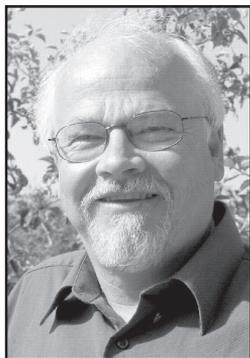


# Bridge over troubled water: Guidance crosses

**NORM AMUNDSON**



*NORM AMUNDSON is a Full Professor in Counselling Psychology / Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. In his writings, Prof. Amundson emphasises the importance of creativity, imagination, cultural awareness, and action as career counselling strategies. He has given numerous workshops and seminars and also has been a keynote speaker at many national and international conferences. He has won many awards for his work, including an honorary doctorate from the University of Umea in Sweden.*

## Abstract

*This article is based on a keynote presentation at an international conference where the focus was cross-over career guidance. Simon and Garfunkel's popular song, "Bridge over troubled water", was used as a metaphor for exploring the cross-over theme. Some of the concepts under consideration included the working alliance, the importance of a keystone, qualitative and quantitative guidance methods, working from the past and the future, and building connections. There also was the suggestion that other metaphors could be used as a way to broaden the exploration.*

**Keywords:** Career; guidance; metaphor; meaning; relationship

## Introduction

The focus of the article is cross-over guidance, and it seems natural within this context to use the metaphor of a raging river (life's problems) and the need for a bridge (integrated career guidance) as a means of traversing the turbulence. This image also comes with a song, one that has endured for many years and is #47 on *Rolling Stone's* 500 Greatest Songs. "Bridge over troubled water" is the title track from Simon and Garfunkel's 1970s album of the same name. The album is the biggest seller ever for Columbia Records.

Interestingly, the song was released at a time of considerable political, social and cultural instability. The message of reassurance and solidarity seemed right back then and still resonates today. For example, after 9-11, Simon played a version of the song as part of the "Tribute to heroes" benefit telethon for the victims of the terrorist attacks. Also, Willie Nelson sang the song during the closing ceremony of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

Obviously, the message that is communicated is compelling. But, let's take a closer look. Here are the lyrics ("Bridge over troubled water" by Simon and Garfunkel, Songfacts, 2006):

When you're weary, feeling small,  
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all;  
I'm on your side when times get rough  
And friends just can't be found,  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down.

Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down.

When you're down and out,  
When you're on the street,  
When evening falls so hard  
I will comfort you.  
I'll take your part.  
When darkness comes  
And pain is all around,  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down.  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down.

Sail on silver girl,  
Sail on by.  
Your time has come to shine.  
All your dreams are on their way.  
See how they shine.  
If you need a friend  
I'm sailing right behind.  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will ease your mind.  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will ease your mind.

In this presentation, I would like to investigate various aspects of this metaphor, looking first at the underlying assumptions of the helping relationship and then moving on to the nature of the bridge itself.

## The helping relationship

According to Cormier and Nurius (2003), a helping professional is someone who responds to needs by assisting with the exploration and resolution of issues. This involves relationship building, assessment and goal setting, strategy selection and implementation, and, lastly, evaluation and termination. Van Ryn (1997) goes on to say that effective helping involves the convergence of Roger's (1980) essential conditions (unconditional acceptance, positive regard and genuineness) with a sharing of power and control through participatory processes. The term 'working alliance' is frequently used to describe the dynamics of a healthy counselling relationship (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). The implication here is that the most effective relationships are those where both the counsellor and the client work together to achieve a desired outcome.

In the song, there certainly is a real expression of need, and the helping strategies that are outlined include drying tears, acting as a friend and ally, comforting the person, and even going so far as to stand in for the other person. The end result is 'clear sailing', positive esteem and the realisation of life dreams. While this magical transformation is all well and good, many questions could be asked about the process.

The helping that is described here is all pretty one-sided. The helper sees the problem and basically takes over for the other person. There isn't too much in the way of working together and sharing power and control as part of this process. All the problems are magically wiped away by the strength and the actions of the helper, and a positive resolution is attained.

While this type of helping has a certain appeal, it doesn't fit that well with reality and the demands of most situations. Effective helping usually requires active involvement of both the person needing help and the person offering to help. If the balance is too one-sided, the helping will be ineffective and build dependence. As a side note here, it is interesting to remember that the relationship between Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel came to an end after the release of this album. While the song has strong mass appeal, it didn't seem to add much to the relationship between the two artists.

