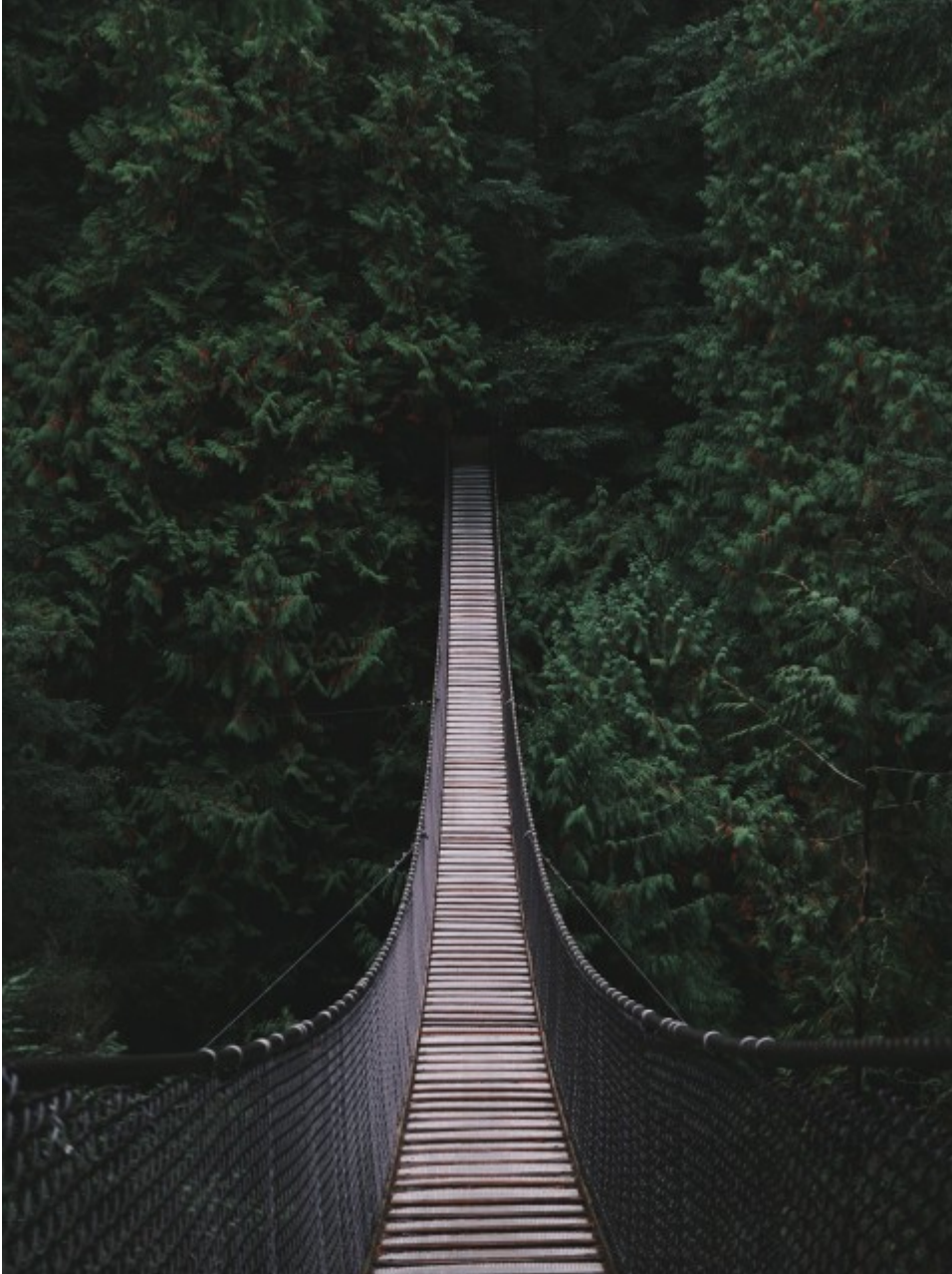


Bridge: Essays by readers

## **We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “bridge.”**

Readers Write in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue



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*In response to our request for essays on bridge, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **dirt** and **lapse**—[read more](#).*

When I was in my twenties, a friend and I signed up for a wilderness training week in the Adirondack Mountains. We wanted to learn the skills to be wilderness guides, especially for trips designed for women. When the training was canceled with a week's notice, we decided we would do the trip anyway and arranged a one-day crash course with the instructor. Then we hit the trail with our equipment and an Adirondacks brochure touting six million acres of adventure.

