

## **A Journey of Hope**

### **Ruth Andrews**

The Journey of Hope, Bob said, was two weeks of action against the death penalty. Sounds good, I said. Then he asked if I knew Bill Pelke. I recognised the last name and began to feel alarmed. The story of Ruth Pelke's 1985 murder was a sensational one: a 78-year-old white grandmother and Bible teacher beaten and stabbed to death in her apartment in Gary by four black teenage girls who had gained entrance by requesting Bible lessons. Their leader, Paula Copper, was sentenced to death at the age of 15.

Bob told me that Bill Pelke is Ruth's grandson. At first he was indifferent to Paula Cooper's fate - she deserved to die. But as time went on, Bill's life began to fall apart. His friends and family deserted him, he spent a lot of time drinking, and his misery kept intensifying. One night at work at a steel mill in Gary, high above the ground in a crane, Bill began to pray. After a while he had a vision of his grandmother with tears running down her face. It was clear to him she was in complete disagreement with the execution of Paula Cooper.

Bill began corresponding with Paula, tried to see her but was not permitted, and began working to have her death sentence overturned. In 1989 she was taken off death row and is now serving a 60 year sentence.

Bill's concern expanded to others on death row. He participated in marches in Florida and Texas. He became a member, and then a board member, of Murder Victim's Families for Reconciliation. At the same time Bill's life took a turn for the better - he got married.

Then in 1993 he had "this really crazy idea" that people who had lost family members to murder could join together with families of people on death row to protest the death penalty - "the Journey of Hope," he called it. Bob Gross, who worked for the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, agreed to organise two weeks of action in Indiana in 1993. He asked if I would help.

Ever since my mother was murdered when I was a teenager in 1969, I have been seeking wholeness, sometimes desperately. My journey includes countless defeats and setbacks, many of them dangerous to my emotional and physical health and always confirming a deep loneliness. What was Bob asking?

I'm not sure he knew, but he did know people willing to share their personal stories and convictions, and do it over and over again. He also knew that this made for good stories in the press. Nobody could accuse family members of

murder victims not knowing what we were talking about, though they could accuse us of being crazy.

I took on responsibility for the Journey's day in South Bend. I arranged for participants to eat and share their stories at Dismas House, a halfway house for offenders. I tried to arrange a meeting with the police, but failed. I wrote a letter asking if the Journey could plant a tree at a drugstore where three employees had been murdered, and was turned down. I tried to organise a group of mothers who had lost children or other relatives to murder, but couldn't get it off the ground. I accepted a speaking assignment and was paired with Sam Shepherd.

When the Journey of Hope reached South Bend, we had dinner in a rundown neighbourhood at the Broadway Christian Church. Three friends came to support me, and church folks were there. For the first time I met Bill Pelke and other members of the Journey. I was scared.

It was in early June, and a ferocious summer storm hit suddenly and hard. After dinner we went upstairs for the programme. Musicians performed inside as the storm threw windy fists at the stained glass. Just as I was being introduced a terrific bolt of lightning jolted the church. It turned out a tree had toppled onto several cars. People rushed out to see if it was theirs. Charlie King, who sings passionate folk songs about overcoming injustice, played until things returned to relative order.

I told my story. It wasn't the first time, but each time is different - it's how the audience listens that determines how I tell it. It felt good.

Then Sam Shepherd spoke. Sam's pregnant mother was murdered in 1954 when Sam was seven years old. His father, a neurosurgeon, was tried and convicted of murder, though he consistently claimed innocence. Sam, then living with his father's brother, had recurring nightmares of his father's execution. In 1964, attorney F. Lee Bailey got Sam's father conviction overturned. Full acquittal followed.

But by the time of his vindication many lives had been destroyed. While Sam's father was in prison, his great grandfather died of gastric ulcers. His grandmother and grandfather committed suicide. After his father got out of prison, he and Sam were unable to develop the kind of father-son relationship they both wanted. Six years after he was released from prison, Sam's father, 46 years old, died of brokenness.

