

The Meaning of Luck

Study Guide

- Stan Willenbring -

Foremost

This story is primarily about the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of developmental stages: belonging.

The themes running through this story are about family and community in all the broad sense of what we consider those things to be.

It is my personal belief that most of what is ailing modern society, as well as individuals, is the loss of community, the loss of a sense of belonging. This has occurred primarily within my own lifetime, within the last 50-100 years.

I would suggest that young readers (or teachers), while reading/using this book, devote some time to studying Maslow's theory and particularly the third level of his paradigm.

Consider why: being stuck at the third level prevents people from moving on to/experiencing the personal fulfillment that for so many seems out of reach.

Chapter 1

Mockingbird vs Brown Thrasher: how are they the same? how are they different?

What are some common birds where you live? What kinds of sounds do they make?

Here's one of my favorite birds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsAEa3cfhVA>

At 7:58 they start explaining how this species learns songs that are specific to their local community. One of the songs the wrens in my region sing sounds like "sugarbeet". I borrowed it for the bird (the cardinal) in chapter 8.

What do turtles eat? (Hint: they actually do eat polliwogs ... and strawberries; probably not many acorns)

Growth hormone: how does it work, what does it do, what makes you release it at night. (Hint: it's not just for kids, not just for growing)

Note: There are three essential things that stimulate your body to release growth hormone at night (while you sleep): getting a healthy amount of exercise every day, getting a healthy amount of sleep/rest each day, and eating a healthy amount of protein every day (esp in the evening).

Chapter 2

Where do the names Wapiya and Suerta come from?

Where does the word Osiyo (chapter 7) come from?

What are turtle and snail shells made out of?

(Hint: for one of them, it's actually part of their skeleton. But why can't that be the same for the other one?)

What are glycoproteins? A better study question might be what is snail slime made of? Or perhaps: What is mucus?

“Allons-y” is a French expression. What does it mean?

Chapter 3

What is watercress? What are some other common wild plants that people can eat?

Can people eat acorns? Many indigenous people did. What kind of foods did they make with acorns? What did they have to do to the acorns before they could eat them? (Hint: they had to do something much more important than just grinding them up.)

Why should you be careful to learn about wild plants BEFORE you ever eat them?

Where might you be able to find reliable information about eating wild plants?

Chapter 4

If you have to move a turtle (like the girl rescuing a turtle from a road): Why should you always move the turtle in the same direction it was already going? How should you handle a turtle?

What kind of turtles do you have where you live? Are there ways to tell different species apart or to tell males from females? What do they eat? Do they have any unusual behaviors?

What kinds of good things do snakes do in the world? Why should we not hate or fear snakes? What should you do if you see a snake? Do you know what kind of snakes live in your area? Could you learn to recognize some of the most common ones?

Chapter 5

What is a pileated woodpecker? What do woodpeckers eat? (Hint: they don't eat wood) Besides looking for food, for what other reasons do woodpeckers drill into trees?

What other kinds of woodpeckers are there? Have you seen woodpeckers where you live? Which ones?

Why does mist/fog form over a pond or a lake at night?

Chapter 6

Cow slobber. Remember Suerta's glycoproteins? What is mucus? What does it do?

Lots of places inside the body have mucus on their surfaces. The only one we usually ever notice or think about is the nose.

So many questions we can ask about the riparian zone! What is it/Where is it? What kind of animals live there? What kinds of plants grow there? (Hint: some REALLY old plant species)

There are many types of wetlands throughout the world, from tiny ones like in our story to massive ones along the ocean shores. What are some of the different types of wetlands? What are some important things to know about wetlands?

What kind of plants are lichens and moss? (Hint: lichens aren't really plants)

What are spores? How are spores different from seeds? How are the diaspores of lichens different from both seeds and spores?

What other thing that grows like a plant (but is not a plant) uses spores instead of seeds? (Hint: How does the Fungi kingdom differ from plants? In what important way are fungi more like animals?)

What are pastel colors? There is also a chalk-like type of art called pastel. Are there any famous artists who used pastel?

Chapter 7

Bears: What kinds of bears live where you live? What do bears eat? How fast can bears run? Bears are a lot like what other kind of animal that we know quite well? (Hint: you might have a pet who is a lot like a bear)

What should you do if you meet a bear while you're hiking in the woods (or anywhere)? (Hint: do not try to scare the bear)

Possoms: What kind of animals are possums? How do their babies grow? What do possums like to eat?

