

discard

A human being is a part of the whole,  
called by us "Universe"; a part limited in time and  
space. He experiences himself, his thought and feeling  
as something separated from the rest—  
a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This delusion is a kind of prison for us,  
restricting us to our personal desires  
and to affection for a few persons nearest us.  
Our task is to free ourselves from this prison.

—Albert Einstein

# The Classic Stories: Self-Awareness

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I have one outstanding trait in my character, which must strike anyone who knows me for any length of time, and that is my knowledge of myself.

I can watch myself and my actions, just like an outsider.

The Anne of every day I can face entirely without prejudice, without making excuses for her, and watch what's good and what's bad about her.

This "self-consciousness" haunts me, and every time I open my mouth I know, as soon as it be spoken, whether "that ought to have been different" or "that was right as it was." There are so many things about myself that I condemn: I couldn't begin to name them all.

I understand more and more how true Daddy's words were when he said:

"All children must look after their own upbringing."

Parents can only give good advice or put them on the right paths, but the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands.

—The Diary of Anne Frank

## The Need for Self-Knowledge

We often think that self-knowledge is not for children, that only adults are involved in such weighty matters. We tend to forget that every tragic drama, every lesson of the fairy tale, every moral to the story, is a call to self-knowledge and useful wisdom. Let us remember that self-awareness is an integral part of every stage and every transition. Let us explicitly cultivate self-knowledge, self-reflection, and self-awareness as the foundation to a very strong life, at every stage.

These Classic stories and lessons specifically address this issue of self knowledge in two forms, negative and positive. The 'negative' form of self-knowledge finds selfishness, self-absorption, Narcissism, and misfortune; in the 'positive' form of self-knowledge we find our own truth, and thus can live more authentically. On the 'negative' side is tragedy, the tragic fate of self-fascination and confinement to self. On the 'positive' side is the good fortune of happy actions. On one hand we recognize the prison of ego-centricity, on the other our truer and wider self freely participates in a wonderful life.

It is important to remember that it is nearly impossible to do these lessons "wrong"; just to begin to distinguish important issues serves the issue itself. Our only mistake is failing to try. For in trying, we incarnate care, and if we care, we will do these lessons beautifully.

## Hellenic: The Story of Narcissus

Narcissus is the classic archetype depicting self-fascination and self-absorption.

**N**arcissus, son of the river-god Cephissus, was so extraordinarily beautiful that from the moment he was born, everyone who saw him fell in love with him. Narcissus thought he didn't care if others loved him and didn't think to return the love he was given. He would pass the lovely nymphs that dwelled in his father's rivers without even a glance or "hello," even though the nymphs all loved him. When everything didn't go his way, he got mad and even left home. He acted like he didn't care.

Echo, who was the fairest of the nymphs, also fell in love with Narcissus. Once she had angered the powerful goddess Hera, who then put a curse on Echo so that she could only speak what was spoken to her. Echo wanted to tell Narcissus how much she loved him, but since she couldn't, she followed him everywhere, hiding behind trees and bushes waiting for the chance to speak to him. Then, one day, she had her chance. Narcissus was separated from a group of his friends while playing in the woods when he heard a rustle of some branches. He yelled, "Who's here?"

"Here," she called.

"Then come" said Narcissus.

"Come," she cried.

"Leave your hiding place," said Narcissus, "and we'll play."

"We'll play," she called, leaping happily from behind the tree. She ran to give Narcissus a hug, but he had forgotten how to love and pushed her away. He shouted, "Take your hands off me! I hate hugs and would rather die than let you touch me."

"Touch me," Echo cried after him and continued to secretly follow Narcissus.

One day, Narcissus broke the heart of yet another maiden who prayed to the goddess Nemesis, "If he ever loves anyone, deny him what

he loves, just as he has denied everyone else his love!”

Nemesis granted her the prayer. Narcissus soon came to a clear and beautiful pond. He looked down into the water, saw a fascinating face, and was instantly captured.

At first Narcissus thought it was a beautiful water spirit and fell in love. He observed from the look in the beautiful creature's eyes that the feeling was mutual.

He reached to touch his beloved but the moment his hand touched the water, the reflection scattered the image and disappeared. As soon as his image in the water returned he called out, “Why do you run away? I love you.” Echo, who was hiding nearby, replied, “I love you.” But Narcissus did not look up, and continued to gaze into his pond as his image reappeared.



