

# The Jar ...



**Original source: Julian Russell (there are many versions of this story!)**

The very famous Chinese professor from the very famous Chinese university sat in front of a group of new students. In front of him was a large glass jar, translucent and slightly greenish. The kind of jar some people keep plants in.

The professor looked at the students but said nothing. Then he leaned down to his right hand side. By his foot was a pile of fist-sized rocks. He took a rock and very carefully dropped it through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar. Then another and another and another. Until no more rocks could be dropped through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar.

He turned to the group and said: "Tell me, is the jar now full?"

The group murmured assent: the jar was now full.

The professor said nothing and turned to his left side. By his foot was a pile of pebbles. He took a handful of pebbles and carefully poured them through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar. Handful by handful, around the rocks, until no more pebbles could be poured through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar.

He turned to the group and said: "Tell me, is the jar now full?"

The group mumbled that it certainly appeared as if the jar could possibly now be full, maybe.

The professor said nothing and turned again to his right side. By his foot was a pile of coarse, dry sand. He took a handful of sand and carefully poured it through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar. Around the rocks, around the pebbles, handful by handful, until no more sand could be poured through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar.

He turned to the group and said: "Tell me, if the jar now full?"

There was silence.

The professor said nothing and turned again to his left side. By his foot was a jug of water. He took the jug and carefully poured the water through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar. Around the rocks, the pebbles and the sand. Until no more water could be poured through the hole at the top of the neck of the jar.

He turned to the group: "Tell, me is the jar now full?"

There was silence, even more profound than before. The kind of silence where those present check to see if their nails are clean or their shoes polished. Or both.

The professor turned again to his right side. On a small blue square of paper he had a small pile of fine dry salt. He took a fingerful of salt and carefully dissolved it in the water at the top of the neck of the jar. Fingerful by fingerful in the water, around the sand, around the pebbles, around the rocks, until no more salt could be dissolved in the water at the top of the neck of the jar.

Once again the professor turned to the group and said: "Tell me, is the jar now full?"

One very courageous student stood up and said: "No professor, it is not yet full."

The professor said: "Ah, but it IS now full."



The professor then invited all the people who were there to consider the meaning of his story. What did it mean? How did they interpret it? Why had the professor told it? And after some minutes the professor listened to their reflections.

There were as many interpretations as there were people in the room.



When the professor had heard from each of the students, he congratulated them saying it was hardly surprising there were so many individual interpretations. After all, everybody there was a unique individual who had lived through unique experiences unlike those of anybody else. Their interpretations simply reflected their own experiences and the unique perspective through which they viewed the world.

And in that sense no interpretation was any better – or any worse – than any other. And, he wondered, were the group curious to know his own interpretation? Which of course, he stated, was no better or worse than theirs. It was simply his interpretation.

Oh yes, they were curious.

“Well,” he said, “my interpretation is simply this. Whatever you do in life, whatever the context, just make sure you get your rocks in first.”

## The “golf ball version...”

A professor stood before his philosophy class with some items in front of him. When the class began, he picked up a very large and empty glass jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous “yes”.

The professor then produced two cans of beer from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar, effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed.

“Now,” said the professor. “I want you to recognise that this jar represents your life. The golf balls represent the important things – your family, your health, your children, your friends, your passions, the kind of stuff that if all else was lost and only these remained, your life would still be full.



“The pebbles are the other things that matter, like your job, your house, your car. “The sand is everything else, the small stuff. “If you put the sand into the jar first, there will be no room for the pebbles or the golf balls.”

You know, the same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small things, you will never have room for the things that are important to you. Pay attention to the elements that are critical to your happiness. Play with your children. Set aside time for your medical check-ups. Help out at a charitable institution. Take your spouse out to dinner. Don’t worry. There will always be time to clean the house and fix the hinge on that cupboard door. Take care of the golf balls first; the rest is just sand.”

More metaphors and similar-style stories can be found in Nick Owen’s books “The Magic of Metaphor” and “More Magic of Metaphor”.