

IF IT ISN'T ABOUT ME, WHAT'S THE POINT?

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A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt

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I begin with a story about two characters meeting on a bridge. These two characters could be anyone, at any time; I will tell the story as a story about a mother and a daughter because the story captures a dynamic of that relationship as I experienced it with my mother. As you listen to the story, I invite you to hear it as a story about your own relationships, or a relationship that you have been close enough to observe. Here is the story:

Once upon a time there was a daughter who had given much thought to what she wanted from life. She had experimented with different jobs, different living situations, and found both success and failure. Finally she felt clarity about where she wanted to go, and why. This clarity did not, however, immediately result in the perfect opportunity. Sometimes no opportunity appeared; sometimes she spotted an opportunity that looked promising, only to find her path hopelessly blocked; sometimes what she thought was an opportunity turned out to be a dead end.

Eventually her commitment and focus paid off, and the right opportunity came at the right time. She was ready—and a good thing, too, since this opportunity would only be available to her for a short time, and then be taken away. She had to act, to act decisively, and to act quickly.

Spirits high, the daughter set off on her path. With each step, she wanted to move even faster; with each thought about her goal, her heartbeat quickened; with each vision of what lay ahead, she found renewed strength. Hurrying along, she came upon a bridge that crossed through the middle of a town. It had been built high enough above a river in order to protect it from the floods of spring.

The daughter started across, enjoying the panoramic view from the bridge. Then she noticed someone coming from the opposite direction. As they moved closer, she was startled to recognize the figure as her mother, waving to her. There seemed to be something tied around her mother's waist. With a few more steps, she could see that this something was a rope, wrapped around her mother many times and, if extended, would probably be about 30 feet in length.

The mother stopped midway across the bridge and began uncurling the rope. The daughter drew near, and prepared to question her mother's curious actions, but the mother interrupted her by saying, "Oh, I'm so glad I caught you here. I need your help; would you mind holding the end of this rope for a moment for me?" Surprised by this request, the daughter took the rope end without thinking. "Thank you, dear, and remember to hold tight with both hands." Whereupon the mother jumped off the bridge.

Quickly the freefalling body hurtled the distance of the rope's length, and from the bridge the daughter felt the pull. She held tight instinctively and was almost dragged over the edge. Fortunately, she managed to brace herself against the bridge rail. After catching her breath, the daughter looked down at her moth dangling close to oblivion.

"Mother, my God—what are you trying to do?" she yelled.

"Don't be concerned about that, dear, just hold tight," the mother responded.

"This is ridiculous," the daughter thought, and began trying to reel her mother in. She could not get the leverage, however; it was as though the weight of her mother and the length of the rope had been calculated perfectly so that together they created a counterweight just beyond her strength to pull her mother to safety.

"Mother, why are you doing this? You'll get hurt!"

"Not if you just hang on, dear; hang on, and I'll be fine."

"But Mother, I'm not strong enough to pull you up."

"Well, that doesn't matter. But don't forget that I am your responsibility: if you let go, I'll be lost."

"But I didn't ask for this responsibility!" The daughter began to look around for help. The bridge was deserted, and no homes were close enough to hear her cries. How long would she have to wait? And why was this happening now, just as her final opportunity had come along? She examined the bridge railing, searching for a place to tie the rope. Something protruding, perhaps, or a hole in the boards. But the railing was smooth and uniform in shape, offering no place to tie the rope, no way to rid herself, even temporarily, of this burden.

The daughter tried again: "Mother, what do you want?"

"Just your help, dear," the mother answered sweetly.

"But Mother, I can't help! I can't pull you in, and there is no place to tie the rope so that I could go for help."

"Oh, I know all that. But don't worry; all you have to do for me is just hang on. If your arms are getting tired, you can tie the rope around your waist."

Fearing that her arms would not hold out much longer, the daughter did as her mother suggested and tied the rope around her own waist. Then she tried arguing with her mother again. "Mother, why did you do this to me? Don't you see what is happening here? What possible purpose could you have in mind with this stunt?"

