

Bridges to Equals

Readings:

It starts when you care
To act, it starts when you do
It again after they said no
It starts when you say *We*
And know who you mean, and each
Day you mean one more.

■ Marge Piercy

The Center for Defense Information's annual snapshot of the globe's significant armed conflicts ongoing as of Jan. 1, 2010, stands at 14. This represents no change from 2008 and 2009 when 14 armed conflicts were being waged.

Over the last two decades, the annual war count has been as high as 39 and as low as 14. While the trend was not always down, with the passage of time, more and more nations have quietly refused to support or directly participate in the use of armed conflict by others in lieu of settling disputes nonviolently.

■ The Defense Monitor, January/February/March 2010

Sermon:

I recently visited a friend in Manhattan. We met in a courtyard near his office and bought a couple of big soft New York pretzels. My friend, Bill, told the pretzel man, "I am so grateful you sell pretzels here. It must be hard work, on your feet for hours in all kinds of weather, but this pretzel just makes my day."

The pretzel man said, "This is a first."

A homeless man walked by asking for change. Bill asked him, "Do you like New York pretzels as much as I do?"

The man paused and looked at us. Bill broke off half his pretzel and handed it to the man, saying, "If this isn't a great pretzel, come back and I'll give you another." The man walked off munching.

I said, "Are you a nut or something?"

"No. I'm just bringing love to New York City. Don't you think New York needs a little love?"

We walked up the avenue. A manhole was open, with a few phone workers around eating lunch. Bill remarked to them, "It must be difficult working underground, but it makes so much difference to everyone when our phone calls go through."

The workers stopped mid-bite and looked at Bill. I wanted to tell them, I'm not with this guy. One nodded at Bill. He looked at the man next to him, and the two made a little high five.

I said, "Cut it out. You're making me nervous."

"I do this all the time;" he said, "nobody's take taken a pot shot at me yet. What's so bad about appreciating people and seeing the world through their eyes? What does it get me to wrap myself in a cloak of superiority or shut myself down in fear of being seen as inferior? Yeah, I'm unusual, but pretty soon everyone in New York will be benevolent and caring. Look, an Indian/Pakistani Restaurant, and there: a Kosher deli that features falafels. And it's happened in my office."

"I don't believe it." Restaurants are one thing, but I knew his law office, Dekom, Lord, and Asch, with its reputation for coldness and superiority.

He said, "Yep, since I've been there, it's a whole new place."

My friend, an attorney, had lost a job at his former law firm by getting into constant struggles with his colleagues. He used to complain that they were out to get him, watching and judging his every move. He would then leap to judgments of them. "I can't believe how stupid he is!" "How she became a partner, I'll never know." And, "He's so judgmental. How can I work with that judgment hanging over me?"

This went on for a year, until they showed him the door. Bill sent out resumes and obtained interviews, and at each interview he railed at how stupid his former law firm had been and how judged he had felt there. He received no offers, of course. My friend could be quite prickly, though he was kind to me, and I always sensed in him a capacity for understanding. Someone else did too. Bill told me his story:

I was going for my interview at, you know, Dekom, Lord, and Asch, nervous as a long-tailed cat entering a room full of rocking chairs. I knew my interview style wasn't working for me, but I kept expecting the interviewer to see things as I did. I wanted to make such an airtight case against my old firm that my interviewer would say, "You were wronged. Your judgment is flawless, and their loss is our gain."

In the elevator going to my interview I sensed everyone silently picking me apart: my suit, my tie, my hair, my face. And I stood there picking them apart: shiny suits, garish ties, misguided haircuts, and lifeless faces.

At the 30th floor everyone left the elevator but me and an elderly gentleman. He looked anxious, and I thought: what do you have to be scared of? I'm the one going for a job interview. The elevator rose, then, with a snap, jerked to a halt. I smelled burning rubber, and the lights went out.

The man said, "Uh oh."

I said a few choice expletives. I was going to be late for my interview. I banged on the door,

The man groaned. I heard him slump to the floor. I groped and found the emergency phone. “Hello,” I said, “I’m stuck in an elevator somewhere above the 30th floor.”

