

Crossing Life's Bridges

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Some say that the most photographed object in the world is the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The Golden Gate is a suspension bridge that spans San Francisco Bay leading into the Pacific Ocean. The bridge is hung on two cables which are made of 27,572 strands of wire. According to one writer, the intent of this beautiful bridge is to be crossed and then admired.

Bridges are among the most interesting constructions made by man. From the earliest civilizations humans were driven to find ways to cross over. A log thrown over a stream, a net of woven vines hung over a forest floor, a pile of rocks built up to make a high path through a rushing river-bridges in many parts of the world date back centuries. Much of what we know about building skyscrapers and highways came from the earlier knowledge of bridge building.

Bridges lead us somewhere, and they connect 2 things that were previously unconnected.

Our senior high students today are crossing over...they are taking steps to connect their past, to their future. In many of their lives, this church is the bridge- a bridge that has been there for them on their journey toward adulthood..and they have learned that it's not just how we cross, or where, or where we cross to, but "on what" we cross. It matters what supports our journey...what leads us forward.

Bridges respond to our human desire to join things. Bridges give us a place to walk when the way is unclear. This congregation has provided a safe place for these young people to

walk. We have been their foundation, their pillars, their arch, their support structure.

The values and principles of Unitarian Universalism are a firm foundation- not of firm answers, but of meaningful questions; not of strict hierarchies, but of shared responsibilities; not of the supernatural, but of the rational. These young people have been shaped by free thought and by our trust in them. There are the structures of the UUCR Bridge.

Now they venture forth...to more complicated crossings, to higher climbs with ever more dangerous waters below. It is good for them to connect to the young adults who have already traversed some difficult pieces of the road ahead.

But lest I paint too romantic or idyllic a picture – let's consider how perilous some of life's crossings can be.

Let us consider how to prepare for what may lie ahead.

Let us better understand how bridges work.

Bridges operate on principles of basic engineering and physics. Bridges work to the extent they deal effectively with compression and expansion. If you suspend a board across supporting blocks and then put increasing amounts of weight on the board, eventually it will snap. But if the design allows for dissipating or transferring the force...or if a material is used that allows for expansion under pressure...then it can hold more weight.

Perhaps some of you have built bridges, or even competed in a junior high bridge building competition...you may have already learned the value of dissipating, transferring or expanding under pressure.

This image of snapping under the weight of too much pressure can also be applied to life experiences apart from actual bridges. All of us sometimes take on too much weight as we try to accomplish all the tasks before us...perhaps we should consider how we might transfer that weight, how we might build bridges in our lives that will direct the pressure in multiple directions. How we can get support for the tasks and the traffic we bear, all that weight that we think we must bear alone.

Like most things in life, bridges can be opportunities.

Take the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, the one we are most familiar with. How many of you crossed the Bay Bridge in the last two months? How many crossed it in the last year?

How many are a little bit afraid of crossing it. Bridges can form a connection to the other side, they also can be quite dangerous.

The Bay Bridge is an amazingly beautiful bridge and it links us to the delights of the Atlantic Ocean. But, for many of us, driving across the Bay Bridge is an act of courage. You start out, after paying your toll, and hopefully not having to wait in too much traffic...and right away, just through the gate, you have to make a choice, "should I drive in the outside lane nearest to the waters edge of the bridge, or on the inside lane, where I could perhaps adopt a casual attitude", hoping that you chose well, you start out on a slow incline...the sun may be sparkling off the water, things don't look too scary, you might look down and see a few sailboats off to the right...

"Oh, this isn't bad, I can do this"...you think.

Following the car in front of you...not too close...not too fast, you continue to drive up the incline of the bridge...the silver cables overhead are huge and look sturdy enough...you ignore any construction that might be going on..."just don't think about it"...

But as you get higher and higher, looking down at the water is less appealing...your imagination begins to activate...the scenarios in your head are not good...don't look down..."don't think about "what if"...just keep looking at the car in front".

Just soon enough, you realize you have crossed the center of the bridge and are on the descent...a sigh escapes your lips and you feel a bit giddy..."we made it!" you whisper to yourself. And soon you are on the other side...you survived another perilous crossing.

So it is in life, sometimes, just keeping our eyes on the road, just continuing to move forward, can be enough to get us across.

Sometimes, and for some of us, it takes more than perseverance.

Sometimes we have to carefully prepare...bring water, sunglasses, the right music, a calm friend, - sometimes we ask for help to cross life's bridges...on the Bay Bridge, you can ask for an escort, you can ask for someone to drive your car across..this is a great thing...that life offers escort services. Don't hesitate to take advantage of offers of help and support. Your generation has increased the methods of connecting to support...hopefully face book, twittering, texting and cell phone apps...have increased your ability to reach out...to receive help.

Seanan told me about a helpful practice at a bridge in upper Michigan...where the custom is to pay the toll for the person who is coming behind you...this is beautiful...you know you are not alone when the toll taker tells you..."don't worry, you're already paid for". Somebody is looking out for you.

Yet, sometimes our fear overtakes us and we fail to cross a life bridge...we fail to connect with the other side...we get just so far, and we turn back, our courage fails, or there is no help in sight...or it is just too scary. This might simply mean that you were barking up the wrong bridge, or you're just not ready yet,

or this bridge looks unsafe, or there's no one waiting and reaching out to you on the other side. Perhaps you need to sit and take time for reflection before you continue on your journey.

None of us can cross all the bridges...and there are times when we're meant to be a bridge rather than cross another hurdle.

Consider what it might mean to be a bridge.

To be a bridge...you don't have to go anywhere...you just have to be present. You have to be fully present to those who are on the road. You need to know where your own strengths are, you need spiritual strength enough to take on another's tension, another's fear, another's hopes. Parents and teachers and counselors know how to do this...how to be a bridge for others...best friends and sisters know how to do this...elders and sons know how to do this.

When you are the bridge, you are expanding...as you listen and hold another's concerns, you are expanding...growing larger and more limber...more flexible. We are all compressing and expanding all the time..throughout our lives. It is the tension of growth.

We live through times when the tension is so great, we think we might snap, but mostly we don't, mostly we find ways to dissipate, to transfer, to get an escort...

A bridge is a construction...a carefully developed work of art...and the most amazing bridges span a expanse of great beauty....a bay, a forest, a river...there is an energy, an aliveness, a mystery about bridges...they call out to us...come across, come to the other side, come and climb higher, come and join with something larger than yourself.

A favorite bridge of mine is the railroad bridge at Harpers Ferry...the steel one that holds a train track and a walking path...it is a high bridge over an ancient river...a bridge that carries the trains into the mountain tunnel beyond...a bridge from which you can almost touch the birds that fly over the girders...

When I'm on this bridge, I feel myself to be a part of something eternal...something old and everlasting...I feel myself filled with an energy of delight...and a steadiness that carries me across a great river at a great height...and I shout and my voice is not mine any longer, the sound of my voice has become part of the whole world around...I can't hear my shout, it becomes part of the great silence. I want to stay on this bridge for a very long time.

Climbing the metal steps down from this bridge, I am renewed, restored to an earlier age, a primal time, a part of myself that gets lost in cities and suburbs is returned to me.

Having crossed this spectacular bridge, I am ready to continue my life's journey. I am ready to be a bridge for others- to be an escort for someone. I am ready to reflect on where I am and where I might go next.

May each of you have spectacular bridges to cross...may you always have companions on your journey, may you find new strength as you become a bridge for others.

So May It Be/ Amen

