



## Receiving a Golden Garland: Folk Tales as Gifts across Cultures

by Jo Radner

In the southern mountain regions of Bhutan, Nepali-speaking people lived for more than a century as farmers and herdsman. Hindu rather than Buddhist, they were a linguistic and religious minority. Some 2,300 have been resettled in New Hampshire—by far the largest refugee group in the state. The Bhutanese Nepalis form only 0.15 percent of the population, but in a population overwhelmingly white, they are very visible. Inevitably, some New Hampshire residents have resented—loudly—the incursion of large numbers of strangers requiring social services. And the refugees face tall hurdles in finding their place in the United States. The elders—many of whom are preliterate, speak only Nepali, and come from a strongly oral culture—are moving into a massively literate, English-speaking country where they see little chance for employment or meaningful participation. Rifts threaten within their community as younger generations become fluent in English and established in American jobs and schools.

New Hampshire agencies have responded very positively to the new refugees. So has New Hampshire Humanities, whose “Connections” adult literacy program supports English language learners from many different countries. Terry Farish, then Director of the Connections program, conceived in 2010 the idea of honoring the oral culture of the refugees by publishing one of their traditional folk tales as a bilingual picture book.

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I am deeply grateful to Terry Farish, whose idea began this project and whose persistent community work was crucial to its success, and to the staff of New Hampshire Humanities, who supported the project throughout its course. Deborah Watrous, Executive Director, kindly provided documentation for this article and gave permission for publication of photos and images.



*Image of Bhutanese refugee camp courtesy UNHCR and map of Bhutan courtesy Human Rights Watch.*

In 1988 Bhutan adopted a policy called “One Nation, One People” and ruled that the Nepali-speaking minority were illegal immigrants. Between 1989 and 1995 more than 130,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese were exiled, often violently, from their homes and farms. Many were trucked across the border into refugee camps in Nepal, where they lived for 18 years—a full generation—before the United Nations began to resettle them. As of March 2016, approximately 85,000 Bhutanese refugees have resettled in the U.S. (“Bhutanese Refugees...” 2016). The Bhutanese Nepalis have all the typical problems of resettled refugees, and have, as well, the highest suicide rate of any resettled refugee population (“Suicide” 2011).

The Council’s goals for the project were not modest:

- honor the dignity of the storytellers and the richness of their culture
  - create a rollicking tale for children to enjoy
  - introduce children and grandchildren of Bhutanese refugees raised in Nepali camps to the culture of Bhutan, a home they had never known but that their elders cherish
  - build a linguistic bridge between cultures
  - promote family literacy
  - generate a powerful, homegrown story for use in their adult literacy program
  - offer both a process and a product to inspire like projects in other languages and cultures, and
  - link through story, longtime New Hampshire residents to newcomers from Bhutan.
- (“Schwartz...” 2013)

Astonishingly, the project has achieved all these goals.

Terry Farish asked me to serve as the project folklorist to help collect folk tales. Lutheran Social Services in Laconia invited us into an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class of Bhutanese Nepali elders—parents and grandparents old enough to have grown up in Bhutan before the exile to refugee camps. We walked into that class on a Tuesday in November 2010 and joined about a dozen men and women dressed in American clothes, winter jackets, and knit caps. They seemed tentative and disconnected. We had in common only a few words—*good morning, my name is..., thank you*—enough to show we cared about communicating, but not enough to achieve much communication. The classroom walls were vivid with the elders’ drawings of Bhutanese houses, temples, flowers, animals. We wanted to ask about them, but the communication gulf was too wide. We tasted just a hint of the disempowerment that refugees live with.



