

THINK RATHER OF ZEBRA

Dealing with Aspects
of Poverty
Through Story

Stories
adapted by

Jay Stailey

Introduction
and
Questions by

Dr. Ruby
Payne



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Stailey, Jay C. and Ruby K. Payne

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For information on storytelling and storyteller Jay Stailey, you may contact him through aha! Process, Inc. at (800) 424-9484, www.ahaprocess.com, or at his website, www.islandstories.com.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

While working as principal at George Washington Carver Elementary School in Baytown, Texas (population: 65,000), I met Dr. Ruby Payne, then the director of staff development at Goose Creek School District. Every time I saw a central office administrator, I asked the question, “What about *these* kids?” “These kids” I referred to were the 900-plus children at Carver whose demographics looked peculiarly different from most students and schools in the district. The Carver kids were more than 90 percent minority and more than 90 percent poor (based on percentage of students who qualified for the federal lunch program). Nearly a third of the students at Carver were taught in a language other than English. In the beginning, more than half the students were unable to meet minimum mastery on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test.

In short, despite special programs and nationally recognized innovative initiatives (Chapter I schoolwide project, bilingual program, HOSTS tutoring, Saturday morning sessions, parenting programs, early-childhood intervention, dual-language multi-age), we were much like similar schools in the nation whose halls were filled with low-income students. We were yet another middle-class institution with a miserable track record when dealing with the students and parents from the culture

of poverty.

In Ruby Payne, I encountered an educator who had spent many years contemplating the question, “What about these kids?” While working with the students and staff at Carver and other schools in the district, Dr. Payne was able to put twenty years of observation and thought together and write the book Poverty: A Framework for Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty. As she began to make presentations in Texas, and eventually on the national level, our conversations and discussions continued. Her work included a close look at the oral tradition within the culture of poverty and the place and structure of story within that culture. During one of our conversations, Dr. Payne pointed out a need for a collection of stories to be used to illustrate and reinforce the points she was making in her presentations.

After a short pause, Dr. Payne looked at me and said, “I believe you know those stories.” She was very persuasive. For more than a year, she met with me, talked with me, and encouraged me, setting and resetting deadlines. “I work much better under deadlines,” she told me.

With the help of many people in the storytelling community—especially Houston tellers Jeannine Pasini-Beekman and Sally Goodroe, Texas tellers Elizabeth Ellis and Tom McDermott, and “alien” tellers Chris Maier and Sunwolf—I was able to gather and write these stories. With the editing and production assis-

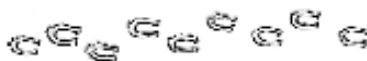
tance of Paula Fornfeist, Dan Shenk, and Toni McAfoos, and the artwork of Leigh Anne Marx, along with my father, Bob “The Zebra Man” Stailey, I am able to present the stories in this format.

I want to thank everyone who had the patience to watch me work and to wait, especially my family. I hope this presentation of stories can be useful in the struggle to help middle-class institutions work successfully with those who come from the culture of poverty.

WARNING! Many of these stories have made appearances in books and other places and have been told by gifted storytellers in the recent past. I have gathered the tales together here to enlighten a specific path toward understanding. My apologies go out to those who have told these stories elsewhere and in many ways have given unique life to these traditional tales. I have tried to give you, the reader, specific story reference points in the Epilogue of this book.

The power of story is greatly underestimated. May these stories be used to teach, to enlighten, and to build bridges of human connection.

Jay Stailey



Dear Reader,

When Jay Stailey and I first started talking about this book, he was president of the National Storytelling Association and principal at G.W. Carver Elementary School, which was the school in Baytown, Texas, with the highest percentage of poverty. Both of us were struck by how much of the important information in poverty that gets conveyed orally is done so through story.

As I began to travel and do workshops on poverty, many people asked how we can teach the hidden rules, the basic understandings that an individual needs to know in order to be successful in the world of school and work. I suggested that “story” would be the natural vehicle.

