Rheumatoid Arthritis Teaches Me About Racism

By Catherine Meeks

Over three decades ago, I awoke in the middle of the night with excruciating pain in my feet which sent me to the emergency room. After several months of visits to doctors, it was finally concluded that I had Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA). I was in my early thirties and this diagnosis caught me by surprise. I set about to learn all that I could about this illness along with exploring treatment options. It did not take long for me to realize that my doctors had a limited repertoire of things to offer me and most of them did not seem to be the right course for me to follow. So, I set about to find a path that resonated with me as the way to go forward. After many pain-filled days and sleepless nights accompanied by my unremitting search to learn all that I could and seeking help from many places, I came to the realization that I was being challenged to completely change my way of being in the world.

I had to reimagine my life and I had to manage my daily life in a way different from anything I had done in the past. It became clear to me that a total lifestyle change was going to be necessary in order to lead me away from a future as a person who was wheelchair-bound. It was a shocking realization. Rheumatoid Arthritis became the bend in the road that was being presented to me and my choice was to make the turn or run off the road to far more challenges.

Though it has taken me a bit of deep reflecting to realize how this challenging chronic illness is a perfect symbolic representation of racism, I am grateful for the insight that has been given to me about these connections. My fifty-year representation of racism, I am grateful for the insight that has been given to me about these connections. My fifty-year representation of racism, I am grateful for the insight that has been given to me about these connections. My fifty-year representation of racism, I am grateful for the insight that has been given to me about these connections. My fifty-year representation of racism, I am grateful for the insight that has been given to me about these connections.

Racism is a chronic illness that confronts all facets of our society and it has to be managed on a daily basis. There is often the hope that some big event sponsored under the umbrella that we like to call racial reconciliation can be work that one has to do only once in a year or in some cases once.

How Should We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?

By Peter Gathje

Guests are no longer lingering at Manna House. They come, usually one by one, to get the meal on Monday night, and the hygiene “hospitality bag” on Thursday morning. There’s no waiting for their name to be called for showers. We are not doing showers right now. There’s no gathering for conversation around cups of coffee. We are not serving coffee right now. This is what hospitality looks like in a time of COVID-19: welcoming people for a few basic services in ways that will not encourage the spread of this coronavirus.

We practice welcome by calling arriving guests by name and by asking each as they arrive how they are doing. Occasionally, our welcome also leads to meeting a special need, perhaps for a blanket or a hat. And our welcome also means the bathroom is available while Manna House is open. Thursday morning, several guests took the opportunity to wash up.

How are the guests doing? Not that well. The isolation of the streets is compounded by the closing and reduction of hours for places to go. The library is closed. Fast-food restaurants are carry-out only; dining rooms and bathrooms are closed. Meals are all takeout, so soup kitchens do not allow for sitting down together to eat.

“It is always hard out here,” a guest said. “Now it’s harder than hard.”

I have been seeking to discern the presence of God in this “harder than hard” time of disease, desolation and death. I have been trying to figure out “How should we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:4).

At Manna House this morning there was time between guests arriving to talk. Fr. Val was there, as he is every Thursday morning, several guests took the opportunity to wash up.

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How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?
Just Mercy
This Film Does Justice to the Southern Criminal Justice Reform Movement

A Review by Todd Moye

I had low expectations for Just Mercy, the Hollywood adaptation of Bryan Stevenson’s magnificent memoir of the same name. How could it possibly live up to the book, in which Stevenson so movingly recounted his work as a defense attorney representing death row inmates in the Deep South? The book justifiably won stacks of awards and launched Stevenson and his Equal Justice Initiative into national conversations about the death penalty and racial injustice. How could filmmakers improve on that? To top it off, as a historian whose teeth grind whenever a director bends the historical facts and a Southerner whose ears clench whenever an actor affects a cornpone accent, I approached the movie even more skeptically than I normally am when Hollywood revises a beloved book.

Just Mercy is sure to have a long life as a conversation starter for church youth groups, racial reconciliation groups and death penalty abolitionists.

The movie happily upended those expectations. Just Mercy is a genuinely great film, one that will start conversations and change minds. (It turns out I shouldn’t have been too surprised: Stevenson was an executive producer.)

