

...BRIDGES... Number 12, 2008: "Taking Flight"

by Joyce Michael on behalf of the Czech Mission Network and the American Working Group

In October, some of the participants in the Partnership Conference suggested that I share the devotions that I presented at Janské Lázně in BRIDGES. Thus, I included the first part of those reflections in BRIDGES 11. Since it now strikes me that the heart of my October mediation may point us toward a new way of being, I have decided to offer those words to you as my Christmas/New Year's greeting for 2008.

Recently, as I translated a story book about Krtek (the little mole), so that a conference member will be able to read it to her grandson when she returns home, I was intrigued by this image: "The butterfly circles over the glade; he flutters in the wind. 'Fly with me, my dear snail, and see the world,' he says. But the snail replies, 'we all do what we can. Believe me, my friend. I do not have wings, so I crawl along the earth.'"

These words may be taken as affirming that we all have our place and way, whether that be soaring through the sky or crawling along the earth. However, I am inclined to be a bit more adventuresome these days. Thus, I want to extol the possibility of flight. Not superficially, I hope, but genuinely and irrepressibly, almost as if we had no other way of walking together, except with joy and delight.

I have enjoyed quite a few moments of "flight" during the Partnership Conference, although the week began with a new wave of uncertainty about the future. Indeed, I was feeling rather weary when I arrived at the office the day that you arrived in Prague. It was as if I was a snail, crawling along the earth until Magda told me of the now-infamous banana explosion. "I asked for 25 bananas, and I received 25 kilos," she said. And I began to laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

Perhaps, I was blind, yet, I had eyes. Maybe, I was deaf, yet, I had ears. I did not have to crawl along the earth like a pitiable creature. I could soar above "myself" and let our time together fill me with joy and delight. Thus, on Tuesday evening, I quietly repeated the banana story to Peter Stephens, and my usually-reserved British friend broke out into such enthusiastic laughter that a few of you looked around to see where the mirth was coming from. Peter laughed, and I recalled a parable that I wrote many years ago.

Based on a passage by Friedrich Nietzsche, that describes the people of the world rocking back and forth in agony at the despair and suffering that are inherent in life, my parable suddenly envisions an old couple in China, who are also rocking back and forth in great distress until the old man's face breaks into a wrinkled, toothless

grin. The old woman's face similarly explodes, and a quiet, almost silent laughter irrepressibly begins – and grows until there is a chuckle here, a chortle there, and a giggle in between. The laughter grows until both the old man and the old lady are laughing with unrestrained delight. And now, they are rocking back and forth again, in the delicious rhythm of joy. And now, the laughter is spreading like a tidal wave to person after person over the face of the whole earth.

I do not know how I came to write that parable, but I do know that when I read it aloud, my very reserved parents both began to laugh in a way that I have rarely seen and heard before or since. Thus, I am bound to conclude that when we are walking together in the vision of God's truth, we do not have to crawl along the earth. Even the most weighted down of us can find a way to hope. Even the most sightless can find a deeper vision. Even the dullest of hearing can find a way to the profound melodies of grace and love.

If we read Isaiah 43:8-9 without much analysis, we may conclude that it is a liberating vision that will bring the nations together. Or perhaps, it describes an influx of hope and delight that may break into our world whenever God's people come together with humble expectation. Either way, it is my prayer that as we nurture the partnerships that are being planted, we will not be content to crawl along the ground. Indeed, as we share our sufferings and our doubts, may blindness be graced by sight, and woundedness be transformed by mercy. Alleluia-Amen.

Nietzsche correctly says that "we do not fly into flying," so let us be encouraged as we prayerfully sing a final time:

"Give us wisdom, courage, too
For the many small steps needed.
Lord, remain with us yet further,
Give us wisdom, courage, too."

Holy God, as we open our whole selves to you, fill us with your spirit, so that your light, your love, and your life may radiate through us and overflow into our wounded world. Hear our prayers. Amen.