"Honey, please don't make fun of me. All I need is a little help from you. You want to argue with me, and you have my life in your hands right now."

The daughter weighed her options: if she let go, then she would always know that she had committed the unthinkable and let her mother fall to her death. If she stayed holding on, then she would lose her last, best opportunity for success and satisfaction in her own life. Regardless of her choice, this moment would haunt her forever. Briefly, she considered jumping off the bridge herself. "That would teach Mother a lesson," she thought grimly. But she truly did not want to die. So how could she make this choice?

Time passed, no one came along. She heard her mother humming below her as she swung in the breeze. Soon the point of decision would be upon her, the point when she would have to continue on her way if she intended to take advantage of her opportunity. Even now it was almost too late to arrive in time.

Then the daughter had an inspiration: while she could not hoist her mother up by her own efforts, she could if her mother would help by shortening the rope from her end, curling it around her waist again and again. Together, they could solve this. Excited, the daughter called down to her mother. "Listen, Mother, I have an idea. I think I know how to save you." And she explained her plan.

"Oh, dear, I don't think I want to do that. You just keep holding on up there and everything will be fine."

The daughter was dumbfounded. Her mother would not help, and she could not keep holding on much longer. It came down to the critical moment, her life or her mother's life. And in that critical moment, miraculously, an insight—no, a revelation, a completely new idea.

The daughter called down, "Mother, listen carefully, because I mean what I am about to say. I mean this more than anything I've ever said to you. I do not accept the authority to choose for your life, only for my own. So I'm giving you back the power to choose for yourself."

"Whatever do you mean?" the mother asked, with a note of fear in her voice.

"What I mean is, it is up to you. You get to decide how this ends. I'll hang on here and be the counterweight; your job is to do the pulling and bring yourself up." The daughter began unwinding the rope from around her own waist and braced herself against the side.

"You cannot be serious!" the mother shrieked. You wouldn't be so selfish. I am your responsibility. What is more important than my life, so important that you would let me die? Don't you dare do this to me!"

The daughter waited silently a long moment. There was no change in the tension of the rope.

"Very well, Mother, I accept your choice," she said at last. And she let go. [adapted from "The Bridge," in Friedman's Fables, by Edwin Friedman]

We tend to speak of our belief in the interrelatedness of life, of all being part of the web of community, in reverential tones. What could be more inspiring than the notion that we are all connected to one another? What could be more comforting than the reassurance that we are never isolated, living and acting in a vacuum, totally alone? Yet this story, told by Rabbi and family therapist Edwin Friedman, suggests that our wonderfully woven interdependent web can at times become binding, a web of shackles that inhibit rather than support our lives. And at times, that web needs to be broken, when it becomes more life-draining than life-sustaining.

Friedman left the characters in his story purposely vague and suggested that tellers and hearers of the story fill in the roles as suited them. I assigned a daughter and a mother to the two roles because the dynamic of the characters in the story fits my own experience and what I have sometimes seen in other mother-daughter relationships. One could switch the roles, have the mother standing on the bridge forced to hold onto an adult child who refused to assume adult responsibilities. Or the two characters could be spouses or partners caught in a mutually supportive relationship that had become mutually destructive. Or the roles might belong to siblings, unable to exist apart from one another, unable to exist cooperatively. A rabbi himself, Friedman also suggested that the two roles could belong to a minister and a congregation, or a committee chair and committee members, or a board of trustees and the rest of the membership, where boundaries had collapsed and unhealthy dependencies grown up. Where do the characters appear in your lives? Are you standing on the bridge, unable to pursue your own goals because of your inability to distance yourself from another? Or did you at some point tie a rope around your waist and jump, ever thereafter demanding that others in your life hang onto you, make your happiness their responsibility?