This book is meant to be a tool for discussion and teaching. Stories can be told, read aloud, or read silently. The responses are meant to be given orally, though a written learning log could be kept. You may wish to develop further questions. Many of these stories lend themselves to a variety of learning opportunities.

Jay’s stories touched my heart. It is only as we work together, each in our own way, that we will begin to address the issues of poverty.

Joe Jaworski, in his book Synchronicity, states, “If individuals and organizations operate from the generative orientation,

from possibility rather than resignation, we can create the future into which we are living, as opposed to merely reacting to it when we get there.”

The questions I’ve developed to go with Jay’s stories are dedicated to the possible.

Ruby Payne

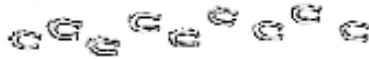


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CHAPTER 1

Tales of Poverty and Wealth

In a tired neighborhood, in an old brick housing project, ten-year-old Carlos lives with his mama. Though outsiders might be afraid to travel in these streets, this is Carlos' neighborhood, and these are Carlos' streets (truth be told, fear is a large part of Carlos' life). On a steamy, late-summer afternoon, he sat on some steps and conversed with Pete about being rich one day. Carlos knew that Pete, an older man with a patch on one eye, could see more with his good eye than most of the rest of the neighborhood combined (except for Carlos' mama). Pete smiled at Carlos and asked, "Did I ever tell you about how Rufus Burns got himself rich?" Pete leaned back and took a breath, then off he went ...

The Remarkable Dreams of Rufus Burns

Rufus was a street peddler who lived over on First Avenue. He had a little house in front of his stable. I believe his horse Maybelle had more room in the stable than Rufus had in his house. I know that the yard in between was barely big enough for a little cherry tree. This all happened before the city government and the Sac 'n Save put street peddlers like Rufus out of business. Early in the morning, way before the sun came up, Rufus would hitch up his wagon to Maybelle and go down to the farmers' market and buy fruits and vegetables. By mid-morning, you could hear the clip-clop of Maybelle's hooves and the chanting song that Rufus would sing out about the produce on his wagon. He would sell apples and bananas and peaches and plums to the folks on their way to work, or maybe a snack, an apricot or grapes, to those already working. For the folks still at home, his song would roust them out and get them moving to the tune of "Tomaaaatoes, ohhhkra, fresh-picked collard greens." He didn't

get rich pulling his wagon and singing his song, but he survived. Some days, Mister Rufus even sold some of the ripe cherries off that little tree in his yard. I bet even your mama remembers eating some of Mister Rufus' ripe cherries.

“You know that’s right,” Carlos said, kicking at an ant on the sidewalk. “But how’d he get rich?”

Back one spring, Rufus woke up earlier than early and shook his head. It wasn’t time to get up, but he couldn’t sleep because he’d had a dream. He dreamed if he went into Houston to City Hall down on Bagby Street and stood on the front steps, he would discover an amazing thing. But time was moving, and he didn’t want to take time worrying about foolish dreams. So he got up, hitched Maybelle to the wagon, and went on over to the farmers’ market. By the time the sun was up, he was so busy greeting his neighbors with his fruit-and-vegetable chant, he didn’t think any more about that dream. Problem was, the next night he had that same dream again. And the next night.

“Same dream, huh?” Carlos was trying not to be interested.

You got that right. And after he had that same dream three nights running, well, you know what they say about dreams like that. He skipped the farmers' market altogether and got a ride into Houston. From mid-morning to late in the afternoon, Rufus stood on those City Hall steps waiting to discover something amazing. But the only thing even a little bit amazing that he discovered was how hot those steps were and how loud his stomach complained about being ignored. He finally went over and sat on a bench under the big oak trees at the library building. No one is real sure where he spent the night that night, but the next morning he was back on the City Hall steps hoping to discover something amazing. The fact that he didn't give up and come home was the only amazing thing about that day. He stayed right downtown, and the next morning, that crazy Rufus was out there on those steps again. Late in



the afternoon of that third day, a policeman got to wondering whether he should give Rufus a ticket for loitering or just run him off. In order to decide, the officer asked Rufus what he was doing there, and Rufus told him about his dreams. That officer looked at Rufus as if he was plum out of his mind and then busted out laughing.

