

OLIVIER CLERC

**INVALUABLE LESSONS**

**FROM A**  
**— FROG**

Seven  
Life-Enhancing  
Metaphors

Translated by Louis Marcelin-Rice



*dreamriver* Press

## **The frog in a pot of water: Are we already half cooked?**

*Imagine a pot filled with cold water with a frog quietly swimming in it. A fire is lit under the pot. The water slowly heats up. It is soon tepid. The frog finds this rather pleasant and continues swimming.*

*The temperature begins to rise. The water gets hot. It is a bit warmer than the frog would like, but he does not panic, especially as the warmth makes him tired and sleepy.*

*The water then gets really hot. The frog begins to find it unpleasant, but he is so weakened that he puts up with it, tries to adapt and does nothing.*

*The water temperature continues to rise gradually, without any abrupt change, until the frog is simply cooked and dies without ever getting out of the pot.*

*Thrown into a pot with water at 122° F, the same frog would immediately give a kick and flip healthily out of harm's way.<sup>1</sup>*

This experiment<sup>2</sup> has a lot to teach us. It shows us that when deterioration takes place slowly enough, it slips past our awareness and mostly arouses no reaction in us, no opposition or rebellion. Isn't this just what we are seeing today in many areas of life?

---

1. It appears that this allegory was first written up in Marty Rubin's book, published in 1987, *The Boiled Frog Syndrome*.

2. ...which, obviously, I don't recommend.

Health, for instance, can deteriorate imperceptibly but surely. Illness is often the result of nourishment that is depleted, industrialized, tainted or even toxic, coupled with lack of exercise, stress and poorly managed emotions and relationships. Certain diseases establish themselves slowly, in 10, 20 or 30 years, the time it takes for our bodies and our psyches to reach saturation point with toxins, tensions, blockages, unexpressed thoughts and repressions. Our habituation to certain minor inconveniences, coupled with the loss of sensitivity and vitality, means that we fail to react to this imperceptible weakening of our health until illnesses that are more radical, more serious and harder to treat make their appearance.

Many couples, too, experience a progressive deterioration in their relationship. Who is able to say: "Our relationship started to go wrong on November 23 at 3 p.m."? The quality of relationships crumbles away little by little, for lack of maintenance. Unexpressed thoughts, misunderstandings and resentments accumulate without being dealt with, without our talking about them or trying together to find solutions. Like an untended garden, where weeds appear and where anarchy gradually takes over, a couple who do not maintain their relationship fail to see that it is deteriorating imperceptibly but steadily, until the situation becomes intolerable. Hence the high levels of divorce in modern society (not to mention the number of separations not recorded by the statistics).

With regard to agriculture and the environment, the allegory of the frog tells us about the gradual poisoning of the soil, air and water, far more insidious and dangerous than the obvious catastrophes reported in the media. Soils saturated with chemicals (in the form of fertilizers and pesticides), imperceptibly lose a bit more of their mineral content each year. As the years go by, more inputs are needed to make the land productive, so that soon we will be putting

more into the earth than we will be getting out of it. Similarly, compared to the big episodes of pollution reported in the press, such as the oil spill from the *Prestige*, we have more to fear from the daily discharges from ships' tanks and the constant polluting of seas and oceans—these are far more dangerous due both to the scale on which they occur and to the fact that the effect is progressive, slow, barely visible, but devastating. This has meant that it has not, to date, produced any saving ecological “knee jerk” response which would rescue the frog—in other words us—from these foul waters.

On the level of society, we are witnessing a regular and constant decline of values, morals, and ethics. Year by year, this debasement of values takes place slowly, so that few of us are shocked by it. However, just like the frog plunged suddenly into water at a temperature of 122°, if one were to show an average American from the start of the 1980s a modern TV show or today's press coverage, his reaction would certainly be one of staggered incredulity. He would find it hard to believe that the time would come when articles would be written as mediocre in content and disrespectful in form as those we frequently read nowadays, or that such crass TV programs could be shown as those we are presented with on a daily basis. The increase in vulgarity and crudity, the disappearance of points of reference and of morality and the relativization of ethics have taken place in such a way—in slow motion—that very few people have noticed them or objected to them. In the same way, if we could be plunged into the year 2025 and see what the world has become by then, if it continues along the same course as now, we would probably be even more taken aback, given the fact that these developments seem to be taking place ever faster (an acceleration made possible because we are so bombarded by new information that we rapidly lose all stable terms of reference). Indeed, it should

be noted that all futuristic films show the darkest of “super-technological” futures.