Narcissus forgot to eat and began to wither away from loving someone who could not love him in return. Echo continued to stay near him. She kept loving him even though Narcissus was too busy loving himself to even notice. He never left the pond for the rest of his life. At the last moment, just before he died, he called to his reflection, “Farewell, I love you.”

“Farewell, I love you,” Echo cried.

When the nymphs and maidens who had always loved him, gathered around to honor his body with a burial, all they found in his place was a flower which they named after him.

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## Asian: The Land of Torment and the Pandas in Paradise

There is a story amongst the pandas, that, after death, all the pandas who had been selfish all their lives go to the land of Torment. In the land of Torment, there is a huge table, with a large pot of delicious rice in the center. Around the table are chopsticks to reach the rice, but the table is so large that the chopsticks are very, very long. All the pandas sit around the table, pick up a bite of rice, but, because the chopsticks are longer than their arms, they cannot put the rice in their mouths. The pandas grunt and cry and complain all the time.

But the pandas who had learned to share go to Paradise after their life. In the land of Paradise, just like in the land of Torment, there is a huge table, with a large pot of rice in the center. And just like the land of Torment, around the table are very, very long chopsticks to reach the rice. But in Paradise, all the pandas sit around the table, pick up a bite of rice, and feed a friend. Then a friend feeds them back. They laugh and celebrate all the time.

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## Parent Guide

These Stories gather great strength from *both* sides of self-knowledge; observations of selfishness *and* awareness of the authentic voice. The brightness of authenticity is grounded by a sober appreciation of our darker tendency to self-orientation. To only emphasize the light of “self-esteem” is to rob our children of the night.

**KEY POINT** to accentuate: In many stories about self-knowledge, the story hinges upon the excessive self-orientation of a primary character. **Selfishness provides the basis for most tragedy and misfortune**; point this out again and again whenever you come across it in stories you encounter with your children.

**Key point to accentuate:** Talk about the effects of a bad disposition as opposed to a harmonious one, and the benefits of developing a positive attitude. Review the POINT OF VIEW (page 78) discussion in the previous section.

Discuss the proverbial saw below and how it relates to the lesson on self-knowledge:

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**“You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”**

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## Asian: A Misunderstood Gift

Forms of these next two stories are found in many countries throughout Asia.

A family of rice farmers lived far upstream on the Po River, growing, collecting, or making almost every thing they needed. Every season, however, the husband travelled to the city to sell some of their rice and buy other goods that they could not make.

Just after the new moon, one fine spring evening, the family made a list of things they needed. If they got a good price for their rice, they could afford almost everything on their list, maybe even something special. Their little boy cried for a toy, and the wife asked for a new comb for her long, beautiful hair. The man promised he would try and get a good price for his rice and get them both a gift.

The woman knew that her husband was very forgetful and tried to help him remember, "See the crescent moon, my husband, it is shaped like a comb. When you go to the city, you will see the moon, and when you see the moon, remember my comb."

The man travelled to the city, but rice was selling so cheaply that he stayed several days to get the best price he could. He was able to buy everything he needed, but had only a tiny bit of money left over. The man thought, "I'm supposed to buy something, but I can't remember what. Oh, the moon, I'm supposed to look at the moon to remember what to buy."

The man looked up at the moon but now the moon was no longer a thin crescent, but full and round. He could not remember what he was supposed to buy for his wife. He went into a large shop and asked the shop keeper to help him. The man said, "I'm supposed to buy my son a toy and my beautiful wife a gift, but I haven't much money and I can't remember what she wanted. She told me to look at the moon and its shape would remind me what to get."

The shop keeper looked at the round moon and exclaimed, "I have the perfect gift. It's a new thing called a mirror. It's round like the moon,

and she can use it while she combs her hair. Your son can pretend that it is a little lake and fold origami boats to play upon it.”

“That must be it!” the man exclaimed, “my wife has long, beautiful hair, and she loves to comb it. And my son will have a gift too! Please wrap it up for me. Thank you very much.”