*Nilhari Bhandari interpreting. The author stands to the right.*

We were very grateful for our interpreter, Nilhari Bhandari, our tenuous bridge across the gulf. Through him we introduced ourselves and I explained the project. I said that we had come as their students to learn about traditions, and especially folk tales, that they remembered from growing up in Bhutan. I started asking about everyday traditions, and bits of folklore began popping up around the room. A proverb about being old and toothless led to my question about baby-tooth customs—and some nervous sidelong glances until someone revealed that they used to wrap the tooth in cow manure and toss it up so it would stick on the house roof. I was glad I was a folklorist. “Ah!” I said, “What would happen if the tooth were on the ground and someone stepped on it?” “The child’s teeth would decay!” Slowly the elders’ formal postures relaxed. Childhood games were remembered, along with singing and dancing—and then suddenly five of the women went into a huddle, whispered, laughed, and burst into a courting song that started out (according to Nilhari, who might have been blushing) “Let us go collect firewood....” Everyone laughed with delight.

*Hari Tiwari*



Then I asked, “How did people tell you stories?” Hari Tiwari, a grandmother of four who had spoken little to this point, raised her head and said, quietly, “My father told me this story,” and proceeded to tell us “The Story of a Pumpkin,” a fully developed, elaborate wonder tale. That unleashed more tales—long, intricate stories that seemed to leap full-grown from their tellers’ memories. Bishnu Mishra said that his great-grandfather had told stories, adjusting their length to keep him and the other boys working in the cardamom fields till the job was finished. Others remembered hearing tales while gathering wood, herding cattle, threshing rice, learning to cook, and chasing monkeys away from farm fields. When class time ran out, I said, “Your assignment for Thursday is to come with one story to tell in class.” They nodded and grinned.



*Tuesday's class.*



*Thursday's class.*

Walking into class two days later, we were stunned by the transformation. People were excited; they laughed and waved and welcomed us. And they looked different. Most of the women had exchanged vivid saris for Tuesday's dark skirts and sweaters; many were wearing celebratory green-glass *pote*—their wedding necklaces. One woman had brought her young granddaughter to class. They wanted their photos taken. Wonderful!

“So,” I began, “tell me stories!”

And—they didn't.

Kunti said, “There is a very small tree. You can climb it. What is it?”

Chandra said, “The ox is dead, but it is still barking.”

Another volunteered, “There is a white gull. When it drinks water, it turns red. What is it?”

It was a game! Riddle after riddle. . . “I don't know!” “I don't know!” Each explanation came with gales of laughter. I was racking my brain to find a true riddle to offer back. Blank. Finally, I remembered only one: “No doors there are to this stronghold, but thieves break in to steal the gold.” “We don't know!” “An egg!” More laughter. I had played the game, but I had been overwhelmed, and we all knew it.



*The teacher provided art supplies and the students drew pictures of scenes from their stories.*

Then the stories could begin.

They flowed from person to person around the room. Wonder tales. Wisdom tales. Stories about clever, ravenous Fox and stupid Bear. Mughul Emperor Akbar and his trickster advisor Birbal. Cannibal demons. Story after story, and then, a pause. The women began to talk together. Then all of them this time—nine, plus the granddaughter—gathered together at one end of the room and sang a remembered love song. That brought the storytelling session to a close.



What had happened? Why had the tentative, subdued refugees in that gray-walled classroom suddenly become celebratory Bhutanese Nepalis? Certainly their transformation had something to do with our delight at hearing their traditions—and with their having shared them together as a group and with us, the official American visitors. But two other factors were probably at play as well: power and gift giving.

I thought again about the situation in which these elders live. Coming from a culture in which gifts are bonds that must be reciprocated, here in the U.S. they must feel themselves always inadequate, always on the receiving end of social services (housing, clothing, food, ESOL classes), disempowered (and even ashamed) by their inability to give back in response to American generosity. But Terry and I had shown them that they did indeed have something of value to give, that we esteemed and in fact *needed* what they offered. Perhaps our hunger for their stories released the elders to be Nepalese in public, in relation to us. Sharing their traditions, they became our generous hosts, inviting us, the dislocated strangers, into their home culture to receive their gifts.