It was a glorious day when we started, and we felt confident. Toward the end of the day we came to a babbling brook, sparkling in the sunlight—and with the bridge washed out. It had landed nearby, upturned like the grin of a Cheshire cat. That should have been a clue, but the water was low and we happily found a place where people had placed stepping-stones to get across.

We hiked for a few days, thoroughly enjoying the beauty of the mountains. One morning we awoke to rain. No problem! Donning the high-quality rain gear we had packed, we hiked onward—for days, in the rain. It was getting difficult to build a fire or to keep any of our socks dry, but we managed.

As we made our way back the way we came, we sang hymns to keep our spirits up. Suddenly my friend stopped both singing and hiking. I bumped into her. We stood on the banks of the babbling brook—now a murky, raging river. The stepping-stones were gone, under how many feet of water we couldn't tell.

Initially, we panicked a bit. We looked at the map. This river went on forever. The only bridge we could see was the upturned one that now seemed to be laughing at us. We had planned for this trip. We had the right equipment for a hiking trip. But we were unprepared for a rising river. We had to change our thinking. We could not wait for the river to subside—that could take days. We had to come up with a new plan.

We emptied our backpacks to see what we had and how we might adapt to this new situation. There was a rope for hanging our food out of the reach of bears. We tied one end of it to a tree, and my friend swam the other end across the river. Luckily, the rope was long enough to secure to another tree. She came back across holding on to the rope. With our backpacks balanced on our heads, we held on to the rope to

traverse the river. I was terrified. The current was strong, and unlike my friend I am not a good swimmer. But I put my life in the hands of God and my faith in the rope, and I slowly made it to the other side.

*Paula Northwood*

*Minneapolis, Minnesota*

It's a long drive from Spokane, Washington, to Fremont, California. It's a trip we took as a family many times during my first years of ministry. It became so familiar that every landmark told me how far we had come and how far we had to go.

That changed one day as we drove through Walnut Creek, California. Southbound freeway traffic takes a long bridge across another highway, arching over commuter lanes that feed traffic into Oakland and San Francisco. As it rises upward, the single lane seems to disappear into blue sky.

That day, seeing nothing but the blue sky, I was seized with raw terror.

On no other trip had I felt that way. It was all I could do to maintain speed and press forward. I felt my heart beating as I strangled the steering wheel and told myself, *The engineers knew what they were doing. We'll be OK. We'll be OK.*

The bridge into the sky was my first clue that I was well on my way into mental illness. Maybe my family had seen other clues before that. But I couldn't ignore or explain that terror. It took a couple of years before I found words for the road I was on. Until then, I pressed on with my life like a blinded driver.

Many experiences in ministry have made me remember that bridge. There are mornings I pause before going out the door. Will my bridge to the future take me to familiar landmarks? Will it collapse on the other side in some disaster? Will it see me safely home? I don't know.

I take the door handle and turn it anyway. I don't need to know where the day will take me. I just need to bundle myself up, fears and hopes and all, and press ahead. In the Gospel of Mark, the young man in the tomb says that Christ is going ahead of us. I hope to catch up with him somewhere along the way.

*Brian Elster*  
*Lawrence, Kansas*

I stood in the corner of the break room, handing out sandwiches to celebrate our plant's safety record. From that viewpoint I could see several team members joking together, and it warmed my heart. I pointed it out to my colleague, who nodded her head in appreciation. An outsider might look at the interaction and wonder what the big deal is. To see invisible bridges you have to know the history.

Differences of culture, language, and race had disrupted our workforce with tension and discord. Our team had been equal parts English, Spanish, and Hmong speakers. Six months later the spreadsheet showed a plurality—36 percent—of Somali Muslim refugees.

The management team was surprised by the religious accommodations these new workers needed. We all took a crash course. In the early weeks, Muslim team members simply left their workstations on the line to go pray, leaving hundreds of pounds of food products to fall on the floor. Our first Ramadan together began without much management awareness. This suddenly changed when a woman fainted while fasting at work.