When the man got home, he explained to his family that he did not get a very good price for their rice, but he was able to buy a present for them anyway. The woman wanted the gift to be for her and opened the present, but she did not know what it was, for none of them had ever seen such a creation before. She looked into the mirror and saw a beautiful woman, but did not know that it was her. She screamed at her husband, “You call this a gift? You have brought a beautiful woman home with you?” and began to cry. Her mother wanted the gift to be for her, picked up the mirror, and she too yelled at her son-in-law, “You have brought home another old woman to take care of? We can barely feed ourselves!” She joined her daughter in sorrow and disgust. The little boy picked up the mirror, looking to see what could be in the gift for him, and, before his father could explain that it was a lake for his boats, the little boy cried out, “There’s somebody who’s trying to get my rice cake!”

Now the man was very confused and thought nobody loved him, and picked up the mirror to see what spirit was terrorizing his family. He looked into the mirror and saw a desperate man, so he clenched his fist and said, “You can’t scare my family, take that!” and punched the mirror.

The mirror broke into a thousand pieces. Because they had each been selfish, they did not recognize themselves, and so lost a beautiful gift.

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## Asian: The Magic Axe

Once there was a very happy boy named Chen Peng who lived in the mountains with his family. One day he went out to cut some wood for the cooking fire. But, as he was walking across an old bridge, the axe fell out of his pouch and into the river below! Down at the riverbank, a very nice man shouted up, "Don't worry, I'll get it for you!"

The man dove into the river and came up holding a beautiful silver axe. If Chen Peng took the silver axe and sold it, he could buy a hundred axes, and have the wood delivered! But then he would not be happy, for if he lost such a valuable possession, he would not want someone else to claim it. Chen Peng valued his happiness more than a hundred axes and called back, "No, that's not my axe."

Again the man dove into the river but this time came up holding a giant golden axe. If Chen Peng took the golden axe and sold it, he could buy a hundred axes, and a hundred oxen, and a hundred bales of silk, and more! But then he would not be happy, for if he lost such a valuable possession, he would not want someone else to claim it. Chen Peng valued his happiness more than any riches and called back, "No, that's not my axe."

Again the man dove into the river but this time came up holding Chen Peng's axe. "Yes, that is my axe. Thank you very, very much."

The man climbed up the river bank and brought the axe to Chen Peng and said, "Because you are happy and honest, you will find this axe to be magic."

Chen Peng thought it was magic just to have his axe back. He thanked the man but was puzzled over his encounter. When Chen Peng arrived at the grove to cut wood for his family, he first ate his lunch and enjoyed the sound of the birds in the trees. It was a beautiful day and Chen Peng soon feel asleep. When he awoke, a stack of wood had been magically cut for him. Chen Peng was elated. Now he could find another way to serve his family, if the axe did all the cutting for them!

Chen Peng hurried home with his wood and told the story to his family.

They all rejoiced for their good fortune,—except for one selfish uncle. He did not think about their good fortune but of the fortune that he might get if he met the man by the river.

The next day, the selfish uncle picked up his axe and went to the bridge over the river. As he was crossing the river, he pretended to drop his axe, exclaiming, “Uh, oh, I dropped my axe.” Down at the riverbank, a very nice man shouted up, “Don’t worry, I’ll get it for you!” The man dove into the river and came up holding his axe.

“Oh no, that’s not my axe. I lost a really nice one,” the uncle lied. Again, the man dove into the river and came up holding a beautiful silver axe.

“Oh no, that’s not my axe. Mine was even nicer,” the uncle lied a second time. And again, the man dove into the river and this time came up holding a giant golden axe.

“That’s it! Oh thank you for helping me,” the uncle lied again and rushed down to the river to get the golden axe from the man.

As the man handed the axe to the uncle, the man said, “Your greed will soon show itself to be foolishness.”

The uncle grabbed the axe, thinking that the man was stupid. He climbed up the river bank and stepped onto the bridge where he could not be seen. “Yippie!” he shrieked and began to jump up and down with excitement—holding the giant golden axe in his hand. But the axe and the jumping were too much for the old bridge and it collapsed! The dishonest uncle plummeted into the river and drowned.

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## Indian: A Bowl of Rice, Grain by Grain

This is a Classic Hindi lore.

Near the famous Arunachula mountain in southern India, a mother lost her son to an illness and became sick with sorrow herself. She cried for days and days and could not believe that her little boy was gone. She did not eat and had no energy left for the rest of her life because she was so distraught. Her family began to worry about her and convinced her to go to the wise man who lived by the mountain.

