

At tether's end, save yourself

By Ruth Ostrow

RECENTLY a woman I know came to me for advice. She had been frustrated by attempts to help a friend who was not responding.

Instead of telling her what to do, I told her this Jewish parable, as told by the old rabbis, which captures the dilemma many of us face in our intimate relationships with lovers, siblings, parents, children and friends. There was a man walking along a mountain ravine. He was well prepared for a long journey, carrying a great wad of rope around his body, a water bottle, compass and appropriate survival items.

Along the path he came across another man, who was merely out for an afternoon amble. "Join me," said the first man, leading the other deeper and deeper into the mountain range. "Could you help me carry some rope?" he asked the second man. The second man happily agreed and tied half the rope around his body.

They walked on, chatting, and developing a solid friendship. Then they came to a precarious, swinging, footbridge. Halfway across, the first man tumbled off. The second man felt a huge tug on his body and grabbed the rope. Slowly he peeked over the edge of the wooden bridge, and saw the first man dangling high above a rocky river.

"Help me, please! Pull me up or I'll plunge to my death," the first man cried. The second man tried to pull up the rope but couldn't. There was no solid railing or tree to tie the rope to. He didn't have enough strength in his arms to pull. And it was obvious that if he tried too hard, he'd end up toppling over the edge.

"I can't pull you up. You will have to climb up the rope yourself," he shouted down. But the first man grew hysterical. "No. I can't climb. I'm afraid. You'll have to pull me up!" The second man tried again. He stood there for hours, pulling, dragging, pleading with the other fellow to help him. "Please try. I can't do this alone," he begged, but the first man remained stuck. "No. I can't," he yelled back. "Pull me up."

More hours went by, night came. The second man was thirsty, exhausted from the weight. He knew that if the first man didn't climb soon, then both their lives would be in danger. "Please at least try," he cried, still trying to pull the rope. "No," said the first man. "I can't..." The next day came. The sun was boiling down. Without water, food or rest, the second man was beginning to slip closer to the edge. But he couldn't let another man plunge to his death.

He rationalised that if he let go, the first man may be buffered by the water and survive. But the situation wasn't so clear-cut. Having ventured this far into uncharted terrain, he believed that only the first man knew the way home, and had water and a compass.

Day became night. Night became day. The second man was dizzy, dehydrated and sunburned. He knew that if he closed his eyes, he'd go over. "You must try," he yelled down. "I haven't got the strength to save you. We will both die."

"I can't," cried the first man, dangling desperately at the end of the rope. And on the morning of the next day, the second man took a deep breath, said a little prayer, and let go the rope. He didn't stay to hear whether the first man survived the fall. He was too busy running to save his own life.

The parable has much significance in the relationships arena. According to Queensland therapist, Diane Summer, it captures splendidly the nature of the co-dependent relationship. This is where two people are unable to move, so stuck are they in some balancing act of inter-dependence, guilt, obligation and fear -- each needing, hoping to be rescued by the other.

In friendship and in love the question always remains: How responsible are we for another? Where does compassion end and indulgence begin? And is it them or us we are really trying to help or save?

The parable doesn't tell what happened to the two men. The first may well have swum happily home, having been mercifully released from the rope that entangled and terrified him.

What's clear from the parable is that our survival is our own responsibility. We are not responsible for anyone else's fears or self-destructive tendencies. We can always try to give good advice and be of service. But past a certain point, our attempts to rescue someone may endanger our own psyche. Nor should we expect others to save us.

These are the words I offered to my girlfriend. I didn't want to save her from trying to save her friend. Merely told the parable and walked away. My parting words were from the Christian adage which echoes a similar sentiment to the Jewish parable: "God helps those who help themselves."

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 14 SEP 2002