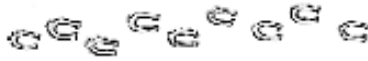
“You old fool,” the cop said. “Certainly you got better things to do than spend three days chasing some ignorant dream. Why, if I spent my time chasing stupid dreams, I wouldn’t be walking my beat right now. I’d be off in some tired old neighborhood east of Houston, trying to find me a peddler’s yard with a cherry tree in it. Because I had a dream just last night that if I found that tree and dug at its roots, I’d find where some bank robbers hid a bag full of money.”

Old Rufus, he recognized an amazing discovery when he heard one, and that policeman didn’t even have to invite him to leave. He came home that very evening, slept all night without dreaming once, and the next morning he dug under that cherry tree and found a bag of money. That’s how Mister Rufus got rich.

And do you know what?

“What?” Carlos asked, looking up at that gleam in Pete’s one good eye.

There was no end to the good Mister Rufus did in this neighborhood after that amazing discovery. And that wasn’t including his fruits and vegetables. I bet your mama remembers Mister Rufus. He was a good man.



The next morning, Pete noticed that Carlos was counting the pennies in his pocket. “If I had two more pennies,” Carlos said, looking up at Pete, “I’d be all set when the ice cream man comes around.” Pete replied, “Let’s go find us a millionaire; maybe he can make up the difference.”

The Millionaire

Carlos jumped down off the steps. He could not imagine where Pete was going to take him to find a millionaire. He thought maybe they would get a ride out to the Interstate. He had seen a rich guy on the TV who sold cars out on the Inter-

state. He also thought Pete might take him down by the new marina. Carlos had seen big boats down there and a new restaurant they were building ... and imagined it must take a million dollars to own a big motorboat or build a new restaurant. But Pete didn't even walk toward his old car. He was heading up Carver Street toward the clinic. Carlos was wondering where Pete was going to find a millionaire up by the clinic. Before they got to the clinic, they turned on Willow and ended up standing on the sidewalk in front of the barber shop. It was all the usual bunch, men his mama had warned him about hanging around—some teenagers, and some a little older, plus a few old men like Buddy Jacks, a blues guitar man. “Well, here's your man.” Pete nodded toward Buddy Jacks and winked at Carlos. Carlos couldn't believe it. He knew Buddy Jacks. Sometimes, when Buddy had a few gigs, people claimed he was flush and tossed his money around like it was newspaper in the wind. Carlos also knew Buddy Jacks sometimes came around his grandma's house and was grateful that his grandma was a good cook and a gracious woman. Carlos knew if it weren't for his grandma, Buddy

Jacks would have gone hungry more than a few times. It was apparent on the days when Buddy came calling, he didn't have a dime to his name.

Just then the tune from the ice cream truck came wafting down Willow Street. Before Carlos could reach into his pocket and count his pennies, Buddy Jacks was holding two quarters out toward him. Carlos thanked him, grabbed the quarters, and ran down to the corner to catch the ice cream man. On the way back to his mama's house, Carlos told Pete about the times that Buddy Jacks had been so busted that Carlos' grandma had to feed him or he would've starved to death. Carlos fell silent, and Pete watched him lick on his popsicle. Carlos finally looked up.

"I see now that you wanted to meet someone who had a million dollars," said Pete with a smile. "I thought I'd show you better than that. I wanted to introduce you to someone who had *spent* a million dollars. In our neighborhood, that's a real millionaire!"