She sobbed as she told the wise man her story and asked if he could take her sorrow away. The wise man said, "Yes, I can help you, but it will cost you a bowl of rice."

"Oh, yes," the woman cried full of hope, "That'll be no problem, I'll go get you a bowl of rice right away," and she began to get up.

"Oh no, not just any bowl of rice," the wise man countered, as he handed her his smallest begging bowl, "You must fill this bowl with rice, one grain at a time. Go to each house in the village and ask for a grain of rice. Tell each person you ask why you are gathering rice. When this bowl is full, bring it to me and I will take away your sorrow."

Gratefully the woman left and began her task. Everybody was happy to help her and when they heard her story, they shared a story of their own about a lost loved one. She went to many, many homes, and heard many, many stories. Soon, her sorrow was not her own, but shared. And soon the bowl was full and the sorrow she had been feeling no longer overwhelmed her. As she walked back to Arunachula, she felt how sorrow was natural and so she let her sadness rest. Instead of meditating on her sorrow, she counted her blessings, and soon, a natural appreciation sprouted in her heart again. She came upon the wise man, bowed to his great wisdom, and, as she gave him his bowl filled with rice, gratefully uttered, "Thank you."

## Indian: Fly or Bee?

The wise of India suggest that if a person does not attend to true happiness, but foolishly follows every temporary pleasure, then he or she will become like the fly who, in one moment alights on candy and next flies to a pile of dung. But if one attends to what is really true, he becomes like the bee who goes from nectar to nectar.

The wise of India also point out that if one tries to become truly happy by following the path of desire without discipline and without instruction, that one will be successful! However, this path will require more time than it would take to completely erode an elephant-size block of granite that is brushed by a silk handkerchief once a century.

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## Judaic: Solomon's Ring

Solomon was a great King in ancient Israel, known for his wisdom and personal power. He even called Be'ezlehub, the craftsman of darkness, to his chambers to be taught the great art of deception. Be'ezlehub agreed to give Solomon the secret of deception, but not so long as he wore the ring of rule, with the wondrous name of the sacred inscribed on the inside. As long as Solomon wore that ring, Be'ezlehub said, he could not impart the secret to the king. Solomon agreed and began to take his ring off, knowing that for a time, he would not be serving as king, and would be only another man thinking about himself.

The instant the ring passed from the tip of Solomon's finger, Be'ezlehub snatched the ring and threw it far into the sea. He then threw Solomon far, far into the sea as well, close to another far away kingdom!

Solomon nearly drowned as he swam for hours and hours until he was picked up by a fishing boat. Because no one would believe he was a King, he would have to use his ancient knowledge of service to gain their favor. He began to make the finest foods for all the shipmen, and prepared fabulous feasts everyday.