And how did they dramatize our new relationship? With riddles!—traditional poetic, metaphorical enigmas, so often used by elders worldwide to teach and acculturate the young and test their wits.<sup>1</sup> In challenging us with riddles that drew on esoteric Bhutanese experience, the elders were assuming a position as our teachers (in fact, taking me up on my introductory assertion that we had come as their students). They chose the playing field, deliberately pointing out our need for education. When I asked *them* a riddle, I accepted the terms of the game—and then the stories could begin.

Even before the book was made—even before we selected a story for publication—the folk tale project had powerful, positive effects. Within the ESOL class, the excitement was not only that English-speaking Americans were listening to their stories; it was that we wanted to make a *book*. The storytellers were empowered not only because they were becoming our teachers, but also because they were becoming participants in American literacy *even before they could read with any fluency*. The change in their attitudes was surprisingly wide and powerful. Their ESOL teacher,

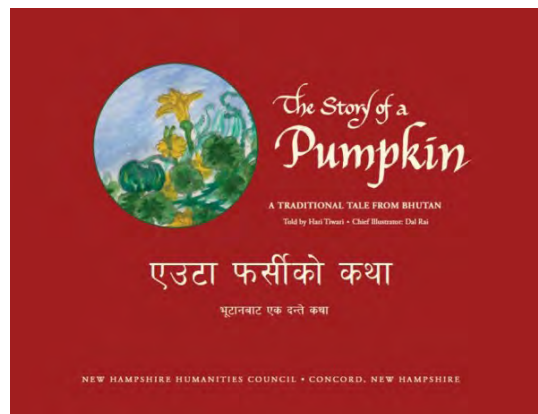
Laurie Lalish, remarked after our meetings, “My students have been much more willing to speak English in class. I think, in the telling of their stories, a language barrier pressure valve was released and [they] are much more relaxed in their experimentation in speaking English.”

The folk tale book project soon began to link the new Bhutanese Americans with their New Hampshire neighbors. Terry Farish and I collected some 20 stories. Choosing one for the book was a significant challenge. (There were some other challenges, too, to be discussed later.) For now suffice it to say that we wound up choosing the very first tale we heard, Hari Tiwari’s “The Story of a Pumpkin.”

