

Metamorphosis

by John White

You could measure by the wiggles of Bubu's tail his contempt for tadpoles who couldn't think. His experience as chairman of the Little Pond Philosophical and Debating Society had impressed on him not only the importance of reason but also the penetrative ability of his own mind.

Of course, not everybody had Bubu's background. His years in Tadpole University had opened his eyes to a lot. There had been the free intellectual give-and-take of his undergraduate days. Later, working on the staff as lecturer and research assistant, Bubu saw his book *Tail Wiggle Coefficients as and Index to Social Maladjustment* published and felt he had opened a new era in understanding aquatic behavior characteristics. Largely unappreciated outside academic circles, the audacity of its revolutionary concepts had exploded powerfully among the intellectual elite. When the work was discussed, tempers flared, and the friendships of years were broken. Yet the masterpiece failed to gain for Bubu the chair he had hoped. His had been the misfortune of developing ideas fifty years ahead of their time.

Yet hadn't the university's loss been society's gain? Hadn't the Philosophical and Debating Society, which he had founded, disseminated light among the inhabitants of Little Pond? The reflection comforted him as he wiggled gently among soft curtains of sunlight in the cool green waters.

Not all Little Ponders had shown appreciation. The mental horizons of most of them were bounded by the pond itself. If life existed in the streams that entered and left it, it was a strange, foreign life. And who was to know what lay beyond in the lakes and oceans of which scientists spoke? Vast distances, infinite spaces. Empty and hostile? Filled with other forms of life? What life could inhabit the salty vastness that scientist described? While such speculation sent delicious intellectual shivers to the tip of Bubu's tail, they left most Little Ponders cold. Patiently Bubu tried to teach them the value of intellectual speculation checked by careful experiment and cold reason.

Bubu became abruptly aware of someone at his side. Powerful thrusts from a frog's vigorous legs had propelled him next to Bubu. The frog was a new member of the Philosophical Society and Bubu greeted him warmly. Though the frog appeared to Bubu to be bound by superstition and subjectivism, he nevertheless showed promise.

"Beautiful day," said Bubu.

"Beautiful," agreed the frog. "And up above it's tremendous. I never knew such colors existed before my conversion."

If Bubu was embarrassed, he gave no sign of it. "I don't doubt your sincerity in the least," he murmured smilingly, "though from my reading in psychology I suspect that your conversion is merely a psychological phenomenon."

The frog looked puzzled. "Well, it's a phenomenon, anyway. I know I'm different from what I was before." He looked at Bubu's quivering tail and then at his own powerful muscles. "For instance, I can do things now that I never used to be able to do."

Bubu grew solemn. Had he possessed eyebrows and fingertips, he would have raised the former and placed the latter together. "You are different because you *think* you are different. I personally have observed the difference, and it confirms all I have come to believe about the overwhelming influence of mind over body. Indeed, I might amplify my statements. Conversion is more than psychological phenomenon. It's a psychosomatic phenomenon."

The frog looked mischievous. "I'm not sure what psychosomatic phenomena are. But if my legs are an example, then I'm all for psychosomatic phenomena." And as if to underline his remark, he vigorously propelled himself in a swift circle before settling down beside Bubu once more.

But then he asked Bubu, "You mean that my legs are in some way unreal?"

Bubu was at home now. "Not at all. I'm not sure, of course, what you mean by *real*, but if you mean what I think you mean, I would say that your legs are the real result of your faith in something unreal. I noticed that you began to develop them about the same time you started talking about your fantastic 'world' of 'air' and 'sunlight' and 'insects.' I can only conclude that your belief in this unreal subjective experience of yours is responsible for the creation of your real legs."

The frog began to look interested. "You mean that unreality plus faith equals reality? That raises some interesting issues."

Bubu was not to be put off. "Exactly," he cried, swelling visibly. "Take hypnosis, for instance. If I were to hypnotize you and then tell you that you had been drinking heavily, you'd start behaving like a drunken frog."

"But that wouldn't be real drunkenness, and there would be no alcohol in me."

"No, but the change in you would be real. What's more, I could produce actual physical changes in you. I might, while you were still hypnotized, tell you that I was about to strike you a heavy, painful blow. I could then touch you lightly, and my touch would produce a real bruise. Your belief in an imaginary blow would have produced real harm."

"And my legs are like the bruise resulting from an imaginary blow?"

"Precisely."

The frog hated to say it, but he could see no alternative. "Then why, Bubu, don't you go to a hypnotist and get yourself a pair of legs? That would be better than a bruise and much more useful than your tail. I got ride of mine soon after my own legs began to function."

Bubu's swelling subsided. "It has to be admitted," he said a shade too casually, "that there are at present limits to what hypnotists and psychologists can do. But that's because our techniques haven't advanced sufficiently. The principle of the thing remains. Once we've developed more powerful psychotherapy, we shall be able to produce the same miracles as you."