The scene that convinced me that the filmmakers understood and appreciated the 1980s comes about halfway through the film. Protagonist Stevenson, played by Michael B. Jordan, is meeting for the first time with Tim Blake Nelson’s character Ralph Myers, a convict whose false testimony has put Stevenson’s client Walter (“Johnnie D”) McMillan on Alabama’s death row. Testing him, Myers demands that Stevenson buy him “a coke” from the prison visiting room’s vending machine. Sure, Stevenson answers. What kind? “Sunkist Orange,” Myers replies.

That’s exactly how that conversation would have gone down in the South I grew up in, where all sodas were “cokes.” It’s far from the most important dialogue in the movie, but a film that gets the little details right is likely to get the big themes right, too, and Just Mercy nails both. It also takes rural Black Southerners like the McMillan family seriously enough to depict them honestly and with great dignity; it shows vividly the ripping toll the death penalty takes on families and communities. There are some positively gorgeous shots of Alabama pine forests, the best of which depicts the men of death row transcending their surroundings and finding some measure of peace among the sunlit branches outside the prison walls. A solid running joke about white Southerners’ inability to reckon honestly with racial injustice in either the past or the present (while Stevenson is trying to save McMillan’s life, the people of Monroeville, Alabama, keep insisting that he visit their To Kill a Mockingbird museum) adds some levity.

In a movie full of terrific performances, Rob Morgan’s portrayal of death row inmate Herbert Lee Richardson is the one that sticks with me.

Just Mercy is sure to have a long life as a conversation starter for church youth groups, racial reconciliation groups and death penalty abolitionists. If viewers go into the movie believing that the death penalty can be applied justly, even in theory, they’ll have to work to feel that way after having seen it. I have to believe that this film will change minds and have an impact beyond the box office.
Exiting the Fortress

By Oliver Roberts

I feel an immense amount of gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to hang some of these artworks in a space like this, in a place like this. If the artworks speak at all, if they have a meaning or convey a sense of place and time, places and times shared and learned, then it is befitting that they get to sit amongst all of these wonderful sisters and brothers and sons and daughters, in a place where acts of radical hospitality and love are performed, daily and incessantly. What an interesting place we find ourselves in, our friends sleeping outside, citizens bustling in and out of the Eaton, all of us in here communing with each other. What an ebb and flow of paradox and of resilience. I am talking about the Beloved Community of course, on earth as it is in heaven, where refuge from Empire is found in agape, a profound respect for any and all we encounter in the Streets, in the Wilderness. I have capitalized the S in streets, as well as the W in wilderness. For me, the Streets are a figurative place as much as they are a real place, and they certainly are very, very real. And harsh. Roman Imperialism is at the heart of the City of Toronto’s agenda. It’s in every Business Improvement Area and parks enforcement agent intervention, and in every rotting Toronto Community Housing Commission property. To be quite frank, I think it’s a battleground, where Empire belies morality, where death and suffering are the tools of our contemporary “growth” and “expansion.” Some of the art here is a reflection of these conditions. Within this civic Wilderness that exists beyond our own personal doorsteps and doorways, for those of us that are lucky enough to have steps and doorways, we have every opportunity to turn face and heart. Our true reckoning of capability, the heartbeat of our own ability to love and be loved can be found here.

Only a few months ago, which feels like last week, I remember a meeting that I attended with all the wonderful sisters and brothers over there. They lived in a wonderful camp on a blue-sky day. I wish Joe could be here now; he is a holder of wisdom, our wisdom. He grows collards and kale in the winter, eggplant, zucchini, tomatoes and spring onions in the long summers. We fight off bugs in the swesty July. He hosts artists, friends, animals and visionaries. And in this past December, yet again, I was sitting in an unusually warm Georgian sunlight with Joe, and I had a vision of a future, although it wasn’t a vision this time, I was in the future, I was sitting with a vanguard of the future. I did not want to be anywhere else on this green earth, and I think that my beloved friend Joe has indeed exited the fortress. Stuart Camp is an anomaly that was created by forces of Empire expelling their sisters and brothers out the tailpipe of this damned society. This all washed over me on a beautiful blue-sky day. I wish Joe could be here now; he is a holder of wisdom, wisdom we are going to need in the days ahead.

