

BRIDGE OF SIGHS

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[Quotations in italics are from the children who were on the school bus on the 35W bridge, when the bridge collapsed.]

Innocence is that *place of believing*, infused with light, wonder and trust-- that the world is a good and safe place, that no one we love will ever die, that the seasons will always line up for their turns in the cycle of years. . . That the years stretch endlessly in front of us like the country roads that stake claim in *body memory* of those of us who've grown up on the Great Plains of the United States. We are born into innocence, if we're lucky. For some, the innocence lasts long. For others it's broken quite young, too young.

We were on a field trip... we went to a swimming pool...

I remember that I was wearing a pink T-shirt . . . with a butterfly on it.

I just felt . . . something was going to happen . . .

When I was on the bridge, I felt scared.

I thought I was going to die.

At six o'clock in the evening of August 1, 2007, at the height of rush hour traffic, the eight-lane "35 W" Bridge, spanning the Mississippi River that flows smack-through the University of Minnesota campus, fell. Disasters of this magnitude all too quickly take on a name, as if in a birthing. This one, this disaster, was called: "The Bridge Collapse."

I felt falling...

I heard a big sound...

I smelled smoke...

I heard screaming...

I was afraid we were going to fall into the Mississippi River . . .

Another bridge-- this, a footbridge-- built in the year of 1749, arcs over the River Cam, at Cambridge University, England. Wooden, and charming, it carries an equally charming story: The official name being "The Wooden Bridge," it came to be called: *The Mathematical Bridge*, the charming story being that it was built-- put together, really-- without nails, bolts, or screws-- anything other than its own design. The art instructor from Cambridge University, England, told us the story while we students stood in the tall grasses near, absentmindedly brushing scratchy weeds away from our legs while scrutinizing the complex geometrics of the bridge. Wondering. Sun, heat glanced off the River Cam meandering beneath the bridge. The Mathematical Bridge was so perfectly constructed by weight and angles that it needed nothing else to hold it together. Such was

the myth, at least. Students put it together, the story goes. And professors were so baffled by its design that they took it apart to attempt its re-construction for themselves.

What is the force that compels us to take things apart and see? Or compels another kind of making sense-- of far deeper mysteries-- death, loss, loss of innocence, death of innocents. How do we make sense of something that has a design, or a design flaw, that belies our ability to make sense of it?

The bus jumped.

The bus was bumping on something and later... it was silent.

I saw rocks in the front of the bus.

I tasted dust in my mouth.

The bus was tilted.

My friend was flying toward the window and I grabbed him.

I saw everything bouncing.

I heard rocks falling.

I remember my heart pounding.

I was afraid about being in the water.

The story goes that the professors were unable to put the mathematical bridge back together without the aid of binding devices, hence the bolts and screws that we could see here-and-there, holding the geometrics. Still, it was *physics gone beautiful*, spanning a well known river, by a major University. Yet, the bridge that so captured my

imagination as we Cambridge University students visited bridges of England, that day-- taking notes and drawing pictures, (no cameras here)-- is called: "The Bridge of Sighs."

The Bridge of Sighs at New College Lane, St. John's College, Oxford University is a replica of a very famous bridge in Venice, so named because it afforded the last view of the beloved city of Venice to those crossing over. That is the name of the bridge that came into my heart, as I stood next to the policeman-keeping-guard, in the still hot dark at midnight, under a big yellow half moon, staring. At the massive green painted steel collapse of the 35W Bridge over the Mississippi River.

I had hitched a ride as a "Disaster Mental Health Services" worker, on what found its own name to be "The Midnight Run" ERV [Emergency Response Vehicle] from the American Red Cross-- transporting food, coffee, and someone to talk to, to the workers at the sites along the way to the bridge collapse. I poured coffee, read maps, checked locations, talked with the drivers, and talked with the police and guards at the checkpoints along the way to the river.

At the closest point to the river, the guard keeping watch let us clamber out of our lumbering vehicle, and to cross through and over, on foot, to see the bridge. Close-up, that is.

It was midnight dark, vacant, still. *How can anyone see this sight and not have 'eerie' creep into their thoughts?*-- My first thought. A watery grave of sacred space. There was no place for cameras here, nor loud talking, nor shouting back-and-forth amongst those keeping watch. And there was none of that. Only space for *hush*, and quiet and still. And that's what we were.

An unusual intimacy floated around us, the guard and I-- as we stood apart from the few others, amidst the weeds, and looked at the river: the heaved steel structure, cars upside down suspended amidst steel and concrete-- a red dashboard light yet blinking, *as if--* on and off and on and off-- the vehicle stuck up under concrete raw-edged slabs, car door open.

The school bus, rectangular and yellow, precariously balanced in a slipped suspension in the heaved high, fallen structure. The guard shifted his feet, looked behind him, and then around: "I like the night work," he said, "...Always have." I looked at the moonlit bridge; I brushed errant rough weeds from around my legs. I felt the stillness right in my skin.

The guard and I-- simultaneously, it seemed-- tipped our heads back, and gazed up and upwards at the immensity of the steel geometrics hovering. I asked him if that particular piece of the collapsed bridge could fall forward.