"Though for myself," he continued, "I prefer to be intellectually honest. I refuse to exploit the cheap benefits that come from living in a world of fantasy. I cannot sacrifice my integrity and believe in what I know to be untrue, even if by doing so I could gain a pair of legs. In any case, your exhibitionistic cavorting's don't appeal to me." The tiny tadpole's dignity seemed pitiful as he quivered beside the frog's vigorous young body.

Something akin to pity filled the frog's eyes as he looked at him. "But Bubu," he said quietly, "the world up above that I talk about is real. I can't explain it, but in a sense it's more real than the watery universe we live in."

"More real *to you*."

“More real to anybody, Bubu.”

“But not at all real to me.”

The frog had lost his bantering manner entirely. “Bubu, the world would be there whether I could feel it or not. It’s still there even though you don’t believe in it. Right now, as we talk, soft breezes blow across the surface of Little Pond. A burning sun pours rays over the bodies of animals, birds, and plants. Other frogs like me are leaping across dry ground.”

“It is very beautiful,” the tadpole said precisely, his tone belying his words, “but I don’t even understand what you mean. What, for instance, is *dry*? No, don’t try to describe it again.” (The frog had been about to interrupt.) “You’ve failed to give me any but the most *mystical* concept whenever I’ve asked about it. Can dry be weighted? Does dry have length or depth? Can dry be touched? Does it have color? To all of this you answer no.”

“As far as I can gather, dry seems merely to be the essence of ‘otherness,’ the opposite of all we’ve come to accept as being fundamental to the watery universe we know. I shall believe it when you can produce solid evidence.”

The frog stretched out a webbed foot. “My legs, Bubu, aren’t they evidence?”

The tadpole made a gesture of impatience, but the frog continued, “The universe we inhabit is evidence of the ‘other world,’ as you call it. Our world grows gray when clouds cover the sun. The surface of our pond is thrashed into a fury when rain dashes on it from the world above.”

It was then that Bubu’s eloquent tail wiggled its derisive contempt. “Ignorant people have always explained purely natural phenomena in terms of myth. Science has adequately explained these. There’s no need to postulate a dry world populated by mysterious suns, moons, and clouds.”

“Bubu, I’ve seen clouds. I’ve been warmed by the sun. I—”

The tadpole’s annoyance nearly choked him. “Show me!” he cried. “Show me this sun. Show me a piece of dry.”

There was a pause, filled only with soft underwater sounds.

“I have to admit,” the frog said finally, “that it’s impossible for me to show you the sun. If you are to see it, your eyes will have to change. There’s a verse in the Sacred Book that says, ‘Except a tadpole metamorphose, it cannot see the

kingdom of dryness.' I'd like you to see and know what I see and know. I hope one day to take you hopping with me between blades of grass. But if I took you right now, just as you are, you'd die. You couldn't stand the exposure. You don't have the right kind of life."

"A few moments ago you told me that my belief in these things had produced my legs and lungs. Maybe. But that's far from the whole story. It's just as true and far more important for you to see that without my lungs and legs I could never live on land. My conversion, or my metamorphosis, was a gateway into a new world. The more I saw of it, the more I changed; and the more I changed, the more I was able to see."

There was again no answer. The tadpole's tail was scarcely waving at all.

"The vital question," the frog continued, "is whether you're willing to follow the evidence where it leads. You'll not be given more evidence until you use the evidence you have."

Bubu said something that sound like "Humph."

Again there was silence.

The frog stretched his legs uneasily. "It's so stuffy down here," he said, "I have to go up for a gulp of air more frequently these days. So if you'll excuse me..."

Underwater etiquette is not very rigid, and the frog darted away without finishing his sentence, thrusting powerfully upward through sunbeam curtains toward the surface of a world that did not exist.

Several minutes passed before Bubu moved. The wiggles of his tail had ceased. Slowly, with another "Humph," he emerged from the cover of a weed and moved in the direction that the frog had taken moments before.

Perhaps weighty problems occupying his mind accounted for the sluggishness of his movements. He might have been thinking of the brilliant remarks he could have made had he thought of them in time or gloating over the masterly way he would put the young frog in his place at the next meeting of the Philosophical Society.

His actual thoughts will never be known, for in his preoccupation he hadn't noticed the swiftly moving black shadow inches above him.

The duck's bill churned violently downward. Bubu was sucked by thrashing, whirling eddies. Immense jaws clamped on his tail, while his body tugged helplessly

in the water. He felt himself jerked powerfully upward. Upward and, oh, unnamable dread, through the surface and into the Great Beyond.

Terrible light and suffocating nothingness surround him for a brief second. Sounds of unbelievable intensity battered his tortured hearing apparatus. Then, with a swift toss of the duck's head, came hot darkness.

“I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.”
2 Corinthians 6:2

“This very night your life will be demanded from you.”
Luke 12:20