## Bridge making

Another aspect of the images used in the song is the need for bridge making as part of the helping process. This element introduces some interesting dynamics that can be explored further. There are several different ways of building bridges, for example with beams, with triangles, using suspension, or using arches. Let's start by looking at the arch bridge, one of the first types of bridges and a form that has been used extensively also in the building of aqueducts and triumphal arches. The following picture was taken at the ancient Olympic stadium in Greece. Some 2 000 years ago, all the athletes passed through this tunnel and under the archway on their way to the stadium.



You will note that arches are designed with an odd number of stones, with the top, middle stone being the *keystone* on which the bridge's weight rests. In this case, the top of the arch consists of 11 stones in total, five on each side and the keystone in the middle. These stones have slanted sides so that they fit tight against each other. The downward force of the bridge's weight spreads out to the stones on either side of the keystone through the force of gravity.

## a: Donald Super's archway of career determinants

The image of the archway has been used in career guidance by Donald Super (1990) as a way of capturing the internal and contextual variables that influence a person's career. According to Super, at the base are the biographical-geographical factors. The first pillar includes personal variables such as needs, intelligence, values, aptitudes, interests, special aptitudes, personality and achievement. The second pillar includes variables such as community, the economy, school, family, society, peer groups, the labour market, social policy and employment practices. The joining stones at the top bring together the developmental stage and role self-concepts, with the keystone being the Self.

What is expressed in Super's image is the complexity of the personal career and the importance of the Self in holding all the elements together. While this certainly reflects humanistic ideals, is the 'Self' the true centrepiece around which we want to build an individual's personal career? In a recent article by Hansen and Amundson (in press), we make the case that perhaps we need to look outside the Self for a different centrepiece (keystone). One of the stories that Dr Hansen and I use in our article focuses on the earlier belief that the earth was the centre around which the planets revolved (perhaps similar to our notion that the Self is the centre around which everything revolves). And then along comes Copernicus with the assertion that perhaps there is something bigger than ourselves (the Sun) around which we revolve. This Copernican change in perspective was not easily accepted by people at the time and we anticipate similar reactions as we challenge people to consider a keystone that might be bigger than the Self.

## b: Meaning as the keystone

Searching for the keystone is a quest that starts with questions about purpose and meaning in life. There is a focus on philosophical inquiry and spirituality, and this is the starting point that helps to define the core set of assumptions about life and about career. The search for meaning involves the Self, but one must also be prepared to ask questions that extend further. The answers for many people include both meaning making and a willingness to receive meaning from something or someone bigger than ourselves. The keystone, then, is MEANING as it is understood from this broader perspective.

Carlsen (1988) provides the following definition for 'meaning'.

"Meaning is both *meaning and mean-ing; intention and in-tending; being and be-ing*" (23). What she is suggesting is that meaning should be considered as both a noun and a verb, as both process and product. This paradoxical integration helps to create a broader understanding. Palmer (1998) indicates that "the poles of a paradox are like the poles of a battery: hold them together, and they generate the energy of life; pull them apart and the current stops flowing" (65).

This focus on meaning is not something that is new to counselling theory. Constructivists, for example, focus on meaning making and the constructing of the social and psychological worlds through individual, cognitive processes while (social constructionists) emphasise that the social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction (Young & Collin, 2004, 375).

These theoretical perspectives point to different aspects of meaning and need to be understood as such.

Perhaps the theorist who comes closest to capturing the full depth of the meaning concept is Victor Frankl (1963, 1984, 1986) who in his classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, lays the foundation for logotherapy. Meaning or *logos*, from Frankl's perspective, is placed at the centre of the helping process, and a willingness exists to consider spirituality as part of the way in which this question gets answered. According to Frankl, meaning can be discovered at two

different levels. At the primary level, there is meaning of the moment, and, beyond this, there is the search for ultimate meaning.

