

Daniel Hirsch, December 1996

COMMITTEE TO BRIDGE THE GAP

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"You and I are called to move from power to power through powerlessness. As fearful, anxious, insecure and wounded people we are tempted constantly to grasp the little bit of power the world offers us. These threads of power make us puppets jerked up and down until we are dead. But ... dare to be baptized in powerlessness, always moving towards the poor who have no worldly power ...

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The first discipline is to focus continually on the poor in this world. We must keep asking ourselves: Where are the men, women, and children who are waiting for us to reach out to them? Poverty in all its forms--physical, intellectual, and emotional--is not decreasing. On the contrary, the poor are everywhere around us. As the powers of darkness show their hideous intentions with increasing crudeness, the weeping of the poor becomes louder and their misery more visible. We have to keep listening. We have to keep looking."

Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Power, Powerlessness, and Power"

The Unsent Letter

I am a notoriously poor correspondent. The joke at Bridge the Gap is that our storage locker is filled with boxes marked in big letters "High Priority to Do," with the date--marked in smaller print--going back to the 1970s.

Sitting on my desk for the last few months has been an unfinished letter to an old friend, Henri Nouwen, thanking him for sending a copy of one of his latest books. The letter need no longer be finished, as Henri died on September 21. Perhaps this will be the completion of that unsent letter.

Henri was a friend of Bridge the Gap for close to 25 years. A Dutch priest and author of something like 30 books, I met him first while I was a student at Harvard and he was teaching at Yale Divinity School. I could find no one at Harvard to advise on aspects of my thesis and my girlfriend at the time suggested this man who lived next to her family home in New Haven. Her father turned out to be the Dean of the Yale Divinity School and the "man next door" was Father Nouwen, then teaching there as well.

When we met, Henri and I made an immediate connection and began a long friendship. When I graduated from Harvard and came back to Los Angeles to work with Bridge the Gap, the friendship deepened. When Henri would visit LA he would often stay with me, the Yale Professor having to sleep on the floor of the miserable \$80 a month apartment I rented. The ironies were not lost on either of us--this friendship between the Catholic priest who taught in the comfortable environs of Yale and the Jew who had taken an oath of living a life of voluntary poverty and service.

During the day, Henri would accompany a group of us from Bridge the Gap to supermarkets where we would be leafleting in support of the grape boycott for the farmworkers. At that time ever the observer, Henri would stand back and keenly watch us exercise our leafleting style. Most people don't realize how much of an art it is. There are a thousand excuses not to take a leaflet on a moral issue. The way someone avoids the offer of such a leaflet is a metaphor for how we all avoid facing the gaping needs of this poor world and our responsibility for them--the rushing by, the refusal to look in the eyes, the hostility from some, the lies from others about "I'll take one on my way out." In the attempted interaction between the voice outside in the cold trying to get the comfortable on their way in to

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understand their connection to those who suffer to produce their plenty lies the fundamental problem of the closure of the soul and the struggle to open it. We would try hard to gently break through, make eye contact, ever offering rather than pressing. Henri would take it all in, watching, but at that time in his life the observer in him remained primary, the accumulator of material for his writings. But something else was going on in Henri too, a quiet, extraordinary growth in absolutely the opposite direction society holds up as the model, but in precisely the natural direction of the soul.

In between teach spells at Yale and then Harvard, Henri took time off and lived at the Genesee Monastery, living the hard and simple life of the monks, and in Latin America, living among the poor and the brutalized. (My own extraordinarily enriching relationship with a Cistercian monastery is a direct result of Henri's repeated suggestions and prodding, for which I am, among many other things, forever grateful.) In this bouncing back and forth between his Ivy League teaching post and his life among the poor, the monks, and the activists, something began to work itself out for Henri. As unstoppable as a bean shoot pushing itself out from beneath good, composted soil in the warmth of spring, a powerful understanding of what power really is began to emerge from deep within Henri's soul. And he went with it.

Courageously, he gave up his teaching position at Harvard. He went to live with and minister to a community of the developmentally disabled, called L'Arche Daybreak Community. The world would think this foolish--moving down the social ladder. Henri had come to understand it was moving up the spiritual ladder. In the book Henri sent me before he died, *Here and Now*, is a lovely chapter called "Downward Mobility." In it, Henri wrote about the mystery of disavowing power and instead serving the powerless.

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I write this at the monastery to which Henri introduced me years ago, where I am visiting for a time. Outside my window graze two mules who have wandered off from their owner's property and are making themselves quite content with the green grass of the monastery meadow. They know instinctively, as do the wild turkeys and deer and ravens and all other manner of wildlife, that they are safe here. They are so comfortable with the place that they make a habit of depositing their manure in neat piles outside the windows of the guest rooms. I then get the wheelbarrow and shovel it up, bringing it to the vegetable garden where, after aging, it will enrich the soil. It brings back a memory, and at least one metaphor.

When I taught at UC Santa Cruz I lived on a small ranch where my chores for the owners including a lot of raking of manure from the horses and goats. One day I would be in Washington testifying in a suit and tie before a Senate committee; the next I would be "back on the ranch" shoveling manure, a common laborer. No better antidote to the seductive illusions of power; our governmental and industrial leaders should try it. Henri would have understood.

Bridge the Gap is composed of talented people who could be doing other work far more remunerative and secure. Bennett Ramberg, our research director, holds Ph.D. and J.D. degrees, was on the research faculty at UCLA for many years, is the author or editor of half a dozen scholarly works on nuclear matters, and is a former policy analyst at the State Department. Joe Lyou, our Executive Director, also has a Ph.D., and with his many talents could be doing "far better for himself" than stuffed into a small, single-room office with the rest of us above a church pre-school, fighting the powers and principalities. As for me, I'm a Harvard graduate and former director of a nuclear research and teaching program at a major university; much of the fall I had to go off salary (again) because Bridge the Gap ran out of funds (again). Our *pro bono* attorneys are distinguished lawyers who could be making real money on other cases rather than helping us fight the good fight. And so too our physicists, chemists, engineers, and other technical experts who volunteer their time and knowledge. Others, like yourselves, contribute in other ways.

Why do we all do it? Because we have come to know the lesson Henri came to know. We are all a mixture of a bit of the Divine spark and a lot of confusion. One of the primary confusions is the socially-instilled belief that we are called upon to achieve power rather than to serve the powerless. But as Henri came to understand with the very core of his being, "Those who are greatest are those who serve."