

Lateral Thinking

by Sudarshan Murthy, ASPE

Many years ago, in a small Indian village, a farmer had the misfortune of owing a large sum of money to a village moneylender. The moneylender, who was old and ugly, fancied the farmer's beautiful daughter. So the moneylender proposed a bargain.

He said he would forgo the farmer's debt if he could marry the farmer's daughter. Both the farmer and his daughter were horrified by the proposal.

So the cunning moneylender suggested that they let providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag. Then the girl would have to pick one pebble from the bag.

- 1) If she picked the black pebble, she would become his wife, and her father's debt would be forgiven.
- 2) If she picked the white pebble, she need not marry him, and her father's debt would still be forgiven.
- 3) But if she refused to pick a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail.

They were standing on a pebble-strewn path in the farmer's field. While they talked, the moneylender bent over to pick up two pebbles. As he picked them up, the sharp-eyed girl noticed that he had picked up two black pebbles and put them into the bag.

He then asked the girl to pick a pebble from the bag.

Now, imagine that you were standing in the field. What would you have done if you were the girl? If you had to advise her, what would you have told her?

Careful analysis would produce three possibilities:

- 1) The girl could refuse to take a pebble.
- 2) The girl could show that there were two black pebbles in the bag and expose the moneylender as a cheat.
- 3) The girl could pick a black pebble and sacrifice herself in order to save her father from his debt and imprisonment.

Take a moment to ponder the story.

The above story is presented with the hope that it will make us appreciate the difference between lateral and logical thinking.

The girl's dilemma cannot be solved with traditional logical thinking. What would you recommend that the girl do?

Well, here is what she did...

The girl put her hand into the moneybag and drew out a pebble. Without looking at it, she fumbled and let it fall onto the pebble-strewn path where it immediately became lost among all the other pebbles.

"Oh, how clumsy of me," she said. "But never mind; if you look into the bag for the one that is left, you will be able to tell which pebble I picked."

Since the remaining pebble was black, it must be assumed that she had picked the white one. And since the moneylender dared not admit his dishonesty, the girl changed what seemed an impossible situation into an extremely advantageous one.

Moral of the Story:

Most complex problems do have a solution, if only we think it through.