The Boy at the Dike  
(Folktale from Holland)

Many years ago, there lived a boy who did a brave deed. His name was Peter, and he lived in Holland, a country by the sea.

In Holland, the sea presses in on the land so much that the people built big walls of earth and stone to hold back the waters. Every little child in Holland was taught that these big walls, called dikes, must be watched at every moment. No water must be allowed to come through the dikes. Even a hole no larger than your little finger was a very dangerous thing.

One afternoon in the early fall, when Peter was seven years old, his mother called to him. "Come, Peter," she said. "I want you to go across the dike and take these cakes to your friend the blind man. If you go quickly, you will be home again before dark."

Peter was happy to go, because his friend the blind man lived alone and was always glad to have a visitor. When he got to the blind man's home, Peter stayed awhile to tell him of his
walk along the dike. He told about the bright sun and the flowers and the ships far out at sea. Then Peter remembered that his mother wanted him to return home before dark. So he said good-bye and set out for home.

As he walked along, he noticed how the water beat against the side of the dike. There had been much rain, and the water was higher than before. Peter remembered how his father always spoke of the "angry waters."

"I suppose Father thinks they are angry," thought Peter, "because we have been keeping them out for so long. Well, I am glad these dikes are so strong. If they gave way, what would become of us? All these fields would be covered with water. Then what would happen to the flowers, and the animals, and the people?"

Suddenly Peter noticed that the sun was setting. Darkness was settling on the land. "Mother will be watching for me," he said. "I must hurry." But just then he heard a noise. It was the sound of trickling water! He stopped, looked down, and saw a small hole in the dike, through which a tiny stream was flowing.

A leak in the dike! Peter understood the danger at once. If water ran through a little hole, it would soon make a larger one, then the waters could break through and the land would be flooded!

Peter saw what he must do. He climbed down the side of the dike and thrust his finger in
Peter looked into the tiny hole. The water stopped! "The angry waters will stay back now," said Peter. "I can keep them back with my finger. Holland will not be drowned while I am here."

But then he thought, "How long can I stay here?" Already it was dark and cold. Peter called out, "Help! Is anyone there? Help!" But no one heard him. No one came to help.

It grew darker and colder still. Peter's arm began to grow stiff and numb. "Will no one come?" he thought. Then he shouted again for help. And when no one came, he cried out, "Mother! Mother!"

Many times since sunset, his mother had looked out at the dike and expected to see her little boy. She was worried, but then she thought that perhaps Peter was spending the night with his blind friend, as he had done before. "Well," she thought, "when he gets home in the morning, I will have to scold him for staying away from home without permission.

Poor Peter! He would rather have been home than anywhere else in the world, but he could not move from the dike. He tried to whistle to keep himself company, but he couldn't because his teeth chattered with cold. He thought of his brother and sister in their warm beds, and of his father and mother. "I must not let them be drowned," he thought. "I must stay here until someone comes."

The moon and stars looked down on the shivering child. His head was bent and his eyes were closed, but he was not asleep. Now and then he rubbed the hand that was holding back the angry waters.

Morning came. A man walking along the dike heard a sound, something like a groan. He bent down and saw the child below. He called out, "What's the matter, boy? Are you hurt? Why are you sitting there?"

In a voice faint and weak, the boy said, "I am keeping the water from coming in."
Please, tell them to come quick!" The man ran to get help. People came with shovels to fix the dike, and they carried Peter, the little hero, home to his parents.

'Tis many a year since then; but still,

When the sea roars like a flood,

The children are taught what a child can do

Who is brave and true and good.

For all the mothers and fathers

Take their children by the hand

And tell them of brave little Peter

Whose courage saved the land.

Additional Activity: Find Holland on a map
The Boy at the Dike

Discussion Questions

1. What is a Dike?
   
2. What was the boy bringing to his friend’s house?
   
3. What was wrong with the dike?
   
4. How long did he stay at the dike?
   
5. Why was he a hero?