



We thought that we had the answers, it was the questions we had wrong.

Bono

In school, we're rewarded for having the answer, not for asking a good question.

Richard Saul Wurman

Village at a Bend in the River — A Fable

Or

Efficiency Meets Innovation — A Foretelling

Once upon a time, a small village sat happily at a bend in a river that meandered through a green valley poised among some rolling hills. The shape of that bend was a pleasant feature that provided some simple benefits — boys could sit along the near bank on a summer's day with fishing rods and catch the lazy catfish that the flow of the river generously delivered to them; holiday picnics could be set up by the wise Council of Elders in the grassy field across the river with the help of large rubber rafts; and the gentle lapping of water against the rocks on their side of the bend provided a soundtrack for wondering minds to imagine places up and down the river that they had never seen, occupied by people they had never met — for there was no reason for the people of this proudly self-sufficient village to venture beyond their field of vision, here at this bend in the river. The fields behind the village provided seasonal crops of fruit, vegetables, and other edibles year round, since they were fairly expert at rotating their well-tended fields to yield all they needed. The chickens and pigs raised in the barns at the south end of the village provided meat and eggs. They had what they needed and didn't feel the need for more.



One Wednesday afternoon in July, a 14-year-old boy named Tom was fishing at the bend – his feet up on a smooth rock, fishing rod in one hand and a beer can in the other (surreptitiously borrowed from his Dad’s fridge in the garage). Fish didn’t seem to be biting on this particular afternoon but, no matter, the sun was warm, the water was calm, and the beer was . . . well, it had started out cold. Tom was just about to call it a day when he noticed something floating toward him from the usual direction up the river. It was fairly large – maybe a log – nothing remarkable really; but as it got closer . . . you know when you see something unexpected that doesn’t quite fit with the surroundings and it takes a while to recognize it? It drifted right to him and bobbed gently against the rock beneath his feet. But it rolled a bit and . . .

Stunned, he scrambled to his feet, knocking the near-empty beer can into the river. He couldn’t quite believe what he saw – a person, or so it seemed, a man, an expressionless face . . . motionless except for the rising and falling caused by the lapping water. He opened his mouth and gasped but no sound came out. He had never seen a dead body before, but this certainly looked like one.

What to do? His eyes flashed right and left and then back to the apparition before him, his mouth still open, finally unable to take his eyes from the floating object in the water. He began to cough and then struggle for air. His arms reflexively reached for the body and then recoiled just as quickly. He wanted to yell, but this fishing spot was selected precisely because people didn’t often walk by. So, he was quite alone. A new thought was quickly dispelled — did this person need help? But he looked quite beyond help.

So, after staring for what seemed like a long time, he gingerly grabbed the nearest arm, and found it to be fairly easy to drag the rest of the floating body up on the smooth rock. Suddenly fearing he would throw up, he took some deep breaths and began to run up the bank, tripping twice on nothing in particular, looked back once more, and hurried back to town.

Half way there, still gasping, he realized that he didn’t quite know what he would do when he got there. The first person he met was Mr. Crenshaw, owner of Crenshaw & Sons Bait & Tackle, “Guess they’re not biting today, eh Tom?” And then, “You OK? You don’t look so good.”

Tom stopped, trying to catch his breath enough to talk, but all he could do was point down to the bend and gasp, and finally, “Dead! I think he’s dead! I don’t know . . .”

“Well, now, Tom, get hold of yourself.” He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder; Tom was bent over, leaning on his knees. “What is it, boy?”

After Tom regained enough composure to recount the sparse facts, they both found their way down among the rocks to the bend. Tom stopped well short of the body and pointed. “There.”

Mr. Crenshaw tilted the body enough to see the face. “Well, yes, he’s beyond anything we can do for him. Doesn’t look familiar. I guess we’ll need some help.” Tom started scrambling again. “Tom. I don’t think we’re in a big hurry. *We* need some help, Tom; but *he* doesn’t.”

Back up at The Bait & Tackle, Mr. Crenshaw and his two grown sons pulled a plank and a tarp from the back of their flat-bed and brought the body up the bank to the truck and drove it to the fire station. Before long, the mayor, the fire chief, a police officer, and Ted Dawson from the mill gathered around the body, and reviewed the facts, as sparse as they were, and talked about what to do.

This town was proud of its ‘can-do’ attitude and believed in the principles of efficiency and well-practiced procedures that had served them so well for generations in the way they conducted their businesses, managed their homes, and taught their children. There were no problems that daunted them. When something new seemed to present a challenge, they relied confidently on established experience and sought the wisdom of the town’s Council of Elders to guide the way. The obvious decision was quickly made to respectfully bury this unfortunate visitor to their bend in the river in an unassigned section of the town’s well-tended cemetery and go back about their business. The task was completed before sundown.

As Al Crenshaw and Ted Dawson climbed out of Al’s flatbed in front of the Bait & Tackle, two boys came scrambling back from the bend with a familiar story, “Three more,” said Jack Knowland, breathlessly. Turns out that word had spread pretty fast about the morning’s surprise and a number of curious teenagers wandered down to the bend to see what they could see; and they saw more than they expected. Three more bodies had drifted into their bend in the river. Al and Ted knew what to do, got a few more neighbors to help and there were three more graves in the yard before midnight. There was the typical feeling of accomplishment from a challenge met, but as they said goodnight, the looks that were exchanged between them said, without words, “What’s going on here?” as they ambled their separate ways, home from a long day.

