

The Man on the Bridge: A Fable about Breaking Free of Codependency

NARRATOR: Rabbi Edwin Friedman tells the story of a man who had given much thought to what he wanted from life. After trying many things, succeeding at some and failing at others, he finally decided what he wanted.

One day the opportunity came for him to experience exactly the way of living that he had dreamed about. But the opportunity would be available only for a short time. It would not wait, and it would not come again.

Eager to take advantage of this open pathway, the man started on his journey. With each step, he moved faster and faster. Each time he thought about his goal, his heart beat quicker; and with each vision of what lay ahead, he found renewed vigor.

As he hurried along, he came to a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. The bridge spanned high above a dangerous river.

After starting across the bridge, he noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. The stranger seemed to be coming toward him to greet him. As the stranger grew closer, the man could discern that they didn't know each other, but yet they looked amazingly similar. They were even dressed alike. The only difference was that the stranger had a rope wrapped many times around his waist. If stretched out, the rope would reach a length of perhaps thirty feet.

The stranger began to unwrap the rope as he walked. Just as the two men were about to meet, the stranger said...

STRANGER: Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end of the rope for me?

NARRATOR: The man agreed without a thought, reached out, and took it.

STRANGER: Thank you...two hands now, and remember, hold tight.

NARRATOR: At that point, the stranger jumped off the bridge.

The man on the bridge abruptly felt a strong pull from the now-extended rope. He automatically held tight and was almost dragged over the side of the bridge.

MAN: (SHOUTING) What are you trying to do?

STRANGER: (SHOUTING) Just hold tight!

NARRATOR: This is ridiculous, the man thought. He began trying to haul the other man in. Yet it was just beyond his strength to bring the other back to safety.

Again he yelled over the edge,

MAN: (SHOUTING) Why did you do this?

STRANGER: Just remember, if you let go, I will be lost.

MAN: But I cannot pull you up!

STRANGER: I am your responsibility

MAN: I did not ask for it

STRANGER: If you let go, I am lost.

NARRATOR: The man began to look around for help. No one was within sight.

He began to think about his predicament. Here he was eagerly pursuing a unique opportunity, and now he was being sidetracked for who knows how long.

Maybe I can tie the rope somewhere, he thought. He examined the bridge carefully, but there was no way to get rid of his new found burden.

So he again yelled over the edge,

MAN: What do you want?

STRANGER: Just your help.

MAN: How can I help? I cannot pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope while I find someone else who could help you.

STRANGER: Just keep hanging on, that will be enough.

NARRATOR: Fearing that his arms could not hold out much longer, the man tied the rope around his waist and then continued the conversation.

MAN: Why did you do this? Don't you see who you have done? What possible purpose could you have in mind?

STRANGER: Just remember, my life is in your hands.

NARRATOR: Now the man was perplexed. He reasoned within himself, If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other man die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation. Either way this will haunt me forever.

As time went by, still no one came. The man became keenly aware that it was almost too late to resume his journey. If he didn't leave immediately, he wouldn't arrive in time.

Finally, he devised a plan.

MAN: Listen, I think I know how to save you. You can climb back up by wrapping the rope around yourself. Loop by loop, the rope will become shorter.

NARRATOR: But the dangling man had no interest in the idea.

MAN: I don't think I can hang on much longer,

STRANGER: You must try, If you fail, I die.

NARRATOR: Suddenly a new idea struck the man on the bridge. It was different and even alien to his normal way of thinking.

MAN: I want you to listen carefully, because I mean what I am about to say.

NARRATOR: The dangling man indicated that he was listening.

MAN: I will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own; I hereby give back the position of choice for your own life to you."

STRANGER: (AFRAID) What do you mean?

MAN: I mean, simply, it's up to you. You decide which way this ends. I will become the counterweight. You do the pulling and bring yourself up. I will even tug some from here.

NARRATOR: He unwound the rope from around his waist and braced himself to be a counterweight. He was ready to help as soon as the dangling man began to act.

STRANGER: (UPSET) You cannot mean what you say, You would not be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What could be so important that you would let someone die? Do not do this to me.

(A LONG PAUSE)

MAN: (SLOWLY) I accept your choice.

NARRATOR: In voicing those words, he freed his hands and continued his journey over the bridge.