

Grade 3: Unit 6, Week 1 Helping Our Neighbors

Read Aloud: **The Straw Choja**

A Japanese Tale retold by Cathy Spagnoli

Wonderful Words: *confusion, fragile, deserves, lonesome, fortune*

Mukashi (mũ kā' shē) means “long ago.”

Choja (chō' jā) means “wealthy person.”

The Straw Choja

Mukashi, mukashi. Long ago in Japan lived a poor man named Taro. He was so poor that he had only hot water to drink and rough, unpolished rice to eat. His clothes, though worn, were carefully patched. But Taro was good-natured and kind. A smile always lit up his face. And his eyes showed the warmth of his heart.

One day outside a temple, Taro suddenly stumbled. “*A-ra!*” he cried as he fell down. “*GAN!*” His head hurt, his chest pained. When he opened his eyes, Taro looked around in confusion. And there, beside him on the ground, he found a piece of straw. “Ah,” he thought, “that was an unlucky fall. But perhaps this is a lucky straw. It looks lonely in the dust. I shall keep it. It just might help me one day!”

On Taro strolled until he came to a pond. Sunlight sparkled on the pond, and dragonflies danced over it. All of a sudden, one dragonfly flew to Taro. “Go back, little one,” he urged. Still the dragonfly circled closer and closer. Taro brushed it away, yet it truly wished to stay. “Well, if you insist, do come with me,” laughed Taro.

So the insect landed on his open hand. Its wings fluttered *chira, chira, chira* against his palm.

As Taro wondered how to carry such a fragile being, the straw tickled his other hand. “Well, I have a lucky straw,” he thought. “Now if this is a lucky dragonfly, perhaps I should put them together.” Then he pulled a thread from his shirt. Gently he tied the dragonfly to the straw.

The dragonfly liked this new way to play. It hummed. It hopped. It twirled in delight *pyon, pyon, pyon*.

“What a lovely toy,” Taro said, watching the dragonfly weave about the straw. Suddenly, he heard a child’s laughter. He glanced up.

Coming down the road was a fine carriage. As it neared him, a boy’s voice called out, “Mother, Mother! Look at that cute dragonfly. Can I have it?” Small eager eyes peeked from the carriage as it stopped. A young mother looked out shyly.

Taro bowed. “Here,” he laughed. “Enjoy it.” And he gave his toy to the boy.

Delighted cries filled the air. The woman’s face relaxed in a smile. She reached into a basket, then held out three huge oranges. “Thank you, kind sir,” she said. “One gift deserves another. Please take these with you.”

Taro gratefully took the oranges. They looked so plump and ripe. Wondering when to eat one, he strolled away. Then suddenly, ahead of him, he heard a moan.

“Oh, I can walk no farther. I shall die of thirst,” sobbed a weak voice. Taro rushed forward and found an old woman leaning against a tree. Her face was most pale. She seemed about to collapse. Her servant looked on helplessly. “I must drink something. I feel so weak,” she gasped.

Taro looked at his fruit, so full of juice. And with a pleased bow, he handed the three oranges to the old woman. “Oh, you have saved me,” she sighed as she ate an orange. “I feel stronger already. Thank you so much.”

And she drew from her bag two pieces of cloth. Each one was covered with cranes. The cloth was so bright it glowed. “Sir,” she said. “I have nothing else to give, please take this.”

Taro carefully took the treasure she offered him. He had never felt such soft silk or seen such delicate beauty. With another bow, he walked slowly away. On and on he journeyed, past rich rice fields and sparkling roof tiles. “Ah, what a lucky day,” he thought. “Now what shall I do with my cloth?”

At that moment, a samurai rode by on an elegant horse. Behind him marched his men, looking quite brave and strong. Taro stepped back to admire the sight. Then all of a sudden *kuta, kuta*, the horse collapsed.

Taro ran toward it. He loved horses, and this one had looked so fine, so fit. Quickly, the samurai and his men gathered around it as well. But the horse stayed as still as stone. His chest held no breath. His eyes held no life.