"Do you see that red line in the dirt there?" he said, pointing behind us—"That's the *line of death*. If the bridge falls this way-- and it could, yes-- then everything within that line will be dead."

Line of death. When do we stand within the line of death? When do we not?

I left all my swimming stuff on the bus.

Jeremy got us off the bus.

Jeremy opened the emergency exit door.

Someone... I didn't know him... helped us climb out of the bus.

I didn't panic.

I learned to stay calm.

The thing that helped me stay calm was when I went to the Red Cross.

The Red Cross helped us.

People were helping me feel better.

I am safe and alive.

MAY 2008:

In the parents' meeting the previous Monday, the mother of three boys who come each week to "Art Therapy," had introduced herself to the group saying that she has three sons-- that two of her sons, A--- and S---, were in the accident, -- but that her youngest son, B----, age three-and-a-half, who had not been on the bus, talks over and over about the bridge falling; he makes the motion with his hands... She demonstrates, putting her finger tips toward one another, then breaking them downward and apart. I listen. I watch her. She re-enacts the motions she has seen so many times they've integrated into her very being. A parent, myself, I know the agony of the helplessness in assuaging our children's distress. The fear that B. has, manifesting in his "repetition compulsion" suggests to me the need that she finish his story for him... that she give him an ending for his over-and-over-telling. Something like: "And everyone is okay." Because each and every person on the school bus lived. She says she will do this. She says, for herself, she gets scared feelings all over again when she sees the Red Cross symbol that I have on my shirt, even though she's thankful to the Red Cross for sheltering these children in those

moments when they stepped from the bus and off the bridge, walking to the Red Cross building nearby.

These children, ages five to seventeen, have taken on many identities: They are: *the School Bus Kids, the Bridge Kids, and the Waite House Kids*. They have neighborhood identities. Most have come to Minnesota from other countries, bringing along with them their *multi-storied lives*. These children made piñatas, brightly painted, and then auctioned them, to support the charity of the driver of the truck-- the driver who just may have saved the lives of these children, having no idea-- *or he did?* -- as he passed their school bus, honked the horn and waved-- passed them in the moment, the pivotal moment, when the collapsing bridge crashed into his truck mere feet in front of the school bus.

I saw the truck...

I saw the truck on fire...

I felt the heat...

The children in the first sessions of Art Therapy range in age from three-and-a-half, to twelve. The three brothers, accompanied by their mother, were the very first children to arrive. Their mother had wondered about leaving B--- with the group. Yet, B-- has his own “story” of the bridge, with his connection to his brothers. With encouragement, and a hand, B--- participated in the art activities... never wanting to be too far from one of his brothers. In one of the groups we even had B---’s help, for our

practicing ‘breathing in calm’ all the way into our finger tips, by having him stand against a big piece of paper taped to the wall and tracing around him, and then “coloring in the calm” all over the tracing.

Sometimes... I still worry about the people on the bridge.

Some families lost someone... someone they loved...

And I think... that ... sometimes goodbye is all we want, but cannot have.

Sometimes goodbye is all we have, but do not want.

Well said. The children make a collage on paper that sprawls out over an eighteen foot roll that’s as bright blue on color as the sky on the day of the bridge collapse; angels have been glue-sticked and taped everywhere... and a school bus cut from yellow construction paper ... “*I want faces in the windows,*” ... one child says... They are specific in the pictures they choose, and in their drawings, and details.

The word FUTURE is taped onto the paper for them, on the far right, with ribbons of blue sky and clouds streaming outward from it:

Can we put anything we want here?

In the last in the series of art therapy sessions, the oldest of the brothers, A---, with B----, came running back to the art room to get their canvas paintings, after everyone had been picked up or walked home for the day, while S---, the middle brother, was still busy pounding more nails into the two foot square “geo- board” we had all

worked on that day... nails hammered into a grid design, colored rubber bands strung around the nails by many eager hands, an intense array of geometric shapes landing on the geo board in all of about four seconds as though a butterfly had alighted-- like the more than one hundred butterflies the kids had folded with origami paper, making a sculpture for the Red Cross.

A---, age 10 tomorrow, helped his youngest brother find his painting.

“Hey B----,” I say, “You worked hard on this, I see! ... You have a lot of paint on here!” [This painting will not dry in a week’s time...] I lift it toward B---- and A--- says: “B----! Hold your hands underneath it to carry it, so you don’t get all paint-y.”

“I’m curious what you would name this painting of yours.” I say to B----.

B---- does not speak in these sessions, though I hear he talks non-stop at home. He has become trusting of me, though, and would allow only me to put fabric paint into his hands and help him make handprints on a T-shirt for Jeremy, today, letting me press his painted hands together to spread the paint over his fingers all the way to the finger tips, and then push them into the T-shirt cloth, lifting them up to see his handprint... Magic.

B---- swept his long-lashed brown eyes up to his big brother, A---. That is a look I know well, having seen my youngest two children give their older brother that same upward look of trust: my middle child-- who rowed under the bridge that very day it collapsed, with the Minneapolis Rowing Club, and the youngest, who like so many of the children of those who worked tirelessly on the bridge collapse, could not understand why her mother was gone so much, those days, weeks...working at the Red Cross.

