

From: *First Steps: a manual for starting Human Rights Education* (London: Amnesty International, 1997)
http://www.hrea.org/erc/Library/First_Steps/

"Mignonette"

(Adapted from p.11 of *Understand the Law* 1994, The Citizenship Foundation)

Aim: This morally complex story about the right to life will help students to think about how rights work out in practice. It also links well with activities about conflict in the next chapter.

Learning points:

- Everyone has the right to life.
- There is a concept of "natural rights."

Time: About one hour

What you need: The Simplified Version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

How to do it:

- Show the class article three of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see **Part Five**), which sets out the right to life:
"Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."
- Form the class into small groups of five or six.
- Read the following story to the class:

"On 19 May 1884, four men set sail for Australia from England in a yacht called the *Mignonette*. They were Captain Thomas Dudley, First-mate Edwin Stephens, Seamen Ned Brooks and Richard Parker, the 17-year-old cabin boy. On 5 July a huge wave smashed into the side of the yacht. It started to sink. The men had time only to grab two tins of food and to get into an open boat before the *Mignonette* sank. The four unlucky sailors found themselves in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, 1,600 miles from land, with only a few tinned vegetables to keep them alive. After three days, the hungry men managed to catch a turtle. This provided them with food and drink, but nine days later that was all gone. Still 1,000 miles from land, with no food and only the occasional drop of rainwater to drink, the sailors became desperate. The Captain wrote in a letter to his wife that, if no ship should come, 'we must soon die... I am sorry I ever started such a trip...' There was, however, one chance of survival, at least for three of the crew, for a few more days. Someone would have to become food for the others. The Captain suggested that they draw lots to decide which of them should be killed, but Stephens and Brooks objected. 'if we are to die,' they said, 'we should all die together'. Young Richard Parker, lying hardly conscious in the bottom of the boat, said nothing. After two more days without food and water, the Captain convinced Stephens that one of them ought to be sacrificed to save the others, and that the obvious candidate was Richard Parker. He was an orphan, had no wife or family, and was already on the brink of death. He woke from his coma only occasionally to drink sea-water which was making him even more ill. They knew their little boat was drifting towards the shipping lanes. They might sight a ship any day - or they might not. They agreed that if no help came to them

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by the next day, then they would kill the boy. None came. Seamen Brooks wanted no part in the killing. While he covered himself with a jacket at the end of the boat, Dudley and Stephens knelt over the unconscious Parker. 'Richard, my boy,' whispered the Captain, 'your time has come. Stephens stood ready to hold the boy's feet but there was no need. He was too ill to struggle as the Captain took out a pocket-knife and plunged it into the boy's neck, killing him instantly. All three men drank the blood and ate Richard's heart and liver for the next three days. On the fourth day, they were sighted by a German ship, the *Montezuma*. The three men were very weak. The First-mate and Captain needed to be hauled on board by rope.

The men landed in England on 7 September. Dudley, Stephens and Brooks went straight to the authorities and explained the reasons for the death of the boy."

- Ask the class in their groups to answer the following questions:
 - Do you think the three men did anything wrong?
 - Should they have been charged with a crime?
 - Should they all be charged with the same crime?
- Now read the next part of the story to the class:

"Incidents like this had happened before, and so Dudley, Stephens and Brooks were very surprised when they were immediately charged with murder - although the charge against Seaman Brooks was later dropped. There was a lot of public interest in the story as it was reported in detail by the newspapers. Money was collected to pay for lawyers to defend the men in court. At the trial, everyone agreed about the facts of the case, but the jury were faced with a difficult task. They sympathised with the three men, and would have liked to agree that it was not wrong for someone to kill another to save his or her own life. But they did recognize that to kill someone intentionally who was not threatening your own life must be murder. The judge offered the jury a way out of this problem by allowing them to take the unusual step of a 'special verdict'. In this, the jury stated the facts of the case, but left a panel of five judges to decide whether Dudley and Stephens were guilty of murder."

- Ask the class in their groups to answer the following questions:
 - If you were one of the five judges, would you find Dudley and Stephens guilty or not guilty of murder?
 - Why?
 - If they are guilty, how should they be punished?
- Now tell the class what happened:

"The court passed a verdict of murder on Dudley and Stephens. The sentence for murder was death, but in this case it was changed to six months imprisonment. By the standards of the time, and compared with the treatment given to other sailors in a similar position, this was still thought by many to be severe."

Questions:

- Richard Parker's right to life was violated. What about the right to life of the other men in the boat?

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- What would you have done? Would you die rather than kill someone else?
- This story happened 64 years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was made. Does this make any difference to Richard Parker's right to life?
- Some people argue that there are "natural" laws and rights which have always existed, and which are common-sense and fair. For example, the right to be free would be a "natural" right. Do you agree that with this idea?
- What other things, apart from life itself, do you think we might have a "natural" right to? Make a list and compare it with the rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Choices:

- What if the men had not told the authorities that they killed the boy? Ask students to make a play, stories, poems, or imaginary letters in which they imagine that they are the three men ten years after the story. How would they feel about what they did? Would they feel guilty? Why/Why not?
- How would you react if you were a friend of Richard Parker?
- As a project, students could make a survey of their friends and family, asking "What do you think are your natural rights?" The resulting data could be collated and used for discussion or as the basis for maths work, for example, by displaying it as a pie chart.