Ambulances, Fences and Cliffs

I first heard this analogy in a sermon, and assumed it to be original with the preacher. But when I heard it from a second source, I went looking for more about it, and was surprised to learn that it dates back to 1895. I’ve collected several versions and references to it, for your reading pleasure. The last is my favorite, for reasons that will become obvious.

While driving ambulances and building fences are important, I submit that there is a third task worthy of our attention in the twenty-first century: shining Mount-Rushmore-at-night illumination on the cliff, and proceeding to tear it down. Perhaps “seeing the cliff” — with its fault-lines — will be the next version of “seeing the cat.” If you don’t yet see the cliff of which I speak, take a look at some of Henry George’s speeches, such as The Irish Land Question or Thy Kingdom Come, two of the “essential documents” listed on the main page.

As you read of it, think of the cliffs of the 21st century: bankruptcy, homelessness, hunger, poverty — and think about the fences and ambulances, and how we might tear down the cliffs rather than simply building more fences or volunteering to drive ambulances. There is no shortage of natural disasters to which we can devote our charitable efforts; let’s fix the manmade hazards. The cliff we face is economic injustice, and not to tear it down is to perpetuate that injustice, or allow it to be perpetuated in our names.

There are multiple versions here; I have no way of knowing which is the original — but each is interesting in its own way.

“The Ambulance Down in the Valley.”

’Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant,
But over its terrible edge there had slipped,
A duke and full many a peasant.

So the people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally.
Some said, “Put a fence around the edge of the cliff,"
Some, “An ambulance down in the valley.”

But the cry for the ambulance carried the day,
For it spread through the neighboring city,
A fence may be useful or not, it is true,
But each heart became moved with pity,

For those who slipped over that dangerous cliff;
And the dwellers on highway and alley
Gave pounds and gave pence not to put up a fence,
But an ambulance down in the valley.

Then an old sage remarked, “it’s a marvel to me
That people give far more attention
To repairing the results than to stopping the cause,
When they’d much better aim at prevention.

“Let us stop at its source all this hurt,” cried he.
“Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally.
If the cliff we will fence, we might almost dispense
With the ambulance down in the valley.


There was a poem written many years ago by Joseph Malens, entitled “An Ambulance Down in the Valley.” It talks about a town that had once engaged in a very bitter debate about whether the best way to deal with the problem they had of people falling off this cliff high above the city was to raise funds to build a fence at the top of the cliff, or to continue to raise funds to park an ambulance down in the valley that was very efficiently hauling people off to the hospital. A lot of the townspeople said, “Look, we’ve always had an ambulance there and it’s worked very well. Why should we raise more funds to build a fence?” But finally common sense hit. Someone stood up and said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” and the old man’s logic won the day. They came to their senses. But the crux of the problem in America is found in the spiritual condition of Americans. We can talk about war. We can talk about rampant pornography and abortion, and all of the other social problems, including child abuse, crime, and murder, but the root cause is what we need to treat.

http://www.drugs.indiana.edu/prevention/poem.html

A Fence or an Ambulance
[A poetic case for the value of prevention]

’Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;
But over its terrible edge there had slipped
A duke and full many a peasant.
So the people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally;
Some said, “Put a fence ’round the edge of the cliff,”
Some, “An ambulance down in the valley.”

But the cry for the ambulance carried the day,
For it spread through the neighboring city;
A fence may be useful or not, it is true,
But each heart became full of pity
For those who slipped over the dangerous cliff;
And the dwellers in highway and alley
Gave pounds and gave pence, not to put up a fence,
But an ambulance down in the valley.

“For the cliff is all right, if you’re careful,” they said,
“And, if folks even slip and are dropping,
It isn’t the slipping that hurts them so much
As the shock down below when they’re stopping.”
So day after day, as these mishaps occurred,
Quick forth would those rescuers sally
To pick up the victims who fell off the cliff,
With their ambulance down in the valley.

Then an old sage remarked: “It’s a marvel to me
That people give far more attention
To repairing results than to stopping the cause,
When they’d much better aim at prevention.
Let us stop at its source all this mischief,” cried he,
“Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally;
If the cliff we will fence, we might almost dispense
With the ambulance down in the valley.”

