

Bridge-Builders

Most of my adult life, it seems, I've been trying to build bridges between people who don't want to come together. Last fall I got tired of the process and decided to build a real bridge—the kind made with timbers and nails.

For more than 50 years, our family has owned a cabin on 15 acres in the mountains of North Carolina. Behind the cabin, a sparkling little stream winds its way through the deep woods. We call it Brushy Branch.

Over the years, three generations of Buckingham children have played in that wonderful stream. We've built dams, floated little boats, caught crawdads and even dug clay from its banks to make genuine Indian pottery.

Until last fall, however, no one had ever built a bridge. Instead, we used an old log, gingerly balancing as we crossed the stream. For years, every time I walked across that log, I dreamed of building a bridge. Last November I finally got around to it.

Using a broken yardstick taped together with masking tape and a length of hemp string, I measured the needed dimensions. I estimated it would take a 16-foot span, 3 feet wide and 4 feet above the ankle-deep water.

On a sheet of paper, I sketched the diagram—the end posts, the braces, the spans, the planking, the side rail and the center posts that would have to be sunk in concrete in the streambed.

This was going to be a real bridge. Not a suspension bridge like the Golden Gate nor an arch bridge like the Rainbow Bridge at Niagara Falls. It was going to be *my* bridge.

"Why not just put another log across



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the stream?" my wife, Jackie, asked when I took her down to the building supply store and spent \$70 on pressure-treated lumber.

"You don't understand," I told her. "I've got to build this. Logs rot or wash away in the spring rains. This will be here many years after we're gone—providing safe passage for little feet across the dangerous narrows of Brushy Branch."

She smiled and seemed to understand. No one builds bridges for himself. Bridges are for those who follow after.

I had all the framework in place when my friend Bernie May arrived to spend

a couple of days. For the last 12 years, Bernie has directed Wycliffe Bible Translators. Under his leadership, Wycliffe has become one of the world's largest missionary organizations. The week before his visit to North Carolina, he had started the process of turning his job over to a younger man. It was time, he said, to seek the Lord for the even-larger role he would play in making certain the Bible was translated into every language. Bernie May is one of the great bridge-builders in the kingdom.

"You're just in time," I told him when he arrived. "Change your clothes and come with me."

Giving him a hammer, I led him down the familiar wooded path to the site of the unfinished bridge. All that remained was to nail the 48 three-foot planks onto the spans. With Bernie straddling one span and me on the other, we started, nailing our way across the stream.

When we finished, Jackie joined us with a bag of roasted peanuts. We sat on

the finished bridge, dangling our feet over the water, eating roasted peanuts and throwing the hulls into the flowing stream. Bernie said that was a time-honored tradition used by bridge-builders throughout the centuries. I think he made that up, but we did it anyway.

That night I slept soundly. Something seemed right. Complete. Maybe that's the sleep of all those who build bridges.

Since then, I've thought a lot about some of the great bridge-builders.

When Billy Graham held his historic crusade in Montgomery, Alabama, in the '60s, he insisted on an integrated choir. The newspaper editorialized that Graham had come to Alabama and set the church back 100 years. Graham's answer was classic: "If that's the case, I failed in my mission. I intended to set it back 2,000 years." That's bridge building.

When David du Plessis attended Vatican II as a classic Pentecostal, he built bridges that many will use until Jesus comes.

In Chicago there is a brilliant young Orthodox rabbi, Yechiel Eckstein, who has spent most of his life helping his people understand Christians—and helping Christians understand Jews. Fierce opposition has come from both sides, yet he continues with his International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. In churches where he has spoken, he is widely acclaimed. Others sneer and call him an "unbeliever." Yet he is a true bridge-builder—and a dear friend.

There are thousands of other builders out there—carefully bridging chasms between people who are afraid to reach out to each other. Making sure little feet don't stumble.

There is no higher calling. ■

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