

Animalis Sanctuary Book Club

a safe place to contemplate interspecies relationships.

Exploring the pages of

Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives

Book Review: By Roxanne Grace Sperry, PhD D(ABHI) AFOCAE

Title: Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives

Author: Hope Ferdowsian, MD

Introduction:

Many of us are familiar with the Phoenix as a creature from Greek mythology that is consumed by fire. Arising from the ashes of the predecessor the regenerated Phoenix enters into new life. In medicine the term the “Phoenix Effect” is applied to those who have undergone a kind of transformation when the ashes of their despair give rise to the winged creature called hope. This transformation is often witnessed by medical professionals who care for survivors of emotional and physical torture and sexual violence. How do some survivors of such horrific crimes not only recover but go on to pursue a life filled with love, inspiring hope in those they encounter? How would a medical doctor write a prescription for a “Phoenix Zone”? Or is a “Phoenix Zone” something that must be written by the self on the heart of the one who suffers? Is it the indomitable spirit of the human condition to be able to overcome such cruelty? Does love overcome all suffering? How do these individuals rise up from the ashes of their trauma; can they do this in isolation or does this require being in community? Is the “Phoenix Effect” a phenomenon that occurs only in humans or can it be found throughout the animal kingdom? Is this ability to rise from the ashes intrinsic to all sentient beings? One physician, Dr. Hope Ferdowsian has witnessed the “Phoenix Effect” in her own medical practice. These observations gave rise to her research giving definition to what a “Phoenix Zone” is and how it functions. However, what is ingenious about her research is that she does not consider human and non-human animals as separate and distinct from each other. Her approach to her research puts all species on a continuum and all of their suffering on a continuum. This unique approach to her research allows for unique discoveries that lead to unique conclusions which unfold throughout the book “Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives”. Previously I asked how would a doctor write a prescription for a “Phoenix Zone”? This book does not leave the

reader without hope. This book in fact does culminate in a prescription for creating a “Phoenix Zone” written by Dr. Ferdowsian. This is a prescription that is written for our society. Will we as a society follow the doctor’s orders?

At the age of nine, Dr. Hope Ferdowsian’s first exposure to torture was found in a shiny red book that her mother stored high on a book shelf, but not high enough to be out of the reach of Hope. It was “her mother’s sad expressions “ when reading the shiny red book that caused a sense of curiosity in her daughter. Eventually Hope retrieved the shiny red book from the high shelf, lifting the cover of the book only to encounter a child of her own age that had been burned to death because of his religion. It was that horrific encounter in that shiny red book “*A Cry from the Heart*” by William Sears that set the course for Hope’s life work as a medical doctor and human and non-human rights activist. Dr. Ferdowsian’s extensive travels around the world allowed her to bear witness to and document the torture endured by both humans and animals. As tragic and horrific as her encounters have been with the tortured souls of both human and non-human animals, she has been able to identify what she refers to as “Phoenix Zones” which are places “Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives”. In the “Phoenix Zone”, the individual can rise again from the ashes of their tortured life.

Dr. Ferdowsian writes with the kind of clarity and integrity that can only be achieved through lived experience creating a bond of trust with the reader. The reader is left with a sense of hope that they too can enter into a Phoenix Zone and rise from the ashes of their own personal trauma. Although Dr. Ferdowsian does not speak to a religious affiliation or directly write about spirituality, she writes from the perspective of who she is; as a physician, she writes more towards the realm of the ‘Phoenix Zone’ as a therapeutic intervention for healing. However, woven throughout the text the reader can discern the language of spirituality as she writes about despair, healing, hope, and transformation.

Within the first part of the book, the reader is grounded in a historical perspective of abuse for both the human and non-human animal. Starting with the true story of a young female child named Mary Ellen who was rescued from her abuser by having an attorney from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) file a writ of habeas corpus. The meaning of habeas corpus in Latin is “you (shall) have the body”. Through the habeas corpus Mary Ellen attained a legal right to bodily liberty and a right to be considered as “someone” and not “something”. Dr. Ferdowsian continues on with her own personal narrative about her work and her encounters with both human and non-human animals who have been tortured.

The reader should be aware that this book is very well written and easy to read on a technical level. However Dr. Ferdowsian does not shy away from describing frank and graphic imagery when she explores the “Shared Roots of Violence and Vulnerability”. She moves the reader deftly through the difficult, but necessary material which clearly demonstrates that violence and abuse towards non-human animals is inextricably linked with violence and abuse towards humans. After reading the first part of the book the reader may want to put the book down to take time to reflect on and assimilated what they have read into their own psyche. Please do pick the book up again and finish it because in the end this book is really about healing, hope, freedom, and beauty.

In the second part of the book, the “principles in action” are found deep within the “Phoenix Zones” these principles include liberty, sovereignty, love and tolerance, justice, hope and opportunity and finally dignity. Dr. Ferdowsian provides the reader with a physiological explanation of what happens to the brain when exposed to extremely stressful conditions. She then enters into an autobiographical narrative, taking the reader into her research exploring what is common between psychiatric disorders such as PTSD and depression in human and non-human primates. She collected the data for her research by exploring sanctuaries across the world that are for non-human primates that have been tortured by being used for research and even in the entertainment industry.

