

COMMITTEE TO BRIDGE THE GAP
1637 BUTLER AVENUE, SUITE 203
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90025
(310) 478-0829

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Another Letter to Help the Year End

The call came, appropriately, from his secretary. "Mr. Tyrone Taborn, Chairman and CEO of Career Communications Group, Inc., wants to invite you as his personal guest to our annual convention at the Baltimore Convention Center," she said. Ten thousand people from around the country would be present, including CEOs of some of the biggest corporations in America. Tyrone would put me up at the Hyatt; would I come?

Now, this kind of invitation is not my normal cup of tea. I don't generally hobnob with heads of firms like Lockheed Martin, and my usual accommodations on the road are found at the Motel 6, not the Hyatt.

This convention, however, is also not your typical meeting of CEOs. The annual gathering brings together thousands of students from the inner city, talented black engineers, and heads of the largest companies in the technology field. It is an integral part of Tyrone's efforts to help blacks from low income backgrounds like his own break out of the ghetto and into the professions. As such, it is a remarkable story of coming full circle, given Tyrone's own history, and an important lesson in an era marked by a national hardening of heart towards one's neighbors in need.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Bridge the Gap was provided with a dozen inner city youngsters through a summer jobs program known as CETA, long-since discontinued in the national effort to eliminate all programs that can help lift people out of poverty. Cramped into our already cramped office, the students helped with various tasks, got a paycheck, and hopefully learned some job skills.

There was a spark of something special in the eyes of one of the students. Extraordinarily shy, it was weeks before he would speak more than a few words. But one day it turned out he had brought to the office something he had written, a short story. We coaxed it out of him. It used the format of a TV show, for that was the primary medium to which he had been exposed, but was filled with the language and raw experience of the ghetto in which he lived. There were clear flashes of great talent evident, even at that young age (he was about 12 at the time). Something very special was buried deep inside him, and we had to draw it out of him, inch by inch.

That young black student was, of course, Tyrone Taborn. He lived in a very tough part of town and had been running with the gangs before he met us. Tyrone was being raised by a hard-working mother who had to hold two jobs to keep the family together. At that time, if I remember correctly, he had never met his father, and ended up only meeting him shortly before his father died.

We hired Tyrone again the following summer, even though the CETA program had been canceled, and each subsequent summer. He flowered in an absolutely remarkable way. Extraordinary talents as a leader, an organizer, and a writer emerged.

One day his mother came to talk to me. She wanted her son to have a chance to attend an integrated public school, rather than the segregated, very poor school in their ghetto neighborhood. Would I become Tyrone's guardian, she asked? Tyrone could then go to a "good" school. Edith

was extremely courageous in this act, driven by wanting an opportunity for her children. I agreed to her request.

Tyrone thus ended up attending the same high school from I had graduated only a decade before. I remember going with Tyrone to Open House Night at the school, where parents accompanied the students to meet the teachers. Coach Kampmann, who had been my cross-country coach just a few years earlier, greeted one of his current students, shook hands with that student's parents, then went on to the next student and his parents, and then to Tyrone. At that point his eyes turned to me, and he said, "Dan, what are you doing here?", to which I respond, in my best parental voice, "And how is Tyrone doing?" Coach Kampmann could not get it to "compute"--Tyrone, with his Afro hairstyle, towering above me, and me, plainly white and only a decade or so older than Tyrone.

But it worked, and magnificently. Tyrone went to the high school during the day and worked at Bridge the Gap after school. He in large measure grew up at Bridge the Gap. He learned about organizing, leadership, and communicating. When Los Angeles was being torn apart during the school desegregation fight, he organized a group of students from all ethnic backgrounds and all parts of the City to make it work smoothly: speaking out clearly that, while the parents might be worried about desegregation, the students themselves welcomed it and thought it enriched their lives.

He ran for the Los Angeles School Board as the first student to do so, arguing that those whose lives were ruled by the Board should have at least some say in its decisions. The news media treated his campaign with respect and credibility.

He then was accepted at Cornell University. He got involved with the black campus magazine, *Umoja Saasa*, and when the university cut off the funding, he took it private and found ways to keep it afloat. From that grew the enterprise to which he has devoted his life ever since. He publishes the national magazine *Black Engineer*, as well as several other magazines designed to encourage and assist minorities in moving into the technical professions. He produces television programs with the same intent. And each year he puts on a huge national conference, at which thousands of black students from junior high school through university meet with representatives of major corporations, providing role models and connections to make possible the move from the ghettos of this country into good jobs in major corporations in the technical fields.

