

Beware the sting in the tale

By Ruth Ostrow

I RECENTLY told a friend my favourite parable, when she was in distress over a relationship issue. It's the story of the Scorpion and the Frog, and it has great application in how we deal with people around us.

For those who haven't heard it, there was once a frog sitting on a rock by a river. Rain started pelting down and the river kept getting higher and higher, finally spilling over and flooding the banks.

A scorpion saw the frog and approached it. "I cannot swim. Please let me ride on your back and help me to get across the river," he implored the frog, in quiet desperation. "If you don't, I will surely die." The kindly frog wanted to help the scorpion but was aware of the danger. "If I let you sit on my back, how do I know that you won't sting me?" "Don't be stupid. If I sting you, you'll die and then who would take me to safety? By killing you, I would be killing myself," said the scorpion.

The frog thought about it, and it made sound sense. Why would the scorpion want to destroy his own chance of survival? "OK. Climb on," said the frog, setting off. Halfway across the river, while the frog was paddling, the scorpion stung him. The frog began to lose consciousness and started to sink. "I don't understand," he spluttered. "Now we will both die. Why did you do it?" "I'm deeply sorry," said the scorpion, weeping as they went under. "It's my nature. It's just what I do."

The story made my girlfriend sit back and think. Her problem is her mother. Every time she tells her mother any of her concerns, she gets criticised. "I just want a normal mother who listens to me and supports me, not one who waits for me to make a mistake and then starts the usual commentary about the fact that I'm not married, blah blah blah."

"But it sounds like you have a very normal mother. Criticising children's lifestyles is what mothers do. It's their job," I said, laughing.

"But why does she always have to give me the 'You should have stayed with Brian. Now who's going to want you?' routine. Why does she always bring up my inadequacies?"

I told her to think about the parable. "The problem is not your mother, it's you -- the frog. Why do you think your mother is going to be any different? She has criticised you like this for years. She probably doesn't mean any harm by it. It's probably just her silly way of trying to help you, or maybe she is venting a bit of disappointment that you're still single. That is a mother's prerogative. But why do you keep believing, hoping, wishing, things will be magically different?"

Of course, there is no answer to this question. We all do the same thing in our relationships. We are frogs. We meet scorpions and hope they won't sting us. They do, and we weep in surprise. Meanwhile, we are being a scorpion to some other frog who expects us to behave differently. I am sure my girlfriend's mother waits patiently for the phone call where my friend says: "Mum, you are right. I am behaving stupidly. I should find a man like Brian, settle down and have kids."

Her mum, from another world and generation, doesn't understand why she keeps getting bitten by her daughter's scorn when all she's doing is giving sound advice.

I think all relationships should come with a sign around their necks: Enter at Own Risk. It's not that we can't give certain people a go, or that we can't hope against hope that the scorpion-part of our friends and family won't poison us this trip across the river. But we must accept the truth of the situation, which gives us the choice to proceed or not.

By accepting the facts, we become responsible for our own hurt. It's no use meeting a beloved who gambles and then crying years later that your savings have been gambled away, or finding a work-obsessed friend who is lots of fun but then complaining that she doesn't have any time for you. The most painless way to live is to be realistic about the limitations of those around us, rather than denying the truth or seeking to change things.

Then we will be forced to ask the really hard questions about ourselves: "Why do I keep putting myself in harm's way?" or "Why do I keep seeking approval from this disapproving parent?" or "Why am I continually disappointed that my cat is not a dog? What is my problem that I expect things to be different from how they really are?"

Because the fact is that unless the frog had some key insight or breakthrough, it would probably give the scorpion a ride next time around, knowing it meant instant death. Why? "It's just what I do." And who is to blame -- the deadly scorpion or the silly frog?

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