On Friday morning, Carlos turned the corner on MLK and ran smack into Pete. Pete was standing quite still, his hat in his hands, as he watched a funeral procession roll by. “Miss Thornton,” he clarified quietly out of the corner of his mouth. Carlos stood erect until the line of cars following the hearse had gone over the railroad tracks, then he turned to Pete.

“Won’t hear her complaining about being poor anymore. Think life is better where she’s heading?”

Miss Thornton’s Poor Sister

When Lily Thornton’s sister May died, Pete started, settling down onto the steps, folks said she went straight to heaven. When she reached the pearly gates, she was standing next to a man who was obviously very rich.

St. Peter arrived and invited the rich man to enter at the pearly gates. Sister May peeked through the gates and watched as St. Peter and the rich man walked into the golden city.

What she saw really got her steamed! A chorus of angels greeted St. Peter and the rich man with a rousing trumpet fanfare, and people filled the streets shouting. When the noise died down, St. Peter gave a short but passionate speech and finished by saying, “Welcome to the City of God. Make yourself at home.” As the rich man walked down the street, people began to shout and wave.



When the excitement had come to an end, St. Peter opened the gates, then bowed and beckoned for Miss May to enter. By now Miss May was really mad, and she decided to give St. Peter a

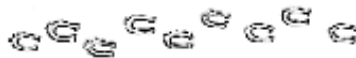
piece of her mind.

“This is the last place I ever expected to be treated this way. I spent a lifetime on earth being discriminated against. All my days I watched rich people walk through doors that were slammed in the face of folks like me. I did not expect to face the same treatment on my first day in God’s heavenly kingdom! I thought that here all people would at least be treated equally. But look ... now the crowds are all gone, and there is no one left to cheer for Miss May Thornton.”

“My dear friend,” St. Peter replied, “I can see how it looks like discrimination, but I must explain. Everything will be the same for the both of you from here to eternity. It’s just that today is a special occasion. We receive poor folks up here every day, but we haven’t had a rich man for nearly eight years!”

And that, Carlos my man, is the truth!

“I know that’s right,” Carlos replied.



“I can’t wait until school starts up again,” Carlos told Pete.

“Why is that?” Pete asked, curious that Carlos would be anxious for the end of summer vacation.

“I want to ask my teacher for a definition of ‘poor.’ At the house I keep hearing Mama and the neighbor ladies talking about ‘welfare for poor people,’ and ‘housing for poor people,’ and ‘poor Miss Annie, her with no family left,’ and ‘those poor Rockets getting beat by thirty points,’ and don’t be ‘poor-mouthin’ my man’ till I can’t tell for sure what ‘poor’ is.”

“I look forward to finding out what your teacher has to say. It seems to me,” Pete added, “that ‘poor’ has more to do with how a person feels than how a person is.”

Willie, the Shoeshine Man

A few years ago, a shoeshine man lived in that yellow house right over there on Yupon

Street. He didn't own the house; a landlord owned the house. Willie, the shoeshine man, just moved in one day without benefit of a lease—or electricity and water, for that matter. At the time, the chief of police used to wander through the town late at night in street clothes trying to discover things that might be going on. Lots of nights he came into our neighborhood because he had a hard time figuring out how poor people lived. They say that one night he was walking down Yupon Street when he noticed a light shining inside that yellow house and heard a rather happy tune being whistled. He went up to the door and knocked. A voice from inside invited him in. He opened the door and stepped inside the room. Willie, the shoeshine man, sat in the middle of the room on a wooden box, reading a paper by the light of a lantern.

“May I join you?” the chief asked. “It's beginning to rain a little outside.”

Willie got up and offered the crate to the stranger. While the rain pattered on the roof, the two men began to talk.

“How do you manage to get by these days?” the chief asked, noting that the house was empty

except for the wooden box that he was now sitting on.

“I shine shoes,” Willie replied.

“Where is your shoeshine shop?”

