

IF PEACE WERE A PRIZE

*The world of fable teaches us that even our most precious values are
contingent, or won at great cost.*

By Salman Rushdie

October 31, 2023



Illustration by Nicholas Konrad / The New Yorker; Source photographs from Getty

 Save this story

To begin, let me tell you a story. There were once two jackals: Karataka, whose name meant “cautious,” and Damanaka, whose name meant

“daring.” They were in the second rank of the retinue of the lion king Pingalaka, but they were ambitious and cunning. One day, the lion king was frightened by a roaring noise in the forest. The jackals knew it to be the voice of a bull, nothing to be scared of, and they persuaded the bull to come before the lion and declare his friendship. The lion and the bull became friends, and the jackals were promoted to the first rank by the grateful monarch. Unfortunately, the lion and the bull began to spend so much time in conversation that the lion stopped hunting and the animals in the retinue began to starve. So the jackals convinced the lion that the bull was plotting against him, and they convinced the bull that the lion was planning to kill him, and so the lion and the bull fought, and the bull was killed, and there was plenty of meat for everyone to eat, and the jackals rose even higher in the king’s regard, because they had warned him of the plot, and they rose in the regard of everyone else in the forest as well, except, of course, for the poor bull—but that didn’t matter, because he was dead, and providing everyone with an excellent lunch.

This, very approximately, is the frame story of the first and longest of the five parts of the book of animal fables known as the “Panchatantra,” titled “On Causing Dissension Among Friends.” The third part, “War and Peace,” a title later used by another well-known book, describes a conflict between the crows and the owls, in which a treacherous crow’s deceit leads to the defeat and destruction of the owls. I used a version of this story in my novel “Victory City.”

What I have always found fascinating about the “Panchatantra” stories is that many of them do not moralize. They do not preach goodness or virtue or honesty or restraint. Cunning and strategy and amorality often overcome all opposition. The good guys don’t always win. (It’s not even always clear who the good guys are.) For this reason, they seem uncannily contemporary, because we, the modern readers, live in a world of amorality and shamelessness and cunning, in which bad guys everywhere have often won.

“Where did all these stories come from?” the boy Haroun asks his storyteller father in my novel “Haroun and the Sea of Stories.” The most important part of the answer is that they come from other stories, from the ocean of stories upon which we are all sailing. That’s not the only point of origin: there’s also the storyteller’s own experience and opinion of life, and there are also the times he lives in. But most stories have roots in other stories, which combine, conjoin, and change, and so become new stories. This is the process that we call imagination.

I have always been inspired by mythologies, folktales, and fairy tales, not because they contain miracles—talking animals, or magic fishes—but because they encapsulate truth. For example, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which was an important inspiration for my novel “The Ground Beneath Her Feet,” can be told in fewer than a hundred words, and yet it contains mighty questions about the relationship between art, love, and death. It asks: Can love, with the help of art, overcome death? And perhaps it answers: Doesn’t death, in spite of art, overcome love? Or else it tells us that art takes on the subjects of love and death and transcends both by turning them into immortal stories.

The storehouse of myth is rich indeed. There are the Greek myths, of course, but also the Norse Prose and Poetic Edda. Aesop, Homer, the Ring of the Nibelung, the Celtic legends, and the three great Matters of Europe: the Matter of France, the body of stories around Charlemagne; the Matter of Rome, regarding the classical world; and the Matter of Britain, the legends surrounding the figure of King Arthur. In Germany, you have the folktales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. But in India, before I heard those stories, I grew up with the “Panchatantra,” and, when I find myself in between projects, it is to these crafty jackals and crows and the like that I return, to ask them what story I should tell next. So far, they have not let me down.

Everything I need to know about goodness and its opposite, and about liberty and captivity, and about conflict, can be found in these stories. For love, I have to say, it is necessary to look elsewhere.

And so, as I stand today to receive a peace prize, I ask myself, “What does the world of fable have to tell us about peace?”

The news is not very good. Homer tells us that peace comes after a decade of war, when everyone we care about is dead and Troy has been destroyed. The Norse myths tell us that peace comes after the Ragnarök, the Twilight of the Gods, when the gods destroy their traditional foes but are also destroyed by them. And the “Panchatantra” tells us that peace—the death of the owls and the victory of the crows—is achieved only through an act of treachery. To abandon the legends of the past for a moment and look at this summer’s twin fables, the film “Oppenheimer” reminds us that peace came only after two atom bombs, Little Boy and Fat Man, were dropped on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; while the box-office monster called “Barbie” makes clear that unbroken peace and undiluted happiness, in a world where every day is perfect, exist only in pink plastic.

And here we are gathered to speak of peace, when war is raging not very far away—a war born of one man’s tyranny and greed for power and conquest—and when another bitter conflict has exploded in Israel and the Gaza Strip. Peace, right now, feels like a fantasy born of a narcotic smoked in a pipe. Even the meaning of the word is a thing on which the combatants cannot agree. Peace, for Ukraine, means more than a cessation of hostilities. It means, as it must mean, a restoration of seized territory and a guarantee of its sovereignty. Peace, for Ukraine’s enemy, means a Ukrainian surrender. The same word, with two incompatible definitions. Peace for Israel and for Palestinians feels even further away.

Peace is a hard thing to make. And yet we yearn for it, not only the great peace that comes at the end of war but also the little peace of our private lives. Walt Whitman thought of peace as the sun that shines down on us every day:

O sun of real peace! O hastening light!

O free and extatic! O what I here, preparing, warble for!

O the sun of the world will ascend, dazzling, and take his height—and you too, O my Ideal,

will surely ascend!

