

“In Transition”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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One Saturday last May a class of students at M.I.T. strung a 60-foot long bridge between two buildings on campus. Made entirely of fiber, it was a culminating experience in a class on “materials in human experience.” Their model? The Incan bridges of half a millennium ago that spanned the Andean ravines of Peru. Specifically, they studied the last remaining such bridge. Even to witness this Incan suspension bridge in photograph form astounds the imagination, stretching as it does like a lithe reptile leaping a perilous gorge and deciding to stay on both sides.

While the Incan bridge builders used the found fibers of their habitat, our M.I.T. students were granted the shortcut of 50 miles of twine pre-prepared from sisal, a much stronger fiber than that used by the Inca. M.I.T.’s John Ochsendorf has a passion for ancient bridges, a passion now woven into the coursework that inspires young minds to forge connections of materials and culture and mobilize in a venture of ancient engineering ripe with lessons of wonder.

“How the Inca Leapt Canyons” was the header of the *New York Times*’ Science Times piece by John Noble Wilford that simply leapt off the page for me. In the early centuries of the second millennium of the Common Era cultures of the Andes worked natural fibers into braids into bridges that served as veritable skywalks criss-crossing otherwise impassable terrain. By the 16th century, some conjecture that roughly 200 such bridges spanned steep river gorges throughout this land where such gorges were the norm.

For us, suspension bridges are the norm. Many of us have driven or ridden across Rhode Island’s Narragansett Bay on the graceful 1200-foot span of the Mount Hope Bridge. Opened in late October, 1929 – an otherwise tumultuous time – the bridge is said to have “taken the island out of Rhode Island.” Forty years would pass before the construction of the 1600-foot Claiborne Pell Bridge at Newport. The most recent addition to nearby suspension bridges is the now familiar Leonard P. Zakim-Bunker Hill Memorial Bridge – 795 feet of aesthetic splendor across the Charles River. We’ve become accustomed to our bridges of steel and concrete. Braided cables, yes, but cables of fiber?

It was the ingenuity of the Inca that permitted fibrous spans of 150 feet across chasms that would elicit gasps from any of us today. Garcilasco de la Vega reported in 1604 on how it was done. The Inca braided the fiber into ropes as long as were needed to cover the span. In increments of three, the ropes were woven to make a larger rope and then a larger rope. As cables they were pulled across a space of nothingness using smaller ropes. Stone abutments on each side were the anchor points. Three cables formed the bridge’s floor – roughly five feet wide – and two formed the handrails. Lengths of wood were fastened to the floor, which was then covered with branches to allow people and animals safe and sure passage. Wilford notes, with appealing understatement, that “it took a while for the Spanish to adjust to the bridges and to coax their horses to cross them.”

These were bridges in motion after all, and in windy weather, horses and guides had even greater cause for high trepidation. Yet in the construction, the weavers and builders had filled in the handrails, as they had the floor, with branches and lengths of wood. In Wilford’s words:

“The side covering, one chronicler said, was such that ‘if a horse fell on all fours, it could not fall off the bridge.’”

There were standards, after all!

We're still learning how to cross chasms, how to dance in the wind, how to recognize what is nearby as exactly the stuff we need to do both, and how to construct our connections for endurance in the most frightful of conditions.

For the ancient Inca, technology and sociology intertwined. Two suspension bridges commonly stretched side by side – one presumably for the elite, one for the commoners, or one for men, one for women. I daresay I would have felt safer on the one constructed for lowly women, provided of course that it had been constructed by lowly women. I wonder who got to lead the horses!

We're still learning – how to connect, how to flex, how to cross perilous straits, how to include. We're still learning how to recognize materials close at hand to lend the gifts that they hold, how to braid what we have into strength not first apparent. We're still learning how to put one foot in front of the other when we find ourselves in a perilous space, trusting the resilience of what is underfoot and alongside. We're still learning that there is another side, but that it will serve us well to pay close attention to exactly where we are.

So it is as we find ourselves in a circumstance far less daunting than an Andean gorge. So it is as we find ourselves in a circumstance when we thought the good earth beneath our feet was firm and continuous. Surprise, it's not! So it is when we're bidden to lay down the blueprints of our well-laid plans and imagine and flex and take a deep breath.

And so I'm about to lay down this script, serendipitous as the story of Incan bridges might be for where we find ourselves. I'm about to lay down this script, because, like the Inca woman about to move from here to there, I know there is a bridge. Like the hermit and the emperor of our story, I know that now is the best time. Now is the best time to set foot on it. As your minister, I know that you are the most important people in my life right now, and I'm counting on you to cross it with me. As a faith community I know that the most important thing we can do this morning is to be here in worshipful community, to stay in community, and to trust the resilience of what is underfoot and who is alongside us. I promise, if we fall down on all fours, we won't fall off. We'll get up again and put one foot in front of the other, because this is who we are, this is what we're about, and mid-bridge is a lousy place to stop short.

[unscripted: speaking heart to heart about the challenge of just hiring an Interim DRE who carried such high expectations and her resignation due to sudden family illness, what we have and what we need to move forward, and the gift of being here and now together in religious community...]

Amen.

Sources:

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John Noble Wilford, "How the Inca Leapt Canyons," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2007, Science Times, D1, 4.

<http://www.bostonroads.com/crossings/mount-hope/>

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