“Oh he’s a fanatic,” the others rejoined,
“Dispense with the ambulance? Never!
He’d dispense with all charities, too, if he could;
No! No! We’ll support them forever.
Aren’t we picking up folks just as fast as they fall?
And shall this man dictate to us? Shall he?
Why should people of sense stop to put up a fence,
While the ambulance works in the valley?”

But the sensible few, who are practical too,
Will not bear with such nonsense much longer;
They believe that prevention is better than cure,
And their party will soon be the stronger.
Encourage them then, with your purse, voice, and pen,
And while other philanthropists dally,
They will scorn all pretense, and put up a stout fence
On the cliff that hangs over the valley.

Better guide well the young than reclaim them when old,
For the voice of true wisdom is calling.
“To rescue the fallen is good, but ‘tis best
To prevent other people from falling.”
Better close up the source of temptation and crime
Than deliver from dungeon or galley;
Better put a strong fence 'round the top of the cliff
Than an ambulance down in the valley.

— Joseph Malins (1895)

http://teach.lanec.edu/ugenbehld/201/handouts/Fence%20&%20Ambulance

The Fence & The Ambulance*
by Scott Nearing

Fences and Ambulances. In my early years I came across a poem called “The Fence and the Ambulance.” The theme was of a dangerous cliff from which people fell and were killed or badly injured. Kindhearted citizens subscribed to buy and maintain an ambulance at the foot of the cliff to take care of the victims. Others, however, demanded that a fence be built along the cliff so that people would no longer fall over. Social workers were those who operated the ambulance after the accidents occurred. Radicals insisted on a fence. For years I subscribed, figuratively and literally, to the ambulance fund. Gradually, I turned my thoughts and energies to fence building.

Does Giving Help? The Garland Fund episode was a wonderful object lesson in the futility and iniquity of private giving. If someone is hungry, you can satisfy him with a square meal. Such giving takes care of the hunger temporarily but it is no answer to the problem of poverty. At the same time, the recipient has been taught to live parasitically and to return for a second handout and a third. Beggary is institutionalized, poverty made tolerable.

Private philanthropy, even when it is directed with the best intentions, is not an answer to economic injustice. It may help tide an individual over emergencies, but subsidies to institutions make the subsidized satisfied with handouts, and eager to come back for more as soon as possible. The Garland Fund aimed to put left-of-center institutions “on their feet.” What the grants did was make them permanent beggars from the Garland Fund and other foundations.

When I resigned from the Garland Fund after a decade of service I posed a serious question to the Board: having given away millions, have we not done more harm than good? My own feeling was that the harm predominated. Senator William Fulbright, who has had years of experience with international handouts, reaches a similar conclusion in his book The Arrogance of Power. Bilateral foreign aid, he says, “is run as a kind of charity demeaning to both recipient and donor.”


Reclaiming Our Health: Fences Again*
by John Robbins
Once upon a time there was a large and rich country where people kept falling over a steep cliff. They’d fall to the bottom and be injured, sometimes quite seriously, and many of them died. The nation’s medical establishment responded to the situation by positioning, at the base of the cliff, the most sophisticated and expensive ambulance fleet ever developed, which would immediately rush those who had fallen to modern hospitals that were equipped with the latest technological wizardry. No expense was too great, they said, when people’s health was at stake.

Now it happened that it occurred to certain people that another possibility would be to erect a fence at the top of the cliff. When they voiced the idea, however, they found themselves ignored. The ambulance drivers were not particularly keen on the idea, nor were the people who manufactured the ambulances, nor those who made their living and enjoyed prestige in the hospital industry. The medical authorities explained patiently that the problem was far more complex than people realized, that while building a fence might seem like an interesting idea it was actually far from practical, and that health was too important to be left in the hands of people [carpenters] who were not [medical] experts. Leave it to us, they said, for with enough money we will soon be able to genetically engineer people who do not bruise or become injured from such falls.

So no fences were built, and as time passed this nation found itself spending an ever-increasing amount of its financial resources on hospitals and high-tech medical equipment. In fact, it came to spend far more money on medical services than any nation had ever done in the history of the world. Money that could have gone to community services, decent housing, education, and good food was not available to the people, for it was being spent on ambulances and hospitals. As the cost of treating people kept rising, growing numbers of people could not afford medical care...

