

Winslow Homer, 'Old woman gathering faggots (The faggot gatherer)', 1865.



The CEO whose Daughters went to Collect Sticks

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There was once a chief executive officer of a multinational corporation who had three daughters. As she grew older her thoughts turned increasingly to retirement, golf, world cruises, luxury yachts, handbag dogs and handsome hunky servants, and she began to wonder which of her daughters was best suited to succeed her as CEO. After careful consideration she summoned the three of them to the drawing room of her mansion and explained her plan.

'I shall set a task that each of you will undertake in turn. It will be a task that almost anyone could accomplish, but the way you accomplish it will tell me what role you will assume in the company and, in particular, which of you will become CEO when I retire.'

'Yee-ha! A competition!' said the eldest daughter.

'Cool. Great idea, Mum,' said the second.

'What's the task, Mother?' asked the third.

'The task,' said the CEO, 'is to go into the wood and collect as many sticks as you can load into a large backpack. You must bring home enough sticks to keep a campfire burning for at least two hours.'

'But that's a menial task!' exclaimed the eldest daughter. 'It's a job for peasants! It's beneath us!'

'What's the point in doing something like that, Mum?' demanded the second. 'We don't do campfires!'

'I'm worried that the task might not be ecologically sensitive, Mother,' said the third.

'Your objections cut no ice with me,' said the CEO. 'I have chosen this task after long and careful thought, and it is my decision.'

All three of the girls knew that once a CEO has reached a decision, nothing can change it, so they stopped complaining and went to an outdoor clothing shop to buy the largest backpacks they had in stock. Then the eldest daughter put on her backpack and, with a show of reluctance verging upon high dudgeon, went into the wood and began to collect sticks.

She'd been at the task for little more than half an hour when she noticed a little old woman in a black cloak and hood who was also gathering sticks. Anyone could see it was tiring and painful work for the poor creature. She groaned as she bent her body so that her arthritic hands could clasp one more stick, and then barely straightened again while she hobbled forward to the next one.

'Let me carry that load of sticks for you, old woman,' said the eldest daughter.

'Oh, that's ever so kind of you, dear,' said the old woman.

The eldest daughter took the old woman's sticks and put them into her backpack. Seeing that she now had enough sticks to keep a campfire burning for two hours, she set off back to the mansion, leaving the old woman to start collecting sticks all over again.

Then the second daughter stumped off into the wood with a backpack and sour face and started to collect sticks. After half an hour or so, she saw a little old woman in a black cloak and hood who was also gathering sticks, and she stopped for a moment to watch her.

'She's so slow!' thought the second daughter. 'I can gather ten or a dozen sticks while she's gathering one!'

So she ignored the little old woman and went on collecting sticks until her backpack was bulging. Then she set off back to the mansion.

After that it was the youngest daughter's turn. She slung the pack on her back and set off into the wood and began to collect sticks. Little more than half an hour had passed before she saw the little old woman in the black cloak and hood, also gathering sticks. Seeing how difficult the task was for the little old woman, and how it made her groan with pain, she was filled with sympathy.

'Please, old woman, let me help you. See, my pack is half full of sticks already. Let me give them all to you. Then you'll be able to go home with more sticks than you could have collected on your own even if you'd worked all day! I can easily gather more. The job isn't painful for me.'

'Oh, that's ever so kind of you, dear,' said the old woman.

She took the youngest daughter's sticks and hobbled back to her hovel, carrying them in her frail arthritic arms. Then the youngest daughter began her task all over again. Another hour and a half passed before her backpack was full enough for her to return to the mansion.

The three daughters gathered again in the drawing room and stood before their mother, who was seated in her favourite armchair, petting her handbag dog and savouring a martini brought to her by a handsome hunky servant. The trio awaited her verdict. She smiled.

'You have all accomplished the task I set you. No surprise there. But as I anticipated, each of you approached the challenge in a different way.' She smiled again. 'Oh, yes, I know about the little old woman in the wood. I paid her to go and collect sticks, and then to present herself at the tradesman's entrance to the mansion and report how each of you had treated her. She was paid minimum wage.'

The daughters were startled, but not surprised. After all, their mother wouldn't have become a CEO if she hadn't been able to plan strategies.

'You,' she said to the youngest daughter, 'proved yourself to have the psychological quality of a low-level employee, one who likes to look helpful even if it costs the company time and money. You will therefore take a menial job in Customer Service on minimum wage.'

The youngest daughter was disappointed, but at least she'd been given a job; and perhaps in time, if she was diligent enough and never complained, she might gain promotion and higher wages. So she thanked her mother and took her backpack to her bedroom and put it away in her wardrobe, because it might prove useful again some day.

'Now you,' said the CEO to her second daughter, 'saw the virtue of appearing more efficient than those around you and outcompeting them. This proved you have middle management qualities. You will therefore start work on the middle floor of head office, with a good starting salary and annual increments.'

The second daughter was a little disappointed because she'd imagined herself to be CEO material, but she was reasonably content with the offer. So she thanked her mother and went into town to sell her backpack for the best second-hand price she could.

'But you, my eldest daughter,' said the CEO, 'are exactly the kind of person I need as my successor. You saw the quickest and least onerous route to accomplishing your task and cared not a jot for anyone you shouldered aside along the way. You therefore have the qualities to become the successful CEO of a multinational corporation.'

Pleased by her mother's verdict, the eldest daughter went outside to throw her backpack into the rubbish bin because she had no further use for it. Then she marched to the boardroom, announced the change in management, enjoyed a five-star lunch and returned to the mansion.

'Thank you, Mother, for being so perceptive,' she said. 'I have now replaced you. The removal men are on their way. I'm sure you'll be happy in your retirement home.'

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