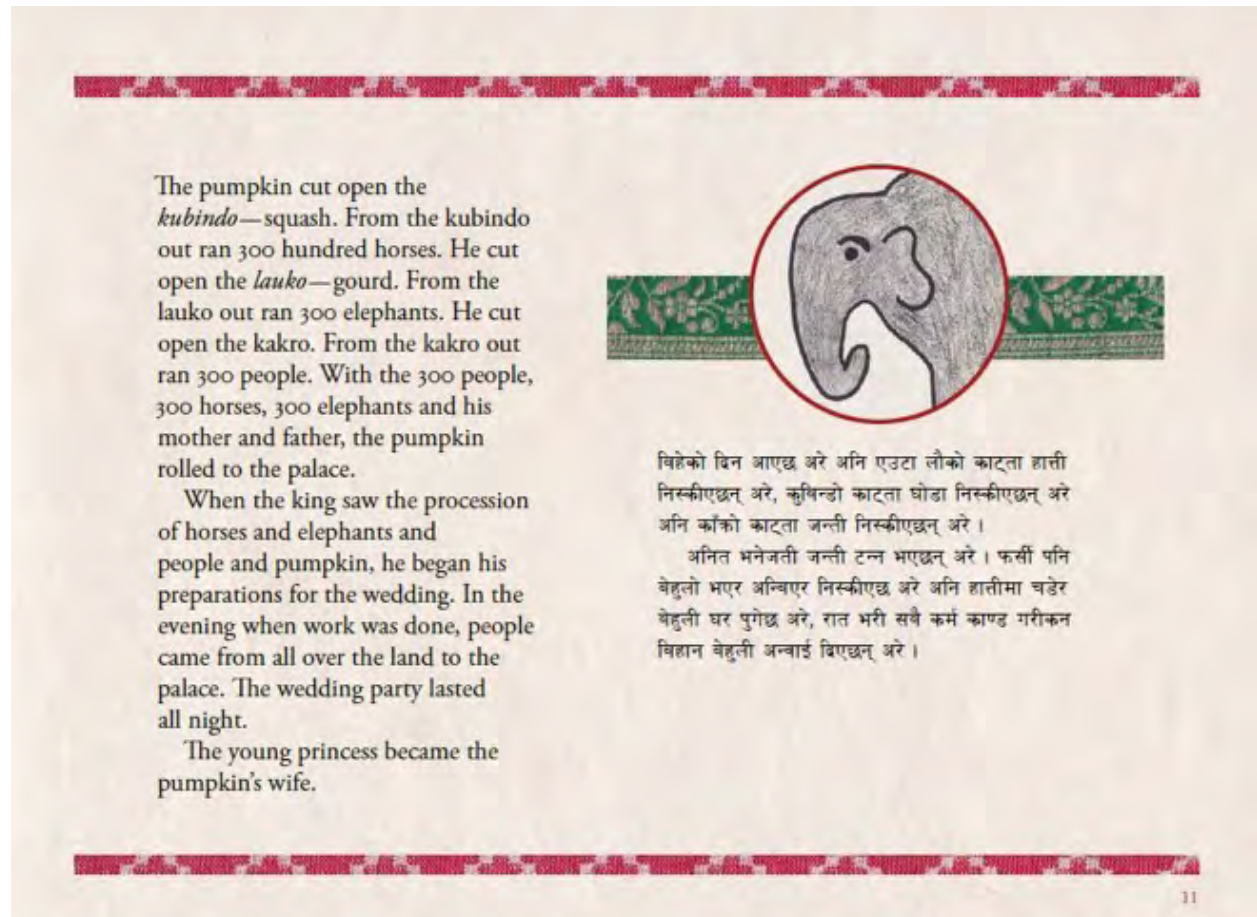
The editorial committee included several Bhutanese Nepalis, and book production involved extensive collaboration within that community—carrying forward the refugees’ consciousness of giving a gift back to their American neighbors. Ambika Sharma in Laconia provided her wedding sari and other traditional textiles to be scanned and used as borders and design elements throughout the book. The designer also scanned handmade paper from Bhutan and used it as the background for each page. Dal Rai, an artist who had taught himself to draw when his parents in the refugee camp presented him with a precious pencil, was invited to paint watercolor illustrations for the story. He even illustrated the scene in which Hari Tiwari had first heard the story: her mother died when she was five, so it fell to her father to take care of her. To keep her quiet during the painful process of combing her long hair every morning, he told her stories.



*Sam Evans-Brown from New Hampshire Public Radio records the students’ tales and the translations; his appreciative story about the Bhutanese Nepalis, their stories, and the forthcoming book was broadcast across the state.*



Other Bhutanese refugees made cameo illustrations of individual elements of the tale to be distributed throughout the book: brooms, a cucumber, an elephant, a cow, and a tea kettle. Several members of the community labored over the Nepali transcript of Hari's story, trying to get its true flavor into print. Kapil Dhungel, who laughed and sometimes almost cried as he proofread the Nepali text, commented with delight, "This is in the simple country style!" With Hari's permission, he added to the end of the tale a traditional closing formula: "The teller of this story will receive a flower garland. The listener will receive a golden one. Whoever tells or listens to this story will find a place in heaven." And Ambika Sharma's interpretation fit that formula neatly into the new purposes of the story. "In our culture," she said, "gold is most valued. By offering a golden garland, we honor listeners who have gained knowledge of the culture and the history of our people."



