
For the Classroom

Harriet and the Stars

~ Leslie Wetzonis-Woolverton

Editor's Note: At the third WECAN 2023 February conference focusing upon Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity, "Harriet and the Stars" was shared as a puppet play. This is the story of the enslaved woman, Harriet Tubman, who escaped to freedom and became the Underground Railroad hero who escorted about 300 other enslaved people to freedom. Leslie Wetzonis-Woolverton's work stands as a stunning moment of artistry and commitment to bring pictures of racial justice forward in a beautiful and sensitive way for children. Shared below are versions of the story for different presentations.

Harriet Reaches for the Stars

A puppet story for Parent/Child & Nursery

Once there was a little girl named Harriet.
She would play with the twinkling stars and night's golden chariots.
Harriet would talk to the trees, to all the animals tamed and wild,
Happy in this only free place to her as a young child.
Harriet jumped like frogs, she twirled and danced like bees,
And watched ladybugs and butterflies sail by so openly free.
There in the fields tall corn, vast crops would grow.
As she, her sisters, mama and papa carefully placed seeds in ordered rows.
Days were long, weeks, months, and years.
Her courage and strength grew and lessened her fears.
Always, Harriet at night would reach up high above,
Wanting to catch distant dreaming stars so full of love.
"I will pull a star down right from the sky,"
Harriet said to herself as they sailed freely by.
She jumped and jumped, and caught her star golden and tall,
Upon her gallant horse leaping over a great freedom wall.
She reached and reached, reaching up with determined pride.
Those long days, Harriet dreamed of catching stars, always close by.
There in the night sky the stars would never fail.
For Harriet and all, the stars could soar and sail.
Harriet would not give up, for one day she knew
This dream of hers would find a way to blossom through.
During each and every season, she watched the wings of birds in flight.
Freedom! Those stars one day would guide her safely by foot in the night.

Harriet and the Stars: Her Journey Toward Seeking Freedom

A story for Kindergarten and older children

A long time ago, on a land not too far from the Chesapeake Bay, a little girl named Harriet arrived on the shores with her mama, papa, and sisters. Harriet was named Araminta at birth, often called Minty for short by her parents. Just like so many others, Minty's name would be changed to Harriet when she arrived in this brand new land. Harriet suited Minty fine as she grew into womanhood. Yet still, her given name would always stay close in her heart and not be forgotten. Harriet would seek peace, love, and joy in the vast surrounding lands and waters of the Maryland Eastern Shore. For this was made her home.

This new land and new home was not easy. Harriet had to learn to navigate an expected code in this new life. She did not always understand needing to be told harshly throughout the day what to do. On Sundays, her father would teach her much about the land, teaching her bird calls, how to name the many animals and their habits through days of her watchful imitative eyes. He traveled ten miles by foot for his weekly visit to his family. He lived on a different farm and distance never kept him from those he loved.

Her mother, every day, would teach her the old ways of nature medicine, herbs from the lands, and homemaking. Harriet loved mending the clothes of her family and quilting best, an art that would again be of importance later in her life. Harriet learned very early on how stories in stitching could be told to and shared with all. Harriet would also find solace, love, and joy from all the animals she cared for, from wild ones on the edge of the woods, and the busyness of bees & butterflies that always danced and played alongside her as she worked.

After long days under sun, snow, and rain filled skies the land which was becoming so familiar was now indeed her home. At nighttime, alongside her beloved sisters, Harriet would listen and discover peace in her dreams. She would listen as long as she possibly could before falling off to sleep, to the private soft chuckles and open laughter from parents, "aunts" and "uncles" in the waning hours of a darkened night so close together. In the soft and hard nights, most would be free in these shared private moments together.

For during the day, the adults and parents could not laugh together openly, daytime was ever so serious.

They would wipe their moistened brows with faded bits of cloth fragments in silence under the hot sun and place hands upon their weary and arched backs through every season. Harriet worked and understood her tasks with the land, working often in song with the many others and her family. Singing would be allowed, and if she closed her eyes she would recognize the comfort she felt often at night. If questions came to her during the day, her sisters would shush her with a finger to their lips or whisper *We'll talk later—Harriet, keep your mind to your work.* They were followed with stern and watchful eyes.

Harriet would look up to the vast night sky and twinkling stars with wonder, gratitude, and hope. She would dream... Reaching up to the stars and out to hold the hands of her sisters, Harriet would let go of the day's hard work. In autumn, Harriet would listen to the crackling of leaves as they fluttered in the wind and danced into the distance. In winter, Harriet would seek the whistling crisp sounds of ice on glass panes of the larger house, and the crunching underfoot of snow as she with others walked home. In spring, Harriet would splash her feet alongside the many newly emerged waterways along the Chesapeake, jumping in the air like the frogs that splashed heavily back into ponds.

In summer, Harriet would play with the sparkling lightning bugs fluttering into the lost light of night and landing everywhere. Harriet realized she could have silent conversations with all of nature around her. She would greet and name the trees daily, often with a bow or curtsy, walking towards the neat row of crops. Of the tiny insects that landed on her hands, arms and shoulders through all seasons during the day, Harriet would welcome them with careful, soft, open laughter, but careful in this small joy not to be seen. She admired their dizzying journeys and how freely they flew from flower to tree to flower again and again. And at night the stars would return and shine freely to brighten the night sky.

Additional text for older children

And as time moved forward many, many years later, Harriet would grow steadily into the age of her own mother. In the future days of her risk-filled pilgrimage, the stars would navigate her and those she brought along to safety. Harriet would begin to recognize friend from foe by the many sounds at night beneath the guiding stars. These moments full of great need

and courage would lead her towards her destiny and calling. Unbeknownst to Harriet as a little girl, this brave task would be called upon again and often well into late adulthood.

Harriet would continue her life seeking guidance from all beings, from every thing she loved. This wisdom acknowledged and gained from the land and all nature would become Harriet's great teacher. And Harriet would listen for the simplest message offered by the wild Cambridge woods full of thick needled pine trees, dense crab grasses, coarse brush, and hollowed fallen logs. Harriet would seek change in the wild freedom all around her. She would not give up.

The little girl, now a petite sized woman, would forever seek solace and safety from the stars at night, which would time and time again lead her way and the way of so many others following behind. Silent echoes would assist Harriet at every turn. And the seen and unseen of so many always remain close to her side.

Harriet, a brave little girl, and a strong, great woman, made the way forward. She would free at least three hundred lives. We, too, can listen to our earth and reach up to the stars. We can be brave in all things known and unknown. We can be bold when our hearts call out for change. ♦

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