“I can not wait. I must go,” cried the samurai, and he strode off.

“Shall we move the horse underneath a tree?” the men asked each other.

Taro stared at the horse in pity. “How lonesome and unwanted it looks,” he thought. “I shall take care of it if you wish,” he said to the men. “Take this cloth in exchange.” He held out one of his glorious pieces of cloth.

Smiling now, the men agreed. “What a fool he is,” they whispered as they left with the cloth.

Taro looked silently around him. Nearby, he saw bamboo waving over a small pond. “First, I’ll bring this poor animal some water,” he decided. From the pond he brought water. Gently, he poured it over the horse’s body *zaburi, zaburi*.

Suddenly, the horse moved. His eyes opened. They twinkled. All at once, he stood up and rubbed Taro gently in pleasure. “Ah, this is indeed a lucky horse,” thought Taro, quite thrilled. “I shall keep it, but first I must find it some food.” Taro rode on to the next village. There he traded the other piece of cloth for grains and some new clothes.

Looking quite grand, Taro left the village. As darkness fell, he rode in and out of shadows, searching for a place to stay. At last, ahead of him, lights grinned a greeting. He neared them and saw a fine old farmhouse. Packed trunks stood in front of it, ready for a trip.

“What a handsome horse. Would you trade him for my two large rice fields over there?” cried the house owner, coming up to Taro. “I have need of such a horse for my travels.”

Afraid that he was only dreaming, Taro agreed. Off the horse he slid. His hand stroked the horse as he whispered good-bye. Then he offered it to the man.

“And since you look like an honest fellow, may I beg a favor?” asked the owner. Taro nodded. “While I am gone, please stay here. Guard my home and lands. If anything should happen to me, they will be yours. I have no family and no close friends.”

“I shall do my best,” promised Taro. He followed the owner inside the house. In great comfort, the two talked for some time. They ate rice and fish. They drank some tea, and then they fell asleep *gusaka, gusaka*.

Birds soon sang *kutt, kutt, kutt* to welcome the sun. And in the soft morning light, the house owner left.

Taro awoke moments later and shook his head sleepily. “Why am I here in this splendid house?” he wondered. Then

he remembered
the straw,
the dragonfly,
the oranges,
the cloth,
and the horse.

Amazed at his good fortune, he walked around his new rice fields. As the days passed, he worked hard. Fields needed plowing. Rice needed planting. Animals needed care.

A year, then two, flew by. From a far off mountain came word of the landowner’s death. Taro became the new master. All the land for miles around now belonged to him. Everything in the house was his, too.

Every day as he worked, he smiled. “To think that all of this started with one little straw,” he whispered again and again. Lucky Taro never ever forgot his poorer days. And his kindness only increased as his wealth did. He helped many others all the time, in every way that he could. To the end of his days, Taro lived in happiness with great good fortune.

confusion

Define: **Confusion** is when things are unclear or mixed up.

Example: My **confusion** became greater when the character in the book moved to a new city.

Ask: Why would it be difficult to do homework in a state of **confusion**?

fragile

Define: If something is **fragile**, it can be easily broken or harmed; it is delicate.

Example: Ruth carefully placed the **fragile** baby bird back in its nest.

Ask: Why would you not use a **fragile** dish to feed a two-year old child?

deserves

Define: To **deserve** is to be worthy of merit or to have the right to something.

Example: After working hard all year, the kids **deserved** a vacation.

Ask: Who do you know who **deserves** praise for something he or she has done?

lonesome

Define: **Lonesome** is when one is sad because of lack of friends or companions.

Example: The new student looked **lonesome** as he sat there eating his lunch.

Ask: How would you help someone who is **lonesome**?

fortune

Define: **Fortune** is chance or luck.

Example: We had the bad **fortune** of having rainy weather on field day.

Ask: When have you had the good **fortune** of getting a better grade than you deserved?