Which brings us back to the call from his secretary. I went to the conference, and was astonished. The shy youngster with the spark in his eye from years ago had grown into an extraordinary man running a significant organization, maneuvering the CEOs of the biggest corporations in the land to enlarge their efforts to attract employees from what we used to call "disadvantaged" backgrounds. Tyrone has become a superb organizer.

Each year awards are given at the conference to honor the Black Engineer of the Year. The selections are from huge firms like Lockheed Martin and Texas Instruments. The awards are presented by the heads of those companies, who, in the process, are exposed to a whole program about the need to open up hiring and opportunity. During the conference each year, Tyrone arranges a breakfast for the CEOs (virtually all white) and the Deans of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. These big companies often provide substantial financial and other assistance to engineering programs at largely white colleges and universities; by bringing together the CEOs and the deans from the black institutions, Tyrone triggers each year a series of new initiatives aimed at providing assistance and new programs at the institutions from which a significant fraction of America's black engineers graduate. At the same time, Tyrone maneuvers the nation's biggest technology firms to set up recruiting exhibits, staffed by their human resource managers, whereby black engineering students can connect with potential employers. He then gets the firms to set up the exhibits a day early, so that inner city students, from elementary through high school age, can interact with representatives of these professions and begin to be motivated about trying to enter these fields. He gives them hope, challenges, and a sense that they too can get out.

I saw that Tyrone is highly respected by his peers and his own employees, and a success, in whatever terms by which one measures that. But mostly, what gave me the most pride about the man that Tyrone has become was the nature of his success. He has not forgotten from where he came; he did not take success for himself and leave behind in the inner cities of this country those who had not been as lucky as he to find a way out. Instead, Tyrone has dedicated his life to helping others make their way out of the slums of this nation. At a time when the country is madly trying to cut off the unfortunate and have them sink, Tyrone has spent his life helping others get out too. I nearly burst with pride at seeing this. He has done well by doing good.

I wandered through the exhibition hall at the Baltimore Convention Center, where the nation's major corporations had set up exhibits and where thousands of young students from the inner city walked through, talking to recruiters from those businesses. In many of those ghetto kids' eyes I saw, or imagined I saw, the same shy hidden spark emerging, ever so tentatively, daring, just a bit, to imagine themselves in a profession like those being demonstrated. I saw, in short, hundreds of young Tyrones being coaxed into hoping, and striving, to get out too. And all this I saw in an enterprise that would not have existed were it not for Tyrone. Like the spark of a holy fire, kept alive by generations of a special priesthood, that which was encouraged to awaken and develop in Tyrone years ago was now awakening the same spark in hundreds of the next generation. Hopefully, the spark ignited within them will equally lead to giving back to their own community, spark igniting spark, as long as there are children imprisoned in slums and poverty.

At the awards ceremony presented (very professionally, I might add) by Tyrone's organization in a major theater in Baltimore, I sat near the Mayor of Baltimore. As we left the theater, I told him how Tyrone had come to us years before on a summer jobs program, and that the next time someone urges the Mayor to cut such a program in his city, remember that--and the Mayor jumped in, "one of the kids cut out might be another Tyrone Taborn."

I subsequently asked Tyrone what had happened to a close friend of his from that time who had not been part of the program that brought Tyrone to us. "He's doing five years in a federal penitentiary for being a drug kingpin," said Tyrone. I was overwhelmed then with the words from the old Phil Ochs song, "There but for fortune:"

Show me the prison
Show me the jail
Show me the prisoner
Whose life has grown stale

And I'll show you
A young man,
With so many reasons why--

There but for fortune,
Go you or I,
Even I.

Tyrone managed to become the man he is because of his own incredible drive and talent, *and* because others helped make available opportunities to express that drive and develop that talent, opportunities readily available to people born with white skin and in more favorable economic circumstances. Who knows what would have happened had his friend had the same chance, or had he been blessed with being born in a suburban world rather than being shackled with the burdens of growing up in the inner city? There but for fortune, go you or I.

At his conference, Tyrone introduced me to some friends, telling them that I had helped get him into Cornell. I told them that wasn't accurate--Tyrone's hard work and talent got him into

Cornell, all I had done was help remove some obstacles that shouldn't have been placed there by society in the first place.

During the conference, I saw Tyrone working the crowd, making everything function smoothly, bringing CEOs of major corporations together with deans from the historically black colleges and universities, constantly maneuvering to open up opportunities for those who came from situations similar to those from which he had come. I couldn't help remembering the commemoration of Dr. King's birthday Tyrone had organized at UCLA while with Bridge the Gap, which was delayed for a couple of hours by a bomb threat. I kept seeing in the man Tyrone had become echoes of what he had learned as a teenager in all those years at Bridge the Gap. He took me to his office, and even there, I heard echoes of our old office where he had done much of his growing up. Little things imparted to him then had become part of his life now, and those skills were now helping others.

