

The Parable of Juan and the Fishbowl

Juan was a boy about six years old who lived in Spanish Harlem, in New York City. His family was poor, so Juan had few toys. Many times he went out into the alley behind the apartment buildings to bounce a ball off the brick walls or to pick through the garbage to find something to play with.

One day when Juan was scavenging, he found a glass bowl covered with grime. Because he had so few things, Juan saw a beauty in that bowl that we would probably miss. He was very excited. He took his discovery gently in his hands and carefully climbed the steps up to the apartment his family lived in. Then Juan carried the bowl to the kitchen sink and began to clean it. When he was finished, Juan was delighted because he discovered that his bowl was perfect. No scratch or chip marred its beauty. Juan gingerly carried the bowl to the kitchen table, sat down, and admired the bowl. Juan was happy.

After a short time, however, the thrill of discovery began to wear off, and Juan started to get bored. Then he had an idea. He would decorate his bowl. So Juan went down to the street and picked up a handful of shiny pebbles and pieces of wire and sticks. He took what he had collected back to his apartment, sat down again by his bowl, and set to work. Juan placed the pebbles on the bottom of the bowl and pretended they formed a roadway. Next he placed the wire and sticks among the pebbles and pretended they were bushes and trees. Then Juan had another idea. He got an old tin can cut it in half lengthwise, placed it over the roadway, and pretended it was a tunnel. When Juan was finished, he looked upon his bowl with great pride—it was beautiful! Juan was happy again.

Once more, however, the wonder and charm of the bowl began to fade for Juan, and he began to lose that special thrill he had felt. Finally Juan realized what he was missing; he had no one with whom to share his bowl, no one to enjoy what he had created. So Juan went to his mother. “Mama,” he said, “can I buy a goldfish to put in my bowl?” Juan’s mother thought for a long time, knowing they had very little money. When she looked into Juan’s eyes, however, she did what all mothers tend to do. She said, “All right, Juan,” and went to the cupboard and found a dollar. She placed it in Juan’s hand.

Juan’s feet seemed to fly above the sidewalk as he ran to the store on the corner. He bought a beautiful goldfish, ran back to his apartment, filled his new bowl with water, and gently dropped the fish into it. Then Juan began to talk to his fish: “Swim along the roadway fish. That’s why I put it there—to make you happy.” The fish merely swam around and around in the bowl, unaware of Juan’s handiwork. “Hey, why don’t you swim among the trees I made for you? That’s why I put them there—to make you happy.” The fish just kept swimming in circles, ignorant of Juan’s pleas. Finally Juan became so frustrated that he began to pound on the side of the bowl, demanding that his fish swim through the tunnel. Again no response. The fish kept swimming around and around.

Juan ran to his mother in tears. “Mama, why doesn’t my fish listen to me? I keep telling him what’s going to make him happy, but he won’t do what I say. Why?” Juan’s mother was very wise and had been watching what was going on. Gently she took Juan on her lap and said: “Juan, the trouble is that you and the fish speak different languages. He doesn’t understand what you’re trying to tell him. The only way he could understand would be if you could become a fish, jump into the bowl, and swim along the roadway, among the trees, and through the tunnel. Then maybe the fish would watch you, see how you live in the bowl, and follow you.” So Juan spent a lot of time wishing he could be a fish.

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