When the book was published, New Hampshire Humanities held the Folktale Festival, a multicultural party extravaganza. More than 250 diverse guests ate Indian curry and American pizza; they heard African drumming by a New Hampshire women's drum circle; they listened to a Yankee joke told by New Hampshire storyteller Rebecca Rule and translated into Nepali, and a bilingual telling of "The Story of a Pumpkin" in which Hari Tiwari and I alternated. Then they witnessed a traditional Nepali friendship dance. Finally, the whole audience joined in a French Canadian contra dance in which the Bhutanese seemed bemused but performed far more gracefully than the rest of us. (My contra dance partner, a Bhutanese dancer, responded to the caller's "bow



to your partner” with a deep bow and the traditional gesture of *namaste*.) Children made and presented golden garlands. And everyone received a book.

In the four years since the party, at least 600 free copies of *The Story of a Pumpkin* have been distributed within the state, mostly to schools and libraries, and University Press of New England sold 300 additional hardcover copies.<sup>2</sup> The book has a Facebook page and blog. New Hampshire Humanities distributed a discussion guide for librarians, a teacher’s guide for grades 2-5, and a simplified readers’ theater version for adult literacy classes. Hari Tiwari and Dal Rai, the book’s author and illustrator, have presented it at conferences, festivals, and classrooms and to the Laconia School Board. Concord Hospital has used the book to ease the anxiety of Bhutanese Nepali patients. News of the book spread across the country; it was ordered by a librarian in Sioux Falls, SD, who wrote, “We have a large Bhutanese population here and it is very affirming for them to see their culture being appreciated in America! Write more, please!”

The book has been a curriculum inspiration for at least one English language teacher, Tina Proulx, working with students from all over the world, who has asked her students to collect folk tales from family members, translate them into English, and then, as a culminating project, rewrite their stories to create picture books for elementary students or limited English speakers and “publish” them digitally. New Hampshire Humanities created a one-page handout (appended, below), “Seven Steps to Create a Bilingual Book with English Language Learners.”

Within Bhutanese refugee families in New Hampshire, hearing and retelling the story in Nepali is helping young children maintain fluency in their elders’ language and encouraging parents and grandparents to revive their storytelling traditions. Tika Acharya, Executive Director of the Bhutanese Community of New Hampshire and New Hampshire Refugee Congress Member for the United Nations High Commission on Refugees USA, recounted the value of the book to his community:

Bhutanese in America love the story, which reflects the natural events of village life in Bhutan. Folk tales help us remember our traditional customs, names of different tools we used in the village, and life on the farms back home. Our elders and seniors who read the story remember their own contributions of hard work on land they once owned and virtually travel back to our home. Our youngsters can ask questions and learn how life used to be in Bhutan and understand our culture in better ways. (qtd. in “Schwartz...” 2013)



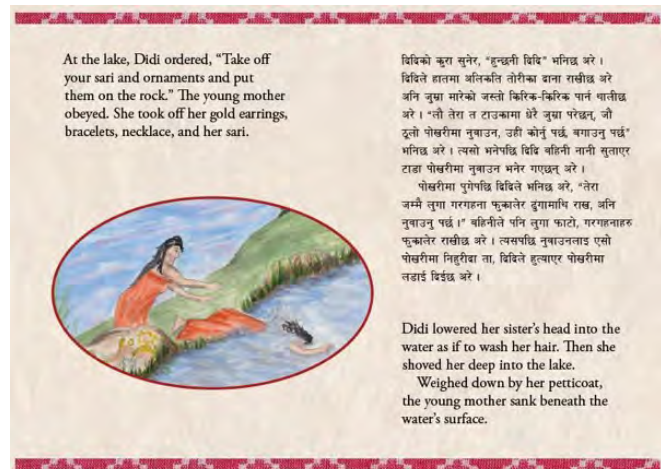
The path to these successes was not without challenges. Some difficult aspects of cultural representation came up in the course of the project. The first appeared as we tried to choose a story for what was to be a picture book for children. Most stories the Bhutanese elders remembered from their childhoods would have puzzled or troubled American elementary schoolchildren. The Hindu religious stories and historical legends would be too esoteric. Many other tales we heard reflected harsh responses to harsh living conditions and presented ethical situations that might horrify American families. Caught stealing rice from a very poor man, for instance, a fox saves his own life and makes amends by lying, stealing, and killing to get a rich bride for the poor man. In another tale, a fox manages to trick a goat and eat up all her kids. We knew that reading such tales would do little to foster local welcome and understanding for the refugees.