And on the long drive back to Toronto on the first days of January, I began to have wet eyes and felt a heavy sensation fall across my chest and shoulders. I thought to myself that, just as Jesus was executed by the State, his teachings bastardized and shouldered. I thought to myself that folks here helped me install for y’all and anyone to look at, they are all wrought in this kind of questioning.
Tommy Sims is My Neighbor

By John Cole Vodicka

Tommy Sims is my neighbor. At least he is as the crow flies.

I live in Athens, Georgia, on a relatively quiet street just a couple of miles from downtown and the University of Georgia campus. Tommy Sims’s home, the one in which he grew up along with a mess of brothers and sisters, is less than a five-minute walk from mine.

I met Tommy Sims last summer, almost by happenstance, while searching for the gravesites of men known to have participated in the many lynchings in northeast Georgia, most of which occurred during and after Reconstruction up until the mid-1940s. But in July 1964, just nine days after the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, Lemuel Penn, an African American Army veteran and reservist on a training assignment at Ft. Benning, was cold-bloodedly murdered by members of the Athens Ku Klux Klan just north of the Madison County town of Colbert, Penn, 48 years old, and two other Black Army officers, were driving north to Washington, D.C., where Penn was an accomplished educator in the District. Four Klansmen were implicated in his death, three of them indicted for the murder (and later acquitted by an all-white jury). I found the gravesites of the perpetrators already: Cecil Myers, buried in Lavonia, Georgia, near the South Carolina border; James Lackey, in a cemetery near Commerce just south of I-20; and Herbert Guest, buried here in Athens. I was still looking for Joseph Howard Sims’s grave and eventually discovered that he was buried in a family cemetery in Athens. It turns out his body has been resting for almost 40 years behind a house located one block from mine — the family house where Tommy Sims, his son, still lives.

I certainly had qualms about snooping around someone’s private property looking for and photographing the grave of a Klan member. After weeks of indecision, I finally got up the courage to knock on the door of this building served as the Athens, Georgia, KKK headquarters in the 1960s.

The Madison County side of the Broad River at the Elbert county line. Lemuel Penn was murdered near the sign post. Below: This memorial marker for Lemuel Penn stands off Highway 172 at the Madison County, Georgia, side of the Broad River. The marker is located just yards from where Penn was murdered by Klansmen.

Below: 199 Prince Avenue in Athens, Georgia. The upstairs of this building served as the headquarters, Georgia, KKK

Penitentiary. “They say my daddy was pretty mean.”

Joseph Howard Sims was a card-carrying member of the Ku Klux Klan. He belonged to the Athens KKK Klavern 244. Chartered in 1960 in Crawford, Georgia, the Klavern moved 13 miles northwest to Athens in 1963 and set up shop in a building on Prince St. just a couple of blocks from downtown. The Klan also met at Herbert Guest’s garage or at Open House Restaurant (operated by Herbert’s wife, Blanche) on Hancock St., and quickly became the most militant Klan faction in northeast Georgia. And Joseph Howard Sims was one of the most violent members of Klavern 244.

- In 1963 and ’64, Sims and Cecil Myers and Thomas “Honsely” Follendorf drove down Broad Street and fired guns onto the Broad Acres Apartment complex, wounding two young Black people, one of whom lost an eye. The perpetrators were fined $100 for firing guns inside the city limits. The guns were owned by Sims and Herbert Guest.
- During the same time period, Sims and the KKK marched to counter-protest African Americans who were marching to integrate the iconic Varsity Restaurant. Sims struck one Black protester in the head with his revolver. He also cooked and pointed his gun at several other protesters, threatening them until disarmed by a police officer. Later, he was seen down the street from the Varsity with the pistol strapped to his side.
- During the same time period, Sims and the KKK were arrested for “cursing” and released after paying a $27 fine.
- Hours after murdering Lemuel Penn, Sims told Herbert Guest at Guest’s garage that “Our timing was off. The n—— car went onto the bridge and not in the river.”

After Lemuel Penn was killed in July 1964, Joseph Howard Sims, Cecil Myers and James Lackey were indicted by an all-white, all-male Madison County Grand Jury. United Klans of America president Robert Shelton sent out a letter to KKK units in seven Southern states asking that members donate $1 toward a defense fund; $3,000 was raised. Out on bail, Sims and Myers stood trial in Danielsville on August 31. Lackey turned state’s evidence and had the FBI with a statement saying he was the driver of the car that followed Penn’s automobile from Athens to the Broad River Bridge, and it was Sims and Myers who fired their shotguns into the Penn car. During the trial, Lackey recanted his confession. The judge allowed Sims and Myers to take the stand but not cross-examine. Both denied they killed Penn. During an hour-long closing argument, one of the defense attorneys reminded the jurors five times that they were Anglo-Saxon. Several jurors were known Klansmen. In less than three hours, interrupted by an hour-long supper meal, the all-white, all-male jury found the two not guilty. The prosecutor shook the defendants’ hands after the verdict, telling them, “There was nothing personal in this.”