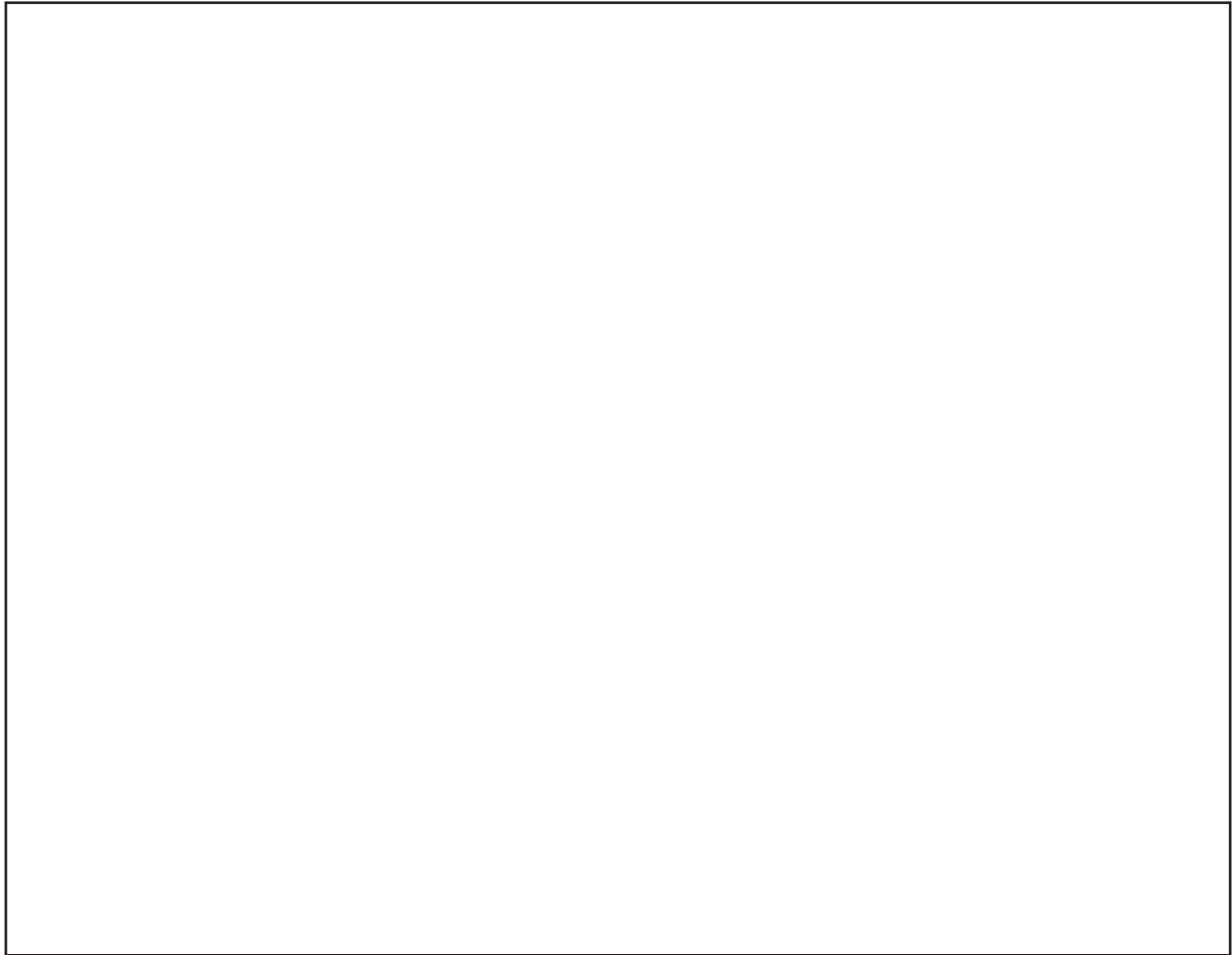
The fishermen took Solomon to the King of their land and asked him to prepare a meal for their royal leader. For three days and nights, Solomon worked in the royal kitchen as he prepared then laid out a feast supreme. The King asked Solomon to enter his service for one year after which he would grant him any favor. Solomon agreed, and asked for a ship to carry him back to his land when his service was complete.

For three hundred and sixty four days, Solomon amazed the King with his energy and service. On the last day, the King asked him to prepare a feast to celebrate their time together. Solomon agreed and asked the fishermen to catch him a fine fish. Luck was with them and soon they snared a gigantic beauty. When Solomon went to cut it open, inside he found his ring! He slipped it on his finger and presto! He was back at his throne with Be'ezlehub; not a second had past!



“Getting someone to think only of themselves, is the most powerful key to deception,” Be’ezlehub summarized for Solomon.

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## Arabic: The Donkey, the Ox, & the Farmer

Long ago, in the upper Euphrates valley lived an old and wise farmer. Through his many years he had learned the language of many animals and talked to them as he worked with them all. He had many cattle, a magnificent ox who plowed his fields, many birds who gave him eggs and meat, and he had a donkey who gave him transportation when he needed to go to market.

One spring, after a long day plowing, the ox was selfishly complaining about how hard he worked compared to donkey. "Oh, I work all day and you just eat and drink and sit around. My days are filled with labor and sweat."

The donkey was not compassionate at all. Instead, his leisure had made him punky, and he hatched a plan for the ox. "I am so smart, I've got it all figured out. Except for an occasional trip to the city, my life is a breeze. Let me tell you how to fool the plowman and that old farmer."

