

## UNDER THE WISDOM TREE SAMPLE LESSON 3

### **Main Issue:**

How can we be true to ourselves?

### **Brazos Dances**

*by Connie Dunn*

When Brazos started school, everyone asked him, "What kind of name is Brazos?"

He had liked his name. It was the name of the river near where his mother and father had met. But he didn't like getting teased. And to make matters worse, when he was just three years old, he had decided to become a dancer. He had seen Michal Barishnikov, a famous American male ballet dancer, dance and he had wanted to dance just like him.

Boys, especially in Texas, didn't dance! That was, so it seemed, everyone's opinion at school—at least the opinion of the boys that Brazos wanted to be friends with.

Brazos loved dancing with the same passion that other boys at his age loved soccer and baseball. He didn't dislike soccer or baseball or any other kind of ball. But he knew that dancing was what he wanted to do. And he knew his ballet classes were filled with girls, but he would even endure that. He was good at dancing, but a boy with a pair of ballet slippers in his backpack got teased quite a bit.

"Brazos is gay!" chanted a bunch of older boys.

Brazos cried. The words stung, but he really didn't know what they meant.

That afternoon when his mother picked him up from school, he asked, "Mom, what does 'gay' mean."

Mom looked long and hard at Brazos and answered, "Gay means to be happy, cheerful."

"Are you sure?" asked Brazos. "When some older boys called me gay, today, I don't think they were saying I was happy. I was pretty sad. I even cried...and, you know, Mom, boys aren't supposed to cry. Could there be another meaning, Mom?"

"Well," said Mom, "there is. It refers to when men and men live together like mom and dad. When they are life partners...just like Tom and Dillon, our next-door neighbors."

"Is 'gay' bad?" asked Brazos.

"Do you think Tom and Dillon are bad?" asked Mom.

Brazos shook his head. He remember just day before yesterday when Dillon fixed his bike for him. And last week Tom helped him bake a cake. He liked Tom and Dillon.

Brazos was puzzled. If 'gay' isn't bad, why were those older boys calling him that?

"Mom...if 'gay' isn't bad..."

"Dillon," Mom broke in, "some people think 'gay' people are bad. But they are just like everyone else. There may be a bad person who is 'gay', but that doesn't make all 'gay' people bad. Unfortunately, some people think people with dark skin are bad people. And though there are bad people with dark skin, it doesn't make everyone with dark skin bad. There are bad people with light skin, as well. There are good and bad people in the world. Now, let's talk more about what happened at school."

"The boys found out I had ballet slippers in my backpack. That's why they called me 'gay.' I took them for show-and-tell."

"Hmmm," said Mom.

"Mom, why don't other boys like me? Is it just because I dance?"

"I'm sure it isn't because you dance, dear. But boys who ballet dance are not in the majority."

"Should I stop dancing?"

"Of course, not, dear. Dancing can come in many forms. Do you remember that you have a cousin who lives on a reservation in Oklahoma?"

"Yes, I remember Running Hawk. But what has that got to do with dancing?"

Mom reminded Brazos of his last visit with Running Hawk. He had gone to the reservation to visit and had learned to dance a ceremonial dance. Running Hawk's mother, who was Cherokee, had made Brazos some pants and a shirt to wear during the ceremonial dance. She had told him that to dance in the ceremony was an honor and that such an honor deserved the appropriate dress. She had even made him a pair of moccasins to dance in. He had thought that the moccasins felt very much like his ballet slippers.

The next day, Brazos took the moccasins to school in his backpack. When the older boys came to tease him about the ballet slippers, he showed them his moccasins. They were fascinated.

"Do you really wear moccasins?" the tallest boy, who was nine, asked.

"Only when I dance in ceremonial dances with my cousin, Running Hawk," said Brazos.

"Gosh!" said the other boy. "We wouldn't have teased you, if we knew you were an Injun dancer. You won't scalp us, will you?"

Brazos looked puzzled, then remembered an old movie he had seen where the Indians had scalped the white people they had killed. What had his mother called it? Oh, yes, she had said it was disgraceful. But, then, she had said it might have happened.

Brazos said, "I'm not Native American. But my cousin is half Cherokee. My Aunt Quill Worker made the moccasins for me. My father's brother, Uncle John, is Running Hawk's father. My uncle isn't Native American either."

"Native American," said the taller boy in a mocking voice.

"That's what Indian people should be called," said Brazos.

"You sure are odd!" said the other boy. "But maybe you're okay."

"Yeah," said the taller boy to the other one. "He may not even be gay, after all."

"I'm not!" protested Brazos. "I'm not even old enough!"

"What's that got to do with it?" asked the taller boy.