After the trial, Sims and Myers returned to their KKK
An Occasional Column by Murphy Davis

It is more than a joy when those who have lived with us at the Open Door Community over the years come back to visit. Dietrich Gerstner of Hamburg, Germany has done that again and again over the years. He lived with us for two significant years in the mid-1980s before returning to Germany to study theology. He sent friends to visit us and learn the art of hospitality. Then he met Ute, who became his life partner; together with other friends who heard the call, they formed the Bread and Roses (Brot und Rosen) Protestant Catholic Worker in Hamburg. Dietrich and Ute birthed and raised three sons: Joel — now in college, and twins Daniel and Elias Eduard (Eduard for Eduard Loring). They have visited us over the years and we had an opportunity to visit them at Brot und Rosen in 2005 for one of their anniversaries and a meeting of the European Catholic Worker Communities.

On March 1, Dietrich came to visit us in Baltimore and brought Elias and Daniel, now 17. They came in honor of Ed’s 80th birthday, so on March 6 (two weeks early) we celebrated with a small gathering of friends and family at Hannah and Jason’s home. Little did we know that it was the last weekend we could have hosted a gathering. Within a week, we oldsters were being quarantined — especially when Dietrich and the boys returned from several days at the Catholic Worker in New York! Oh, how our lives turned on a dime!

But all in all, it was a wonderful visit, with time to talk about community life, the state of the world in a perpetual state of war, and the ongoing growth of the numbers of refugees — both those from our own cities and towns and those from all over the world whose lives are at risk from political and environmental catastrophe. By the time Dietrich, Daniel and Elias left, we had to resort to virtual hugs, knowing that we were all going into quarantine in our various corners of the global community.

So now we, like everybody else — along with David and Simon, are at home with only the daily walk in the neighborhood to get out of the house. Zoom has taken the place of being together. Since our son-in-law Jason is a first responder, he, Hannah and Michaela are especially careful not to show up. We hope that this finds you coping well with shelter-in-place and hoping that this period — however long it lasts — will move us to create more justice in the workplace and appreciation for those among us who do the dangerous and dirty work throughout the year. (And I mean appreciation in terms of just wages and workplace safety).

Our extended community has experienced some hard losses lately. Cleveland Sasser worshiped with us for many years. A Registered Nurse at Piedmont Hospital, Cleveland slipped into worship after his shift change on most Sunday afternoons. A committed activist, he was one of 30 of us arrested in DeKalb County during the Grady campaign; and he never neglected to remind us during intercessions to pray for Mumia Abu Jamal, imprisoned in Pennsylvania, and for all alcoholics and addicts staying sober one day at a time. Cleveland died of brain cancer, which took him quickly. Cleveland Sasser, ¡Presente!

Robbie Buller called to tell us of the death of Coffee Worth in March. Friends and family had gathered recently in Athens to celebrate Coffee’s 100th birthday! Coffee and my mother had been friends since the 1930s. She followed Mama as a student at Women’s College of the University of North Carolina (now UNC Greensboro) and was a regular at the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant where my grandfather was founding pastor. Because her name was Louise Maxwell, her friends dubbed her “Coffee” and it stuck for the rest of her life. She and her beloved George did courageous work in South Korea in dangerous times. They “retired” to Koinonia in South Georgia where they lived active lives of service and resistance. After George died and she became more physically limited, Coffee moved to the Jubilee Community where she lived as a cherished elder and blessed all those who came and went. She visited the Open Door often and we will always cherish the year that she and George spent a long Christmas season with us. It is surely one of life’s greatest blessings when we have the gift of wise mentors. Coffee and George will live among our Cloud of Witnesses.