“We know,” a voice said. “Be calm. We’re working on it. We don’t know what happened. It may take some time.”

“How long?”

“We don’t know. Be patient.”

Then the man said, “I hate this. I get claustrophobic.”

I thought, “The exact thing I don’t need: to be stuck in an elevator with a nut case.”

“I’m shaking,” the man continued. “When I was a boy they punished me by locking me in a closet. They’d leave me alone for hours.”

That stopped me. In the dark of the elevator I could see in my mind’s eye a boy cowering in a closet, and something inside of me opened to this man. Maybe it was because I could see nothing, so my heart’s imagination went to work. Maybe it was because we both shared our current misfortune, and we needed each other. Maybe his aloneness in a closet reminded me of my aloneness, always one up or one down, never at one with. Though strange to me, I felt close to this man and could glimpse what he was going through.

“It’s different now.” I told him. “We’re in this together. You’re not alone.” We both sat breathing. I said, “When I was a boy, playing football, everybody tackled me. Under a mountain of boys, I couldn’t see, couldn’t breath. My face pushed into the dirt, I thought the weight would crack my ribs.”

We introduced ourselves and talked of other experiences in enclosed spaces. As a kid I had played making tents and forts in my room. He had once almost drowned. I said, “I can see how a small space would upset you.”

The man said, “I don’t change the oil in my car. I can’t slide underneath to unscrew the plug. I couldn’t conceive of going into a cave. Even New York City feels too confined; it’s an island, and all these skyscrapers. I’d be happier in Montana. I am the only person in America who takes vacations to Nebraska. But I love to see the open sky.

“As a young man,” he continued, “I traveled the country hopping freight trains. I remember one August afternoon in North Dakota. The prairie swept out endless on all sides, grass and grain waving in the breeze. The sun seemed to ease down like a child settling to sleep. It washed everything in gold. The train rocked like a mother, and I stood on this open flatcar, soaking in the light and the space. That night the stars swam in the sky above the moving train, and the occasional farmhouse glowed, and the earth seemed to breathe in repose awaiting the next dawn.

“When the sun rose, the ponds offered wisps of vapor, and ducks and geese and larks seemed to leap into the transparent infinite sky. You know what they call a group of larks? An exaltation -- a exaltation of larks.”

Again in my mind’s eye I could imagine his experience and almost see the open prairie. He asked, “Do you work here?”

“I have a job interview.”

“I’ll bet you’re nervous.”

“Yeah, I am. I hate feeling judged.”

“I’d be nervous, too. But your interviewer has a big job and might also be anxious. And whatever judgment occurs, you are just as human as your interviewer.

“But I’ll bet you get hired. You’re a calming presence. You let me talk about my fears and then about North Dakota. I’d hire you.”

“Do you work at Dekom, Lord, and Asch?”

“No, and I hear they’re a tough old law firm. Then again, they’re human and nervous, and could use your calm listening.”

I felt him reach for me. We squeezed hands for a moment. I listened to us breathing in the dark. His hand trembled. He asked, “Would it bore you to hear more of my travels? It helps me relax.” Onto the black canvass of the elevator he painted verbal landscapes of the wide spaces of America.

After a while we heard some activity outside, and a crowbar pried open the door casting light upon us. Mechanics pulled us out. The man and I parted. A worker ushered me into Dekom, Lord, and Asch and explained my tardiness.

I sat across from my interviewer who looked peeved. I thought of saying, “I’ve just been stuck in an elevator, so lighten up and give me a break,” but I could see his situation, like I could see the prairies through the old man’s eyes. I said, “You must have had to juggle your schedule to meet with me now.”

He grunted and went through a series of questions. He's human, I reminded myself, and nervous. As we finished I said, "You face a big challenge finding the best person for this job. A lot of weight must ride on your shoulders."

He looked at me, skepticism on his face. I shook his hand, "Good luck!" As I rode another elevator down, I smiled at me, the applicant, wishing him, good luck. A few days later he called to tell me I had the job.

