

The Message of Friendship

Still sitting at the same spot, Hope, the duck, thought some more about how he had envisioned his friendship with Jack, the tiger, to be, about how "at home" he had felt with him, and about how he was now experiencing a sense of profound loss.

"What he was really saying, " Hope looked at the water flowing through the stream while talking to himself, "was that his desire to make sure that Jan remain his friend was stronger than his willingness to risk losing him. He might love me and miss me, but he felt that he could not have a 'living' friendship with me while Jan was around."

Wondering why Jan felt this way, Hope got up from his spot and set out to find the tigers. He didn't have to go far. Some ten minutes later, Hope found the two walking towards him from where the centre usually held its group sessions.

He invited the two to sit down on the grass and posted the question to Jan. Looking unperturbed, Jan smiled and replied, "Well, this is quite simple. I didn't know that you are still struggling with it after all these years. You are a part of Jack's history and though you were friends before I came along, Jack can only live fully in his 'tigerness' with me as his friend. And there is not nearly enough time and energy for us to share our lives together. There is just no room for both friendships in Jack's life. I had to give up my own forest and *my* other friends in order to be with Jack. We all move on with our lives this way."

All the while when Jan was talking, Jack looked terribly pale.

Trying his best, Hope explained his own notion of friendship, of an inclusive way of sharing one's life with different people, without having to "move on" from one exclusive friendship to the next. But Jan simply stared at him suspiciously.

Wanting desperately to know what Jack thought about what Jan had said, but at the same time mindful of not disturbing his old friend's peaceful mind, Hope tried to decide what to say, or not to say.

After a long silence, Hope realized that it was neither the time nor the place to say another word, so he got up, and hugged both farewell. Jack, knowing that it would be the

last time that he would lay his eyes on the duck for another very, very long while, held on to Hope long and fast as if he did not want to let go of him.

Walking away, Hope suddenly remembered the frog, who once promised him her friendship and her little stream as his new "home," which was right after Emmett sent him away from the first and only "home" he ever knew. "I wonder what she thinks of all this now?" Hope decided to make the long journey back to the little stream near Emmett's old house.

He arrived months later, with the spring.

The blossoming plants reminded him of the first time he had met the frog. On and around the water of the stream, there were lots of ducks, swans, rabbits, sheep and other animals, but he saw no sight of his old friend, the frog. He started asking around.

"Oh!" a sheep named Christa exclaimed, "You must be the little duck for whom she spent her lifetime looking, then. Yes, we all knew her. She passed away just last winter, of a terrible cold. Well, we don't know the whole story - she was very private, but she left word that if you ever turn up, she would like you to go to the local wise priest."

Directions at hand, Hope found the priest without any difficulty.

"Ah, yes," the priest smiled after Hope introduced himself, "your old friend the frog asked me to tell you what she realized after Majesto's death...."

The priest then told Hope why and how the frog set out to find all animals named Christa and invite them to live at or visit the stream and become her friends, if they ever wanted to. And many of them did.

She also tried her best to find the duck, but year after year, travelling far and wide, she only found more homeless ducks and swans. She invited them all to the little stream and shared her life with them. But she did not manage to find the little duck with whom she set out to reconnect -

"She died with this one regret, " the priest said, "she asked me to tell you that she only realized what she had done to you after Majesto died. She said that she also understood that in order to share one's life with someone new, one does not have to 'kill' one's old friendship. But it took her a lifetime and a terrible death to learn that lesson. She hoped that you would find it in your heart to forgive her."

Letting his tears fall to the ground, all hope could do was nod. When his tears ran out, Hope said good-bye to the priest and then went to the stream. He watched the animals quietly from a distance for a while, silently said good-bye to them - all of whom now had a home because of his old friend the frog - and went on his wandering journey.

"Perhaps I will now tell the tale of my old friend the frog," Hope murmured, "and help all that I encounter to understand her message of friendship."

But deep down in his heart, he knew that the message could only be recognized when one was ready to receive it. His footsteps became heavy when his thoughts carried him back to Jack and Jan....