The Rev. Albert Love was a treasured colleague gone too soon. He was an important part of the Civil Rights movement from his college days onward. And it was in college that he met his wife, Juanita, with whom he had a lifelong partnership. His central focus all the way through was the Vote. He probably held more voter registration drives than anybody else you will ever find and never wanted us to forget that the cost for voting freely was paid in the blood of the martyrs. He worked over the years for the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), on the staff of the Honorable John Lewis and as a founding member of Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta. He was until his death the founder and pastor of the Boatrock Baptist Church.

An event we’ll not forget with our friend was in June 1990. On June 18, six of us took over the shuttered Imperial Hotel. (The story is told by Terry Easton in Raising Our Voices, Breaking The Chain: The Imperial Hotel Occupation as Prophetic Politics.) We had invited Bro. Albert to preach at the Open Door Community worship the following Sunday. I called him and said, “Um, Albert, we have a slight change of plans. We’re holding our worship service in the street in front of the Imperial at 5:00. Will you still come and preach for us?” He never missed a beat: he was there at the pulpit which we had set up smack in the middle of West Peachtree Street and he preached as if it were the most normal place to worship. No gap for this good brother between the sanctuary and the street.

We will always miss him. Anytime you saw Albert Love he had a broad smile on his face. “How are you, Albert?” The answer was always the same: “OUTSTANDING!” He was right. He was outstanding in every way — no matter how he felt or what was going on. He was outstanding, and moving forward to make the world a better place. Our hearts are with Ms. Juanita Love and the folks at Boatrock Baptist and full of thanksgiving for Rev. Love’s gift to the justice movement. Oh, and are you registered to vote?

Millard Farmer, 85, also died in March. He was one of my important teachers. I met him in 1976, shortly after the United States Supreme Court upheld the Georgia death penalty law in Gregg v. Georgia. Millard was on the ground
Rheumatoid Arthritis  continued from page 1

in a lifetime, but nothing could be farther from the truth. So much time is spent looking for the short cut to racial healing; and just like with RA, there is no shortcut. Every day demands vigilance for the sufferer of RA: dietary practices that eliminate toxic foods such as dairy and sugar have to be observed every day and at every meal, an exercise regimen has to be maintained, both prescribed medicines and herbs have to be taken on a daily basis, stress has to be managed and one’s life has to be balanced between work, rest and relaxation. The regimen cannot be kept only when it is convenient, in the same way that racism has to be vigilantly managed and it has to be done every day.

Unfortunately, racism mistakenly leads many white people to think that it can be dealt with when it is convenient because it is not a source of daily pain for them. But this idea is not grounded in reality, because every time a person refuses to resist the racist structures that are so insidious in America, those structures grow stronger, and ultimately there will be more pain caused for the person as a result of their complicity than would be true if a path of resistance had been chosen.

I see this clearly as I experience what happens to my joints when I think that I can surely eat whatever sweet, dairy-filled food I choose on a given day, since I have been vigilant for so long. The result is swift and undeniable. By the time I have finished the food, I can tell the difference as my body reacts to my less-than-good choice. Thus, the resistance to racism each time that one is confronted with the opportunity to resist, results in the weakening of the toxins being generated and released by it and makes it possible for more positive healing energy to be released in our society which helps us as individuals and collectively.

How Shall We Sing  continued from page 1

I cannot question God unless at the same time I trust God wants something different. Put another way, all that is in me that desires life, that desires a better world, that loves, that seeks justice, that aspires for the good of all humanity and the creation — that is God within me. All that is in me that mouns life lost, that sorrows at suffering, that cries out at injustice — that is God within me.

And so, I am left with a choice in this “harder than hard” time. Jesus faced the same choice in his temptations in the desert. Is God with us in our vulnerability, or should we put our trust in the way of control? Jesus faced his vulnerability as a human being as he responded to each temptation; the same vulnerability I face in my humanity. Will we live on the Word/bread of God, or on the economic power of turning stones into bread? Will we trust in God to be with us or will we test God by claiming religious power over life? Will we serve and worship a God at odds with the powers that be, or serve and worship the idol of domination over others?