The more people kept falling off the cliff, the more a sense of urgency and tension developed, and the more of the country’s money was poured into the heroic search for a drug that could be given to those who had fallen to cure their injuries. When some people pointed out how fruitless the search had been thus far, and questioned whether a cure would ever by found, the research industry answered with massive public relations campaigns showing men in white coats holding the broken bodies of children who had fallen, pleading, “Don’t quit on us now, we’re almost there.”

When a few families who had lost loved ones tried to erect warning signs at the top of the cliff, they were arrested for trespassing. When some of the more enlightened physicians began to say that the medical authorities should publicly warn people that falling off the cliff was dangerous, representatives from powerful industries denounced them as “health police.” A fierce battle ensued, and finally, after many compromises, the medical establishment did issue warnings. Anyone, they said, who had already broken both arms and both legs in previous falls should exercise utmost caution when falling.

Of course, this is just a fable.


Elul’s the time to build strong fences
By RABBI WAYNE ALLEN

A pundit once remarked that the difference between a surgeon, an internist and a pathologist is that the surgeon does everything and knows nothing, the internist knows everything and does nothing, and the pathologist knows everything but by then it’s too late.

The month of Elul is soon upon us. It begins our annual post-mortem: our intensive review of our past year’s behavior. It is called the Penitential Period. And while such review is necessary for repenting of sins of the past, it is far better to use our time to consider ways of preventing sin in the future.

This thought is cleverly conveyed in a poem by Joseph Malins entitled A Fence or an Ambulance. It is a poetic rendition of a story about a city debating what to do about the dangerous cliff within its boundary. While some advocated putting a fence around the cliff, those who advocated putting an ambulance in the valley won the day.

“For the cliff is all right, if you’re careful,’ they said, ‘And, if folks even slip and are dropping. It isn’t the slipping that hurts them so much. As the shock down below when they’re stopping.’ So day after day, as these mishaps occurred, Quick forth would these rescuers sally/To pick up the victims who fell off the cliff. With their ambulance down in the valley.”

This is how the situation remained until wisdom intervened. “Then an old sage remarked: ‘It is a marvel to me/That people give far more attention/To repairing results than to stopping the cause, When they’d much better aim at prevention. Let us stop at its source all this mischief,’ cried he, ‘Come neighbors and friends, let us rally; If the cliffs we will fence we might almost dispense/with the ambulance down in the valley.’”

At first, this good advice went unheeded, but eventually, logic swayed those who were locked in to the error of the past. “To rescue the fallen is good, but ‘tis best to prevent other people from falling.”

It is easier by far to annually ask forgiveness for wrongs committed than to put into operation the appropriate mechanism to prevent them from being done. Yet, like the sensible few described by Malins who agreed with the sage, it is far wiser to put a strong fence round the top of the cliff than an ambulance down in the valley. The month of Elul ought to be the starting point for each of us building those strong fences.

http://www.soilandhealth.org/02/0201hyglibcat/020121horne/020121ch24.html

THE AMBULANCE IN THE VALLEY

Joseph Malins

‘Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;
But over its terrible edge there had slipped
A duke, and full many a peasant.
The people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally.
Some said “Put a fence ’round the edge of the cliff,”
Some, “An ambulance down in the valley.”

The lament of the crowd was profound and was loud,
As their tears overflowed with their pity;
But the cry for the ambulance carried the day
As it spread through the neighboring city.
A collection was made, to accumulate aid,
And the dwellers in highway and alley
Gave dollars and cents—not to furnish a fence—
But an ambulance down in the valley.

“For the cliff is all right if you’re careful,” they said;
“And, if folks ever slip and are dropping,
It isn’t the slipping that hurts them so much
As the shock down below—when they’re stopping.”
So for years (we have heard), as these mishaps occurred
Quick forth would the rescuers sally,
To pick up the victims who fell from the cliff,
With the ambulance down in the valley.

Said one, in a plea, “It’s a marvel to me
That you’d give so much greater attention
To repairing results than to curing the cause;
You had much better aim at prevention.
For the mischief, of course, should be stopped at its source;
Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally.
It is far better sense to rely on a fence
Than an ambulance down in the valley.”

