselves a worthy one?

Once I have pondered these kinds of questions myself, I feel better prepared to respond to a range of children's questions about bravery but also to their possible comments about Frog and Toad being 'stupid' or not brave because they were afraid.

A 'comparisons' concept stretcher

Read the concept-stretcher key document about exploring concepts through comparisons and try out the following activity. Ask pupils, in small groups to discuss what is similar and different about the following terms:

- Bravery and fearlessness
- Bravery and confidence
- Bravery and courage
- Bravery and determination
- Bravery and self control
- Bravery and strength

An 'opinions' concept stretcher

Read the concept-stretcher key document about exploring concepts through opinions and try out the following activity. Ask pupils, to indicate whether they agree, disagree with the following statements -- thumbs up (agree), thumbs down (disagree) or thumbs horizontal (can't decide right now). Choose a few pupils and ask them to give reasons. Allow challenges and some discussion.

1. Bravery is never being afraid.
2. A bully could never be described as 'brave'.
3. A thief could sometimes be described as 'brave'
4. If you are brave, you are brave in all situations.
5. Fear is only a problem when it stops you from doing what you think is right.
6. Fighting dragons and giants could be wrong.
7. You can't be brave and cautious at the same time.

'Virtue' as an ongoing topic

Once children have an idea of virtues as character traits that enable people to do the right things for the right reasons and in the right ways at the right times, you could make it a theme of inquiry that you could draw attention to when relevant ideas come up in future discussion or activities.

Here is a simplified list of the spheres of life mentioned by Aristotle in which we would need certain virtues or traits of character in order for us to do the right things. You could provide the list to children and ask them what 'virtues' they think are appropriate to these spheres of life. Would they (or you) want to amend the list or add to it?

1. Attitude to risks I face
2. Attitude to my appetites
3. Attitude to 'what is mine'
4. Attitude to myself
5. Attitude when I feel put down
6. Attitude to living alongside others
7. Attitudes to other people doing well or badly
8. Attitudes to learning, knowing and believing things
9. Attitudes to planning what I should do.

Links between 'virtues' and 'emotional intelligence'

Daniel Goleman (1996), *Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury (p. 285) writes:

'There is an old fashioned word for the body of skills that emotional intelligence represents: *character* ... The bedrock of character is self-discipline; the virtuous life, as philosophers since Aristotle have observed is based on self control. A related keystone of character is being able to motivate and guide oneself, whether in doing homework, finishing a job, or getting up in the morning. And, as we have seen, the ability to defer gratification and to control one's urges to act is a basic emotional skill, one that in a former day was called will.'

Philosophical inquiry provides opportunities not just to draw attention to 'skills' of self-control and deferred gratification but also to discuss when self-control, deferred gratification, self esteem and anger management are wise (*ie*, when they are achieved for the right reason and in the right way at the right time).