Reactive assessments were done, which led to more fans, cooling headbands, and education on the spiritual practices of Islam—along with safety measures to monitor the team members as they fasted. A translator was hired to assist with training.

As the chaplain, I focused on helping people understand one another. I interviewed our Muslim team members about their prayer practices. I helped the management plan the break schedule for our second Ramadan together, so that team members could break the fast as soon as possible after sundown and eat right before sunrise. It became common for me to walk into the locker room and find women kneeling in prayer.

But even with all the accommodations, communication, and positive interactions, the workforce remained segregated—especially in the break rooms.

Change started with a corporate-mandated safety awareness week. Production lines had to work together to improve safety. Over many months I noticed how team

members first spoke to each other only about the task at hand, then about other work-related things, and then about personal things. Break room tables still had invisible signs identifying which group they were for, but it was more common to see people mixing.

Standing in the corner handing out sandwiches that day, I watched as a circle formed. People turned their chairs and bodies toward each other. A Latino man told a story. A Somali woman told a joke. The roar of laughter was huge and contagious. The conversation continued as I stood watching the success of months of work. A bridge had been built between team members—across deep chasms of culture, race, and language.

*Carrie Kreps Wegenast*  
*Appleton, Wisconsin*

When I was 14, I woke up one fall morning and found that my father and stepmother weren't there. I knew they had gone with some friends to a square dance the night before, 18 miles away. But surely they would not have intentionally stayed out this late. Perhaps the car had broken down and they couldn't get it fixed right away. In that case, I told myself, they might be back on the morning train or bus.

Meanwhile, I had chickens, a pig, and a cow to tend to and some newspapers to deliver. Like most families in our town in 1941, we didn't own a phone; most news was delivered in person. In this case it was brought by an uncle, who soon pulled up in a pickup truck.

A major river bisected our county in Oklahoma. It followed a winding course and was prone to flooding. Six miles upstream from us was a highway bridge. Built in 1929, its approach deviated from a straight course by about a half mile in order to cross the river at a narrower point. The builders made another money-saving decision, too. Instead of extending the south end of the bridge over dry land with an additional span of steel and concrete, they ended it with an approach span made only of wood. Twelve years later, when the fall rains came the highway department was diligently fortifying the roadway north of the river with boulders. Apparently no one was watching the south end of the bridge very closely.

That night, my stepmother's brother, Oscar, was working near the north end of the bridge as part of a road repair crew. Around midnight a passing car honked and Oscar looked up to see his sister, Louise, waving from a window. Another car was behind them.

A few minutes later the second car returned, its occupants shaken. They sputtered through their explanations: "Something's happened to the bridge!"

"We were right behind that other car when suddenly its taillights just disappeared."

"We were barely able to stop before going over ourselves. We backed all the way off the bridge before we turned around."

Oscar's heart sank into his boots. But he was able to get into a truck and give orders for others to get lights and ropes and follow him back to the bridge. As best as they could tell, the approach span had just disappeared. There was a gap of at least 50 feet and nothing below but swiftly flowing waters opaque with mud and trash. The river had shifted its course and chewed away those wooden supports. Most likely the final collapse of the span had occurred just as the last vehicle was driven onto it.

It seemed like the entire county was shaken by that tragic incident. I remember the sight of two longtime political enemies, out in a boat together, searching for the bodies. Two of my parents' friends' bodies were found within the next few days, one of them 50 miles downstream. When the flooding came the following spring, my stepmother's body washed up on the opposite bank. A third friend's body was never found, and neither was my father's.

Bridges are constructed to bring people together. This one failed miserably, permanently separating the parents of three families from their children. The other children had no close relatives available, and there was some delay in getting them placed in suitable homes. Fortunately for my sister and me, we were surrounded by uncles and aunts, as well as by the two widowed grandmothers, who took on the job of being our bridges to adulthood.

