

The Animal School

Rev. Dr. Devorah Greenstein, Accessibility Program Associate, Unitarian Universalist Association

This is a fable you can use as is, or adapt for your needs – embellish it and perform it with lots of dramatic emphasis – the underlined words almost always get a laugh – adults really like the story too. The story was loosely adapted from a story that George Reavis wrote when he was the Assistant Superintendent of the Cincinnati Public Schools in the 1940s. You can find the original Reavis version online.

Many years ago, the animals in the Great Forest decided that they wanted to start a school for all their children. Until that time, it had been the responsibility of parents to teach their children the skills they needed to know, but the animals in the Great Forest wanted their children to learn from professional teachers. So they organized a school and hired staff.

The teachers met and decided to provide a standardized educational curriculum to their animal students. So they adopted an activity curriculum consisting of swimming, running, flying, and climbing. All the animals took all the subjects – because it was very important to them that no child be left behind. To ensure that students were progressing satisfactorily, standardized achievement tests were administered to all students.

Here's what happened. The ducks were excellent in swimming. In fact, the ducks were better than their teacher. But some of the ducks made only passing grades in flying and all of them were very poor in running. Since they were slow in running, they had to stay after school for remedial running practice, and they had to drop swimming in order to practice running during their swimming class time. This was kept up until all the ducks' webbed feet were very sore. And the ducks were so tired, that soon they were only average in swimming. But average was acceptable in school, so nobody worried about that – except the ducks.

In running, the rabbits started at the top of the class, but they did very poorly in swimming. Also, the rabbits insisted on hopping around, and the teachers were concerned about their hyperactivity – so they made the rabbits walk everywhere instead of allowing them to run or hop. And the rabbits had to come in early every day for special swimming class. Many of the younger rabbits developed severe fur problems because they were having to spend so much time in the swimming pool.

The squirrels were excellent in climbing and running. In fact, the squirrels were the best students at climbing the standardized tree. But they wanted to fly by first climbing the tree, then spreading their paws, and gliding to the ground. (That's the way squirrels fly.) But in flying class their teacher made them start on the ground instead of at the treetop, and the squirrels were not mastering the course material. So every day, the squirrels had

therapy – a flying therapist took the squirrels into the gym and made them do front-paw exercises to strengthen their muscles so they could learn to fly the right way. The squirrels' paws hurt so much from this overexertion that some of them only got a C in climbing. Some of the squirrels failed climbing altogether.

The eagles were definitely problem children – in climbing class, the eagles beat all the others to the top of the tree, but they insisted on using their own way to get there and were quite stubborn about it. The eagles said that clearly it was the goal that mattered, and that it was quite right for eagles to get to the treetop by flying. The school psychologist diagnosed them as having oppositional-defiant disorder. (That's a real diagnosis that some children are given in school.) A strict behavior modification plan was developed for the eagles.

We can end this story in two ways. Sad to say, in some schools, we still make squirrel children try to learn to fly by flapping their paws, and punish eagles for being defiant about their right to be themselves.

But happy to say, in some schools we enjoy all children for themselves. Each squirrel is a perfectly wonderful squirrel. Each rabbit a lovely rabbit whether or not they choose to hop, or skip, or roll, or walk. Each eagle is allowed to be an eagle; and we encourage each duck to swim and swim and swim and not worry about learning to run.

And the moral of the story is:

When we try to make everybody the same, nobody is happy. People can get hurt and their very best gifts can go to waste.