

“The Bow”

It's been a while since I have written a story, but I've been encouraged to write again. Here goes!

I hadn't thought of this incident for a long time, but while listening to some acclaimed screenwriters talk of their trade... speaking of honesty and truth, the story came to mind.

I grew up on Cowboys and Indians. I was usually the cowboy but sometimes enjoyed being the Indian as well. (If you didn't know, I AM 1/16th Indian.) Indians are cool because they didn't have to have guns. They armed themselves with creations of their wit and their tools. Of course, their main armament was bows and arrows.

Down the road about two miles from our house grew a little patch of wild trees. Once while riding by on my bicycle, I saw those little trees as “perfect” for making bows and arrows. I stopped, took my trusty pocketknife from my Levis pocket and began whittling away at the twig bases trying to harvest supplies for my idea. With my dull knife, progress was very slow. I thought, “I need a hatchet!”

Quickly, I mounted my bike (or trusty steed as I pretended) and raced to the house. I found the hatchet (as I imagined, a tomahawk) and returned to my little forest. Harvesting the lumber was much easier now! I cut what I thought would be a good bow and several of the small, most-straight plants for arrows, bound them up and hauled them back to the house where I could become as a craftsman.

When I got to the house, I started stripping bark from all my sticks. Peeling the bark wasn't too difficult, even with my dull pocketknife, so that task went rather quickly. But to have a good arrow one must cut all the little bumps along the twig so it would be as smooth as possible. If there was a bump on your arrow, as it slid beside the bow during a shot the arrow could go astray. You'd miss your cowboy, and he could shoot you with his pistol! Not good if you're the Injun!

I worked on the arrows and got them as smooth as I could. I sharpened the points then whittled a slot for the bowstring in the opposite end. Then I began to work on the bow. I cleaned off all the bark but was having trouble getting the bumps off the bow. The bow-stick was bigger and “mature”. The bumps were harder and tougher to cut! I worked and worked, then finally decided I'd whittled enough, yet, it was hardly smooth at all.

Next, I needed to find some string. But, where would I find some string? "Twine!"

There was always some binder twine lying around in the cow lot from when Dad fed hay to the cows!

I went to the lot and started searching for the “just right” (that is, long enough) string for the bow. I found it! I pulled it up out of the muddy muck, cleaned it off and returned to my crafting.

Now, you have to know here that I was never a Boy Scout, so tying knots was not something I really knew a lot about. But somehow I managed to get the string attached to the bow with a mega-series of knotted loops on each end of the bow.

I was proud of my creation! It had been an all day project. I had just finished when Dad came home from work. I could hardly wait to show him what I’d spent the day working on!

“Look what I did, Dad!”

He inspected my work and then commented, “Don’t you know how to string a bow?”

“I thought I did...”

Dad untied my string from the bow and got out HIS pocketknife. I always was in awe of Dad’s pocketknife. When I was allowed to use it, I noticed how it was always oiled at the pivot points of the blades and opened up smooth as silk! And sharp! Dad’s pocketknife was always sharp as a razor.

Dad began to whittle. He whittled down the ends of the bow to flatten them some, then cut little notches to hold the bowstring. Then he asked, “How come you didn’t cut these bumps off the bow?”

“I tried.”

In only a few moments, it seemed, with his sharp knife, Dad had finished my bow. It was almost like he’d bought it at the store!

Then Dad took my bowstring and tied a loop in one end. He hooked the loop to one end of the bow, measured the string, and then tied a loop in the other end of the string. It looked too short to me! Then Dad showed me how to hook the end of the bow inside my left foot. Then by pulling the top of the bow with the middle against my knee, bending it, so that I could hook the string to the top end. Finished. I WAS AMAZED!

This creation looked much more like a REAL BOW than it had when I was finished with it! I really believed an Indian could have made it!

“Let’s go try ‘er out,” Dad said with a smile.

We went to the front yard and I handed Dad my best arrow. He looked at it, took his knife out, and made a better notch and loaded it, then drew the bow.

SSSSSHHHHHhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh THUNK! It went almost to the barn and stuck in the dirt! WOW! I was amazed!

And this was mine! Mine to do with as I pleased! There couldn’t have been a prouder kid! Proud of myself! Proud my dad helped. Proud of my possession!

Dad put a little finishing touch on the rest of my arrows. Then he said, “There ya go.” He went back into the house leaving me alone to learn about my new weaponry.

I shot my arrows. Some shots were better than others. I shot them mostly, just into the air. I couldn’t shoot my arrows out of sight so I could always find them.

The real problem was, I didn’t know what to shoot AT! Maybe Dad would have an idea. I ran back into the house. Dad was visiting with Mom.

“Daddy, I need a target. What can I shoot at?”

“There’s some cardboard out in the well house. Draw you a target and shoot at that.”

I ran back out the door and headed to the well house. I found the cardboard, then thought, “Crayons!” I ran back into my room, tore through my junk drawer, found a crayon and then rushed back outside. I bent over the cardboard and started coloring circles for my target... bull’s eye and all.

As I was doing this, I heard my little sister, Ann, come up behind me. She was looking over my shoulder and she asked, “Whacha doin’?”

“I’m making a target for my bow and arrows. Don’t bother me! This is boy stuff.” She didn’t bother me, but continued to watch.

Finally, I got the target colored, then stood it up. I backed off about ten paces and notched an arrow onto my bowstring. I almost had my bow drawn, then, FLOP. My target fell down!

