



Author's Note

My sons Will and Connor are almost teenagers now, and ever since they were little boys, we've enjoyed creating stories together. It's a give-and-take process, whereby each of us contributes an idea, a character, or a plot twist until we've woven together an entire story. Before long, we began illustrating the best of our stories, and soon after that, we published our first collection of bedtime tales, *"Dad, Tell Me A Story"–How to Revive the Tradition of Storytelling with Your Children* (Nicasio Press 2010). Besides containing twenty-five of our favorite stories and illustrations, the book offers guidance to parents on how to create a storytelling tradition within their own families.

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My children and I often weave bits of their daily lives into our stories. When my children began studying Chinese history and culture in school, we were inspired to create this story about a land where kite flying is more than just a pastime. – *John McCormick*

The Kite Maker of Beijing

By John, William, and Connor McCormick

It was perfect weather for kite flying. The old man worked his kite skillfully as it arched up into the sky. The kite was fiery red and shaped like a dragon, complete with bulging eyes, scraggly beard, and spiked tail.

No one knew the old man's real name. The children who gathered around him just called him "Soaring Dragon," because his favorite kite—the one he was now flying—soared higher than any of the other kites in Fragrance Hill Park.

Fragrance Hill Park was a favorite kite flying spot in Beijing, the capital of China. It was often full of children and kite fliers. People loved the grassy meadows surrounded by maple, sumac, peach and persimmon trees, whose flowers gave off a sweet scent. But today the weather behaved as if it didn't know what to do. A blustery March wind shook the new buds on the trees. One minute the sky was dark and cloudy; the next it was clear and bright.

Soaring Dragon loved the park, too. He lived nearby in one of Beijing's oldest *hutongs*. But the maze-like neighborhood full of small houses and courtyards built along narrow streets

and alleys, was no place to fly a kite. So the old man spent his days in Fragrance Hill Park, making kites and teaching children how to fly them.

“Make it dance,” cried a little bob-haired girl.

“You mean like so?” Soaring Dragon twitched his index finger ever so slightly, and the Dragon kite bopped up and down, then looped three times in growing circles.

The children screamed with glee. A skinny boy in glasses pleaded, “Can you make it dive?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Soaring Dragon. He tugged his wrist so the kite plunged at the children. Its fabric snapped in the wind and the children squealed in delight. They dove to the ground as the dragon’s tail brushed against their cheeks.

“Do it again!” the children cackled when the kite spiraled upwards once more.

Nothing made Soaring Dragon happier than flying kites in the park with children. The children loved Soaring Dragon, too. Maybe it was because he always had a smile on his face, or because they liked to hear him roar with laughter when they pulled on his wispy gray beard. He always had time to show them how to untangle a knotted piece of string, or to help launch a kite into the air.

Today’s kite flying was at last broken up by the calls of parents summoning their children for dinner.

“Goodbye, Soaring Dragon. We’ll see you tomorrow,” they called as they ran home.

Soaring Dragon lingered behind, flying his kite and enjoying the quiet that had returned to the park. Only the diminishing echo of children's voices still rang in his ears. Several other kite flyers were in the area, practicing their maneuvers and stunts. The sky had finally cleared, and the late afternoon sun cast a red-orange glow over the park.

Soaring Dragon gazed up at his favorite kite fluttering in the wind. He loved to feel its power and grace vibrating down the string into his fingers, hands, and body. In these quiet moments, he felt a kinship with the kite. "Oh, how wonderful it would be to become a kite," he muttered to himself. "I could spend all my days soaring high above the earth."

At that moment, a warm wind brushed against his cheek and he heard a voice call to him. Not a child's voice, but a voice from above.

"Soaring Dragon, you've lived a long and good life. As a reward, it's now time for you to join me in heaven."

Soaring Dragon looked all around him. Who said that? Was someone from the *hutong* playing a trick on him?

"Where are you?" he called. "Come out from your hiding place."

"I'm right here," said the voice, now coming from behind him.

