

The Fable of the Bridge

by the late
Rabbi Edwin Friedman, adapted

THE FABLE OF THE BRIDGE begins with a woman wrestling with her own thoughts about her future and what choices she wants to make about her life. After much contemplation, she achieves great clarity and is excited about the vision she can see for her life. She starts off on the journey to her future...

SHE MUST TRAVEL to another town where an amazing opportunity is waiting for her—but she must get there by the next morning, or the opportunity will pass.

She travels many hours, each step getting more excited about the life she is creating. As the full moon rises, she is alone in her thoughts as she starts crossing a bridge.

Out of the corner of her eye, the woman sees a stranger coming towards her. She thinks the man approaching is putting his hand out to greet her.

However, the stranger has the end of a rope in his hand, with the other end wrapped and knotted tightly around his waist. **"Here,"** the stranger says to the woman, thrusting the end of the rope into her hands.

And although she is perplexed, the woman complied.

The stranger asks the woman to hold on tight with two hands, then promptly jumps off the bridge toward the deep river, running swiftly far below. **"Hold on!"** the stranger cries, as his free-falling body hurtles the distance of the rope's length.

From the bridge above, the woman abruptly feels the pull. She holds tightly to the rope, despite being almost pulled over the side of the bridge. Peering down at the stranger who is close to oblivion, the woman yells, **"What are you trying to do?"**

"Just hold tight," says the man in response.

The woman tries to haul the stranger up, but she cannot. She cannot get enough leverage. Her strength is almost perfectly counterbalanced by the man's weight. **"Why did you do this? I cannot pull you up,"** the woman cries.

"Just hold on. I need you," the stranger yells. **"If you let go, I will be lost."**

The woman looks around for help, but no one is near. She holds on for a while, and then calls down, **"Please, I cannot hold you. Please climb up."**

"I am your responsibility," says the man.

"Well, I did not ask for it!" says the woman.

The woman tries to invent solutions, like tying the rope to the bridge, but she cannot find any solutions that work.

Fearing that her arms cannot hold out much longer, she ties the rope around her waist. If she just waits long enough, the woman thinks, someone is bound to come and help her pull the stranger up.

She waits many hours, but no one else comes. **"Why did you do this?"** she asks again. **"Don't you see what you have done? What possible purpose could you have had in mind?"**

The man did not answer her question. **"Just remember,"** replies the man, **"my life is in your hands."**

Time passes... and a decision needs to be made. The woman knows she cannot hold on much longer. In desperation, one final idea occurs to her. If the stranger hauls himself up, while she keeps the end steady—if he reaches up, while she reaches down—working together, surely they can get the stranger back to safety.

But the man isn't interested in climbing up. **"You mean you won't help?"** the woman cries out. **"But I told you, I cannot pull you up by myself, and I don't think I can hang on much longer, either."**

"You must try," the man shouted back in tears. **"If you fail, I die."**

More time passes and finally, the point of decision has arrived. The woman says to the man, **"Listen to me. I will not accept the position of choice for your life. I will only accept the position of choice for my own. As for the position of choice for your life, I hereby give it back to you."**

"What do you mean?" the man asks, suddenly afraid.

"I mean, simply, it's up to you," she replies. **You decide which way this ends. I will help you, if you help yourself."**

"You cannot mean what you say," the man shrieks. **"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."**

The woman states again, **"I will not stand here and hold this rope. If you want to live, you must start climbing now. If you start climbing now, I will help you. Please, start now."**

She waits a few minutes, but there is no change in the tension of the rope. **"I accept your choice,"** the woman says, at last, and frees her hands. ■ ■ ■