So I began at Dekom, Lord, and Asch, the infamous law firm. A haughty associate showed me around. I thought, he's trying to appear so superior, but we're equally human. What if we were stuck in an elevator together? What might he be afraid of? A still small voice of insight told me that he would fear not being in control. So to help him feel in control I told him, "I am glad to have you showing me around. You seem to have your finger on the pulse of this firm." He seemed to brighten up.

I met my secretary, who looked like a turtle with half her head inside her shell. I thought, we're in this together and we need each other. I said, "I hope we can work as a team because I need your help learning the ways of this office. I'm sure you know a lot about how this firm operates, and I am open to all you can teach me."

She stood taller, "Yes, I'd be glad to."

One day a partner, who I knew had a reputation for feasting on associates and picking his teeth with their bones, stalked into my office. I felt afraid, but simply sat and listened. Maybe everyone else either used his surliness for profit, or ran away from it. Maybe no one just stayed and listened to him. As I listened I said very little. When he left, he shook my hand and thanked me.

Word filtered back to me that another junior associate had learned of my firing at my other firm and had told the office an exaggerated version of my failings. I told everyone of his success in a recent case. For a while he gave me odd looks, but when we were both assigned to a case, he welcomed me into his office and said, "I asked to work this case with you. I think we'll make a good team." And we did.

Months went by. Everything seemed to be going along pretty well until one day the senior partner, Mr. Lord, stormed into my office. "Mr. Bridges," he declared, "for thirty years this organization has been steeped in superiority and suspicion at every rung of the chain of command. But now my clerk, ordinarily his own species of snake, has become affable to the point of making bows to the janitor. One senior partner, who has lived to display the epitome of sartorial stuffiness, now lounges in his office in shirt sleeves and braces. Another partner, whose reputation for egregious surliness has never been challenged, now insists on sitting at partners' meetings with a grin plastered across his face. The associates, whose stabfests once rivaled those of the Roman Senate, now roam our corridors seeking someone's back to pat. Even the secretaries are cheerful. It's an outrage.

“As I consult with our staff about this, fingers point to you. What can you tell me about this sea change at Dekom, Lord, and Asch?”

He’s human, like me, and afraid, I had to tell myself, scared of change, of his firm losing status, of personal vulnerability, and of not being in control. I said, “I have grown weary of judging and of being judged, so I am seeing the people around me as of equal value to myself, and seeing their perspective on the world. That may have helped relax things here at the office.

“But I realize you are the senior partner with a call to lead this firm. You have to stand at the head and look with vision into the future. You have to chart a course. Sir, leadership is a lonely and thankless job.”

I could see an ounce of weight lift from his shoulders. “Right you are, Bridges,” he said as he left.

A few days later he had me in for brandy to talk over his vision for the firm. It seemed Mr. Lord had felt alone, with no peer in whom to confide. Though by force of habit he still saw me as an underling, he also saw me as someone who could glimpse his burdens and understand.

My friend told me this story and added, “It’s a shift from a life of being better or worse than others, to seeing life through others’ eyes. I look at someone else and realize he or she is not better or worse than me, and carries the same feelings and hopes and delusions as I do. When I regard someone as my inferior or my enemy, I blind myself to all that is common between us.”

“Somewhere we evolved to love each other. Some anonymous animal millions of years ago found that loving helped survival. Now we can tear each other apart, or we can see things from another’s point of view, and consider someone else’s welfare important, which I think helps us survive. Call me crazy, but millions of years of natural selection have placed me here to consider what my brother and sister are going through, and to help save the planet. I can’t fight evolutionary development.”

Dekom, Lord, and Asch is now a pleasure to work for, and my friend, Bill Bridges, seems joyful as he breaks bread with homeless men and sips brandy with law partners.

His insight is ultimately spiritual, that the spirit thrives in connections, in relationships, in love; and in loving one more until all are loved.

Indeed, the spirit loves all equally and infinitely. This spirit supports us as we make graceful arches to connect with nature, with our inner mysteries, and with the sacred in each other.

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Reeves

