

The Drinking Gourd

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By Carol Montgomery

Performance Time = 2-3 minutes

Cast (5+):

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Polaris

Big Dipper 7 (1-7+)

Moss

(NOTE: This is one of several free Readers Theater scripts useful for any study on the Underground Railroad or to help celebrate Black History Month.)

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By Carol Montgomery

Polaris: I am the North Star. I ALWAYS point North. I don't move across the sky or change place from season to season like other stars. Because I am so dependable, men at sea and runaway slaves have used my light to help them know the way to safety and freedom.

Narrator 1: Slaves often used a hollowed out gourd as a water dipper. Slaves called the stars of the Big Dipper "The Drinking Gourd" because the shape reminded them of their water dipper. They sang a song called "Follow the Drinking Gourd" with code words in the lyrics showing the way North to freedom.

Big Dipper 7: Hey Ho! What do you know?
The Big Dipper Seven shows the way to go!

Narrator 2: The Big Dipper, or Drinking Gourd, displays a handle and an attached cup with a pouring edge. That pouring end of the big Dipper—Drinking Gourd—is made of two stars that point to the North Star. Follow the bottom star of the pouring end up to the top star.

Polaris: Keep going and you'll find the North Star! That's me!

Big Dipper 7: Hey Ho! What do you know?
The Drinking Gourd shows the way to go!

Polaris: Once you find me you'll remember the North Star always points North. I am dependable.

Narrator 1: Slaves knew if the sky was cloudy at night they couldn't see the North Star.

Polaris: *(looks sad and hides behind script)*

Narrator 1: But, they could study the trees to see which side the moss grew on—if any.

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Narrator 2: The old song, “Follow the Drinking Gourd” says in the second verse, “The dead tree shows the way.” That was a clue.

Moss: I am Moss. You can find me growing on the cooler side of dead tree-- sometimes living trees.

Narrator 1: Escaped slaves learned to follow the moss growing on the trees.

Moss: So slaves followed me to Freedom because I like the north side best!

Narrator 2: Escaped slaves knew that north was the direction of freedom—free states and Canada—where there was no slavery.

Polaris: So on clear nights runaway slaves followed the North Star. I pointed the way to freedom.

Moss: And on not so clear nights or days they looked for me, Moss, on trees. Remember I like the north side best. So, follow **me** to freedom.

Narrators 1 & 2: But, escaped slaves always watched the sky for the Big Dipper/Drinking Gourd. Why?

Big Dipper 7: Hey Ho! What do you know?
The Big Dipper Seven shows the way to go!
Hey Ho! What do you know?
The Drinking Gourd shows the way to go!

All: North to FREEDOM!

(Optional: Add story of slave or Underground Railroad script?)

Curriculum Links (Valid in 2010):

- <http://www.42explore2.com/undergrd.htm>
(Lots of links including some on the Drinking Gourd...)
- <http://www.songsforteaching.com/folk/followthedrinkinggourd.htm>
(Words, mp3, and lesson plan on the Drinking Gourd...)
- <http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/>
(History, meaning of lyrics, teaching materials...)
- <http://www-istp.gsfc.nasa.gov/stargaze/Spolaris.htm>
(Includes link to a “lesson plan” that has lots of great ideas and questions, but does not seem to be written by a teacher...)
- <http://www.hvastronomy.com/bigdipper.html>
(Outlines of Big Dipper, Little Dipper, and other stars—including Polaris; information on the Big Dipper—including legends from other cultures...)
- <http://www.synapses.co.uk/astro/bearings.html>
(Detailed information on Polaris and the Big Dipper for more advanced students or the teacher...)
- <http://my.execpc.com/60/B3/culp/astronomy/Spring/Polar.html>
(Shows how the Big Dipper is part of a constellation, how the North Star is part of the Little Dipper, and plenty of step-by-step training for the budding astronomer...)
- http://www.sciencebuddies.org/science-fair-projects/project_ideas/PlantBio_p043.shtml
(Explains how moss grows on the **north side of trees in the Northern Hemisphere**, but also provides instructions and **photos** for a science fair project on moss—if your climate is damp enough.)
(Note: There are tons of Q/A sites online that try to answer this question—all basically the same way. This was the best site covering moss growing on the north side of trees, in our Northern Hemisphere. Even college students have proven it through their science research projects posted online.)