

DISCUSSION GUIDE
PHOENIX ZONES: WHERE STRENGTH IS BORN AND RESILIENCE LIVES
By Hope Ferdowsian, MD, MPH

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the central purpose of *Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives*? What are some of the themes that emerge from the book?
2. Throughout the book, Dr. Hope Ferdowsian uses the story of the phoenix to describe a phenomenon called the Phoenix Effect and the reason for the book's title—*Phoenix Zones*. Why do you think she chose the phoenix as the central metaphor? Did it resonate with you? Why or why not?
3. The author refers to key principles as the foundation for what she describes as Phoenix Zones. Describe these principles and what they mean to you in everyday life and during extreme circumstances. How does upholding these principles in society reduce vulnerability and promote resilience? Are there ways you could implement them in your life?
4. Conversations about the ways we treat other people and animals—and the reasons behind the decisions we make—can be polarizing. In talking about violence, the author writes, “We need better solutions that address its roots, including the link between human and animal suffering. This book contends that we cannot address one without addressing the other.” Why do you think the two might be closely linked?
5. The book sets aside the idea of human exceptionalism while also maintaining that individual and collective human struggles matter. How does the author juxtapose these two ideas? Can you think of some examples from contemporary politics or current events?
6. We often read or hear brief breaking news stories about violence directed at humans and nonhumans. How does a book like *Phoenix Zones* contribute to the conversation in a different way? How could we use what we learn from this book to help us understand those news stories better, and to try to change the context in which they're discussed?
7. How did the author's experiences and expertise as a physician, scientist, and advocate shape how she delivered the subject material?
8. What were your reactions to some of the stories in the book, including the juxtaposition of stories about people and animals? Discuss any aspects of *Phoenix Zones* that you found controversial. Have you changed your opinions, attitudes, or behaviors since reading the book? If so, how?

9. How can we—as individuals and as a society—be more responsive to individuals who have experienced different forms of trauma?

10. Describe how historical views presented in the book—for example, links between violence against people and animals and a shared response to violence against people and animals—contribute to the book’s key messages.

11. In the book, the author discusses how fear and intolerance for uncertainty, as well as group identity, can exacerbate gaps in empathy. What would it take to bridge gaps in empathy? How can we become more unified as a society without erasing identities, especially those that have emerged in response to oppression?

12. The author writes, “When the accumulation of historical and ongoing oppression weighs heavily upon us, how can we rise up to face the incredible task of meaningful, seemingly impossible, widespread change?” How would you address this question? Do some individuals have a greater responsibility than others to enact or promote changes in policies and practices? What policies and initiatives are critical to encouraging more sustainable empathy, resilience, and meaningful change?

FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS: Few things get our compassion flowing like the sight of suffering. But our response is often shaped by our ability to empathize with others. Some people respond to the suffering of only humans or to one person’s plight more than another’s. Others react more strongly to the suffering of an animal. These divergent realities can be troubling—but they are also a reminder that trauma and suffering are endured by all beings, and we can learn lessons about their aftermath, even across species.

With *Phoenix Zones*, Dr. Hope Ferdowsian shows us how. Dr. Ferdowsian has spent years traveling the world to work with people and animals who have endured trauma—war, abuse, displacement. Here, she combines compelling stories of survivors with the latest science on resilience to help us understand the link between violence against people and animals and the biological foundations of recovery, peace, and hope. Taking us to the sanctuaries that give the book its title, she reveals how the injured can heal and thrive if we attend to key principles: respect for liberty and sovereignty, a commitment to love and tolerance, the promotion of justice, and a fundamental belief that each individual possesses dignity. Courageous tales show us how: stories of combat veterans and wolves recovering together at a California refuge, Congolese women thriving in one of the most dangerous places on earth, abused chimpanzees finding peace in a Washington sanctuary, and refugees seeking care at Dr. Ferdowsian’s own medical clinic.

These are not easy stories. Suffering is real, and recovery is hard. But resilience is real, too, and *Phoenix Zones* shows how we can foster it. It reveals how both people and animals deserve a chance to live up to their full potential—and how such a view could inspire solutions to some of the greatest challenges of our time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Hope Ferdowsian is an internist and preventive medicine and public health physician whose expertise spans the fields of medicine, ethics, and public health, as well as human rights and animal protection. Since childhood, she has been preoccupied with the ways in which other people and animals are viewed and treated in society. As a physician, she has cared for patients, taught undergraduate and graduate public health students, medical students, and residents, and led key research and policy initiatives. Her personal experiences and portfolio of work have prompted her to consider the ways in which the vulnerabilities and needs of people and animals intersect, and many of her projects have focused on the connection between the health and wellbeing of people and animals. She has published broadly in this area, and her book, *Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018) also explores this topic. The book represents a culmination of her intersectional work and an effort to better understand and address the root causes of violence, injustice, and suffering.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS:

Review by Barbara J. King in the *Times Literary Supplement*: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/our-family-and-other-animals/> (**Full article available upon request.**)