Hurriedly, I returned the target to its upright position, then marched ten paces back to try again. Same thing! Just as I was about to let the arrow go the target flopped over!

With a keen insight for the obvious, I decided there was too much wind. I needed something to hold the target up. An idea flashed in my head how to remedy my problem. ANN!

Returning to the target I called out to Ann! “Would you please come and hold this target up for me?”

“No! You’ll shoot me!”

I shook my head and hung it in disbelief that my little sister had so little faith in me!

“I won’t shoot you! I promise. This is a big target. There’s no way I could miss it and hit you!” The target was about two feet wide and two feet high. I thought, “How could I EVER miss something that big?”

I went over to the target and held it up. I stood as far to the side as I could and held it by just the top corner with my arm outstretched. I said, “See? Like this! If you hold it like this, you’ll be way far away, and there’s no way I could hit you.”

Slowly, she came over to the target and held it just as I had been doing. “That’s right. Just like that! If you’re still afraid you can let go of it just as I shoot.”

Reluctantly, she stood there. I could see the fear in her eyes, but I knew she had nothing to worry about.

I got back into firing position, notched an arrow and drew the bow. I closed one eye and stuck my tongue out the side of my mouth. (That’s the way one aims the best, ya know.) I took aim, so very carefully. When I was on the target, I let go of the string.

SSSSHHHHHHhhhhhhhhh THUNK! WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!
It was Ann! She was screaming! She grabbed her hand and was wailing like a Banshee! I’ve really never heard a Banshee scream, but I’ve heard all my life how loud it is!

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!! MAMA!!!!!!!!!! MAAAAAAMAAAA!”

I knew this was an emergency, and I had to do something quick! I had to get her to shut-up or my life was in danger! I intercepted her as she ran toward the house. I

grabbed her hand. “Here! Let me see!”

I looked at the hand she’d claimed was wounded. Sure enough. The arrow had hit her hand in that meaty part at the base of her thumb between the thumb and first finger. I don’t remember seeing any blood. Well, maybe a drop or two, but it was mostly just skinned up pretty bad.

“That’s not too bad,” I said. “It’ll quit hurting in a minute.”

She was still crying, but moving from crying to that sobbing stage. You know how girls are!

“I’m sorry, sister. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to.” I think she was just about ready to forgive me and say, that’s ok, but it was too late. Her Banshee wail had been heard inside the house. Mom and Dad both burst through the screen door headed our way!

“What happened?” It was my mom who’d asked.

Ann cried, “GAYLON SHOT ME!”

She had been shot, but I was the one fixin’ to die! I explained, “The wind kept blowing my target over and I needed someone to hold it up. Ann said she’d do it. I accidentally shot her hand, but it’s not too bad. I looked at it, and...”

Dad was livid! I don’t remember what all he said but none of it was good. It was mostly stuff like, how could you be so stupid?

He grabbed the bow, which I still had in my hand, and raised it above his head. I just knew he was fixin’ to hit me with it. My life flashed before my eyes, and I ducked for cover. And, being a dad myself now, I know that’s what he wanted to do. I KNOW that crossed his mind! But he didn’t hit me with it. What he did was worse! He grabbed the bow with both hands and racked it down across his raised knee. “CRACK!” It broke plum into!

When I heard the crack I looked up. I saw the anger in Dad’s eyes. I saw my perfect bow in two pieces. But that’s not all. He then grabbed up the arrows and they met the same plight. He took them all! With one mighty blow across his knee, they were all broken in two!

Along with the bow and arrows... my heart was broken. My creation had taken all day long, and completed with special help from my dad, which, because he was so busy working hard to raise his family, seemed to come so seldom. It seemed to be

the worst day of my eight-year-old life!

I didn't get a whippin' that time. However, I would have gladly traded a whippin' to have my possessions back. But that was not to be. The deeds were done. It was over. I felt pretty bad for a while. Why? Because I was so stupid. Because I had made a decision that had turned out to make me seem stupid. Forrest Gump's line was, "My mama always says, 'Stupid is as stupid does.'" I guess I know how he felt.

So, where is the truth and where is the honesty in this story? Honestly, looking back from my vantage point of today, I think Dad could have handled it differently. But also, I think he honestly handled it like most of us handle situations, as reactionists'. He reacted to his feelings and in the moment, broke my treasures.

Many times, we react to our feelings. Later then, we wish we'd thought it out and acted rather than reacted. But that's a hard lesson to learn.

But the truth is, I'd acted stupidly. Maybe stupidity deserves reaction. But was it really stupidity? Or was it just one of those moments that went very badly. I'll let you judge.

Another truth is that stupidity is usually classified by the judgment of others. We rarely classify ourselves as stupid. We live justifying our actions, or reactions as the case may be, realizing our abilities and our limitations.

Another truth is that we many times don't know our abilities or our limitations. That's why we are encouraged to try, then try, try again. How else can we learn but by our failures?

This story is one that could be paralleled by any kid who has gone through the growing up process, or any adult, for that matter, on the road to maturity.

While we live, we learn. Sometimes we'll be judged brilliant. Sometimes we'll be judged stupid. Honestly, it's how we convert our knowledge to wisdom that will count in the long run. And I freely admit, I still struggle with that!

Cain reacted and killed his brother. Moses reacted and broke the tablets. Jesus just said, "Forgive them."

May I be so bold as to forgive and strong enough to accept forgiveness.

~Gaylon Stamps