The ox leaned in closer to hear the secrets of the donkey. But, unbeknownst to them both, the farmer was listening as well. "Tomorrow, after a good morning's work, start to grunt and pant. Drop down on your belly like you are very sick. Even if the plowman beats you to get up, lie there and whine. When he takes off the yoke and leads you back here to the stable, don't eat. Take a day or two of complete rest."

Well, the next day, all seemed to go according to plan. The ox faked an illness, got led back to the stalls, and was offered the finest fodder, which he refused. The donkey winked to the ox, boasting that their plan had gone so well. But then the farmer turned the tables on them and said to the plowman, "Hook up the yoke to the donkey and let him plow all day!"

The following day, the farmer decided that the ox was probably still too sick and the donkey should plow another day, then another! The donkey grumbled to himself, "I should have kept my advice to myself," when another selfish idea struck him. He turned to ox and whispered, "I

heard today that the master was planning to take you to the slaughterhouse if you do not recover soon.”

The next morning the ox was wagging his tail and pawing at the ground, ready to go. The farmer hooked up the ox and the donkey and both were put to work thereafter. The ox served gladly, but the selfish donkey was forever unhappy.

## **Arabic: Kahil Gibran**

This is from *The Prophet* by Kahil Gibran, Knopf Publishers.

**A**nd a man said, Speak to us of Self-Knowledge.

And he answered, saying:

Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights.  
But your ears thirst for the sound of your heart's knowledge,  
You would know in words that which you have always known in  
thought...

The hidden well-spring of your soul must needs rise and run murmuring  
to the sea;  
And the treasure of your infinite depths would be revealed to your  
eyes...

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For those who are stingy  
and complacently satiated  
and repudiate good and right,  
will facilitate hardship for them  
and their wealth does not profit them when they fall.

—The Qu'ran

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## African: The Tortoise and The Hare

Most westerners know this fable through Aesop,— not realizing that Aesop probably gathered most of his fables from the folklore of the mother continent.

On the edge of the savannah, Hare was bragging about how fast he was. His bragging filled the time and no one could talk to one other. Everybody has stories to tell, but hare thought only of himself.

Tortoise decided to stick his neck out and challenged him. “I’ll race you.” Tortoise knew that Hare would not be able to say no, and it would be a joke on Hare’s bragging.

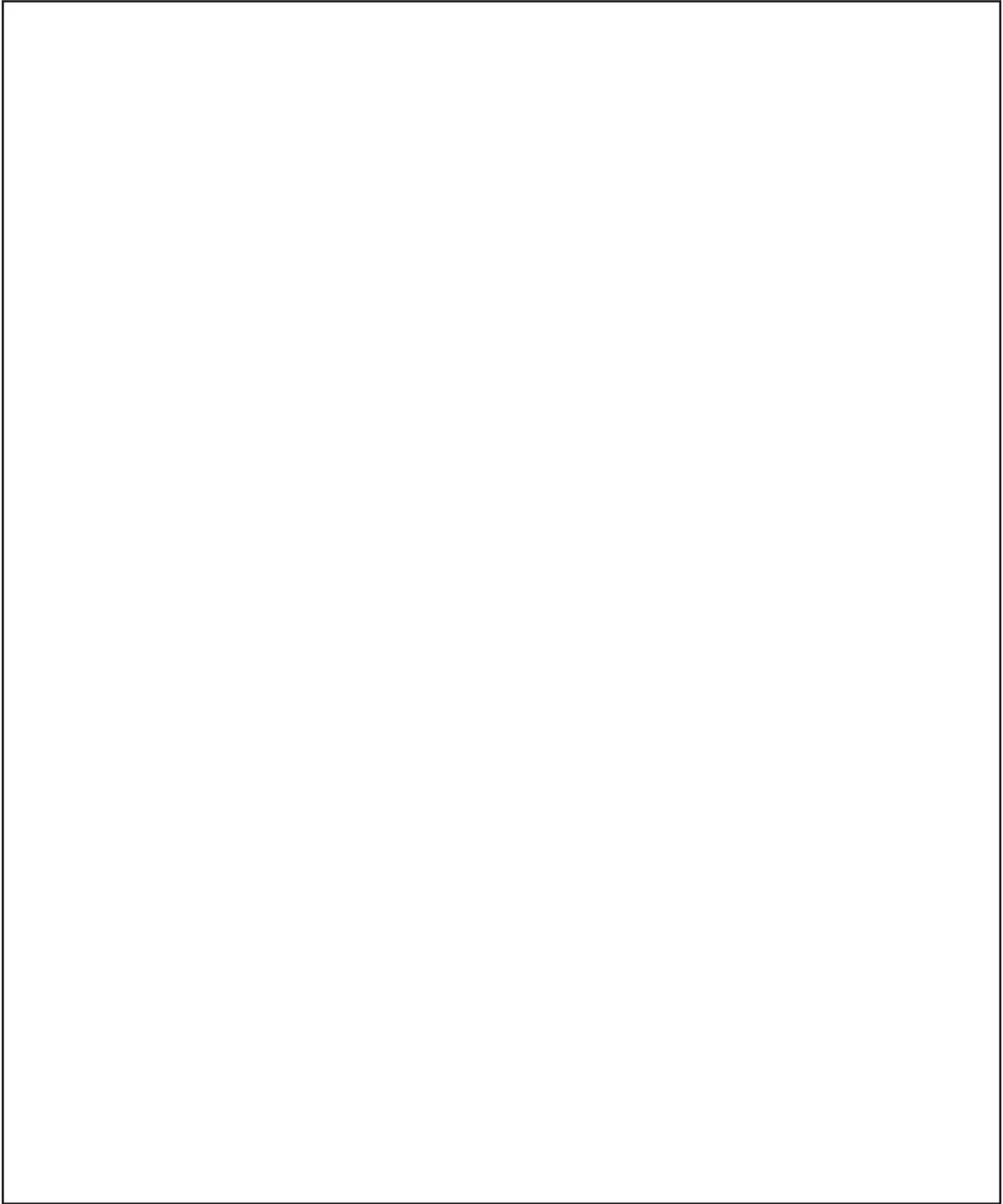
Hare laughed and laughed and fell for it. He started strutting, talking ‘bout how cool he was, and how fast he could run. He looked silly and only fooled himself. Tortoise’s joke had worked.