One of the abiding tensions in both individual and communal spiritual life is the tension over priorities, the tension over who is to be served first and most. For an individual, this manifests as it did for the characters on the bridge, whether I can put my own needs ahead of another, given how I am taught from the time I am small that it is important

to be kind and care for others. For a church community, the tension comes in the debate over whether the needs of the institution and the members are more important than the needs of those outside the church walls. Does a church exist primarily to serve its members or the larger community? Sure, the answer is both, but in a time of limited resources, are we first to make sure we maintain what we have here and then, if anything is left over, turn our attention to our neighbors? Most Sundays when you come here, you are likely to be met with requests for your time, your money, your gifts: how much of your own church commitment is an effort to tend to your personal spiritual needs for inspiration and contemplation, and how much of your commitment is to be spend on doing something, giving something, for others? Given that spiritual teachings of all kinds emphasize the need to care about more than our own self, it can seem unspiritual to come to church just for me. But it may also be a reality that a big chunk of my time and energy outside church is already given over to others, caring for my family, my work colleagues, my friends who are struggling in their lives, my neighbors; is it not enough to be giving out there, and can I not just come to church and just be for while, just come for me?

Our culture offers as a dominant value the self, recommending that we tend first to self-interest and self-fulfillment, that we speak in "I" statements, that what matters most are my needs and what I want to make me happy. And congregations of all kinds have adopted these cultural norms, luring members by agreeing with that culture that "it is all about you." We ask newcomers what they want, and we busily set about trying to provide it as funds and imagination allow. When members are unhappy, our first tactic is typically to ask, "what are we not doing for you?" We softpedal our "demands" (and demands is far too strong a word) for commitment, whether financial or volunteer. We hope you will grow spiritually through your involvement with us, but we also promise never to actually ask you to account for your spiritual growth and leave it up to your own discretion, how much you give (whether you give anything), how much you do (whether you do anything). And this is a congregational style that characterizes not only most UU churches, but churches of all kinds.

Back to the bridge of the opening story: when a relationship begins, whether with another person, another community, another church, individuals enter it looking for something for themselves. Thus the first relational encounter is about the self. Initially, friendships, romances, community involvement, church involvement are about me. But the meaning of the relationship sometimes never grows beyond that point, the reason for involvement remains self-centered, everyone asks "what's in it for me?" until one day we find ourselves on the bridge. The other person, work colleagues, church members tie a rope around their collective waist and jump, expecting you or the institution to devote all energies and resources to hanging onto them, to supporting them however they wish. All talk about a larger purpose disappears; the discussion shifts to individual needs, individual priorities, surviving and keeping everything just as it is now.

Or sometimes roles change, someone else stands on the bridge, and we find ourselves having to choose between supporting the institution in its interests or going elsewhere. In a church, this manifests when we press volunteers into service because we have committees that need members and work that must be done, we maintain systems and programs because "we've always done it this way" even when the system is broken and the programs no longer attract.

Perhaps the time has come to chase everyone off that bridge, to take the rope out of the hands of any institution, any members, any one person, any one organization, and find a new way of functioning. What happens in this church, what happens in our community, what happens in any relationship, is not about me, nor is it about you, or you, or you. We have a higher purpose, a deeper reason for coming together than fulfillment of any individual ego. Staying focused on that purpose will ensure that we do not remain trapped on the bridge, locked into a mutually unproductive relationship, leaving both parties with no recourse but to drop the rope to the detriment of the other.

But if it's not about me, just what is it about? Do you have an answer to that question which does not involve referring to yourself? What is your purpose in being here, this morning? What is our common purpose as a spiritual community? And can we speak of that purpose in terms that are not self-serving or self-satisfying or self-sustaining?

No one finally wants to be on the bridge, dependent on someone else to hang onto us, forced to hold a rope that gives nothing but rope burns to the one holding it. I encourage you to let go that rope and walk on across the bridge, called by a purpose larger than any one of us, invited to live and love more abundantly, free of all ropes, free.