Whitman's "ideal" was peace. So let us agree with him that, hard as it is to find, this thing is ardently worth pursuing. My parents thought so when they named me Salman, a name whose root is the noun *salamat*, meaning "peace." "Salman" is "peaceful." And as a matter of fact I was an extremely quiet, well-behaved, studious boy, peaceful by nature. The trouble began later.

If my work has been influenced by fables, there is also something decidedly fabulist about a peace prize. I like the idea that peace itself might *be* the prize—that this jury of wise benefactors is so infinitely powerful that they are able to bestow upon a single individual, and no more, one year's award of peace. True, blessed peace, not trivial contentment, *paix ordinaire*, but a fine vintage of Pax Frankfurtiana, a whole year's supply of it, delivered to your door, elegantly bottled. That's an award I'd be very happy to receive. I am even thinking of writing a story about it, "The Man Who Received Peace as a Prize."

I imagine it taking place in a small country town—at the village fair, maybe. There are the usual competitions, for the best pies and cakes, the best watermelons; for guessing the weight of a farmer's pig. A peddler in a threadbare frock coat arrives in a horse-drawn wagon, and says that if he is allowed to judge the contests he will hand out the best rewards anyone has ever seen. "Best prizes!" he cries. "Roll up! Roll up!" And so they do roll up, the simple country folk, and the peddler hands out small bottles to the various prize-winners, bottles labelled Truth, Beauty, Freedom, Goodness, and Peace. The villagers are disappointed. They would have preferred cash. And, in the year following the fair, there are strange occurrences. After drinking the liquid in his bottle, the winner of the Truth prize begins to annoy and alienate his fellow villagers by telling them exactly what he thinks of them. The Beauty, after drinking her award, becomes more beautiful, at least in her own eyes, but also insufferably vain. Freedom's licentious behavior shocks many of her fellow villagers, who conclude that her bottle must have contained some powerful

intoxicant. Goodness declares himself to be a saint, and of course everyone finds him unbearable. And Peace just sits under a tree and smiles. As the village is so full of troubles, this smile is extremely irritating, too.

A year later, when the fair is held again, the peddler returns but is driven out of town. “Go away,” the villagers cry. “We don’t want those sorts of prizes. A rosette, a cheese, a piece of ham, or a red ribbon with a shiny medal hanging from it. Those are normal prizes. We want those instead.”

I may or may not write that story. At the very least, it may serve lightheartedly to illustrate a serious point, which is that concepts which we think we can all agree to be virtues can come across as vices, depending on your point of view and on their effects in the real world. In Italo Calvino’s book “Il Visconte Dimezzato” (“The Cloven Viscount”), the hero is split in two by a cannonball hitting him squarely in the chest. Both halves survive, their wounds treated by an expert doctor, and after that it turns out that the viscount has been bisected morally as well as physically; one of his halves is now impossibly good, while the other has become impossibly evil. However, it turns out that both halves do an equal amount of damage in the world and are equally dreadful to deal with, until they are sewn back together by the same expert doctor and become, once again, physically singular but morally plural, which is to say, human.

My fate, over the past many years, has been to drink from the bottle marked Freedom and therefore to write without any restraint those books that came to my mind to write, and now, as I am on the verge of publishing my twenty-second volume, I have to say that on twenty-one of those twenty-two occasions the elixir has been well worth drinking. On the remaining occasion, namely, the publication of my fourth novel, I learned—many of us learned—that freedom can create an equal and opposite reaction from the forces of unfreedom, and I learned, too, how to face the consequences of that reaction, and to continue, as best I could, to be as unfettered an artist as I had always wished to be. I learned, too, that many other writers and artists,

exercising their freedom, also faced the forces of unfreedom, and that, in short, freedom can be a dangerous wine to drink. But that made it more necessary, more essential to defend. I confess there have been times when I'd rather have drunk the Peace elixir and spent my life sitting under a tree wearing a blissful, beatific smile, but that was not the bottle the peddler handed me.

We live in a time I did not think I would see in my lifetime, a time when freedom—and in particular freedom of expression, without which the world of books could not exist—is everywhere under attack from reactionary, authoritarian, populist, demagogic, narcissistic, careless voices; when places of education and libraries are subject to hostility and censorship; and when extremist religion and bigoted ideologies have begun to intrude in areas of life in which they do not belong. And there are also progressive voices being raised in favor of a new kind of bien-pensant censorship, one which appears virtuous, and which many people have begun to see as a virtue. So freedom is under pressure from the left as well as the right, the young as well as the old. This is something new, and made more complicated by our new tool of communication, the Internet, on which well-designed pages of malevolent lies sit side by side with the truth, and it is difficult for many people to tell which is which; and our social media, where the idea of freedom is every day abused to permit, very often, a kind of online mob rule, which the billionaire owners of these platforms seem increasingly willing to encourage—and to profit by.

What do we do about free speech when it is so widely abused? We should still do, with renewed vigor, what we have always needed to do: to answer bad speech with better speech, to counter false narratives with better narratives, to answer hate with love, and to believe that the truth can still succeed even in an age of lies. We must defend it fiercely and define it as broadly as possible, so, yes, we should of course defend speech that offends us; otherwise we are not defending free expression at all. Let a thousand and one voices speak in a thousand and one different ways.

To quote Cavafy, “the barbarians are coming today,” and what I do know is

that the answer to philistinism is art, the answer to barbarianism is civilization, and in any war it may be that artists of all sorts—filmmakers, actors, singers, and, yes, those who practice the ancient art of the book—can still, together, turn the barbarians away from the gates. ♦

This is drawn from the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade acceptance speech given by Rushdie on October 22nd, as part of the Frankfurt Book Fair.