Jesus chose to embrace his vulnerability, to practice compassion, not control; discipleship, not domination; solidarity, not separation. Jesus chose to be with the outcasts, the lepers, the tax collectors and prostitutes, the foreigners, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, the sick, the unclean, the ostracized and excluded. Why? Because that is where God breaks in to affirm another way, and where we can sing God’s song of love and justice while we live in a strange land where those are in short supply. ✨

Peter Gathje is Vice President for Academic Affairs/Dean of Memphis Theological Seminary, and a founder of Manna House, a place of hospitality in Memphis. He wrote Sharing the Bread of Life: Hospitality and Resistance at the Open Door Community (2006) and edited A Work of Hospitality: The Open Door Reader 1982 – 2002. (pgathje@memphisseminary.edu)

As is true with RA, one is either resisting the harmful forces of racism or supporting them by being complicit with them and helping to maintain their strength. There is no neutral ground with either one of them. After all these years since my original diagnosis, I am stronger and healthier than I would have been had I not had this chronic illness. This is true, despite the medical predictions that I would be wheelchair-bound by now, because I was willing to change my entire way of being in the world. I understand racism far better now because of this amazing teacher that has made it clear to me that racism’s demands for lifestyle change are as powerful as those of Rheumatoid Arthritis. ✨

Catherine Meeks is the Founding Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing, and the retired Clara Carter Acree Distinguished Professor of Socio-cultural Studies and Sociology from Wesleyan College. She has published six books and is editor of Living Into God’s Dream: Dismantling Racism in America (2016), which focuses on racial healing and reconciliation. She and Nils Strope are authors of Passionate for Justice (2019), a book about the life and witness of Ida B. Wells for our time. She writes for the Huffington Post and is a regular contributor to Hospitality. She is involved with prison work, visits on death row and works for the abolition of the death penalty. (bayma53@att.net)

Exiting the Fortress  continued from page 3

communities, those who try and exit the fortress in search of a holy land, have only Love’s radical nourishment to look forward to. It will replace the vices of our times, slowly, like a great tree growing through decades of harsh conditions. Pleasure and existential exaltation, joy and happiness, will become this great satiation only found in the presence of Creator, of the warden of the Streets, of Father Sky and Grandmother Earth. Strife will be marked by a dedication to this great admirable movement. Truly, anything is worth these aspirations.

Thank you once again for welcoming me into this space and for listening to me speak. If you have any questions about the artwork, please do not hesitate to introduce yourself and ask me. And as they say, peace to all our relations. ✨

This homily was delivered during the February 16, 2020 Sunday service at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Toronto, Ontario. That Sunday was also the day that Oliver Roberts’ art exhibition entitled “Exiting the Fortress” opened to the public. Oliver is an artist and disciple of the Beloved Community of God Movement currently living and working in Toronto, Ontario. He grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, with his family, and was radicalized at 910 Ponce de Leon, the Open Door Community, during his adolescence. (olivenbert123@gmail.com)

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

The story unfolds, as if it is about the other. But it turns out that we are the other. The person in need is in fact us, and we must reach out to ourselves.

For only in serving the other, are we serving ourselves. We are as much in need as those in whom we see need.

The Gospel is not just about thinking, but more about action in righting wrongs, for in addressing wrongs, we are making things right in ourselves.

It has never been about ourselves, and yet it always has been. For we only become truly ourselves by becoming the other in all things.

— Michael Thomas Marsden

Michael Marsden is a retired faculty member and administrator who served four public and three private colleges and universities during his career. As a lifelong Catholic, he is dedicated to social and restorative justice. He continues to write to share ideas with the public.

How to exit from the fortress continues from page 2

Julie Lonteman

poetry corner

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Tommy Sims is my Neighbor continued from page 4

and prepared for the moment. He had started a law office called Team Defense. His basic premise was that when the state marshaled its resources to seek a death sentence against one of its citizens, the defendant needed to be represented by a team. Not an individual lawyer but a team of lawyers, investigators, psychologists and other members of the wider community. No one person could get the lay of the land by himself/herself. Different people will understand different aspects of the crime—you’ll be killed, and they must work together to make the wisest decisions...

I first saw Millard in action at the pre-trial motions for the Dawson Five in 1977. Five young Black men had been set up and threatened and coerced into confessing to the murder of a grocer in the community. It did not take long to figure out that the evidence was fabricated and the young men had had nothing to do with the crime. Millard recruited to the case Tony Axam, an African American lawyer from Atlanta. On the day I attended the hearing with a van filled with law students and educators, along with the SLC, we were protesting the ongoing segregation of the Taliaferro County schools. To keep Black students from integrating the white schools, Crawfordville officials closed the white schools and began bussing white children to neighboring counties. In Crawfordville, Sims and Myers beat up a one-legged, elderly African American man while firing a gun at his son, and assaulted an SCLC photographer during a march from a church to the courthouse. “FourKKKers Attack Negro,” a newspaper headline read. Sims and Myers were arrested. The $100 bond was posted by Crawfordville residents.