*James Morse*  
*Starkville, Mississippi*

**From Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*:**

**“No man is an island.” But there is another truth, the sister of this one, and it is that every man is an island. . . . We sit in silence with one another, each of us more or less reluctant to speak, for fear that if he does, he may sound like a fool. And beneath that there is of course the deeper fear, which is really a fear of the self rather than of the other, that maybe the truth of it is that indeed he is a fool. . . . The paradox is that part of what binds us closest together as human beings and makes it true that no man is an island is the knowledge that in another way every man is an island. Because to know this is to know that not only deep in you is there a self that longs about all to be known and accepted, but that there is also such a self in me, in everyone else the world over. . . . Island calls to island across the silence, and once, in trust, the real words come, a bridge is built and love is done—not sentimental, emotional love, but love that is pontifex, bridge-builder. Love that speaks the holy and healing word which is: God be with you, stranger who are no stranger. I wish you well. The islands become an archipelago, a continent, become a kingdom whose name is the Kingdom of God.**

Sunrise beams peeked through the morning fog. The dew sparkled on blades of grass and leaves of trees. Walking the path by the blueberry orchard, I met the edge of the property. There I stepped onto a dirt road, its gravel top revealing the red clay below. Blooming trumpet vines and sweet-smelling honeysuckle crept to the road’s edge.

The road gradually descended. For a mile there was just one house, next to a field of content-looking horses. I don’t recall any crops, just pine trees and kudzu.

At its lowest point, the road gave way to a bridge. The gravel scattered onto its concrete. A stream rounded a bend, ran under the structure, and flowed on.

I made this bridge the midpoint of my daily walk. I would gaze at the water and then turn back. Once my walk was done, I prepared for my workday.

As a summer volunteer at Jubilee Partners in Comer, Georgia, my workdays were never the same. I could be pulling weeds and picking squash, or cooking for 40 people (what to do with that squash?), or mowing grass in order to reach the weeds and squash. Sometimes I taught English classes to adults; sometimes I cared for young children while their parents learned. I cleaned all sorts of structures and dwellings and the things they housed. I varnished cabinet doors.

A daughter community of Koinonia Farm, Jubilee was formed in 1979, also the year of my birth. Koinonia's seeds of Christian faith, service, and community were loosened and blown by the winds of the Spirit. They had taken root on another piece of rural Georgia land—250 acres with three ponds. The work God gave to Jubilee included welcoming the stranger, visiting with prisoners, and living simply.

Most notably, Jubilee's partners and volunteers offer hospitality to refugees. They have hosted thousands of refugees from dozens of countries. Refugees stay for about two months, learning English, connecting with health care and other services, and exchanging cultural lessons. The serene natural setting offers healing to families traumatized by war. Jubilee Partners is a bridge for refugees crossing from their true home to their new home.

Jubilee was a bridge for me, too. I was 21 the summer I was there, about to start my senior year of college. It helped me move from the faith I grew up with—with its overemphasis on personal salvation and discipleship—to one in which piety's fruit is justice and the healing of the world. I began to have faith that God is saving all of creation, everywhere and always. Walking to the bridge and back, seeing the beauty of the summer mornings, feeling the gift of my breath—all this prepared me for living out my faith, one workday at a time.

*Beth Honeycutt*

*Mars Hill, North Carolina*

On 9/11, I was in New York City for a meeting. I heard the sirens, saw the horrified people dusted with white ash running uptown.

I live in San Francisco, and I was planning to see my daughters in New England while I was nearby. After the attacks, I was able to reach my family and assure them I was all right. But the bridges and tunnels were closed. Officials feared that more



attackers might destroy them, or use them to escape or invade the city. How could I get out of Manhattan, I wondered?

I was born and raised in New York City, and I know it well. I remembered an obscure iron bridge spanning the Harlem River from Upper Manhattan to the gates of the old Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. I wondered if that bridge might still be open.

I hired the last rental car available from Avis. I drove north through the jammed traffic to the top of Manhattan Island. There it was: the little iron bridge, painted a cream color. Cars and trucks jammed onto it. My turn came, and I drove slowly across to the Bronx. I took some deep breaths and my body relaxed.

I drove on to Connecticut, haunted and praying for healing and compassion. I feared our government's reaction to the attack. It was a changed world. But I had found a bridge that took me away from the place of pain and sorrow and connected me to my family.

*Robert Warren Cromey*  
*San Francisco, California*

It was the first time I had seen our son James that excited about a school project. His ninth-grade class was doing a unit on bridges, learning about different types and the physics and engineering involved. The final project was for each student to pick a type of bridge and make one out of uncooked spaghetti. Then the teacher would test how much weight each bridge could hold.

