

Crossing the Bridge

By: Lynn Holaday Fuentes

On a sunny summer afternoon, my daughter and I rode a bus south along Michigan Avenue in Chicago. When we stopped for a light by the pillars at the end of the bridge, I looked idly out the window and saw a wiry man in a T shirt drag a young boy around the pillar, lock his left arm around the boy's neck, and proceed to smash his right fist repeatedly into the boy's head.

I was flooded by horror, then rage. I leaped to my feet.

"Open the door! Open the door!" I screamed. Someone's beating a boy!"

The occupants of the bus turned and gazed at the scene outside. I pushed against the back door. "Let me out!"

The driver released the door, doubtless glad to rid himself of his hysterical passenger. I jumped down, and the bus trundled on into the Loop.

Right in front of me was the attacker. "Stop it!" I said.

He eyed me for a long moment, then let go of the boy. I was relieved, but as I slowly began to comprehend my situation, fear crept in. I stepped back, edging toward the corner where there was more traffic, human and automotive. The boy slid around the pillar and joined a woman and a smaller boy.

The man looked at me through slitted eyes, hand still in a fist. "He's my kid, and I can discipline him if I want to."

The mother, also wiry, appeared beside him. "You get the fuck out of here," she said.

I reeled at this. I had thought of her as a potential protector of the child.

Emboldened by her support, the man took another step toward me. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

The boys huddled against the rail, watching, the older holding his hand to his head.

I was shaking now. Crowds of people were passing by, including burly men, who certainly heard this exchange, but no one stopped. It was as if we were invisible. Then I remembered my cell phone. "I'm calling the police," I said defiantly, grabbing it from my purse and waving it as if it were a weapon.

The man and the woman watched me as I dialed. Everything receded into the background except our three figures, poised in this tense tableau. Then, suddenly, the

moment broke. The parents took the boys by the hand, and giving me a wide berth, walked past me and across Wacker Drive, looking for all the world like a family of happy tourists. They were getting away, and there was nothing I could do.

My daughter ran up, breathless. She had gotten off the bus at the next stop and passed them in the middle of the street. She, too, had called the police.

Then a police car pulled up at the light right next to me. I leaned excitedly over to the driver and told him my story, pointing to the family that was now making its way across Michigan Avenue. “Yes,” he said, “they notified the sergeant. Something about somebody spanking a kid.”

Who had made this translation? “He wasn’t spanking him,” I said. “He was beating him. With his fist.”

I brightened as I saw another police car on the other side of the intersection intercept the family. There was a brief discussion between the father and the sergeant, still in his car, and then the sergeant drove off and the family continued its walk up the hill in the direction of the Hyatt hotel.

“But he’s letting them go!” I said frantically to the policeman in front of me.

“Yeah, well, it’s up to him,” he said. The light changed, and he drove off.

Since then I have struggled with this incident. Had I made things worse for the boy? Would he be punished more severely as a result of my actions? Why was I, a smallish woman in her fifties, the only one to do anything? What was I expecting the police to do? Had I accomplished anything at all?

At times, I have wished someone would intervene in my life, swoop down and pick me up and take me somewhere that didn’t have all the problems that my current locale had. Like all young women fed on fairy tales, I had my version of the knight in shining armor on a white steed, galloping at full tilt, slowing just enough to reach down with a powerful arm and lift me (willing and weightless) up behind him. Needless to say, this never happened. If it had, I wonder if I would have been pleased to have the decisions taken out of my hands.

But what of my interventions in the lives of others? I have stepped in to help my children, probably, like most mothers, more than I should have. I tried to intervene in my parents’ lives by preaching to them about their lifestyle – without having any impact whatsoever. When an alcoholic relative reached the stage where he was coughing up blood, I did an intervention to send him to treatment.

But that was family. What about strangers? To what extent are we expected to be our brother’s keeper?

There are plenty of reasons not to help. A Chinese principle holds that if you save a man's life, you are responsible for him forever - probably because you can't just pull someone out of the water and leave him on the bank for wild animals to find. Once started, you have to finish the job. But even without that level of responsibility, we fear falling into an endless morass of red tape, chasing down social agencies and filling out forms, or, worse, spending hours and days with a victim we don't know and probably don't want to know.

And intervention might make things worse. At least it was an intact family, I said to myself afterwards. If the father had ended up in jail, what would I have created then? Often intervening is just playing God when we haven't been invited to take on the role. It's not always clear whether we are liberating or invading.

And what if it's dangerous? If I had pursued the boy's situation, what would his father have done to me? Was that what people were thinking when Kitty Genovese was raped and murdered in New York while they watched from their windows and did nothing?

I used to be shocked that we could leave even one child in the hands of an abuser, but now that I understand the practicalities, the muddy waters, the solutions that are sometimes worse than the cure, I see how complicated it is. We don't have enough hands to expose the wrongs, to follow up on them, or to find a solution.

When there is a great horror and an especially appealing victim, or when a short-term surgical strike or daring rescue mission will solve the problem, something may happen. But give us a chronic issue like domestic child abuse, and few people step up.

If presented hypothetically with this particular issue, I probably would have said it would have been useless to leap from the bus and confront the abuser. The problem was too difficult to solve, the action too ineffectual, the responsibility too muddled, the full story unknown, and the potential for danger too real. But when the actual situation occurred, some instinct rose up and overrode my apathy. I don't take much credit for it.

Still, I'm glad I acted. Not because I'm satisfied with the outcome, and not because I had a duty to act (I can't even feel annoyed with the others on the bus or on the street because another day it could easily have been me), but because responding to another in trouble is part of what it means to be human.

Edmund Burke, eighteenth century Irish philosopher and statesman, said, "All that is necessary for evil to prevail is for good men [and women] to do nothing." If we have the power to help others, however little, and we stifle it - from fear, because we're too busy, because we think it's hopeless - what remains but soulless bureaucracies to deal with people in distress?

And we may not be as ineffectual as we think.

Chaos theory tells us that when a butterfly flaps its wings in Tokyo, it affects the weather

in California. Perhaps I didn't change the parents, but maybe one of the boys will remember that someone thought what his father was doing was wrong. Maybe a passerby will be nicer to his own children. Maybe someone on the bus will think differently about what's happening at a neighbor's home. Maybe my daughter will see me differently.

Perhaps the only thing that changed as a result of my leap from the bus was me. But as Gandhi says: you must be the change you seek in the world.