

Discussion Questions for

FRIEDMAN'S FABLES

Favorites Read by the Author

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The Bridge

MORAL: *When things start going really well, watch out.*

1. How would you get the man hanging from the rope to take responsibility for himself?
2. How much responsibility does the man on the bridge have for the other?
3. Why is it so difficult to let go once we are experiencing “ropeburn”?
4. What is a higher value, self-sacrifice or achieving your own salvation?
5. Why do the needy often get most needy when others around them are functioning best?
6. Why are the dependent so often calling the shots?
7. If the man on the bridge never got away, could the man hanging on to the rope be accused of murder?
8. How does “The Bridge” get played out in families, schools, religious institutions, health-care delivery centers, business organizations, welfare programs?
9. Could both men be the same person?
10. If someone came up to you and said, “Hold the end or I’ll jump,” what would you do?

A Nervous Condition

MORAL: *Beware the insensitivities of the sensitive.*

1. If the wife had come to you for advice, how would you have given her “insensitivity training”?
2. How would you get this man to take responsibility for his own feelings?
3. How can the wife continue to keep her husband’s ganglia sheathed?
4. Was their marriage a good match?
5. Why are people able to control others by being easily hurt?
6. When is adaptation to another healthy and when is it destructive?
7. In what ways can being concerned for oneself be freeing for another?
8. In what way can it be empathic to put another in pain?
9. How does challenge convey confidence?
10. How might the approach that the wife finally took be translated into running organizations? A whole country?

The Power of Belief

MORAL: *The way to cure an ostrich is to make him afraid of the dark.*

1. Would you describe the man in this tale as persistent, rigid, stubborn, idealistic, delusional, contrary, principled?
2. How could you prove that this man is psychotic without making all committed people sound crazy?
3. What would the man do if his family decided not to take his seriousness so seriously?
4. At what point can you be sure that reason is not going to change another's mind set?
5. What's the difference between unassailable beliefs and cherished beliefs?
6. What kind of evidence would it take to change your most cherished beliefs?
7. How did you come to hold those beliefs with conviction?
8. Why are all irrefutable positions suspicious?
9. How do rigid people get more flexible people to doubt their own sanity?
10. What's the best thing to do when an entire organization, or a complete civilization, is under the influence of totally incorrect beliefs?

The Lesson

MORAL: He who forgets his past may be sentenced to relive it, but she who can't forget her past is also sentenced to relive it.

1. What are this woman's dreams telling her about herself?
2. Which dream describes the worst bind?
3. What do tolerating abuse and not being free to love have in common?
4. To what extent is power given or taken in family relationships?
5. Are women more likely than men to be punished for trying to be themselves?
6. How does this woman regain power in her marriage?
7. If she told her dreams to her husband would that help?
8. Are women more likely than men to be victimized by multigenerational processes?
9. Can dead parents tie our hands behind our backs?
10. What would you advise the husband to do?

Net Results

MORAL: *The unmotivated are notoriously invulnerable to insight.*

1. Why can't Harry see that his efforts are not working?
2. How would you get Harry to realize that the more he tries, the worse things will get?
3. Why is his wife resisting what is good for her?
4. What would it take to get her just to say "no"?
5. Why does she do better with her "backhand"?
6. Which partner is more caught up in the game?
7. To what extent is the net result due to his overfunctioning, her passivity, or how both partners are connected?
8. When do games become serious?
9. When you see yourself locked in an overfunctioning/underfunctioning struggle, what is the best way to get out (1) if you are the overfunctioner, (2) if you are the underfunctioner?
10. Who won the match?

The Magic Ring

MORAL: *Keep the ring on your finger, not in your nose.*

1. Do we all wear some type of ring?
2. How can we protect ourselves without “rings”?
3. In what way could the ring be a vow?
4. What can enable us to minimize the traumatic effects of emotional shocks?
5. Do women need rings more than men?
6. Does a ring gain or lose power as it is handed down through the generations?
7. What is the role of ancestral force fields in bonding?
8. If you were the grandmother, what would you have told your granddaughter?
9. What is the role of timing in the way relationships take off?
10. Was she finally ready for a relationship or did she just drop her guard, or are they the same thing?

The Curse

MORAL: *The Devil tricked us all by keeping devilishness for himself.*

1. Have marital relationships become more or less serious over the years?
2. Are people doomed to make poor marital choices?
3. How much does successful marriage depend on the “right” choice?
4. What makes our bonds become binds?
5. Why is premarital counseling so ineffective?
6. When does commitment destroy love rather than enhance it?
7. When is divorce escape?
8. How much success is anyone having bringing fundamental change to any of the basic institutions of our species?
9. If psychology and sociology are Satan’s lures, what is the information he does not want us to gather?
10. In what way could this fable be seen as God’s challenge rather than as Satan’s curse?

The Friendly Forest

MORAL: *Reasonableness is the natural manure of terrorism.*

1. Why do the animals excuse the Tiger's nature yet try to make the Lamb adapt?
2. Would they ever ask the Tiger to leave?
3. If the Tiger eats the Lamb, whose fault will it be?
4. Is the Tiger inherently evil or just doing what comes naturally?
5. In what way could the Tiger be seen as the symptomatic member of a family?
6. Should the intrusive party ever have equal rights?
7. When dealing with uncompromising forces, are peace and progress ever compatible?
8. In what way does a consensus orientation always give strength to the extremists?
9. How do you establish criteria in order to know when not to escalate and when to say, "I've had enough"?
10. To what extent is evil (or any disease) an independent force, and to what extent are its destructive effects the result of immunological failure?