Soaring Dragon whirled around to see a bald old man with white eyebrows and whiskers standing there. He leaned on a walking staff, noisily eating a peach. The peach, thought Soaring Dragon, is the symbol in Chinese culture for long life and wisdom. Perhaps this was a wise old man!

“Who are you?” asked Soaring Dragon.

“Don’t you recognize me?” said the stranger, wiping peach juice from his chin. “I’m Shou-Hsing, the patron saint of old people.”

Soaring Dragon’s kite took an unexpected dive before he quickly righted it. “But why are you here?” asked Soaring Dragon, keeping one eye on his kite and one on this strange visitor.

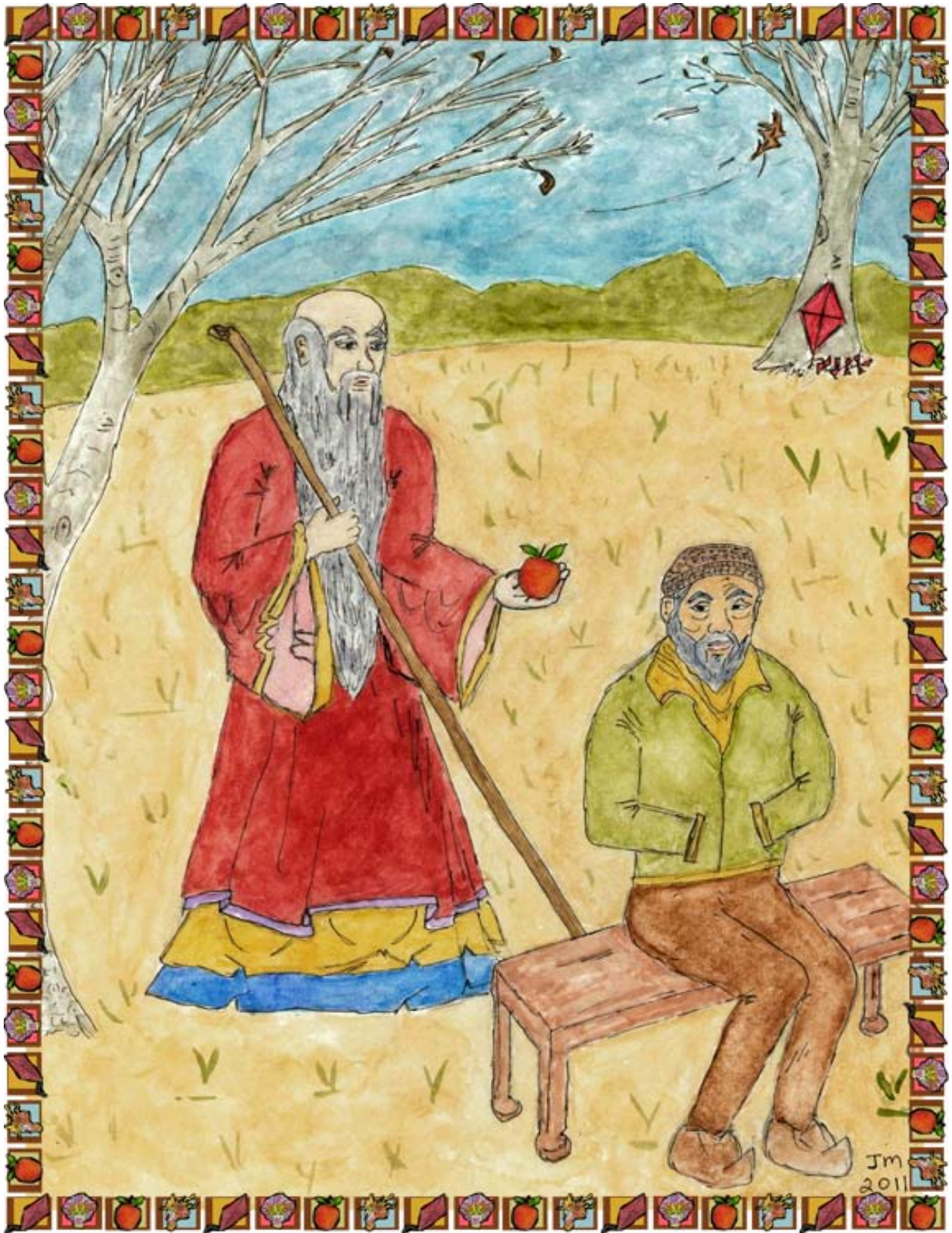
Shou-Hsing pulled a large book from his robe. He opened the book in the middle, and thumbed through several pages. “By my reckoning,” said Shou-Hsing. “You’re one hundred and ten years old.”