From the beginning we were drawn to “The Story of a Pumpkin,” but even that tale caused some concern. Here is a very brief summary:



A magical pumpkin becomes the “son” of a childless farmer and his wife, helping with chores around the farm until one day, proclaiming that he is mature and needs a wife, he woos one of the king’s daughters. Overcoming the king’s obstructive demands with the assistance of other vegetables in the garden, he marries the daughter and takes her home to the farm. Returning on a visit to the palace, the pumpkin climbs a tree (!) to pick mangos for his wife, falls from a branch, smashes to pieces—and walks out of the shattered shell as a handsome young man. The king and the other princesses are astonished.

After the birth of a baby daughter to the pumpkin man and his wife, the eldest sister, Didi, overwhelmed by jealousy, makes a visit to “help” her younger sister, contrives to drown her in the lake, dresses in her clothes, and goes back to the farm and the pumpkin man, impersonating her sister. For three nights an apparition resembling the younger sister visits the house at midnight, nurses and massages the baby, makes rice pudding for the husband, and leaves filth from the barn on Didi’s pillow. On the third night the husband lies in wait and catches the intruder, who explains that she is his true wife and tells the story of Didi’s betrayal. Didi is punished severely, and the pumpkin man and his family live on happily.



Initially, some American listeners thought Hari had told us two tales and suggested that only the first, happy one, up to the marriage and transformation, should be published. But it was clear that Hari regarded the two phases of the story as a single tale. The dark half was needed; jealousy can be murderous and must be expunged. In fact, when I asked Hari what her favorite part of the story was, she said, “When the mother comes back”—and I remembered that she had been only five years old when she had lost her own mother, and that this was the story she had asked her father to tell over and over again.

So all agreed that the whole story should be in the book, but then we had to face questions about how it should be presented. One immediate issue was the ending. In Hari’s first telling, the pumpkin husband catches Didi and mutilates her, cutting off her nose and ears. The editorial board feared that for American readers this violence would overshadow the happy resolution of the story. We consulted with Hari, who readily changed the punishment to banishment from the kingdom (a solution that, like mutilation, removes Didi’s chances of a husband and family of her own). We felt this alteration was justified, not only because it was an available motif within Nepali narrative tradition, but also because it preserved the emotional truth of the story.

But what about other cultural elements in the story that would elude American readers? The illustrations carry visual information about material culture—brooms, tea kettles, clothing, the variety of shapes and sizes of Bhutanese pumpkins, and so forth—even though these are not explained in the text. But the cultural resonance of some items in the story is not even hinted at: the symbolic connection between mangoes and marriage, for instance, or what the Laconia class explained to us about the dietary and cultural importance of pumpkins.

Supernatural dimensions of the story also remain deliberately vague in the published book. For the Hindu Bhutanese audience the pumpkin man might be a god. In a later conversation Hari told us that she thinks the wife was actually drowned, returned as a spirit to her baby, and “the pumpkin had divine power to bring the spirit of his wife back to life.” In the version of the story Hari provided for the book, however, the wife tells her husband that she escaped her older sister by swimming under water.

Do such ambiguities, omissions, and discrepancies finally matter in the project? Cross-cultural understanding is a lengthy and always incomplete venture; perhaps it is best to see *The Story of a Pumpkin* as an invitation to further conversation and learning. Certainly the work to create the book led Terry Farish and me to unexpected insights into the range of a community’s interpretation of one of its traditional tales. Over and over again our consultations with our Bhutanese colleagues brought us to consider the ways in which folk narrative traditions do and do not transcend cultural boundaries.