Why don't they get some of the bad diseases that other animals might carry?

How does our human body temperature compare to the body temperature of a possum? a turtle? a snail? (or a fish or a frog or a snake)

Are possums dirty? (no) Are they mean or dangerous? (no)

Do possums really help to get rid of ticks? (yes)

Do snakes really help to get rid of ticks? (yes, big time!)

At the end of this chapter, Suerta bids goodbye to the baby possum saying “Buena suerte, Vaquerito” (which means “good luck, little cowboy”).

How would you say "good luck" (or any expression you like) in various languages?

Chapter 8

What is a spongiform mushroom? What other major types of mushrooms are there? What should you know BEFORE eating any wild mushroom? (Or ANY wild food)

Why do wild animals want to eat any time they find food?

What are tannins? Why would you find them in swamp water? Think back about the questions for chapter 3 about indigenous peoples using acorns for food ... and what they had to do first before they could eat them.

Do birds really have contests to see who has the best feathers? (Hint: yes, sort of)
The story mentions pinnate feathers. What are some different kinds (shapes) of feathers that birds have?

Chapter 9

How is bread made? What are the ingredients?

Why does bread dough need to be warm but not too hot? (Hint: it's a lot like body temperature)

Why do you have to knead bread dough?

Why does bread dough rise? (Hint: for the same reason that the yeast water in the story was bubbling ... so why does the yeast water bubble?)

What are the steps in the process of growing and harvesting hay?

What is an animal's niche? What is a habitat? What is a biological community?

What is an ecosystem? (Hint: it can be a lot of things, from very small to really HUGE)

What is a food web? What are herbivores, carnivores, and omnivores?

Chapter 10

Think back to the possum in the woods, in chapter 7. Who do you think Little Mo might be?

How long do possums live? Why is winter so dangerous for possums?

In the story, sometimes during the winter they would find Little Mo had not come to get his meal the night before. They would worry. But then he would start showing up again. What do think was going on?

What should you do if you encounter a possum?

How (why) does the possum 'play dead'? (Hint: he's not playing)

What can you do to help possums around where you live?

Chapter 11

Not every chapter needs to have science questions. Some chapters are just for fun!

However, this chapter is a good place to discuss the relationships of the characters in the story.

What makes the various characters unique? Which scenes did you feel certain characters acted or spoke with insight? Which characters did you feel were silly or funny?

What does each character contribute to their companions/the community? And how does each character benefit from being part of a community or relationship?

Chapter 12

Can you think of a name and theme for Suerta and Wapiya's holiday?

What does the Spanish word 'compañeras' mean?

What kind of creatures might live in a meadow? (Think about tiny ones too)

What kind of plants grow in meadows?

What kind of creatures might live in the trees around the edges of a meadow?

Aside from being the home for many animals, what are some other reasons meadows are good?

Chapter 13 - Epilogue

What kind of bird is a whippoorwill? Where do they nest?

What (and more importantly, how) do they eat?

What are some reasons why the deer would like the meadow? (Hint: think about the food web)

How are pine trees different from oak and poplar trees?

Why are tulip poplar trees famous?

What are sassafras and mountain laurel?

How do birds float on updrafts?

What kind of animal is a lizard? What other animals are lizards closely related to? (Hint: also think of some animals from long ago who aren't here anymore)

How are lizards different from salamanders?

The descriptions in this final chapter (the Epilogue) are my attempt to describe the mountain where I have hiked nearly every day for 15 years, and the foothill of the mountain, where I live.

The foothill actually is spiral-shaped, like a snail. And there actually is a boulder up on the mountain that looks like a smiling turtle. And there is a creek we call Little Daughter Creek, which was named by my once-tiny middle 'granddaughter' who is now bigger than me.

To me, this mountain is 'the turtle mountain'. Not for the rock, although that played a key role in the original idea for this fairy tale. Nor for the rounded turtle shape of the mountain. Or even for the fact that there is a thriving population of turtles there.

It's because, on my daily hikes there, that wild wooded place is always slow, quiet, soft-natured, and peaceful. Just like the turtles who live there.

Turtles have a lot more to teach us than just about biology.