Soaring Dragon paused for a moment while he allowed Shou-Hsing’s words to sink in. One hundred and ten? Could he really be that old? Meanwhile, his kite dipped toward the ground before Soaring Dragon reined it in.

“What if I am?” he said at last. His kite rose higher, fluttering furiously in the wind.

“This is the *Book of Life*.” Shou-Hsing held it up. “It contains the records of the life spans of everyone on earth. I’m the keeper of this book.”

For the first time, Soaring Dragon realized what was happening. It was the end of his life. He felt weak, and his hands lost their grip on the string. The kite dropped again, until Soaring Dragon finally found the string and gave the line a good tug.



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As Soaring Dragon struggled to keep the kite aloft, he glanced sideways at Shou-Hsing. “But what if I’m not ready to leave? I like flying kites and playing with the children who come to the park.”

“Do not be afraid,” said Shou-Hsing. “It’s time for your spirit to rise up to heaven. You’re needed there.”

Shou-Hsing raised his hand and the wind stopped. Soaring Dragon’s kite came fluttering down, rocking back and forth like a pendulum.

Soaring Dragon too felt the strength leave his body. He crumpled to the ground and lay on his back, staring up at the cloudless sky. His eyes were full of confusion and fear.

Shou-Hsing lifted a finger to his lips and gently whispered, “Shhh.” Shou-Hsing then waved his hand over Soaring Dragon’s face, as a gesture of comfort and blessing. Soaring Dragon closed his eyes and his fingers let loose of the kite string. His kite drifted silently to the ground. It came to rest on the grass next to Soaring Dragon. At that moment, Soaring Dragon’s spirit left his body and rose toward the heavens under Shou-Hsing’s watchful eye.

As strong as Soaring Dragon’s spirit had been in life, so too was it strong in the afterlife. Soaring Dragon didn’t want to leave, even though a place was waiting for him in heaven. As his spirit rose higher, it suddenly entered another, larger dragon kite flying nearby.

“So this is what it feels like to be a kite!” shouted Soaring Dragon. He felt light as a feather, yet full of energy and power. He rode the air as a bird does, dodging and dancing with each gust. It was a giddy, weightless sensation unlike any he had experienced.

Shou-Hsing had never had this happen before. He pleaded with Soaring Dragon to come out from the kite. Soaring Dragon refused. "I'm not ready to leave yet. Let me stay here in this kite so I can play with the children who are my friends."

Shou-Hsing was impressed with Soaring Dragon's devotion to children. Shou-Hsing said, "Very well, Soaring Dragon. You may linger in your kite for now. But remember, you will one day have to come to heaven where you're also needed."

Meanwhile, down on the ground, a young man named Lu Ban and several of his friends were flying the kite that Soaring Dragon's spirit had just entered. Lu Ban's dragon kite was the largest in the entire city and needed a team of men to fly it.

Suddenly, Lu Ban's hand jerked upward. Lu Ban could feel a new energy in the kite, as though lightning had struck it and electricity was now flowing through the kite and into him. Lu Ban eyed the kite closely, wondering what was going on.

It still looked like his kite. The kite was topped with a large red dragon's head, sporting great horns, yellow eyes, long whiskers, and a stringy black beard. Its centipede body had dozens of pairs of dancing, feather-tipped legs. The legs balanced and lifted the kite, allowing it to soar even in the strongest or lightest of winds.