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For most, Thursday morning started in the usual ways: Crenshaw & Son’s Bait & Tackle opened at the usual hour for those preparing for a weekend of fishing; Riverside Lumber Mill loaded a long-bed cut of pine from the woods just west of town; Barton’s Electrical had a handful of contractors preparing to install some lighting around the newly landscaped park; Dependable Building Supplies began work on a gazebo and bandstand in that park; and Europaville Coffee-n-Donuts served the usual collection of ‘to-go’ customers on their way to work along with the usual retired guys who sat their usual 90 minutes holding forth about the weather and the prospects for a good olive harvest. Donuts were still the favored breakfast, but bagels were starting to make inroads into the typical morning fare. Of course, there was some talk about the four unfortunate strangers who had to be quickly buried up the hill. Some were hearing about it for the first time. “Young Tom Egan found the first one.” It was Dave Abel: “Al Crenshaw says the kid could hardly talk he was so stunned. Thought he was going to puke. I guess he learned some grown-up things, eh?”

Then, suddenly everything changed. Everything.

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Mayor Bradley burst in – “Guys . . . I’m need’n’ some help. Lots o’ help. Right now, come ON.”

What’s the matter, Jim, you look like . . .”

“This time it’s more than a dozen, come on. Right now.” Mayor Bradley never raised his voice for anything, so they knew to move. “Down to the bend. Al’s got his truck down there. *It’s bad.*”

On the way to the bend, they learned that fifteen more bodies had washed onto the rocks overnight. When they got there Chief Davis was clearly in charge, barking orders and making decisions. “Too many to bury individual. Gotta be common. Jake’s got his backhoe. Need to load ‘em up quick -- get ‘em outta the water, *fergodsake*, and haul ‘em up the hill. Let’s move. This can’t wait.”

The men dispatched their assigned tasks with the same efficiency and focus as the smaller group had used on the original four the day before. It was their nature. But they didn't have time to admire their teamwork and know-how in an emergency. By mid-afternoon the number coming down the river to settle against the rocks at the bend had doubled and they were piling up. They worked diligently to stay ahead of the flow and stack them up the hill to await the digging. By nightfall, nobody was counting. The steadiness of the volume was astounding, it just didn't stop – until about nine when the numbers reduced to about a dozen an hour, giving them hope that they might get ahead of the task if they kept at it. Once a sizable crew had been organized and settled into a rhythm, the mayor left Ted Dawson in charge and assembled Europaville's Council of Elders in the library for some planning.

“Gentlemen, I haven't seen anything like it, well not since the war, but never in a town like ours. But I figure we know how to handle an emergency. Barton and Davis tell me they can fashion a conveyor. Crenshaw's boys got Jake's second backhoe running and figure they can dig the other side of the hill quicker and deeper where the soil's softer. Dirt from the second set of holes can fill the first, and so on.” Decisions were made; sandwiches and water would be distributed; older guys would be rested every half hour; the mayor could be a commanding figure when there's a need, “Barton'll rig up some lights, we can keep it up all night if we hafta!” The mayor was conscious of the need for optimism.

Progress, even in the dark, was considerable; and in the early morning hours, under a sliver of moon, the work slowed to a halt for a few hours of rest.

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Those who were thinking that the worst was over had a dramatic shock when the sun came up over the bend in the river. The cluster of bodies that had built up at the bend was an overwhelming sight, more than they had seen all day yesterday. After a few minutes of staring at the accumulation, the mayor gathered the men and a few of the teenagers, any who were within earshot, at a picnic table in the park, just a few yards from the conveyor. “Guys, we have to step this up. We're gonna need some of you boys with us. Dawson, can you widen the conveyor? You know, double it? Barton can you get us some more power, it's gonna have to carry some serious weight. We'll need another patch of land for another graveyard, and we've got to reconsider the depth.”

The assembled group, less orderly and more breathless than the previous meeting, leaned in to study the drawing Barton was making of a structure to handle the larger conveyor, all nodding approval. Doc Samuels began a side conversation about the health issues for the water supply. Tom Egan, the boy who had found the first body, was hanging around the periphery of the meeting wanting very much to say something 'grown up' and maybe be of some use. He said something to nobody in particular: “God, I wish all these people could be coming down the river alive, you know?” Barton paused mid-sentence; someone said, “I just can't imagine . . .” but Barton went back to describing how the rollers could move more weight uphill if they were double-belted. Then Tom spoke up a bit louder, surprising even himself with the forcefulness of his voice, “Hey, what if we sent someone up the river, you know, coupla guys maybe, and find out what's killing all these people? D'ya think maybe there's something we could do about this up there, you know, at the source?”

All three conversations stopped at once. Each of the men looked up at Tom for along moment, mostly blank expressions, some looked at each other and back at Tom, then, pretty much simultaneously, turned their attention back to the drawing of the conveyor, the electrical diagram, and the discussion of the water supply. "You know, I think we can get ahead of this with parallel crews alternating between the first hill and the second . . . Sure the water's gonna be affected for awhile, but I think Crenshaw could fashion a filter, a FILTER, that could keep it clean enough . . . *whaddayathink*, Doc?"

And with the increasing magnitude of the challenge, they went on into the evening, demonstrating their optimism, stretching their capacity for an unprecedented workload, showing their ability to plan, and making use of their skills as builders, system designers, and innovators. They had elevated their response to this challenge to industrial levels of efficiency and follow-through, without asking each other questions like, "Who were these people?" "Why was this happening to *them*?" or "Who did they leave behind?" Meanwhile, Tom and his young friends, knowing their place, just listened . . . and learned from their elders.

