

To Build A Better World

The following intergenerational skit is a contemporary parable about affirming the variety of gifts in the human condition as well as about working with mission partners to create meaningful and lasting change. It can be used as a church school play, in worship, or in a special One Great Hour of Sharing event. It is designed to be used as simply or as elaborately as you wish. Props can be created easily: cardboard cutouts for both the hilly land landscape, the truck, and the beams. A hard hat and tool kit can identify the builder; a pocket protractor and T-square the engineer; a baseball cap the child; a color palette and beret the artist, and a basket full of colorful cloths the old woman.

Despite a serious underlying message, the skit is broadly drawn, like a cartoon. Have fun with it! Don't overlook the use of humor and exaggeration in acting, characterizations, costumes, and sets. Remember, we all learn valuable lessons while at play.

In a more serious vein, a question-and-answer period might be appropriate after the skit. Some discussion starters include:

1. What are the most important points of the story? What do they have to do with One Great Hour of Sharing?
2. What mistakes did the flatlanders make as they tried to help the old woman? How is this similar to mistakes we sometimes make when we try to help others? Have you ever felt like the old woman must have felt in this story? Can we learn lessons from this that we can apply to other relationships, e.g., parent and child, congregation and community?
3. What made you laugh? Why?
4. Why do you think the child was the first to believe the flatlanders should listen to the old woman? Does the exchange between the woman and child remind you of any biblical texts?
5. The flatlanders mistook the woman's cloths for rags. Have you ever considered something to be of no value, even though it was important to someone else?
6. What can we learn from neighbors who have fewer material possessions than we do? How can we apply this learning in our highly complicated society?

Characters:

Storyteller, Truck Driver, Old Woman, Builder Engineer, Child, Artist

Placer: A hillside near the border between flatlands and hilly land.

Storyteller: Once upon a time, the world was divided into two places—flatlands and hilly land. The people from flatlands were prosperous while the people from hilly land always seemed to have bad luck. Forces of nature pelted hilly land with rain. Strong winds eroded the soil until it was hard to grow food. Hilly land people were poor and lived simple lives.

One day a group of flatlanders set out in a truck to try to help the people from hilly land -- a builder with a strong back; an artist who could create beautiful things; a brilliant engineer; the truck driver, and a child.

On reaching hilly land, the group noticed an old woman who had many pieces of cloth tied onto a large basket she carried on her back.

Builder: Ma'am, why do you have so many rags?

Woman: These cloths are like friends. They protect me from the cold and fill in corners when the wind blows. They sop up water after the rain to use for cooking and cleaning, and they make colorful costumes for festival days.

Engineer: (Aside) Look like rags to me.

Woman: Not everything is as it appears.

Engineer: Perhaps, but the laws of math and science are universal . . . and those rags look universally useless.

Woman: You must be from flatlands.

Artist: Yes, we have heard that things are not well here. We've come to help.

Woman: Here we are grateful for small blessings. We know about the riches in flatlands, and at times we envy you, but we have a resourcefulness we think you've overlooked in your land. Still, I appreciate your concern.

Builder: Where is your house?

Woman: I use this lean-to during the rainy season. But I am often on the road. Then this basket, a few utensils and these cloths are all I need.

Builder: (Aghast) Are there others who live like you?

Woman: Many people live like me.

(The flatlanders gasp and speak among themselves, everyone talking at once) "No homes . . . how can this be . . . these few possessions . . . poor thing . . . the people here must really be suffering." They then huddle together. The woman is oblivious to their concern. She sorts through her cloths and ties a bright bandana around her head.

Builder: *(To the others)* These people are truly in need. We are wealthy by comparison. Perhaps we could build homes for them. We have the resources and the experience. We can help them.

Engineer: Good idea! I can design the structure.

Driver: I can haul the materials.

Artist : I can make it beautiful.

Child: And I can bring some toy cars and trucks for the little ones to play with.

Builder: *(To the woman)* We will build houses for you and your people to live in

so that you'll be protected from the elements and your children will have a safe, secure place to grow up.

Woman: I'm not sure that a house is what I need, but I'm grateful for your kindness. Beware, though. Things here aren't like on flatlands. Get to know our land and our people or your ideas won't work.

