A preacher and an ironworker

During seminary, I spent my summer breaks building bridges.

by Bruce K. Modahl in the February 1, 2017 issue

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I was an ironworker. Earl was my foreman. We worked for a company building bridges in Florida. Some of them were simple overpasses for an expanding interstate highway. Others were the top layer of a three-layer-cake structure—they swirled over the bridges below. No one showed us the plans. These bridges were complicated and scary high. We built one bridge over a bay. It had to be high enough for ships to fit under. Once they were completed, I drove family members and friends over the bridges and said, “I built this.”

Of course, more people were involved in this work than our crew of 12 or so ironworkers. There were carpenters, concrete finishers, and laborers. Laborers mostly worked the Georgia backhoe—our name for a shovel—preparing the approaches from roadways to bridges. This being Florida in the late 1960s and early ’70s, the crews were segregated. Ironworkers were white. Carpenters were white. Concrete finishers were black. Laborers were mostly black. It was a man’s world except for the occasional female dump truck driver.

I was the only college student—and then graduate student—on the crew. It did not take long before people knew I was studying to be a pastor. Everyone called me preacher. Earl hired me back every summer and during Christmas vacation. By the end of each summer I was close to being the senior man on the crew. That’s a high turnover rate.

We worked ten-hour days. The day began hot and got more so, mid-90s every day, but on the bridge deck made of rebar and concrete it may have been 120 degrees. If I ever had thoughts about quitting school, by the second week of work I knew I was going back come September.

Only two stayed on the crew throughout the years I worked for Earl. One was named Donny. My first summer I struck up a conversation with him at the watercooler and found out we were the same age and from the same city. I asked him what high school he went to. He walked off. Later Earl told me Donny went to high school at Raiford, the maximum-security prison. After that first conversation Donny called me School Boy or College. One day he was mad about something and side-armed a pair of hefty pliers at my head. Good thing his aim was off or I would have been in the hospital and Donny would have gone back to Raiford High for some remedial work. I gave him a wide berth.

One day for some reason I can’t remember he brought his girlfriend onto the bridge at the end of our lunch break. It may have been a Friday and she came to pick up his paycheck. A number of wives or girlfriends did this. It was not unusual for a man to cash his check and go on a weekend bender with nothing left over for food or rent or family. After the first summer of ten-hour days in that heat I understood why someone could do that. One man told me, “It seems like all I do is put on my boots, go to work, come home, take my boots off, sleep and repeat. All my life that’s what I have to look forward to.”

Donny’s girlfriend was very pretty; Donny was not. As we returned to work someone asked, “Donny, what does she see in you?” Donny answered, “It’s because I got a big dick.” The young woman was perched on top of a bundle of rebar. She responded to Donny’s comment by landing with a thud on the plywood deck. With a loud soprano laugh she threw her arms up and announced, “Yes, I love Donny’s big dick.” I expected someone to say, “Well, you ought to see mine.” But we stood silent and off to the side.

The other constant on the crew was Charlie. Charlie was in his fifties. I never knew a rodbuster on a bridge working past his twenties. Rodbusters are people who work with the rebar, the long reinforcing iron bars used in construction. They look like long three-quarter-inch pieces of spaghetti. Roadways take a little bit of rebar, bridges a lot more. We put 15 tons of it into each span of a bridge. Charlie called himself the ramrod of the rodbusters.

I tied rebar into place for the railing with Charlie one day. It was a cushy job. One man held the rods in place and the other man tied them in. We took turns at the jobs. We got to talking about this and that. He mentioned he had spent time in Leavenworth. He said it like it was no big deal.

I asked him, “Charlie, did you say you were a prisoner in Leavenworth?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“What did you do?”

“I shot my lieutenant over in Italy. He was putting our platoon in danger. I didn’t kill him, though.”

I did some math in my head and figured that yes he could have been a soldier in World War II and in the Italian campaign. I gained a new and wary respect for Charlie that day.

These bits about Donny and Charlie might help you understand why one of the state inspectors said, “Ironworkers are the lowest form of human life.” He was talking to another inspector. He didn’t know I heard him, and I did not tell anyone on the crew. I didn’t want anyone to prove him right. I took pride in his words, however. I liked the notion of being one of a tough group of men. But then I was only a visitor in this life. Once the end of August arrived I was gone.

We all practiced creative cussing. I swore with the best of them, but I never took the Lord’s name in vain. I kept my conscience clear on that one. People talk about frat house or locker room culture. Our talk was a cauldron of misogyny.

