

The Old Man and the Travellers

There was once an old man who lived in a village in a mountain valley. He had worked hard on his farm all his life and now he was content to hand over most of the work to his children and the younger ones in his village. His days were now pleasant and leisurely. Most of all, he liked to climb up the mountainside behind his village and to sit on a bench there, smoking his pipe, dozing from time to time, but also contemplating the village, the fields, the people and the animals that he loved so much in the valley below.

One sunny summer's day, as he sat there smoking his pipe, he heard footsteps approaching along the mountain path which passed by his bench. It was a young man with a heavy pack on his back. He walked up to the old man and said, "Do you mind if I sit down and rest a while?"

"No, of course not, make yourself comfortable," replied the old man. It was a hot day and the young man was clearly tired because it took him a while to catch his breath.

After a few minutes, he turned to the old man and asked him, pointing down to the village below, "Is that your village down there?"

"Yes," said the old man. "Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering what the people are like there," the young man said.

The old man thought for a while, pulled on his pipe, and then answered with another question.

"What are the people like in the place you've just come from?"

"Oh, that's just it," said the young man, pulling a face. "I don't even like to think about them. They were all liars, cheats, thieves and drunkards. That's why I've left. I'm looking for a new place to settle down and your village looks nice."

The old man looked at him sadly and said, "I'm afraid you'll find that the people in my village are liars, cheats, thieves and drunkards, too. This is no place for you."

With a sigh, the young man picked up his pack and went on his way.

A few days later, when the old man was sitting on the same bench, dozing in the summer sun and smoking his pipe, another young man approached along the mountain path, carrying his heavy pack on his back.

He walked up to the old man and said, "Do you mind if I sit down and rest a while?"

"No, of course not, make yourself comfortable," replied the old man. It was another hot day and the young man was clearly tired and he closed his eyes for a while before taking a good look around him.

After a few minutes, he turned to the old man and asked him, pointing down to the village below, "Is that your village down there?"

"Yes," said the old man. "Why do you ask?"

"What are the people like there?" the young man asked.

Once again, the old man thought for a while, pulled on his pipe, and then answered with the same question. "What are the people like in the place you've just come from?"

A smile spread over the young man's face. "Oh, they are wonderful," he replied. "You couldn't wish to meet friendlier, happier more hospitable people. I've only been away a few weeks and I'm missing them already. But I wanted to see the world and to find out more about life. But I'm looking for a place to stay for a while and your village looks so nice."

The old man returned his smile and said, "Of course, you'll be welcome to stay. We could use some help with the harvest. You'll find the people in my village just as friendly, happy and hospitable as those you have left behind."

And the two of them made their way together down the mountainside to the old man's village.

*(This story is based on one I found in **A Guide to Student-Centred Learning** by Donna Brandes and Paul Ginnis, published by Blackwell. I find it best to tell it rather than read it, so that participants can more easily visualize the scene and the exchanges it depicts. It is open to different interpretations but a key one seems to be about the effect of the expectations a teacher or a group member may have of a group or class, and the powerful influence each individual can have on group climate - Rod).*