"Well, I'm not old enough to pick a life partner. My mom and dad were both 25 when they decided to get married," Brazos said.

"Oh," said the two older boys.

"I'm not getting married," said the taller boy.

"Yeah, me neither," said the other boy. "You gotta like girls to get married!"

"Yeah," said the taller boy. "And you might just end up gettin' married to Elizabeth, who has red hair and freckles."

Brazos walked away from the boys feeling pretty good. He didn't think he wanted to be friends with the boys. He wasn't sure exactly why. But he thought it was because they thought Native Americans might hurt someone just because they were Native Americans. He sort of thought these boys liked only the not nice parts of what they thought Native Americans were and he was sure that this was not the way he wanted to be. And he knew that there was much more to being Native American than some movies had shown where they were fighting the white man. Besides, his uncle had explained all that. The Native Americans were at war with white settlers who were taking their land. There had been many wars, his dad had fought in the Persian war.

These boys were 'bullies.' Isn't that what he had learned from his Weekly Reader? Brazos did not want to be a 'bully,' but he did not want kids to pick on

him. He just wanted to be friends with kids. He wondered if he was really all that different from other kids.

That afternoon when Mom picked him up from school, she asked how his day had gone. He asked her why some people were so mean about other people they didn't even know.

Mom explained, "Brazos, there are a lot of different kind of people in the world. Some look different, because they come from different cultures, like Running Hawk is Native American and you are not. Some believe differently, like we are Unitarian and believe that all people should be honored. Some people have different ethical values, which means that they may not be honest, respect the earth and other people or accept that there are many diversities in the world for which we are thankful."

"Mom, why do boys like the ones at school have to make fun of someone else or even a whole group of someone elses?"

"You have just learned a big lesson, today," said Mom. "It's easy to put someone or a whole group of people down so that you can feel better than they are. But standing up for who you are is a big job. Some people use physical violence, but you learned to resolve the problem with words instead. You also learned that words can be just as harmful as the physical violence. This is a big lesson for a small boy. I think maybe you've gotten taller!"

"Oh, Mom!" Brazos said playfully. "I'm not any taller! But I sure don't like some people that dislike people because they think things that aren't even true."

"Learning the truth is hard, Brazos. Some people spend their whole life searching for truth only to find that their eyes were closed when the truth came to them," Mom said.

"Is that like the boys not understanding what was wrong with calling Native Americans, Injuns?" asked Brazos.

"Yes," said Mom. "Now get ready for your ballet lesson."

"Okay, Mom."

### **Major Theme Discussion:**

*(Depending on ages of your children, this can be done as questions or as a commentary. Some groups may require a bit of both. Included are some questions. Most of the answers relate to the story. However, there may be something you know the children can relate to better than the story to understand the value. All connections are a value lesson.)*

Who can tell me a value they found in the story? (**NOTE:** *There may be other values the children find in the stories.*) Did someone say believing in what you know? It was important to Brazos to believe in himself and be true to his own

self. Some people say things because they heard someone else say it. They may or may not know what it means. As UUs, we believe in diversity, which also says that it is okay that you don't act or look or think or believe the same as someone else.

Can anyone think of other values?

### **Supplies for Activities:**

1. 3-11 year olds  
colored yarn and 4 brass bells (any size) for each child
2. 12 & up  
No supplies necessary.

### **Activities:**

#### **3-11 year olds**

##### ***Make Dancing Anklets.***

*(History Note: Native Americans give thanks or pray for what nature gives them. One way they give thanks is by praying. For Native Americans, one way to pray is by dancing.)*

Cut yarn pieces in 8-10-inch lengths. The pieces will need to wrap and tie around the ankle. Take one piece of yarn, then wrap another piece or several pieces of yarn (these can be of different colors to make a pattern or just add to the beauty) around it, looping it so you do not see the original piece of yarn. Tie a knot in the ends of the looped pieces of yarn to keep them from coming unwrapped. At the ends of your original piece of yarn, tie a bell. You should make two of these: one for each ankle.

##### ***Dancing with Anklets.***

After the children have completed their Dancing Anklets, put on some Native American flute music and let them dance.

#### **12 & up: Discussion Group**

*(If your group of teens are split between younger teens and older teens, you might think about setting up two discussion groups. However, you may be surprised to find that they all get along famously. Just watch for signs that the group is not working and adjust.)*

### **Discussion Topics:**

- What does it mean to be true to one's self?
- Have you ever doubted yourself before? When? How did you overcome it or how are you planning to overcome it.

- Do you believe that because someone is gay or lesbian that they should be treated differently? Do they deserve to be made fun of? Should they be denied jobs, because they are gay? Should they be allowed to raise children?
- Do you know people who are gay or lesbian? How do you feel about them? How are they different? How are they the same?