I could continue giving more examples of this phenomenon, for instance in politics or education, but the principle is in evidence all around us for anyone to see. Let me make it quite clear, however, that by highlighting this slow process of decline, I am not doom-mongering, nor am I idealizing some bygone era when health, family values and morality were perfect. Such a past is clearly mythical. In making these observations, my intention is rather to point out that when a situation results from a process which takes place over a *long period*, any rapid and short-term solutions are generally inadequate, if they do not actually aggravate the situation in the long run. It is therefore not a question of going backwards, to a so-called ideal past, but of discerning, in our attempts to improve the present, what are merely fleeting illusions and superficial props and patches.

Thus, with regard to health, our refusal to take into account this slow deterioration leads us to consume more and more drugs and to undergo an increasing number of treatments of all kinds. The colossal “health care” costs (which are in fact illness costs), far from being a sign of a progressively healthier society, actually indicate a health policy which ignores the deep and lasting causes of illness and which, by providing only rapid, symptom-oriented and superficial solutions, contributes in the long term to longer-lasting and ever more complex diseases. Only a *long-term* policy of prevention and health education would allow a re-orientation of this drift into hyper-medication, given that it would take at least one generation before we would begin to see any results.

Similarly, in the case of society, we will not stop the development of violence and delinquency, closely linked to the above-mentioned loss of values, simply by multiplying the means of repression, the number of policemen, securi-

ty agents and closed-circuit TV cameras. If we do not take into account the deeper global causes of this phenomenon, going back several decades, any quick-fix solutions we resort to—which for election purposes must obviously be rapid and supposedly effective (or at least appear to be so)—will only provide us with a brief reprieve before the problem recurs on a larger scale. Modern Western society thus resembles a punctured ball that is deflating and that we are clumsily trying to knock back into shape by putting glue on it: since we are unable to breathe more soul into a society that desperately lacks it, we try to firm up its structure by means of laws and decrees of all sorts, the increasing number of which is a clear sign of bad moral health.

What the allegory of the frog teaches us, then, is that whenever a process of deterioration is slow, slight and almost imperceptible, we need either a very acute consciousness or a good memory to realize that it is happening, or else a reliable yardstick whereby we can assess the situation. It seems, however, that all three of these things are now rare.

1) Without *consciousness*, we become less than human, moved only by instincts and automatic reactions. Consciousness is therefore an essential condition of our humanity: no real thought, no reflection and no free will are possible in the absence of consciousness. Lacking consciousness, man is asleep, whether actually or figuratively. This is why “awakening” is at the heart of all forms of spirituality.<sup>3</sup>

2) Deprived of *memory*, we could spend each waking day in the darkness of night (and vice versa) without in the least realizing it, because changes in light intensity are too

---

3. Some even go as far as teaching how to become conscious in dreams, such as the Toltec way, as described by Carlos Castaneda, or in Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the Six Yogas of Naropa, one of which is devoted to the dream state.

slow and weak to be perceived by the human eye.<sup>4</sup> It is memory that makes us aware *a posteriori* of the alternation of day and night, as it is memory that enables us to measure all the subtle developments that take place in and around us, at a very slow rate. Without memory there would be no comparison, no discernment, and therefore no development.

3) Lastly, one of the reasons the frog ends up being cooked, so to speak, is that it has no thermometer other than its skin to gauge the gradual increase of temperature: it has no viable *yardstick* by which to evaluate the situation as it develops. And when it comes to us, what are our standards? How do we evaluate the “ambient temperature”? With reference to what do we determine the quality of our life, of our health, and of society?

Before we weigh ourselves, we check that the scales are set on zero. Before we use a measuring instrument, we calibrate it, otherwise its measurements are not reliable. But what of our own inner “instruments”? Do we know what the social, cultural, family, religious and other influences are that have calibrated them, often unbeknown to us?

What allows things to deteriorate without provoking any reaction on our part is probably our excessive confidence in our own personal judgments—which are necessarily subjective—in conjunction with our readiness to doubt the older collective standards, which have been replaced by others that are variable. The older standards were established by religions, which showed, on the one hand, abysses

---

4. Incidentally, I discovered the premises of this allegory of the frog at high school, when I was put in charge of the lighting of a stage production: the director had asked me to make all the changes in the intensity of the lighting so slowly that the audience would be unable to notice them. I was amazed to see that indeed, below a certain level of speed, only memory could indicate, by comparison, that the situation had changed.