### c: Career guidance methods

The archway can also serve as a metaphor for the range of guidance methods that people bring to bear on any situation. As someone who has promoted an 'active engagement' approach, I have called for the inclusion of a wide range of counselling intervention and assessment methods (Amundson, 2003a, b). This range starts with some of the more traditional counselling and assessment methods but goes beyond to include other more dynamic approaches. One could imagine one pillar of the arch holding the more quantitative and rational counselling methods and the other pillar highlighting more dynamic methods such as metaphor and storytelling. McMahon & Patton (2002) argue that both approaches are an important part of the assessment process.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work with a number of different counsellors. What I have repeatedly observed is that the truly talented counsellors are usually eclectic and have flexible boundaries when it comes to applying intervention methods. Despite much of the rhetoric, most start with relationship building (the Rogerian conditions) and then exhibit some flexibility when it comes to dealing with real-life problems.

As I have reflected on my own process, I have realised that, in addition to a plethora of intervention methods, on those occasions when I really am at a loss as to what to do next, I search for a 'quietness' of spirit. What follows are some of the reflections that are part of the Hansen and Amundson (in press) article.

A session filled with activity needs to be tempered with a willingness to just "be" in the situation. Certainly, this involves periods of silence, but it is more than just sitting quietly. I have a sense of patience, self-assurance and confidence that the activities will be helpful if I just take my time and stay with the process. The type of patience I am referring to is perhaps best exemplified in the pattern identification exercise (PiE) (Amundson, 2003a). In the PiE, clients are encouraged to describe in detail some of the activities they find satisfying. These descriptions focus on times when things are going well and also when there might be some problems. In gathering the information, I need to facilitate a full reporting of the events. Subsequently, there is a process of collaboratively interpreting the patterns observed in the description, and then applying these patterns to career/life problems. In the midst of this activity I often wonder whether anything helpful will come out of it. It is more than a question of trust and hope, I think. Someone might simply be talking about how they enjoy shopping or sitting in a coffee shop and watching people. However, what I have experienced over and over again is that significant patterns emerge if I just allow them to do so. This process proceeds at its own pace (often slower than I would like), and it is important that I don't try to force the situation. This combination of slowness, quietness and, at the same time employing an active counseling approach, might appear contradictory. Nevertheless, it has certainly led to some significant counseling outcomes.

So what is it about slowness and "being" that seems to be so powerful? A recent experience with rehabilitation (hip replacement) has helped me to reflect further on this question. As part of my exercise program I walked slowly up and down the street. This "slow walking" was interesting in that I saw the world in an entirely different light. I noticed reflections in puddles and green shoots of grass poking through a new strip of pavement. I realised that I was seeing things in an entirely new way. My usual pace of activity did not allow for this type of observation.

While I wouldn't want to stay in a permanent state of slowness, it reminded me of the power of viewing and experiencing the world from a slower set of parameters (2).

It is this 'quietness' of spirit and willingness to view the world from a state of wonder that serves as the keystone for the various methods that are being employed. The fusion of counselling methods depends on the existence of a centre point, a keystone, that helps to organise methods and to direct the career counselling process.

#### d: Working from both sides

Continuing with the image of bridge making, one also needs to consider how bridges actually are constructed. While it may work with some simple 'beam' bridges to lay a log across the water working only from one side, in most larger projects the builders have to proceed in a different way. Bridge construction typically starts on both sides of the water at the same time, and then there is a joining together in the middle.

As I have thought about this process, it reminds me in some respects of what solution-focused counsellors call the 'miracle question' (De Shazer, 1985; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Friedman, 1993). With this approach, people are encouraged to move beyond their present circumstances and to consider what the problem would look like if they viewed it from the place of solution (the future). Metaphorically speaking, rather than standing on one side of the river and looking across, have people visualise a move to the other side of the river and then look back at where they have come from. This change of perspective is even more powerful when people physically move to another spot reflecting their new viewpoint (Amundson, 2003a). Problem solving does not always have to be done in one direction. Sometimes it is more helpful to imagine what the problem would look like if it were solved and then to work backwards from that starting point (the other side of the water). When one starts from the perspective of a 'problem solved', there is greater confidence and sometimes even greater clarity about the steps that need to be taken.