And then, in May of 1966, Joseph Howard Sims shot his wife, Mary, in the face in an Athens, Georgia, hospital nursery. One month after the shooting, in June 1966, Sims and five others, including Myers and Guest, were tried in federal court in Athens on the conspiracy and interstate travel charges related to the Penn murder. Sims and Myers were convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Guest was ultimately convicted of an unrelated drug-running charge. Before beginning his federal sentence, Sims pleaded guilty to assaulting his wife and served a few years at Reidsville prison. Paroled on the state conviction, Sims began serving the federal sentence in 1970. Both he and Myers served about six years in federal penitentiaries.

The violence didn’t end, though. In 1981, five years after his release from prison, Joseph Howard Sims got into an argument with a fellow former KKK member at a flea market near Athens. Sims was shot dead. He was 58 years old, his son Tommy was 21.

I see my neighbor Tommy Sims from time to time. I have not yet asked him about his father, or told him what I know about his daddy, or asked if he’s come to a place of peace with all he and his family have endured. I saw him six months ago and he told me he’d just been diagnosed with bladder cancer. “They say they caught it early and it’ll be alright. But it ain’t somethin’ to play with.”

The last time I talked to Tommy it was in a grocery store checkout line. He was buying liters of soft drinks, potato chips, cookies and sandwich meat. I remarked that it looked like he was fixin’ to have a party. “My mama’s family gets together at my house every couple of weeks to play cards and watch TV and visit,” he told me. “My mama’s side of the family gets along a lot better than my daddy’s side.”

Author’s note: Lemuel Penn is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. He left behind a wife and three children. His gravestone is located just yards from the graves of Medgar Evers and Thurgood Marshall. Penn’s name, along with Evers and other civil rights martyrs, is etched onto the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. For a thorough telling of the Lemuel Penn lynching, read Murder at Broad River Bridge, by Bill Shipp, University of Georgia Press.

John and Dee Cole Vadichka and sons were Resident Volunteers at the Open Door Community in 1985-86 and 1992-93. John founded and, for 15 years, directed the Prison & Jail Project in Americus, Georgia. Today he is an activist, writer and community organizer who lives in Athens, Georgia. (johnvadichka@comcast.net)
Dear Murphy & Ed,

Thank you for all you do and all the powerful messages that come in Hospitality.

It is the moving “Hani’s Tears” (March issue) that prompted me to write. The message drew me in and the beautiful faces — the dignity of these people as they strive for normalcy on the riverbed.

Please thank Weldon Nisly and the Christian PeaceMakers Team Iraq Kurdistan for this gift to us all.

And a special thank you to Open Door family for your ongoing ministry.

A grateful reader,
Irene Massey
Burlington, North Carolina

It has taken too long to send this message, but thank you, nonetheless, for your important article, “The South Is Always In Us,” in the February issue of Hospitality. It’s a significant contribution to the long-overdue process of reclaiming the part of Southern history that has been forgotten or intentionally buried.

Martin C. Lefeldt
Atlanta, Georgia


Dear Eduard,

I hope this finds you, Murphy; Hannah, David and all the family and friends well and safe. In this time of plague, I expect many of your friends are not well and safe — I believe it was Jim Wallis who posted recently about how plagues highlight injustice.

Both I and I are doing well and largely self-isolated, other than occasional trips to the grocery store. Our mothers (mine 98 and Beth’s 94) are both managing in independent living with the support of their retirement communities. Enclosed find a check for Murphy’s new book. Please ship me six copies and use the rest for copies for those in prison and others who cannot afford one. Give a copy to one of your enemies.

I appreciate Hospitality and follow you occasionally on Facebook. I think of you often and am especially reminded of 910 when working with Missy Harris (on the board of Asheville Poverty Initiative/12 Baskets Café with me) or encountering Amy Cantrell (doing great work on the streets with Beloved House). Give my love to Murphy and my best regards to David.