Engineer: Nonsense, woman. The laws of science and math are universal. If a building works on flatlands, it will work on hilly land.

(The woman smiles, but says nothing.)

Storyteller: The small band returns to flatlands to gather their materials. Soon they return and set about their task.

Engineer: Woman, we have returned to begin building your house.

Woman: Before you start, there is something you may want to know . . .

Storyteller: The woman is interrupted as the truck starts sliding down the hill. In flatlands there is no need for brakes strong enough to hold a heavy load in hilly land.

Driver: *(calling out, as the truck slides back.)* My truck! I can't keep it still! I'll have to let it roll down and then accelerate back uphill. I'll have to stay in the cab the whole time, so you'll have to unload without me.

Woman: But if you . . .

Builder: Sorry ma'am, we have no time to listen. But we'll be done in no time—even with this inconvenience.

Storyteller: The woman sighs and sits down to watch as the group begins to build. However, try as they might, the house will not go up straight. The uneven terrain keeps the beams from connecting properly.

Builder: *(exasperated)* I'm at a loss. *(To the engineer.)* Your design is wrong for this place.

Engineer: What you mean my design is wrong? It's your materials that are faulty.

Artist: I'm losing patience with both of you. I won't be able to put my skills to any use at all until the house is built. It's pointless for me to be here.

Woman: Excuse me, but I have a suggestion.

Builder: With all due respect, ma'am, we're professionals. We'll fix it. *(The woman sighs and shrugs, amused at the infighting among the builders. Meanwhile, the child is watching from a hilltop, intrigued by the woman's confident humility.)*

Child: *(impatiently)* Our way doesn't seem to be working.

Artist: *(sharply)* Child, you're not helping any. Pipe down until you have something more helpful to

say.

(This rebuke makes the child cry. The old woman comforts the child and dabs the child's eyes with one of her rags.)

Driver: *(accelerating past the group)* I'm getting pretty low on fuel!

Engineer: And I'm getting pretty low on ideas!

Artist: I'm just about out of patience!

Builder: And I'm getting pretty tired from trying to fit these beams together!

Woman: Perhaps if you tried a different approach . . .

Engineer: *(impatiently, as if tired of explaining the same thing over and over)* There's only one way to build a house. The laws of math and science are universal.

Child: *(stands up straight and says loudly)* Maybe we should listen to her. *(All turn to the child.)* Maybe she does have an idea that will work.

Builder: *(skeptically)* Okay, woman. What is it you want to say?

Woman: Our land and our way of life are different from yours. Not better or worse, just different. So you can't just bring your way of life into our land expect it to work. Solutions are simpler here. We need to be flexible. There aren't many straight lines or elaborate structures. But we can still accomplish a good bit. Watch. *(Calls to the driver.)* Drive it back up here and stop!

When the driver rolls the truck up, the woman wedges a knotted rag under the wheel of the truck. It stops rolling.

Driver: Why didn't I think of that? Now I can shut off the engine, save fuel, and help with the building.

Woman: *(to the builder)* These cloths you thought were useless can be most helpful. They mold into any shape, so they fit into odd places. Use them in the joints between the beams to even out the odd angles of our hillsides.

Builder: Amazing!

Woman: *(to the engineer)* Because they are flexible, the cloths allow the beams to move ever so slightly in the heavy winds we get in the winter. This helps the shelter last longer.

Builder: We shouldn't have come. You could have built this shelter by yourself.

Woman: Oh no, not true. We probably would never have gotten around to it. We need things like wells, roads and hospitals more than new houses. Since we can't afford to build all those things at once, it would have been a long time before we would have built any houses.

Artist: You mean we spent all this time building something you didn't even need? Why didn't you tell us; we could have been building a hospital.

Woman: It's not too late to start, but you must learn to work with us, not for us. What you have is valuable, but what we have is too. Together, we can construct a better world. As an artist, you can observe our ways of working and show them to your own people in ways that they might learn from us.

Storyteller: So the builders complete the house, and come back in a few weeks to learn about the needs of the hillylanders, and how they can work with each other to meet those needs. By listening first, they become more effective. They even invite some hillylanders to return with them to flatlands to share their resourceful wisdom. Eventually, the old woman's words come true; together, they do construct a better world.