This assignment was just the kind of construction challenge that James loved. As a toddler, building with sand or snow occupied him for hours. For his birthday he always wanted the latest construction toy. Our house, with its second floor overlooking the downstairs family room, provided James with endless opportunities to experiment with pulleys, elevators, and repelling lines for his action figures. As a teenager he and a friend filled a garage with old grills and lawn mowers that they found on garbage night and stripped down for go-cart parts.

I learned about the bridge project when I came home to find James sitting in front of large piles of spaghetti cut to precise lengths. I wouldn't have believed you could cut dry spaghetti without shattering it. Over days James glued these pieces into the

same shape in various sizes: an X surrounded by a square. He glued many of these squares together to make two beautiful filigree towers, each shaped like the Arc de Triomphe. The remaining smaller squares formed the base of the bridge: a rectangular box about four inches wide that spanned the width of our dining room table.

On top of that base he placed a road of spaghetti. The two towers went several inches in from each end. Then he suspended the base from the towers, using dental floss for cables. He had created an intricately beautiful suspension bridge.

Unfortunately, when James took his bridge to school the teacher suspected that his parents must have been the ones who made it. Most of the other students had gone with a beam bridge—the simplest option, which also looked strongest. I had to assure the teacher that my husband and I couldn't have made something as precise as James's bridge if our lives depended on it. When it turned out to be one of the strongest, the teacher was compelled to give James a good grade. But I got the impression that the teacher viewed James's precision and enthusiasm with suspicion, as if no youth should be that committed.

James's fellow students certainly felt that way. They smashed his bridge as soon as the weight test was over. It broke my heart. It was his first lesson in the costs that sometimes come with pursuing our God-given passions. Thankfully, he persevered with his love of construction. This year, at 27, he started his own mechanical engineering company.

*Karen Boivin  
Ottawa, Ontario*

It is nearly impossible to get around Pittsburgh without crossing a bridge. I remember hearing as a child that during the construction of the George Westinghouse Memorial Bridge, a worker fell into a concrete support and his body was left there. It's not true, but for years I thought about it every time my family drove across that bridge. Perhaps I feared that if an adult could be abandoned like that, a child could too.

Another bridge haunts me still. It spans a deep ravine in a city park next to a church I served. You might not realize you are crossing a bridge unless you are on foot and

notice that you are looking down on the tops of giant trees.

One evening the choir members gathered for rehearsal and found an unfamiliar car in the middle of the small parking lot, leaving little room for any others. Peering through the windows of the locked doors yielded little information: a pile of papers, a yoga mat, a jacket.

A carelessly abandoned car was a stupid thing to be the proverbial last straw. But this was a big building with a small congregation, in a place where parking was at a premium. There was space on the other side of the property, but this thoughtless person had chosen to hog the space where the choir parked—volunteers who gave their time to rehearse and lead worship. Most of them also wore several other hats to make mission and ministry happen—as of course did I, who as a small-church pastor could get worn down by a perceived lack of respect for all the thankless tasks I did. I was indignant for their sake and my own.

When the rehearsal was over and the car was still there, with no sheepish owner waiting to get a piece of my mind, I called the police. They came, took note of the details, and left.

The next day we learned that the car belonged to a woman who had parked it, locked it, walked to the bridge, and jumped to her death. Out of respect for her family no further details were released.

I felt shock, horror, and shame to the core. My righteous indignation was ash in my mouth. I wanted to take back all my self-pity and start over. My first thought should have been to give someone a piece of my heart, not my mind. She had walked around the outside of our building to find a bridge to her death. She may not have realized she was passing a church. Worse yet, that may have meant nothing to her. No sense of a bridge from her misery to consolation, from despair to hope, from the valley of the shadow into the sunlight. No one to walk beside her and share, “Out of the depths I cry to thee.”

Who was responsible? I, Lord?

*Carol Divens Roth*  
*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

A situation at our church blew up—out of control, unlike anything in our church’s history. There was secrecy, blame, and betrayal. At a congregational meeting after a controversial pastor resigned, the bishop looked out on a sea of grim faces, a congregation divided.