Yet now, it behaved so differently. His kite had come to life!

As Lu Ban got used to the kite, it became much easier to control. In fact, Lu Ban no longer needed a team to help him fly it. All Lu Ban had to do was will the kite to do what he wanted, and the kite obeyed.

Over the next several months, Lu Ban became the most skilled kite flyer in the land. His dragon kite performed loops, dives, rolls, and spins to perfection. Lu Ban won many kite flying competitions, including the most famous contest of all in the city of WeiFang, in nearby Shandong province.

Lu Ban also entered his dragon kite in aerial combat competitions. In these competitions, all the contestants fitted their kites with sharp razor blades. That way, as other kites came near, they could cut their lines or shred the fabric in their sails.

Before these competitions, Soaring Dragon's spirit was filled with uncertainty. Once the actual fighting began, his nervousness drifted away. It was replaced by a sense of confidence, excitement, and even mischief. Soaring Dragon's spirit propelled the kite to new heights and speeds. The kite darted around like a hummingbird between flowers. Soaring Dragon's spirit made the kite so agile and fast, it easily sliced the lines, tails, and fabric of all the other kites. Lu Ban always emerged the victor.

In one competition, though, a sudden burst of wind snapped the line to Lu Ban's dragon kite. To the crowd's amazement, the dragon kite continued its aerial combat against the other kites. When the dragon kite was victorious, Lu Ban let out a whistle and his kite landed softly by his feet.

Children were delighted by Lu Ban's skill in kite battles. They marveled at how Lu Ban had so suddenly become such an accomplished master. And Lu Ban sometimes wondered the same thing himself.

Shou-Hsing, meanwhile, had not forgotten Soaring Dragon. One overcast day, as Soaring Dragon's spirit was flying happily in Lu Ban's kite, a warm wind lifted the kite close to a low hanging cloud. From the cloud Shou-Hsing called to Soaring Dragon, "Why are you still here? Don't you remember that you're needed in heaven?"

"But I'm wanted here," Soaring Dragon protested. "The tricks I perform in Lu Ban's kite make all the children happy. And they make me happy, too."

"There are children in heaven who also need you to make them happy," Shou-Hsing said.

Soaring Dragon was jolted by a sudden gust across his kite's sails. Then he heard something. "What is that sound?" he asked. "Is it the wind?"

"That's not the wind," said Shou-Hsing. "It's the voices of the children in heaven, calling to you."

"What do you mean?"

"These children are waiting for you. They never got a chance to fly kites while they lived on earth. They want you to show them how."

As Soaring Dragon listened, he heard these voices more clearly. They were not from the children in the park. The voices came from the sky above.

Oh, those poor children! Soaring Dragon cried. "I must be needed in heaven. But how will my spirit escape from this kite?"

“That’s easy,” said a delighted Shou-Hsing.

Shou-Hsing raised his hand and an even stronger rush of wind burst from the cloud. It snapped the line to Lu Ban’s kite. The kite broke away, flying freely on its own.

On the ground, several children cried out to Lu Ban, “Look, your kite is going to fly away.”

Lu Ban was surprised but not worried. “It’s happened before. Watch what I do, and the kite will come back to me.”

Lu Ban placed his thumb and index finger at the corners of his mouth, and let out a shrill whistle. He looked skyward, fully expecting his kite to return and land at his feet, as before.

But this time was different. The kite didn’t return to earth, but began to spiral up into the sky.

Lu Ban whistled again, but nothing changed. The kite circled higher and higher, until finally it was a speck in the heavens. Then it disappeared altogether.

There were many sad people on earth that night, including Lu Ban and the children who came to the park. But there were also many delighted children in heaven. Children who, for the very first time, learned to fly a kite.

That made Soaring Dragon very happy.



For more information on storytelling with children, visit www.DadTellMeAStory.com.

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