“He is wrong in his head,” the majority said,
“He would end all our earnest endeavor.
He’s a man who would shirk this responsible work,
But we will support it forever.
Aren’t we picking up all, just as fast as they fall,
And giving them care liberally?
A superfluous fence is of no consequence
If the ambulance works in the valley.”

But a sensible few, who are practical too,
Will not bear with such nonsense much longer;
They believe that prevention is better than cure,
And their party will soon be much stronger.
Encourage them then, with your purse, voice and pen,
And while other philanthropists dally,
They will scorn all pretense and put up a stout fence
On the cliff that hangs over the valley.
Better guide well the young, than reclaim them when old,
For the voice of true wisdom is calling,
“To rescue the fallen is good, but ‘tis best
To prevent other people from falling.”
Better close up the source of temptation and crime
Than deliver from dungeon or galley
Better put a strong fence ‘round the top of the cliff
Than an ambulance down in the valley.

http://www.dynamicflight.com.au/Reading/Articles/Poems/the_ambulance.htm

The Ambulance Down in the Valley

T’was a dangerous cliff, with the wind blowing stiff,
But to fly risk will always be present.
Three steps, all uphill, adds a bit too much thrill,
Makes the leap from the edge not that pleasant,

So to make it more fun, something had to be done,
But suggestions they just did not tally.
Well some pilots said, “Put a ramp on the edge”
No “An ambulance, down in the valley!”

Well the ambulance way, it carried the day,
In a resolution that passed in a flash.
Well the joy of the crowd, was liberal was loud,
For those crowds they just love a good crash.

And so for some time, when conditions weren’t fine,
Quick forth would the rescuers sally,
To pick up the men, who’d not fly again,
With the ambulance down in the valley.

Said the local MD, “It’s a marvel to me,
That you’d give so much greater attention,
To repairing results, than to curing the cause,
Why you’d much better aim at prevention.”

Aren’t we picking up all, just as fast as they fall,
And giving them care liberally?
Why should we revamp, and put in that ramp,
If the ambulance works in the valley?

With patient refrain, I went on to explain,
What happens, if they let, the nose pop.
It’s not falling as such, that hurts them so much,
But the shock down below when they stop.
“They’re wrong in the head,” the lawyers all said,  
“We must end their foolhardy endeavours.  
If they can not be taught, to make it safe sport,  
Then we must act now to stop them forever.”

“The mischief of course, should be stopped at its source,  
Come friends, come on neighbours, let us rally!  
For it makes better sense, to rely on a fence,  
Than an ambulance down in the valley.”

So quite unexpected, a fence was erected,  
And our flying days came to an end.  
No longer can we, set up and fly free,  
It’s becoming a worrying trend.

Now if this story seems queer, as I’ve given it here,  
Things often occur which are stranger.  
For we’ve lost the right, to many a sight  
With our failure to control the danger.


http://www.frouin.com/mindpoetry.html

Poetry For The Mind

Most poetry is for the soul. Every once in a while a poem is written to illustrate a point. Frank Soural, a Certified Quality Assurance Practitioner who is working with us on an ISO project, gave one such piece to us. It illustrates the difference between Corrective, Preventative and Pre-emptive action:

The Cliff

T’was a dangerous cliff, they had freely confessed  
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant.  
And over it’s terrible edge there had slipped  
Many a Duke and a peasant.

Something will have to be done said the people,  
However their approach to the project did vary.  
Some said: “Put a fence on the edge of the cliff”.  
Some said: “Put an ambulance down in the valley”.

— Author Unknown

- **Corrective action**: Take the fallen Duke or Peasant to the hospital quickly. (Quality Control is an Operational function, an after the fact correction).
- **Preventative action**: Put a high fence at the cliff’s edge to prevent all but a few crazy teenagers
from accidentally taking a tumble. (Quality Assurance is an Engineering function. It prevents before the fact).

- **Pre-emptive action:** Convert the cliff to a gentle toboggan hill. (Design Engineering – Redesign the process so that error can not occur).

Thank you Frank, for an entertaining explanation of approaches to problem solving. We will keep this in mind when next confronted with a challenge.

Our very best wishes for a happy holiday season. See you in the New Year!

The Results Team: Nick Newton, Sue Schell, Roger Linton, Ken Nicholls, Jenna Craig & Ramona Bryant