

Workshop Materials

THE BRIDGE AT NEVERWAS CLOSING REMARKS AT BARODA

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Once upon a time there was a beautiful land known as Neverwas. The people who settled in Neverwas loved it, for it provided everything they needed to live and prosper. There were fertile fields for farming, mountains for mining and timber, and a broad river with crystal clear water that ran through the land. To the west, on the other side of the mountains, a natural harbor invited access to the vast ocean. To the east, as far as anyone could see, a great golden plain extended into the rising sun.

The Neverwas-ites felt truly blessed, except for one flaw in their near-paradise. The mighty river, which in many ways represented the life force of the people and the land, divided Neverwas into two distinct lands: the mountains with the mines and timber sat west of the river, with the ocean still further west; the great fertile farmland and endless plains lay to the east of the river. The people of Neverwas could only cross the broad river twice a year when the river flow slowed enough to allow them to guide their flat-bottomed barges with long poles.

Over the years, the people of Neverwas adapted to the challenges resulting from the river divide. The people on the east side of the river learned to farm and irrigate the vast fields. They grew a healthy variety of food crops, and also cotton for making clothes. On their side of the river, they built great mills powered by the river flow and processed their grains into flour and meal. The people on the east side became experts in growing and processing the crops that their fertile fields produced.

The people on the west side of the river learned to mine the mountain ore and forge metal tools and utensils. The trees from the mountain forests provided plentiful wood for building shelters and eventually boats. They learned how to harness the power of the river to mill the lumber. They became expert builders and designers, making use of their never-ending supply of timber and ore to engineer new tools, devices, and structures. Some of the westsiders became sailors, and over the years they learned to venture out well beyond the Neverwas harbor.

And twice a year, every year, the people on both sides of the river devoted

themselves to crossing the river and exchanging food, cloth, timber, tools, utensils — all the goods that had to be traded in order for people on both sides of the river to live and prosper.

Over the years, all the people in Neverwas spent their nights gazing into the brilliant sky above. The Neverwas-ites on the east side observed the changing shapes and patterns of the moon and stars. Over the years, they noticed how the landscape of the sky was arranged when certain events occurred in their land. When they experienced great joy upon the births of new babies, they looked to the sky; when their crop harvests were bountiful, when the river brought them many fish, whenever good fortune embraced them. But they also looked to the sky when they experienced great suffering during plagues, droughts, floods, and other tragedies. Over the years, they began to see connections between what occurred in the sky and what resulted on the land. They wove wonderful stories about the creatures and characters they saw in the sky, and passed these stories down from generation to generation.

Like their neighbors to the east, the people who lived west of the river developed a fascination with the sky. Over the years, they too carefully watched the movement of the moon and stars. They learned how to predict when certain formations would appear, and where in the sky they would appear. As their sailors began to sail farther away from Neverwas, they observed that the position of the sky landscapes changed. Over the years, they charted the sky formations, noting the dates, times, and locations of the moon and the brightest stars. They used their knowledge of mathematics to calculate and predict their location based on the position of the moon and stars. They eventually learned how to navigate the vast ocean by using the sky landscape to guide them.

Over the years, the council leaders of Neverwas met together to talk about how they could make life better for people on both sides of the river. Every year, the leaders from both sides discussed how wonderful it would be if they could cross the river throughout the year, rather than just twice a year using the pole-driven flat-bottomed barges. Every year, the leaders would speculate how wonderful it would be if there was a bridge at Neverwas. But the people on the east side of the river knew nothing about designing or building bridges, and the people on the west side of the river, including their best engineers, had no idea how they could build a bridge that would span the broad expanse of the river.

One year, the west side sailors returned from a long trip across the ocean with exciting news for the engineers. They had visited a faraway land and observed the largest and stoutest bridge they had ever seen! This great bridge spanned a river even broader than the Neverwas river, according to the sailors. The engineers were skeptical. How was that possible? They had to see it for themselves. They

pooled their resources and selected their three most trusted engineers to sail on the next boat out to see this great bridge.

Months later, the boat carrying the engineers returned to Neverwas. The engineers literally sprang from the boat deck onto the dock, so eager were they to get started on their own bridge. For they had indeed seen the great foreign bridge! It did exist, and the engineers brought back detailed sketches of the bridge's ingenious design. The engineers and the mathematicians immediately set about reproducing the structural calculations to design a bridge for the river at Neverwas.

Word spread quickly on both sides of the river about the prospects for the long-awaited bridge. It was finally going to happen! The farmers and the mill operators on the east side of the river started looking for new land to acquire to grow more crops and mill more grain as they anticipated great riches from increased trade to the west side and beyond. The loggers and the builders on the west side began stockpiling building materials as they anticipated a great building boom on the east side, thanks to the easy transport the bridge would bring.