A--- looked at B---- and then at the painting, thought a moment, and said: “I would name this painting of yours, “The Green Painting”.

B---- smiled.

“And what would you name your painting, A---?” I ask.

A---’s painting is vibrant. It is, at first glance, a large rainbow-- glitter sparkling the painting like angel’s breath. *Where did he find that glitter?* There’s a vividly painted sun in each of the upper corners of the painting. I’m thinking the title will be ‘The Rainbow’ -- or something like that. He says: “I call this painting “The Two Suns” . . .

The sun was shining brightly, after one of the longest winters in Minnesota that most of us can remember-- today, one of the first rare gorgeous Saturday afternoons. The boys’ mother pulled up in a car very reminiscent for me of cars I’ve had-- beyond the impetus to repair its falling apart parts and filled with items of miscellany from door to door-- She bumped her car over the curb to park it. I told her I usually park that way, myself.. I pointed to the Red Cross symbol on my T-shirt. I’ve told her that looking at it when she sees me, each time, will help her associate the symbol with a new feeling, other than the scared ones... a desensitization process for her. She said she still feels the gratefulness to the Red Cross when she sees the Red Cross symbol.

When she sees A---’s painting and hears the title, I wonder if we both hear it: “The Two Sons.” I notice we each have a hand over our heart, without thinking-- as if we could contain the vulnerability that mixes so inextricably with love. She turns back to the painting. “Ah...” she says: “He has a BRIGHT future!” She points to the rainbow in A’s

painting. As I'm leaving, she's backing her car, and leans out, handing me a banana-- a token of some sort ... I don't eat bananas, but I take it anyway, in thanks.

I think I want to be a doctor..

When I grow up, if I have children, I will show them the sculpture we made for the Red

Cross and I will say: 'That is the butterfly that I made for this sculpture' ...

Or maybe I want to be a fashion designer...

I want to be one of those people that drives an airplane. That sits right up front ... you

know... yeah... the pilot...

Or maybe I want to be . . .

Later that night, when I picked up my son, Will, from the airport, I could see that this time he wasn't limping. He'd sustained a serious injury in his freshman year of college, that healed, against all odds. He'd been told that he would never run again; yet tonight, he tells me he'd had to *sprint* through the airport, to make his plane. An though his injury has physically healed, my heart still wrenches when I see him whole and strong; I am never far from memory's difficult image of my eighteen-year-old-son, unable to walk in the way that every parent takes for granted their children will walk. And yet that very injury informed my son's choices about what he wanted to study, and what he hopes to do in his adult life.

I learned that things happen when you don't expect it.

I learned anything could happen to anyone at anytime.

While eating dinner with my son in a restaurant, rain beat down outside, running rivulets down the restaurant windows, accompanied by an oddly omforting deep sound of thunder. I tell my son about my day with the kids-- the painting of A---'s. Will is about to graduate from Stanford University. His graduation day coincides with B----'s fourth birthday. When he hears me describe A----'s painting, he looked up: "I've studied many things during these intense college years; I have knowledge in a variety of areas, and knowledge, in depth, in specific subjects. I, too, have a bright future, it would seem-- and yet, never would I have that mind, that creativity, that ability in thought-- to make a painting with two suns!" His amazement is absolute.

Just before going upstairs for the night, my son wandered into to the kitchen. "Hey," he says. "A banana! I love bananas! ... okay if I have it?!"

EPILOGUE:

Those of us who survived the bridge collapse, know this... you meet new people and you just cannot go there with them-- this explanation of that bridge. How it collapsed on so many lives, including your own, even though you were not even on the bridge in those moments. How you were right there, trying to pick up the pieces-- at least some of the pieces-- how you tried to help the people who helped pick up those pieces, or how you stood right next to the bridge past all the security tapes, at midnight, next to a guard

keeping watch, and looked at that startled wreckage of a bridge: the cars, some upside down, the car doors still open, dashboard lights –red- still blinking, and the school bus, the bus that was within 150 feet of fatalities happening, so you have since heard-- all of it, in suspended animation, under the sigh of a big yellow half moon, in an intimacy of scared and sacred space. How it kept after-shocking you. How you just do not want to explain, or have to articulate a ding dang thing to someone who is going to ask structural type questions, instead of seeing. You. With a mixture of compassion, or some sort of something that you can't seem to put words to, that you have so longed for. That you could at least, and at last, lean into for a moment-- just a moment-- and heave the biggest sigh, a sigh that you've been holding too long . . .

The Bridge of Sighs stands beautiful, and dignified, over a flowing river through the middle of a University, where willows weep and hold the heat and air that wafts through, carrying invisible messages. Sun shines down, rain falls, the seasons really do line up one after the other, seasons that are certainly milder than those of the Midwestern United States, but seasons nonetheless-- that stretch us into our days toward one another, and back into the world, where we can be so many different things, and live so many different stories-- into the universe right up through the Milky Way without end. . .

Or maybe I want to be . . .