*The Story of a Pumpkin* is now a book—and, as the South Dakota librarian’s response made clear, the book by itself has made a useful contribution to the integration of Bhutanese refugees into the U.S. Its use in literacy programs has encouraged language learning; in schools it has entertained New Hampshire children and given them positive awareness of their new and very different neighbors; in Bhutanese homes it has promoted bilingualism, foregrounded the wisdom and storytelling of the elders, and kept alive awareness of family origins.



For our purposes as folklorist educators, however, the process of the project was even more important than its product, and like New Hampshire Humanities I hope that it will offer a useful model for work in other regions and cultures. The key was recognizing from the start that the Bhutanese elders were our teachers, and that they and their community could make a significant contribution to their new country. At every stage of the project, Bhutanese people played decisive roles as we collaborated to create a book that would honor their culture. Our genuine, respectful attention had an immediate, lasting transformative effect in that Laconia ESOL classroom and, later, beyond it; in gathering folk tales, we were validating essential memories and receiving esteemed gifts.

Interpretation of any folk tale is flexible and varies according to the life experiences listeners bring to it. As *The Story of a Pumpkin* gained more and more attention in the New Hampshire Bhutanese community, it invited wide-ranging commentary. One man, Bishnu Khanal, compared his entire refugee generation with the man trapped inside the pumpkin. “We have a large communications gap here. But our children will bridge the gap. In the story, the man emerged from the pumpkin and became his true self. In that same way, our children will emerge from the pumpkin and become their true selves in our new home” (qtd. in Schwartz 2013).

*Jo Radner is a former president of the American Folklore Society and of the National Storytelling Network. Professor Emerita at American University, she received a BA, MA, and PhD from Harvard University and now works in northern New England as a freelance folklorist, oral historian, and storyteller.*

#### Endnotes

1. See, among many other sources, F.A. de Caro, “Riddles and Proverbs,” in Elliott Oring, ed., *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1986: 175-197.
2. Figures from New Hampshire Humanities. *The Story of a Pumpkin* has been out of print since March 2016, although New Hampshire Humanities has a few softcover copies. [www.nhhumanities.org](http://www.nhhumanities.org)

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# Seven Marigolds

## Seven Steps to Create a Bilingual Book with English Language Learners<sup>\*</sup>

*Here is a very brief outline of the steps the New Hampshire Humanities Council (Now New Hampshire Humanities) took to create a bilingual Nepali-English book with Bhutanese students in Laconia, NH, in a Lutheran Social Services ESOL class. For more steps, see our blog: <https://storyofapumpkin.wordpress.com>.*

- 1. Create a bilingual book committee.** Choose representatives of the culture the tale arises from, an ESOL educator, creators of the book, and possibly a writer, a children's librarian, a community leader, a book designer, a folklorist. Can you pay stipends to creators? Consider writing grants to private or business funders.
- 2. Generate folk tales with the help of an interpreter.** The leader tells a tale as an example to the group of participants. Invite participants to remember a tale told to them when they were children. As a teller tells a story, the interpreter gives a word-by-word interpretation (not a summary). Record each tale in the teller's language and the English interpretation.
- 3. Transcribe the tales.** We selected one tale from the community we worked with to develop into a bilingual picture book. You might choose, instead of a single book, to create an anthology of all the tales collected.
- 4. Illustrate the tale.** Let the community guide you to a respected artist who agrees to serve as illustrator. The illustrator listens to the teller tell the story and, with the book committee, determines the illustrations to be created.
- 5. Write the tale.** If the teller is not also the writer of the tale, identify someone in the community to write the tale in the teller's language, based on the oral telling. English version: adapt the word-by-word interpretation to a telling in English that is accurate and flows for U.S. readers.
- 6. Production and publication.** Layout text and illustrations. Proofread both languages, again and again, with multiple readers. Chose how to publish, from photocopying to e-book to working with a printer.
- 7. Publication party.** Invite people from the community who created the book as well as the wider community. The tellers of the tale are honored and can give the tale to their new countrymen and women.

\* "If you listen to a tale you will receive a golden garland." Traditional end to a Bhutanese tale.

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