

THE SINDBAD STORIES: THE ISLAND

The Story

Sindbad the sailor said:

'I was born wealthy in the city of Baghdad and wanted for nothing. I spent my wealth as if it were an endless spring without a thought for the future. But one day the spring ran dry and, almost without noticing, I became poor. Whilst I wondered about what to do I recalled some lines of poetry that advised that no man who does not venture forth will ever gain anything. Nothing will come without effort and risk. So, I resolved to travel on a ship. I sold all my things and raised a reasonable amount of capital, then joined a merchant ship from Basra. It sailed from island to island buying, bartering and selling. Believe it or not, I became wealthy again but no sooner had I become so than I was to lose it all. This is the way of fate, against which we can do nothing.

'You see, we arrived on an island that was nothing short of paradise. Every fruit grew on the island and we stayed there for some time. Many of us explored the island while others had fun and played games. But every night we all gathered together around a fire and told each other tales of seafaring and much else besides. Maybe because sailors live such precarious lives, their futures uncertain, one night we got to talking about what we can be sure of. A very philosophical discussion it was too.

"How can we really be sure of anything?" one of our company had said rather curiously.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm sure that I'm a sailor and that we have found paradise," said another.

"Maybe. But maybe," replied the first, "this is all a dream. This paradise island does seem too good to be true."

This is a good place to stop the story and to ask the class what they think about the sailors' discussion. Write the ideas up like so:

A: What can we be sure of?

B: I'm sure that we have found a paradise island.

A: But how do you know that this isn't all just a dream? B:

Before reading, or writing up, what the sailors say, for the next part, let the class make their own suggestions and ask them if they can guess what B will say in response to A. (Note: this exercise is not just about guessing what the sailors say but also – and mainly – about what the children think, so if they don't guess correctly take a real interest in what they say instead.) Then write up the next part of the dialogue but as a formal argument:

B: If you pinch yourself that proves that you are not dreaming.

A:

Next, ask, first of all, whether they agree with B's argument, followed by what they think A will say in response. Again, try not to make this only a guessing exercise. I have deliberately left out B's reasons for why pinching yourself proves that you are not dreaming. This is because it is for the class to think of reasons. The sort of reasons I've heard classes include are as follows: 'If you pinch yourself and it hurts then you can't be dreaming because you can't feel pain in your dreams'. This, as I'm sure you can imagine, leads to a discussion of whether or not one can feel pain in a dream. I have also heard that 'If you pinch yourself and you don't wake up then you're not dreaming'. When you and / or the class are ready, continue writing up the dialogue had between the two sailors:

A: You could be dreaming that you are pinching yourself.

Follow this with more discussion about who they agree with most: A or B. The entire dialogue should be on the board for the class to see and assess for themselves:

A: What can we be sure of?

B: I'm sure that we have found a paradise island.

A: But how do you know that this isn't all just a dream?

B: If you pinch yourself that proves that you are not dreaming. A: You could be dreaming that you are pinching yourself.

When you and / or the class are ready continue with the story.

Sindbad the sailor continued:

"All I have to do," said the second, "is pinch myself to discover if this is nothing but a dream or not." He pinched himself. "See! It's not a dream and I've proved it."

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"You could be dreaming that you just pinched yourself," replied the first.

“One thing I’m sure of,” said I, “is that the ground is beneath my feet.” I was so pleased with myself for having found something I considered to be absolutely certain that I jabbed my knife into the earth to finish my point.

‘Just then the earth moved. I got up and went to the beach to see if the ship had felt the surge. I shouted to the ship’s captain, who had remained on board. He shouted back in horror for he could see something from the ship we could not.

“Get off that island if you value your lives!” shouted the captain. “For it is not an island but a giant turtle! It has woken up and is looking to dive into the sea again.” Sure enough, we looked to see its huge head, craning round to see what was on its back and what had woken it from its ancient slumbers.

‘We had no time to gather our things or return to the ship. The creature plunged into the sea’s depths having languished long on the surface – long enough to allow forests to spring up on its back, and rivers and lakes to form. We found ourselves bobbing up and down in the open ocean like bottles cast adrift as we watched the ship vanish behind the horizon leaving us to the whim of fate once more.

‘And while fate gives, it also takes away.’

Task Question: Sindbad was wrong about the ground beneath his feet. What, if anything, can we know for certain?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ What is certainty?
- ✓ What is knowledge?
- ✓ Can something be known for certain?
- ✓ If not, then how certain do we need to be to be able to say that we know something?
- ✓ Could we be dreaming right now? How can we tell if we are dreaming or not?
- ✓ Is feeling certain the same as being certain?