The reader continues to travel with Dr. Ferdowsian as she takes us deep into sanctuaries for elephants, men, women, children, wolves, gorillas, and farm animals. The author’s astute observations reveal to the reader that a “Phoenix Zone” is much more than a physically safe sanctuary. A “Phoenix Zone” is a physically safe place where relationships between humans and/or humans and animals can thrive and help the suffering soul rise from the ashes through “the principles in action”

The author concludes the book with the possibility of “Phoenix Zones” but, there is much heart work to be done in order to create a “Phoenix Zone”. We as a society must develop a consistent moral framework and close the empathy gap. Dr. Ferdowsian provides a vision for creating a path to building these “Phoenix Zones”. She writes in a frank manner about how we as a society must change our way of thinking. The author referred to what Albert Einstein said, if we think of humans and animals as simple independent categories we are experiencing an optical delusion. We must leave our silos that separate us from each other as species and embrace the fact that human and non-human animals are inextricably linked. The way in which humans and animals suffer is not very different, but the way in which humans and animals rise from the ashes of their suffering is also more similar than different. Like the shiny red book that rested high atop the bookshelf “Phoenix Zones” is a tall order for society, but like the shiny red book not beyond the reach of hope.

I have read and reviewed this book through the lens of a woman who is a scientist and is a strong advocate for animal welfare and animal rights. But, I am also a Christian and I experienced this book as being written for a secular audience which is wonderful. However, without overtly stating it for a Christian such as me this book has the thread of the Gospel running through it. When the author refers to the Phoenix rising from the ashes into a new life, I can only think of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and overcoming death. The beauty of this book is that we can apply our own metaphor in the best way to relate to our own life. The utility of using different metaphors to deliver the same message makes it possible to engage with this book in a variety of situations and places.

Anyone who is a humanitarian or involved in a cause related to social justice should read this book. More importantly if you are not a humanitarian or involved in a cause related to social justice after reading this book you may become inspired to think about becoming involved in a cause for justice. The author mentioned the origins of Humane Education and incorporating it into the school curriculum. This book should become a mandatory read for humane educators.

Dr. Ferdowsian emphasizes that in order to have these “Phoenix Zones” embedded and properly functioning in society that we must have a “consistent moral framework”. How do we build this moral framework that will allow “Phoenix Zones” to flourish? We live in an age where the human has become of prime importance. We as humans have become our own idols. This will make it difficult to establish a moral framework that is inclusive of all sentient beings. And it will make it difficult to transcend our own biases unless we are willing to look beyond our own human interests and focus on a higher power, a creator. We need philosophical and theological precepts to draw upon to build this moral frame work.

What is unique about Dr. Fredowsian’s research is that she considers all sentient beings and their suffering on a continuum thereby eliminating the false distortions and the “optical delusion” that separating species from one another creates. In order to build the moral framework to support “Phoenix Zones” there must be no optical delusion that is caused by separating species and considers all species both human and non-human and their suffering on a continuum. The pioneering work of Andrew Linzey in the development of Animal Theology can provide the grounding of the moral framework to support ‘Phoenix Zones’. Animal Theology eliminates humanism and the human as the idol because Animal Theology is a God centered theology rather than a human centered theology. It is a theology when properly studied and interpreted moves us beyond our own biases to focus on the Creator and all that has been created by the Creator. Like Dr. Ferdowsian’s research Animal Theology eliminates the “optical delusion” of separating species into silos that blind us to the suffering of the other. Animal Theology considers all species and their suffering on a continuum.

The church has been and is a “Phoenix Zone” for the human refugee and asylum seekers. Unfortunately because of the optical delusion of separating species into silos the church has not been a “Phoenix Zone” for non-human animals. As Animal Theology emerges in the church it challenges and stretches the Christian way of thinking with the intention of doing precisely what Dr. Fredowsian discusses, creating a moral framework that is inclusive of non-human animals. After reading this book I want to examine this book through the lens of scripture. In the Gospel of Matthew there is the greatest commandment.

³⁷Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

This book leaves me asking myself who is my neighbour? The answer is all sentient beings human and non-human.

About the author:

Dr. Hope Ferdowsian is an internist and a preventive medicine physician. Her areas of expertise are in the fields of medicine, public health and ethics. Within her global health work she has cared for patients that are survivors of torture and sexual violence. She has worked on the international stage inclusive of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Uganda, and the Federated States of Micronesia. Through her work she has developed a deep understanding of how the suffering of humans and non-human animals is undeniably linked. Her work and intimate knowledge of the suffering of others has led to her

voice being heard at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Global Health on a United States Surgeon General's global health call to action along with many other highly esteemed organizations and institutions all over the world. She is influential in establishing key research initiatives and setting policies to advance the welfare of those who suffer and are disenfranchised on a global scale. Dr. Ferdowsian is a teacher and has taught medical students and residents. Now she is reaching out and teaching the broader public through her book "Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born And Resilience Lives".