During the two-hour meeting, members offered their thoughts. Some spoke of anger, some of hurt, some of being ashamed of others’ actions. I spoke from the heart of hopes dashed, underhandedness, feeling stabbed in the back. Some chose to remain silent.

In closing, we prayed. The bishop clarified that he had moderated a clearing of the air and nothing more. The congregation itself had to solve its problems and work through its division.

People filed out, mostly silent, faces glum. Small groups talked in low voices. There was still our side and the others. How could we come together and move forward through so much bad feeling?

Then a woman came toward me—one of the others. “Oh Susan, I love you,” she said, eyes moist. She stretched out her arms, and I hugged her back. In the seconds of that hug, the impassable chasm shrank in the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. Our congregation was going to make it.

*Susan J. Alexis*

*Albuquerque, New Mexico*

There was no bridge to the island where my father lived, three miles from the mainland. The last time I saw him, he picked me up in his 52-foot sailboat on a blustery day. A gale was moving in from the north, and black clouds were rolling low overhead. The passage was a sea of rising whitecaps. In that kind of wind it’d be unsafe to raise the sails, so we’d have to motor at six knots max. It would take a while to get home.

I knew from his letter the week before that the motor in the speedboat had exploded on his way into town, that he’d used his bare hands to grab the burning electrical wires and throw them overboard to keep the fire from spreading to the gas lines. He wrote that he’d “doctored his paws with gunk and socks”; by “gunk” he meant 20-

year-old antiseptic cream. Now I could see the scabs and welts through the tines of the tarnished ship's wheel. "How are your paws?" I yelled through the wind. He grunted and shrugged, laughing as the cold spray came up and soaked us both.

My father lived an impossible life for a bachelor losing his mind in his early seventies. He had aphasia of the frontal lobe and had long since lost his ability to form cohesive sentences. This was tough for a man who once lectured to 300 students at a time, who prided himself on his brilliant use of words. We attributed it to a stroke he suffered at sea, alone in his boat in a raging tropical storm, hallucinating the most awful demons holding him captive. He was recovered by a Swedish fishing vessel, scrawny and hollow-eyed and broken. We thought for sure we'd lost him to the ravages of his mind, but he came back enough to keep living in his self-made empire, insistent on his independence. As he steered the boat through the storm, I noticed how frail he looked.

Hours later, soaked and shivering, we got to the outer reaches of the harbor. Once inside the cove, we had to make a 360-degree turn to dock. We were both proud that we could do this with our eyes closed by now. I wrapped the stern line and bow line in big loose coils and put one line over each shoulder to clear my hands. In times past, as we slowly approached the dock, I would use my hands to show my dad how much room there was. This time, however, he went toward the dock at full speed. I yelled, "Go astern!" He screamed back, "Go!" and so I climbed up and around the spinnaker pole and got ready to jump five feet down to the dock. Then he knocked the engine into reverse and we raged astern, heading toward the rocks. I jumped.

I couldn't believe I made it. I had leapt over a great expanse of roiling water down onto splintered wood. Something in my knee snapped on the impact, and I was down. Pain overtook me. I heard a muddled version of my dad's familiar command: "Take a turn!" So I crawled army-style with the lines and tied them each fore and aft to a cleat. I pulled the boat in with all my might. Then I lay on the dock looking up at the sky, rain on my face, biting my tears, praying.

My dad came over and looked down at me with a bewildered smile on his face. "What you?" he asked, meaning, "What are you doing?" I explained, as I would 20 more times during my visit, that my leg had snapped and I couldn't walk.

He helped me up the rocky path to the old house, up the enormous flight of stairs, and to the back room, where an old sail would serve as my bedspread to protect me from the leaking roof. We sat there together, drinking whiskey as the 40-knot wind whistled through the cracks in the windows. We were stuck on the island.

My injury felt serious. I asked if there was anyone who could come take me to shore when the weather got better. There were other families on the island, but he'd scorned their attempts at friendship, preferring his solitude. "Nah," he said, laughing, as the lightning lit up the room. He'd burnt all his bridges.

Days later, when the storm ended, he brought me his father's old cane. We went outside together and saw something neither of us had ever seen: a double rainbow, both full and complete, starting in our harbor and ending on the mainland. We held hands and cried at the beauty. God had built us a bridge.

*Clare McNamara*  
*North Anson, Maine*