#### e: Connecting to the bridge

A bridge does not simply sit by itself; there is usually a need to connect the bridge to other existing roads. There may even be a need to construct additional roads. The bridge becomes part of a broader transportation system. This connection to other roadways involves backwards movement from the edge of the water. It seems to me that this backward movement creates a type of 'backswing' (Amundson, 2003b). Whether you are swinging a hammer, a broom or a golf club, the focus is the same: first moving backwards in a controlled fashion and then moving forwards with increased energy and focus. A good backswing should also be accompanied by an appropriate release point and a follow-through. From a psychological perspective, this image points to the need for energy and momentum (increased self-esteem) to assist one in entering onto the bridge. This energy comes from reviewing past achievements and doing some self-exploration.

As counsellors, we are often in the 'backswing business'. We help people to take a backwards look before starting off on a new journey. This process is designed to build self-esteem and to help people develop a better sense of their strengths, their challenges and their goals. The success of the new journey depends on the connections that have been made to the past and also to the ways in which goals are connected to future pathways.

### Expanding the range of metaphors

While the image of a 'bridge over troubled water' is a useful image, it is also important to recognise that it is not reality itself, but only a metaphor. Simon and Garfunkel remind us of this fact by prefacing the image with the words "like a ..." A metaphor can be a helpful way of

viewing a situation, but there may be other images that are equally helpful. Metaphors in and of themselves can also serve as blinders to other possibilities.

The use of additional metaphors can contribute to an expansion of creativity. Combs and Freedman (1990) make the following observation.

Any single metaphor is a particular version of a particular part of the world. When people have only one metaphor for a situation, their creativity is limited. The more metaphors they have to choose from for a given situation, the more choice and flexibility they have in how to handle it. Finding multiple metaphors expands the realm of creativity (32).

The process of using additional metaphors enhances imagination and opens the door for other options.

Many other metaphoric possibilities could be examined. David Whyte (2001), for example, uses the example of water and of journey in a very different way. Consider the following description.

It seems to me that every human life has the elements of a sea voyage, of a journey and an arrival. That every human life is also like a vessel that contains innumerable other lives for which we have a deep responsibility. That this vessel journeys from one unknown sea to another as we go through important epochs of our lives, and that every soul's journey in the world is like a captaincy – that is, an identity which is necessarily attentive, powerful, and responsible, but not fixed, more like a meeting place of the elements in which the known vessel and the unknown sea must join in vital conversation. Out of this conversation we create a directional movement in the world that not only ensures our survival but creates exhilaration, the wind on our face, an immersion in the present whilst we simultaneously experience the joy of speeding toward our destination (59).

He goes on to say that we are living at a time in history when navigating the waterways can be challenging because of the currents of change that swirl around us. It is not hard to imagine an entirely different analysis based on this image. Even Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* has a perspective on the importance of tides in the affairs of men:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
– William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (1599)

Many images other than waterways may be applied. It is not hard to imagine images such as an overgrown garden, a maze, a dance, mountain climbing, seasons of growth, and so on. In terms of the helping relationship, it is also possible to imagine different roles. One may reach out as a coach, a guide, a friend, a mentor or even a counsellor. By using a variety of images, an opportunity exists for imagination to flourish and for new perspectives to emerge.

## Concluding comments

The issue of cross-over guidance is an important one, and it can be explored in a number of different ways. In this article, I have employed a metaphoric perspective, using the imagery in Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge over troubled water" as the starting point. This exploration focused on the nature of the helping relationship and the different aspects of bridge making. The archway bridge was of particular interest, especially the fact that in constructing bridges one starts on different sides of the water and meets in the centre where the keystone is placed.

Interestingly, Donald Super also used an archway model in trying to consolidate his ideas. While Super captured a broadly based guidance framework with his model, some limitations

are noted in his use of the Self as the keystone. The suggestion is made that Meaning may be a better point of consolidation, taking into account both meaning making and meaning receiving.

The idea of the keystone was also a usual concept for looking at the eclectic use of counselling methods. A wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods can be used in any situation, and an organising and direction-making element also needs to be infused. Good career guidance requires more than a *smorgasborg* of possibilities; the need also exists to know when and how to use the various counselling methods.

In many ways, the images in the song serve as a launch pad for creative exploration and analysis of a wide variety of ideas related to cross-over guidance. While this is a good beginning, it is important to keep in mind that any metaphor is just another way to look at a situation. Sometimes it can be helpful to use other metaphors to examine the same situation. The realm of imagination and creativity is enhanced by adding other perspectives.

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