Peace and love, with an attitude of gratitude,
Phil Leonard
Fairview, North Carolina

Hi y’all,

Yesterday afternoon, after returning from a lovely walk, Dee and I received a phone call from George Miller. George said he was connected to the Open Door in the early days as a dermatologist. George lives in Athens, receives Hospitality, and called to tell me how wonderful my article on “Chained Gangs in Georgia” was! And that my article ran alongside Murphy’s! George is a member of Oconee Street Methodist Church, the same church Dee & I worship at. We’ve come to know and love George over the two years we’ve been attending. He is a remarkable man, amazing servant. Anyway, I told him I’d get in touch with you two to let him know we’re all connected.

He sends his love and prayers your way.

Peace,
John Cole Vodicka
Athens, Georgia

Open Door,

Thank you for being a flower that opens our hearts to each other.

Brandy Swann
Woodbridge, Virginia

Thank you for all you do!

I appreciate your work and the stand you take for women and everyone.

Elizabeth Baker
Mentone, Alabama

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Grace and Peaces of Mail

Dearest Murphy, Ed, Hannah...

I am still praying for you all, every night before I sleep, and now throughout every day. You are courageous, persevering, and so loving.

Two old Pendleton women friends and I took a trip this past week to Montgomery, Alabama. They had seen the movie, “Just Mercy,” but I had not. I did have the book, and on the 6 ½-hour drive down there I read it to them. The book had lots more than the movie, they said. I plan to go see the movie tomorrow.

We visited the Lynching Museum and the Legacy Museum, and it was gut wrenching and horrible. It made me appreciate Murphy so much more for all her work with those on death row. My heart breaks for those incarcerated, and especially for those who were sentenced wrongly. My life is forever changed since the time spent at 910, for that is where I was “borned again.” I have to go to the Haywood Street Church and rub elbows with the homeless ones there, I have to go to visit the immigrants who are in detention near Americus ... I can no longer sit back and enjoy my comfortable little home without feeling sad for all those who cannot have a place to feel comfortable.

In Montgomery, I saw almost no white folks. I don’t know what the ratio is, but in the hotel where we stayed, the whole staff was Black, and they were so very warm and friendly. At the museums, there were very few visitors besides us, maybe because it was mid-January, but most of those were Black also, and all we encountered held their heads high and walked tall.

My life is forever changed after experiencing the Museums, also. And I hope I am a kinder and gentler human being for all my life experiences — you know I turned 80 yesterday...what a milestone, what a huge lifetime! And it’s not long ‘til you will be 80, Ed. I have learned to be grateful for it all, the said, the happy, the pain, the joy, the anguish, the halleluiahs.

Huge, gentle hugs to you all. I love you and I thank God for your being in my life.

Betty Jane, She, Her, Hers and the whole wide universe.

Betty Jane Crandall
Weaverville, North Carolina

Dear Murphy & Ed,

Thanks for another very informative and meaningful issue of Hospitality!! Your continued emphasis on and coverage of Civil War issues, Confederate/slavery symbols, etc. have helped us to explain current issues to our family and friends in a new, but accurate light.

Continued positive vibes and prayers for Murphy.

Sincerely with a hug or two,
Ed & Barb Kasek
Harford, Wisconsin

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Open Door Community Needs:

- Granola bars
- 2% milk. We use 2 - 3 gallons a week for coffee and we need small containers for children.
- Stamps to write prisoners
- Money for prisoner support and prisoner family support
- Summer socks
- Stocking caps
- Tee shirts - Sm/med/large/X large/XX large
- Blue jeans, all sizes

Please send us your name when you give a gift.

Thank you! Murphy, Erica, Beth, Tyrone, Simon, David and Ed

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The Box

1

I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides.

— Blé Wiesel

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: Silence is Betrayal

Act Up: Silence is Death

2

The Swamp

From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores. And they have not been healed or bound up, or softened with oil. (Isaiah 1:6 NRSV)

3

Why do we publish Hospitality?

“We need always to be thinking and writing about poverty, for if we are not among its victims its reality fades from us. We must talk about poverty, because people insulated by their own comfort lost sight of it.”

— Dorothy Day, By Little and By Little, p. 106

And among the poor we always remember Prisoners “as though we are in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:13) which is very, very difficult to do. But if we visit and write prisoners, we can be bent toward the concertina wire, steel bars and concrete.

May it be so among us.

Ed Loring

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