Duane was an ironworker on the crew building the bridge from the opposite side. One day we spotted a young woman walking across the construction site. It was a long walk in the dirt that was being turned into a four-lane highway by oversized machinery. As she got closer Duane stood on the edge of the bridge and hollered all manner of unattractive language in her direction. We expected her to turn aside and give us a wide berth. She did the opposite. She came straight in our direction. Duane turned around and said, “What do I do now?” One of his crew said, “You’re on your own with this one.”

The young woman climbed the hill and came onto the bridge deck. Both foremen watched this play out. She walked toward us. She had eyes only for Duane. She said, “Why did you talk to me like that? Those were ugly and offensive words.”

Duane wanted to disappear. I saw it in his eyes. His eyes did not meet hers. He said, “I’m sorry. I did not mean what I said.”

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She said, “You didn’t answer my question so I’ll ask it again and answer it for you. I asked, ‘Why did you talk to me like that?’ The answer is you wanted to impress all these other guys standing around here. You wanted to impress them by assaulting me with your words. And that is just what this was, an assault.” She turned her back to us and walked away. Earl and the other foreman let us stand and watch her go. I never heard Earl raise his voice except in warning. When she was out of hearing range Earl yelled, “Get back to work.”

Earl was the only person I never heard cuss or join the talk about women. He was a husband and a father. During lunch break he sat with us in the shade under the bridge. Sometimes Earl talked about being in combat during the Korean War, when he was only 18. Someone nicknamed him Baby. The name stuck. In spite of his baby face, the platoon leader picked him to carry the Browning automatic rifle. Each platoon had a BAR, and it went to the strongest man to carry. Earl talked about what he saw, what he did, and what he was ashamed of.

He said the platoon was resting one day next to a building. Two prostitutes approached, and a few in the platoon gave them some business. As the platoon made ready to head out, Earl said he turned toward the prostitutes, unlimbered the BAR, and released a volley just over their heads. He laughed as they ran.

He said he was a mess when he was discharged. Back home he loaded a small boat with camping gear, food, beer, his pistol, and plenty of ammunition and headed for a small island off Pass-a-Grille. He paid a man in the convenience store by the boat launch to come over every two weeks with some food, beer, and water. Earl told him if he did not answer his call on one of these trips, he should go back to the store and call the police. Earl told us he lasted for six mosquito-bitten weeks. He came to shore exhausted. He cleaned up and got a construction job. He met the woman “who saved my life,” he said. “She led me to Christ and forgiveness and a transformed life. Even after all these years of marriage I feel desire for her when she walks across the room.” Earl was the softest hard-shell Baptist I ever met.

Earl didn’t cuss, but he would put a stopwatch on us to see how many rebar ties each of us made in a minute. We never knew whom he was watching. He stood on the edge of the deck with that stopwatch and a little while later would mosey over to one of us to let us know how fast we were tying. Then he would say either “Keep it up” or “Tighten up.”

Maybe once a week Earl wanted a theological discussion. These took place while I worked and he stood over me talking. One time he got after me about baptism. “Why is it,” he said, “you baptize babies and only dab a little water on their foreheads? In the Bible baptism calls for submersion.”

I tossed my pliers down and cranked myself up to a standing position. I said, “Why does it matter to you how a person is baptized when you don’t believe baptism does anything?”

Earl said, “What do you mean by that?”

I said, “We believe God is the actor in baptism. God sends the Holy Spirit upon the one baptized and claims that person as his child because in baptism we are adopted into God’s family and made brothers and sisters of Jesus.”

Earl said, “I’ll have to ask my preacher about that.” And he did. He came back the next week and said, “You are right. We believe baptism is only a sign that the

person has accepted Christ. But we believe it should be done the way it was in the Bible.” That was a good discussion, I thought.

We were about halfway through summer and had lost a few men from the crew. A black man came onto the bridge with his tools and asked for the foreman. He walked over to Earl and asked him for a job. Earl talked to him awhile about jobs he worked on in the past and why he left the job and asked him a few questions about his experience and whether he was afraid of heights. Earl hired him. His name was Harry Truman Jones.

As soon as Harry fell in working with us, Donny walked over to Earl. Donny said, “If you are hiring this nigger, I quit.”

We all heard it and stopped to listen and watch. Earl looked at Donny for about 15 seconds before saying to him, “Donny, I cannot have your last paycheck by tomorrow, but you can come Friday afternoon to pick it up.” Donny walked off the bridge, got in his car, and drove away.

Donny came back about two hours later during our lunch break. He asked Earl if he could have his job back. Earl said, “Yes, you can. But you have to work with Harry the way you work with everyone else on this crew.” Donny said, “OK.” Donny treated all of us like he was aiming for a good fistfight. So we settled into business.

The Bible says the calf and the lion will lie down together. I suppose this side of Jordan they do not necessarily have to like each other.

A version of this article appears in the February 1 print edition under the title “A preacher builds bridges.”