It reminded me of the time a decade ago when I had attended in Detroit the funeral of a close friend, Peter Weber, who had worked out of Bridge the Gap's office around the same time as Tyrone. When he left us to return to Detroit, Peter had driven back in a red VW bug, packed with literature from our office about Amnesty International, the Catholic Worker, work against the nuclear arms race, and other such activities from his time with us. Ten years later, at his funeral, hundreds of people were present to testify about all the magnificent things Peter had helped create in Detroit--a Catholic Worker house of hospitality for the poor, actions to fight the arms race, and an Amnesty International chapter that had helped free a number of political prisoners abroad. There were, of course, many, many influences on Peter, but I felt then, as I did now with Tyrone, the remarkable reality that one can touch another human being in a way that contributes to the betterment of the world, and they can do the same, and the circle ever widens. Just as the harm we do ripples far beyond our ability to comprehend, so too does the good. A chain reaction of love or a chain reaction of that other force--the choice really is ours.

In Memoriam -- Charles E. Ashbaugh, III

A couple of months ago I tried to reach an old friend, Chuck Ashbaugh. I got his answering machine, and after his recorded voice told me to leave a message, I did so. Some time later, his wife Connie called back and told me there was bad news about Chuck. He had killed himself a couple of months earlier. I hadn't even known. His voice still on the answering machine, but he had been dead for weeks. I felt shaken.

Chuck had been an operator of the UCLA reactor during all the years we had fought to have its safety problems resolved, or, failing that, have it closed down. We were obviously on opposite sides of that fight. Yet, as has happened so often in our work, based as it is on Gandhian principles, Chuck and I became good friends. Despite the ideological differences between us--and he was a true believer in the nuclear dream--there developed between us a good and genuine concern and friendship. There could not have been two more different people. Chuck was a vigorous supporter of Nixon and the National Rifle Association (NRA) and numerous other far-right causes, with handlebar mustache, beer belly and cowboy boots. His father was the director of the Richard M. Nixon Museum in San Clemente. The day President Reagan was shot, I saw Chuck rushing hurriedly on campus. I asked him where was he going. He said, to mail in his contribution to the NRA in its "hour of need," knowing that the assassination attempt would revive efforts for gun control.

When it was finally revealed that others at UCLA had made false claims to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission--over Chuck's objections--about security at the reactor, there was an effort by one of the people accused by the NRC of misconduct to instead have Chuck take the fall. (This nuclear security question was a very important issue, given the use of bomb-grade uranium and the plans for the 1984 Olympics to be held but a few hundred yards away from the reactor.) Chuck came to us for help. The irony was not lost on either of us--he trusted us, his supposed

adversary in the fight over the reactor at which he was employed, far more than he trusted the people for whom he was working.

In the end, Chuck's unwillingness to permit a falsehood to be perpetrated contributed to the final decision to shut down the reactor. He eventually paid for his honesty with his job, when the reactor was finally decommissioned.

One day Chuck called and said that he was coming over and that we should get a "six pack of Coors" for him (he always played his redneck role to the hilt; the beer had to be Coors just to tweak us.) He wouldn't tell us why he was coming over. When he arrived, he brought up several boxloads of old parts of the reactor (decontaminated, he assured us), including two panels from the control console, one with the key for starting up the reactor still in it! Like the head of an animal mounted on a hunter's wall, he said we had won the reactor battle fair and square and should have some trophies of our victory!

When the reactor was finally decommissioned, Bridge the Gap was permitted a final inspection, to make sure the radioactivity had all been removed. Pursuant to the terms of the closure agreement, I was permitted to perform the inspection, accompanied by an attorney and one technical consultant. When I walked into the former reactor facility with one of our attorneys, to be greeted by the opposing lawyer and the other reactor personnel we had fought so long, there was a loud gasp as I then introduced our technical consultant. In walked Chuck. The former reactor operator was now the consultant for the very group that had succeeded in shutting it down!

Chuck loved the irony of the situation, the horror on the look of the attorney defending the reactor who had always suspected Chuck (incorrectly) of providing information to us. Now Chuck walked in, on the side of the "enemy," the environmentalists. He had not really come full circle, as feared by his former reactor compatriots--he was still vigorously pro-nuclear, and would ever remain so--but he was a different man. He had seen his allies in the nuclear arena lie; he had seen his supposed adversaries, us, tell the truth and go out of our way to genuinely befriend him. And genuine friends we became. It is a story Gandhi--the master of making a friend of an adversary--would have loved.