For one long year, everyone in Neverwas waited for the engineers to finish the designs for the bridge. The people on both sides of the river elected representatives to a new council, specially formed to oversee the bridge project. On the day that the new council was briefed on the project plans, there were great celebrations all across the land.

But the celebrations were brief. For the engineers from the west side had devised a plan for the bridge that the eastside council could not accept. The problem was not in the design or the structure or the cost of the bridge, but its location.

The plans specified that the bridge was to be built at the place where the river was narrowest and straightest. The westside engineer explained that this was the only feasible place where the bridge could be built for three reasons:

1. As the location where the river was most narrow, there was more margin for error that the supporting structures on each side of the river could bear the weight of the wide span.
2. As the location where the river ran most straight, there was less risk to the supporting structures due to erosion or flood.
3. Due to the mountains on the west side of the river, the chosen location was the only place where there was adequate access to build a roadway that could connect to the bridge on the west side.

But the leader of the eastside council strongly objected to this location. It was simply not possible to build the bridge at this spot, he exclaimed, for three reasons:

1. Three hundred years before, there had been a great drought on the east side of the river. The great drought was broken only after the eastsiders

had gathered at this very spot to prayerfully appeal to the stars above. Every year since, the eastsiders held a festival to celebrate and to appeal to the stars that there would never again be such a devastating drought. The bridge simply could not be built on this sacred site.

2. Their best and most revered sky readers had revealed that the stars in the heavens favored a site three miles up river, near a hill on which the eastsiders had always gathered to gaze up at the night sky.
3. The eastside mill operators and farmers also supported the same site three miles up river, where the river happened to run the fastest and widest. But it also happened that three large mills were already planned to be built there, and the site bordered the farms of the two wealthiest and most powerful farmers in Neverwas.

For five long years, the Neverwas westsiders and eastsiders argued about where the bridge might be built. For every location the westside engineers considered workable, the eastsiders objected. For every location offered by the eastsiders, the engineers' calculations showed it to be unworkable.

And so it happened that one spring, there was an abundance of rain and the river swelled and was in danger of flooding both sides of Neverwas. The eastsiders gathered on their sacred spot, now threatened by the rapidly rising water, at the very spot the bridge had been proposed. They prayed and appealed to the stars in the heavens for the rains to stop.

Despite their appeals and prayers, the storms grew even stronger. The river rose rapidly, flooding the farmers' fields to the east. There were terrible lightning strikes over the mountains, causing devastating fires to the timber structures in the villages. Before the rains eventually doused the fires, many of the buildings on the west side burned to the ground.



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One of the buildings that burned was where all of the plans, sketches, and designs for the bridge were stored.

And that is the story of how the bridge at Neverwas never was built.

[Steve presented “The Bridge at Neverwas” as his closing remarks for the Baroda Workshop. Devkumar Trivedi attended and offers his impressions of the story:

The Bridge at Neverwas, a parable of panoramic perception written by Steve, seemed like a spectacular gate of a manor which opens the path to several doors in the grand structure. This story should be in the textbooks for the final year of every school. While the nervous system is designed for our survival, inability or disinclination to see further around the mind’s corner will hasten extinction. In the age when man has traversed cislunar landscapes, if senses are so sacralized as to treat them infallible, if perceptual prisons are not broken, if conceptual cages are not opened, if a flight on the wings of values is not undertaken, civilization will accelerate to ashes and dust.

In the chapel of freedom, unbiased debate and open discussion are the secular deities. Conflict of interest between what I as an individual want, and what we as a community — mankind — need, can be resolved by a mind trained to “see ourselves as others see us,” and also to see ourselves what others see. Impressionable minds from kindergarten stage need not be colonised by the doctrines of ideology, theology, macho He-ology, or self centred Me-ology.

The story impacted with such a constructive implosion that all the dimensions of my understanding deepened, widened and gained elevation. Building bridges to exchange resources enriches riparian habitations. And where civilizations have moved far away or declined, new bridges have to be built on new locations. This effect was further intensified by the heightened vocabulary of the beautiful lines of the song by George Harrison, in which he tells us that the “space between us all” doesn’t really constitute a space but rather a connection...a bridge. He reminds us:

When you see beyond yourself then you may find that we are all one,
And life flows on within you and without you.

Metaphorically, building bridges between maps and territories, between the abstract and the immediate, and between values of love and compassion, is the preemptory need of the century. While genes over the globe have interfused, celibate memes of faith have clashed in crusades. Bridges of awake communication (i.e. awakened, inter alia, by general semantics) will help the journey from self-righteous narcissism, over to the destination of understanding, justice, and evolution.]