Stories for Thinking #6 - 'Anansi the Spider'

(West African Folktale)

Anansi the spider is well known to the people of the West Indies. There are many funny stories about him because he is such a clever spider, full of tricks. These are called Anansi stories, and this is how they got their name.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, all things were named after the Tiger, for he wads the strongest of the animals and king of the forest. The lily whose flowers bore red stripes was called Tiger-lily, the moth with striped wings was called Tiger-moth, and the stories which animals told in the forest were called Tiger stories.

Of all the animals in the forest Anansi the spider was the weakest. Nothing was named after him. No one was interested in his stories. So one day Anansi climbed down to Tiger's ear and said, 'Please Tiger, because I am the weakest everyone laughs at me. Your stories, would you let them be called Anansi stories?

Tiger thought for a while, his tail sliding back and forth. 'All right,' he said. 'You can have my stories, but on one condition. You must bring me Mr. Snake -- alive.' The animals of the forest who could hear this laughed. How could Anansi catch the great poisonous Snake, who ate all who came near him?

The first thing Anansi tried was to dig a large slippery hole. At the bottom he put Snake's favorite food, an avocado pear. Snake glided down the path, saw the hold and his favorite food. Carefully he wrapped his tail around a tree, lowered his body down the hole, and ate the avocado pear. Then he pulled himself out and went on his way.

Next Anansi made a noose, covered it with leaves, and placed two young bananas inside it. Soon Snake was gliding slowly towards it. Snake lay on the noose and began eating the bananas. Anansi pulled hard, the noose tightened, but snake slid through.

'If you do that again,' said Snake, 'I will eat you.'

'But I only wanted to measure you,' said Anansi. 'I bet with Tiger that you were the longest thing in the jungle, even longer than that bamboo tree.'

' Of course I am,' said Snake. 'I am much longer than that!'

'Could I measure you?' asked Anansi. 'I will cut the bamboo. You lie down beside it and we will see how long you are.' Snake agreed to this strange request, so Anansi cut the bamboo and Snake stretched out beside it.

'I will tie you at one end to help you stretch,' said the Spider.

Anansi tied Snake's tail. 'Now stretch,' said Anansi. The Snake did so and as his head reached the end of the pole Anansi tied it as hard as he could. 'I've got your measure!' he laughed. And he had. Snake wriggled and writhed but could not get free. Snake was tied fast at both ends of the bamboo. And Anansi took him to show Tiger.

'There you are, Tiger,' said Anansi. 'Can stories of the forest be named after me?'

'I always keep my promises,' said Tiger. 'From now on the stories can be yours. And this can be called the first Anansi story.'