“I can’t afford a shop. I take my shoeshine box—you’re sitting on it there—to the sidewalk in front of the clinic, or the Sac ’n Save. Then I shine shoes for folks as they need it.”

“You shine shoes on the sidewalk? Can you make enough money that way?”

Willie spoke up with both patience and pride: “Each day I make just enough money to buy food for that day.”

“Just enough for one day? Aren’t you afraid that one day you won’t make enough, and then you’ll go hungry?”

“I let God worry about the ‘one day,’ and He helps me take care of the ‘today.’”

As the police chief headed home later that night he decided to put Willie’s ‘a day at a time’ philosophy to the test. The next day, he issued an order to his men that the \$50 street vendor license be strictly enforced and include shoeshine men.

That night, the chief returned to Yupon

Street to see if Willie might be whistling a different tune. But to his surprise, Willie was sitting in that little house, still whistling a happy tune.

“My friend,” said the chief, “I heard the police were cracking down on street vendors today and wondered if you had been able to make enough to buy food.”

“Oh,” replied Willie, “I was pretty angry when I heard I wouldn’t be able to shine shoes. But I knew that I got a right to make a living, and I’d have to find a way. As I stood on the corner telling myself that very thing, a group of people came up the sidewalk. When I asked them where they were headed, they told me they were going out on the highway to pick up aluminum cans. I asked if I could join them and they said, ‘It’s a big old highway. Come ahead.’ So I picked up aluminum cans. At the end of the day I was able to sell them for just enough money to buy food for today.”

“Just enough for today?” said the police chief with a hint of disgust in his voice. “What about tomorrow? What about next week?”

“I let God worry about the ‘one day,’ and He helps me take care of the ‘today.’”

The next day the police chief told his men to enforce the law about no pedestrians on the highway. He told them that anyone caught walking out on the highway should be forced to join the National Guard and receive no pay for thirty days.

That night he returned to Yupon Street and, to his amazement, Willie, the shoeshine man, was still whistling a happy tune. There he sat on



the wooden box, whittling on a piece of wood. When the chief inquired about Willie's day, he got the whole story.

"The police caught me out by the highway picking up aluminum cans and made me join the National Guard. At the National Guard office, they issued me a uniform and gun, made me stand at

attention all day, and said I wouldn't get paid for a month!"

"Oh, my friend, I bet you wish now that you had saved some money."

"Well, let me tell you what I did. At the end of the day, I looked at that gun and thought, *This baby's worth some money!* So on the way home, I took it to the pawn shop, got this whittling knife and just enough money to buy food for today. Now I'm whittling a gun out of this piece of wood that will look just like the one I pawned."

The police chief was stunned. "But what if one day you have to use that gun in the line of duty?"

"I let God worry about the 'one day,' and He helps me take care of the 'today.'"

The following day, while Willie, the shoeshine man, was standing post at the armory, the police chief sent some men to order him to guard a captured fugitive. "If he tries to escape," they grunted, "shoot to kill!"

"Shoot to kill? I'm not a soldier, I'm just a shoeshine man."

"If you don't shoot to kill, we'll figure you must be in with him."

Willie watched the man closely as a crowd began to gather. Slowly the man began to back into the crowd, looking out of the corners of his eyes for an escape route. Without hesitating, Willie shouted, “Let God be my witness: I am no murderer! If this man is guilty as charged, let my gun fire straight and true. But if he is innocent, let my gun turn to wood!”

He pulled his gun and aimed at the prisoner. But when the gun did not go off, he looked at it strangely, then dropped it on the pavement with a wooden *clunk*. The crowd gasped, and whispers of mystery turned to shouts of miracles.

At that moment the police chief came forward and identified himself to Willie as his night visitor. He invited Willie to move in with him at his house and be his advisor. I think he was still hoping to figure out how Willie could live so happily, one day at a time.

But Willie declined his offer and returned to that little house there on Yupon Street. He’s gone now, Pete added, but as far as I can tell, every bit of that story is the truth.