Caught in Her Own Web

MORAL: *No one gets the problem they can handle.*

1. Is Ms. Muffet in charge or out of control?
2. Could Ms. Muffet have heard advice to take care of herself?
3. Would you want Ms. Muffet on your team? For a supervisor?
4. Why don't the Ms. Muffets of this world ever have a sense of humor?
5. Are women more likely to become entangled in their webs than men?
6. When do our creations express our lives, and when do they shape them?
7. Is it possible to be committed and not lose perspective?
8. Could an entire institution become caught in its own web?
9. If the web had been destroyed would Ms. Muffet have started over, become depressed, rejoiced "I'm free"?
10. How does the striving for perfection paradoxically inhibit evolution?

Metamorphosis

MORAL: *How little control we have over the way we control others.*

1. If Mrs. K. has the power to transform Mr. K. in one direction, why can't she change him back?
2. What puts Mr. K. so much at his wife's mercy that he can't control his own transformation?
3. In what way is Mrs. K. also becoming transformed?
4. Who is adapting to whom?
5. What is the agent of transformation in their relationship?
6. Could the caterpillar have ever changed if his partner had not made the first change?
7. How does one put space into a relationship without actually leaving?
8. To what extent was it Mrs. K.'s actual leaving that changed Mr. K. back, and to what extent was it the fact that she just stopped thinking about him?
9. How do caterpillars know when you've stopped thinking about them?
10. How do you get another out of your mind when they are preempting your brain cells?

'Round in Circles

MORAL: *The most difficult habit to break is breaking the habits of others.*

1. Is the fly compulsive or committed?
2. Is there any way the moth could have gotten through to the fly?
3. Why can't we see ourselves as others see us? Are they always more objective?
4. To what extent does objectivity depend on position, on technical skills, on emotional attitude?
5. What gets us stuck in circles?
6. How is the fly's habit different from a drug habit?
7. To what extent does the adhesive quality of habits reside in the attraction itself, the nature of the repetition, some other intrinsic vulnerability, the relational patterns that develop around them?
8. Would you rather have the fly or the moth on your team? As a supervisor? A boss? A parent? A teacher?
9. If the moth were less interested in telling the fly how to live his life, would his own chances for survival increase?
10. If "flies" didn't have to relieve themselves every 13 seconds, could they accomplish more?

Burnout

MORAL: *Keep your nose to the grindstone and it will flatten your face.*

1. Can a scavenger ever hear, “Don’t work so hard”?
2. Why don’t scavengers know when to quit?
3. Why didn’t the other fish take over, at least temporarily?
4. To what extent do people take crap in a system because of their position in the tank, and to what extent is it due to their training before they entered?
5. Why can’t the others function after the scavenger burns out?
6. How are the other fish in the tank and the scavenger connected?
7. When does overfunctioning lead to the burnout of another, and when does it lead to the burnout of the overfunctioner?
8. If you do the “dirty work” in a system, how do you get out of that position without having the system collapse?
9. How would you set up criteria for evaluating all institutions according to their capacity to function without having to include a scavenger?
10. In what way is the burnout of any member of a system attributable to a failure of leadership?

Symbiosis

MORAL: *Partners separate because they were unable to separate.*

1. When is symbiosis healthy? When is it destructive?
2. Is mutual need fulfillment an adequate basis for a relationship?
3. At what point does interdependency become problematic?
4. How do you distinguish intimacy from dependency?
5. What affects human bonds more, the nature of the people or the nature of their relationship?
6. Why is it so hard to preserve boundaries in close relationships?
7. How do you communicate independence to a virus?
8. How applicable is this fable to marriage, parenting, teaching, therapy, leadership, politics, theology?
9. To what extent does the malignant potential of any invasive force depend on its own toxic nature, and to what extent does it depend on the vulnerability of the host?
10. If all the “hosts” in the world expunged their viruses, which life form would mutate more?

An American Holly

MORAL: *If all else fails, don't just do something, stand there!* (Murray Bowen)

1. How could the man have known when he had consulted enough experts?
2. Would the tree have healed faster if the man had gotten angry sooner?
3. Could resistance to healing be in the relationship rather than in the medicine?
4. How can we know when we might have become part of another's illness?
5. Why does willfulness trigger willfulness?
6. What makes an organism go contrary to its nature and build up resistance to healing processes rather than to pathological processes?
7. What is the best way to help others overcome such resistance?
8. Suppose the resistance is in yourself?
9. To what extent does the power of perversity reside in the seriousness of the response?
10. Would the man have become so involved if he had had more Hollies?

Soaring

MORAL: The children who do best in this world are those we make least important to our own salvation.

1. Why do some fledglings have more trouble leaving home?
2. How did Baby-bird wind up thinking that learning to fly was for the benefit of his parents?
3. Could Baby-bird's "attitude" ever permit him to hear anything for his own good?
4. Could will-conflict be the key ingredient in all self-destruction?
5. Is it still willful to try to change another when the other is acting self-destructively?
6. If Baby-bird's parents had let him go on the first try, would the results have been the same?
7. Is "soaring" something that must be taught or does it come naturally?
8. Can the contrariness of "Baby-birds" become so imprinted that no one can help them change?
9. Can you think of any books on raising children that try to get parents to de-focus their child?
10. Why do children tend to function best in those areas where their parents are least anxious and most incompetent?