The race began and Hare darted out of sight in no time. Well, like everybody knows, Hare laid down in the sun to rest, thinking so much about himself he forgot the race and fell asleep.

Step by step the Tortoise inched out the course and neared the end. Hare woke up, remembered the race and darted for the finish line. Everybody knows Hare lost the race when Turtle stuck his neck out.

Bragging all the time does no good, sticking your neck out for your friends does.

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## **Native American: The Coyote Who Thought He was a Lamb**

Make sure your children are reminded of the Ugly Duckling story as you talk about this tale.

**M**ama coyote died giving birth. Baby coyote was left in the chaparral alone, cold and hungry. An ewe took pity on coyote pup and let him suckle from her. She had just given birth herself and was full of milk. Coyote soon had lamb brothers and sisters and a Ram step-father and an Ewe step-mother. Coyote was surrounded by sheep and thought he was a sheep too.

Coyote was the fastest of all his brothers and sisters and was very proud of it. No one yelled in defeat and told him he was different. All the sheep were very kind to him and said, "Yes you are the best." But they all gave him a strange smile, which coyote did not understand.

Coyote went to his mother and asked why his siblings and friends smiled at him so strangely. "That's for you to find out and for no one to tell you," she told him. Coyote wondered all the time about the mystery. Then one day, while getting a drink of water, he saw his reflection in the crystal pool and suddenly understood.

That is why coyotes do not eat sheep and prefer rodents and bugs.

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## Parent Guide: The Positive 'I am'.

Encouragement is food for growth, wisdom is its guidance. Parents should regularly point out kinds of self-knowing for their children. Point out selfishness in tragic characters they encounter, and likewise point out the mature self-giving of the hero and heroine.

Self-realization is the thematic juxtaposition to selfishness. See them together, light and dark rolled into one strength of self-awareness. Do not rob your children of the night.

Point out these two themes when you find them in the stories you encounter together.

Praise their kindness.

Praise their accomplishment.

Call them back to relationship from their self-obsession, and praise their choice to relational authenticity.

Use the stories of the Ugly Duckling and The Coyote Who Thought He Was a Lamb as occasions for you to express your interest in self-knowledge. Use these stories to initiate your language with your child about truly growing up.

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The single essential ingredient of good manners is a sensitive awareness of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners. If you don't, you don't.

—Emily Post

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