

Benkei Versus the Giant Carp

By

Larry Lefkowitz

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

“Benkei Versus The Giant Carp,” by Larry Lefkowitz is one of those stories that is out of my depth but that I love it for the craft.

I know nothing about Japanese or Jewish proverbs. I’m neither Jewish nor Japanese and have never cared for the foibles of proverbs and their supposed fables. The ones contained within here are comparable in and of the sense that they have been glued together by the author and reflect the deep care and consideration they have taken to read and deconstruct the comparisons.

The plot is simple.

Benkei must save his mother from the giant carp.

I cannot enough stress the humor that exists in this adventure.

I think that the strength of this story, the beauty of this story, lies in the juxtaposition of cultures:

For the rest of his life, Benkei adopted a positive outlook guided by the fear that “If the heart is bitter, sugar in the mouth won’t help” while mindful of the Zen admonition, “Enlightenment is the food that eats you.”

In the sense that the clash of opposites is what often creates, I think somewhere in my English training they call that an oxymoron, Lefkowitz creates a comparison rooted deep in two traditions.

My mother is hard, but at least she was let down nicely in her expectations of me (when she asks what magazine I write for (cause she’ll never remember and that doesn’t bother me) she tends to follow that with why aren’t you teaching – i.e. better job). Benkei has to fish that bitch out of a carp and still takes shit from both sides.

At least we know that our mothers love us and want the best from us, provided that we limit the number of gargantuan fish swallowing them to the ones that we can kill – probably because they can’t kill us.

Do you want sushi or gefilte?

Either way, read this story.

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language...)*

Benkei then cut open the carp with his sword. Fortunately, his mother was still alive. “Nu, what are you waiting for,” she said, “Get me out of this fish. I’m swearing off gefilte fish for life!”

Benkei nodded and pulled her out of the fish. “Do you mean, mother, you will substitute sushi?”

“Are you crazy, that would be admitting that your mother-in-law has better taste than me!”

Benkei Versus the Giant Carp

According to Japanese legend, the heroic samurai Benkei killed a giant carp which had swallowed his mother when she fell into a waterfall, which calls to mind the Japanese saying, apparently borrowed from the Yiddish, “If a person is destined to drown, he will drown in a spoonful of water,” but then Benkei’s mother did not do things half way. In any event, Benkei’s mother escaped such a fate when the giant carp swallowed her, which almost caused Benkei to lose his taste for gefilte fish. In order to save his mother, Benkei knew he had to kill the giant carp.

Benkei had to defeat the giant carp not only to save his mother, but also in order to escape his having to commit seppuku, an act which would please no one except his mother-in-law. The same who dared to claim that sushi was tastier than gefilte fish. Of her it was written, “A nasty tongue is worse than a wicked hand,” although she was adept at both. She forced Benkei to violate the sage advice that “Only one who can swallow an insult is a man;” albeit, he justified his refusal to do so on the basis, “The person who is his own master cannot tolerate another boss.”

Facing the giant carp, Benkei concentrated on entering the state where his body and the sword he held become one – the oneness in which he was the sword and the sword was he: the state of MUGA, ‘no ego’ or ‘no mind.’ He thus achieved HONSHIN, ‘the original mind’ and SHIJIN, ‘the perfect man,’ and, more importantly, AI-UCHI ‘free

from the fear of death.’ And, finally, ICHINEN, ‘the instant in finding oneself standing sword in hand before the fallen enemy.’

Benkei killed the carp with one stroke of his sword. Now he had to act quickly to save his mother, violating the ancient proverb: “When your enemy falls, don’t rejoice, but don’t pick him up either,” which was ok if your mother wasn’t inside the enemy. Benkei picked up the giant carp and wrestled it onto the kitchen table. He beamed at his wife, “A year’s supply of Gefilte fish, go and have delivered a barrel of horse radish.” Benkei then cut open the carp with his sword. Fortunately, his mother was still alive. “Nu, what are you waiting for,” she said, “Get me out of this fish. I’m swearing off gefilte fish for life!”

Benkei nodded and pulled her out of the fish. “Do you mean, mother, you will substitute sushi?”

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There are those who claim that the legend of Benkei and the giant carp resulted when a Lost Tribe of Israel arrived in Japan -- likely the tribe of Zebulun, seafarers who surely fished. (Moses: “They shall partake of the abundance of the seas”). The biblical Job asks, “Can you pull in leviathan with a hook?” Leviathan was a sea serpent that the righteous would dine on at the end of days. The cabbalist book, the Zohar, claims that the feasting on leviathan is not literal but symbolizes the reception of enlightenment. The search for enlightenment is a basic tenet of Zen.

Benkei was no slouch when it came to looking for enlightenment. He rejected as not applying to him, the statement, “Everyone wants to get enlightened but nobody wants to change.” He was Japanese, and Zen stressed the search for enlightenment without having to wait for the end of days. Samurais, unlike the Jews, weren’t known for their patience, the latter guided by the ancient tempo, “If it goes, it goes, don’t force it.” Having achieved the physical by killing the giant carp, Benkei was ready for the spirituality of Zen. In his search for enlightenment, he came across the Zen wisdom:

You and I sip a cup of tea. That act

is apparently alike to us both,
 but who can tell what a wide gap
 there is subjectively between
 your drinking and my drinking?
 In your drinking there may be no Zen,
 while mine is brimful of it.

If it turns out that Zen adherents drink their tea through a lump of sugar in the manner of East European Jews who put a small piece of sugar between their front teeth and sip hot tea through it, there is, indeed, basis for the claim that a Lost Tribe of Israel reached Japan and influenced the traditional tale of Benkei and the giant carp.

For the rest of his life, Benkei adopted a positive outlook guided by the fear that “If the heart is bitter, sugar in the mouth won’t help” while mindful of the Zen admonition, “Enlightenment is the food that eats you.”

Gefilte? he mused, mindful of the giant carp that had swallowed his mother. Certainly stuffed.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Charles, Senior Editor at fleasonthedog.com, closes out his emails with “Stay hungry. Stay foolish.” My piece, “Benkei Versus the Giant Carp” may violate the first, but certainly conforms to the second.*

What led me to write this ‘humor’ was coming across the Japanese legend about the samurai Benkei killing the giant carp which had swallowed his mother when she fell into a waterfall. At first, I thought I had stumbled upon a Yiddish bit of humor, especially with the giant carp aspect, as gefilte fish is made from carp. But no, it was truly a Japanese legend.

With respect to the Zen search for enlightenment, I can only quote what Buddha, if he had been Jewish, would have said about it:

*Zen is not easy. It takes effort to attain nothingness. And then what do you have?
 Bupkis.*

My stylistic influences in writing it were more Yiddishkeit than Japanese; if there be Japanese humor (samurai shmaltz?). I'm sure I would feel like Ruth among the alien corn.

AUTHOR BIO: Lefkowitz's Jewish story collection 'Enigmatic Tales' is published by Fomite Press. Fomite will shortly publish his novella and story collection 'Lefkowitz Unbound'.