After the UCLA reactor was shut down, Chuck worked there for several more years decommissioning it. Thereafter he had several other jobs, in the radiation field, but he had difficulty finding a job at a major nuclear facility. I suspect that part of the problem is that he now had a reputation as having a characteristic undesirable in the nuclear industry: honesty. Chuck had warned his employers at the UCLA reactor not to misrepresent their security plan to the NRC judges; when his employers got caught doing precisely that, they tried to pin it on him; and when they went even beyond this, he was prepared to stand up and tell the truth. The truth shall set ye free, we are told, but it may also make it difficult to find employment in your chosen field, particularly, it must be said, in the nuclear field. A true believer in the nuclear enterprise to the end, his disappointment in not being able to find appropriate work in it was greater than any of us realized at the time.

His last job in the radiation field ended and he had been out of work for about a year when he took his life. His efforts to find a nuclear job were unavailing. Reluctantly, at the urging of his wife, he started interviewing for teaching positions, without apparent success.

Shortly before he died, Chuck had one more job interview; a few days passed, with no answer. He took that to mean another rejection; shortly thereafter he killed himself. His wife came home from making funeral arrangements a couple of days later to find a message on their answering machine: the school was very impressed with Chuck's interview and the job was apparently his! A couple of days too late. If only they had called sooner; if only he had hung on a little longer. . . .

More than a decade earlier, at the darkest time in Bridge the Gap's struggle over the UCLA reactor, when we were on the verge of quitting, Chuck called. He said, "I can't tell you why, or what is going on, but Dan, just hang in there. Don't quit now." We listened, and months later we won; the reactor was shut down. We could not see in that darkness any light, but Chuck, our supposed adversary, gave us the hope to continue when we could see no reason for the hope.

Apparently no one close to him knew how seriously depressed he was and how real was the risk. I had been in touch with him several times over the year, kept urging him to drop by and get together, but it didn't happen. If only I had known how serious was his situation, if only I had tried harder, if only I had known so I could have tried to give him some hope as he had me years before. . . .

The mass of humankind lead lives of quiet desperation, said Thoreau. We must reach out into others' lives, be there for them, and give a hand if they will take it. Tyrone took the hand offered, and now has spent his life offering his hand to others, a chain reaction for good. I wasn't there for Chuck when he needed it; I didn't know, but nonetheless, I wasn't there.

At the heart of all great religions and ethical systems is one fundamental premise: to love one's neighbor as oneself. That love needs to be concrete and real. If it is, it spreads, almost invisibly, like runners from a strawberry plant, creating new bursts of sweetness. But evil, if not effectively opposed, spreads rapidly as well, like a cancer. The lobbyists who sell their services to the highest bidder, who spread campaign cash around to politicians to buy access and influence for clients with money, who use pure political power to force things like unsafe nuclear waste dumps onto relatively powerless communities of Native Americans and the poor--the effects of their immoral actions can extend tens of thousands of generations, as leaking radioactivity poisons generation after generation.

The choice is always ours: to love, or to be just out for ourselves. To reach out to those in need, or to grasp primarily for our own personal benefit. There is a world in need of our love, much of it quiet in its desperation, like my friend Chuck, the depth of whose need I did not know, or like the 12-year-old Tyrone, with the spark of great potential, hidden amidst the bruising effects of a ghetto childhood. And there are those not yet born, but whose lives will be cruelly deformed or shortened by pollutants and poverty created by the greed and hardened hearts of our era. Do we reach out and help, do we struggle to prevent harm--or do we go mainly our own way, wanting primarily our own pleasant life, our own house behind the proverbial white picket fence? I think the answer is clear for the person of conscience, no matter how difficult: it is to remember constantly, with every breath and with the fullness of heart and with the depth of our lives, that "there but for fortune, go you or I."

Every time the going gets rough--and you had better believe it does in this work, when the forces against us seem overwhelmingly powerful, with an unlimited willingness to lie in order to win--and things seem so dark one contemplates quitting, I will remember Chuck, who taught me to not give up, no matter how bleak things may appear at the moment. I will also remember the Chuck whose own tough times got so difficult that he forgot that same lesson; and I will remember the phone call that came in for Chuck, a couple of days too late. Hang in there when times get tough, for the bell that rings may ring for you, but not on your schedule. And reach out to those in need, for one may become a Tyrone Taborn, and another could be a Chuck Ashbaugh.

Daniel Hirsch