As I listened I imagined Sam as a boy struggling for life. Now in his mid-40s, Sam, unlike his father and grand parents, refuses to give up.

I started to understand the importance of the Journey of Hope. We must work for life, demand an end to violence, and keep loving whenever and whoever we are moved to love. The spirit of reconciliation is irrepressible and can make its way into the most unlikely circumstances. When people don't understand this I feel devastated, and am at a loss to know how to explain my feelings. How can people not want to be transformed?

It's been a slow process, but in my life I've come to understand that I *must* be an agent of reconciliation. The result is that I now work as a mediator and criminal sentencing consultant.

When I heard that the Journey of Hope would be in Georgia this October, I decided to get more involved. I blocked out a week on my calendar and joined an autoclub, just in case my '86 van wasn't up for a 1200-mile trip. I talked to the schools about my children being absent for a week, and talked up the trip with my kids. I borrowed money.

After Saturday soccer games, Simon (11), Marcus (8) and I packed our sleeping bags and tent and set out. We spent four days travelling from northern Indiana to south Georgia. On the way we toured two caves in Kentucky, climbed the highest peak in Smoky Mountain National Park, and visited a Cherokee Indian Village.

Finally we reached Koinonia community in Americus, Georgia. Koinonia is a Christian pacifist community that years ago was a target of violence because blacks and whites were living a common life. It was late at night and raining. There was Sam - slim, athletic, clever and funny, somehow younger than when I last saw him. Bill Pelke seemed to be everywhere. There was this incredible volunteer, Troy Reimer, who had pulled the Journey together from Virginia and who could sleep anywhere or nowhere. There was Bob Gross, bringing order and serenity into the midst of chaos.

Once there it seemed to me I had undersold the Journey to myself. Most folks here were in it for the duration - two weeks of intense living together, supporting each other, and working their butts off. I was here for only two and a half days, and was the only one who had brought young children.

I stopped thinking about myself when I met Shirley Dicks, my speaking partner for my first two assignments. Her son Jeff was on death row, but the week before, while participating on the Journey with her son Trevor, 24, and Jeff's daughter Marie, 16, Shirley had gotten a call saying Jeff was off the Row!

He's still in prison, but at least Shirley can try to wipe out the image of her son being strapped into the chair and hit with electricity for 15 seconds, then another blast if he's still alive.

Shirley had told this story:

"I remember my curly-haired son at five as he went off to school, looking back at me as if I had abandoned him. Jeff was a good boy, never gave me any trouble, never talked back, and helped around the house. When he turned 18 he and his wife moved to Kingsport, Tennessee where Jeff became friends with another boy. This child had been in trouble with the law since he was very young. Jeff was with him one day, driving the car when the other boy went inside a shop, killing and robbing the shopkeeper. Jeff had no prior knowledge of the crime, and took none of the robbery money when it was offered. Instead, he called me, and in a scared little boy's voice, asked what to do. Jeff decided on his own to turn himself in to the authorities as he was not guilty."

"I wasn't in the courtroom when the guilty verdict came down. I had been thrown in jail because I cried out in court when testimony was not spoken in front of the jurors. I looked out of the cell window and saw my oldest daughter leave the courthouse, her head bent low. I knew in that instant the jurors had chosen *death for my son*, and the screams began. A nurse gave me a shot as the screams kept on coming from deep within. Tennessee was going to strap my son in a chair and burn his skin away. And he was not guilty!"

"The next few years were a blur. My husband and I divorced. Jeff's wife left and I adopted a month-old daughter. We moved to Tennessee to be with Jeff, to visit each week. My heart broke each time I saw his sunken eyes, watched him pretend everything was fine."

"If you have a loved one in prison, especially on death row, no one wants to be your friend. We found ourselves hated. My daughter was treated cruelly as she grew older and there was no end to my grief and pain. Twice Jeff's execution date was placed on my birthday."

"We are brought up believing that if a person is innocent, he will be set free. I know from experience it isn't so. If you have the money for the best of counsel, you will not sit on death row. If you are poor, you will die."

"I pray to God that I will live to see the day when we in the United States can say no more killing in our names."

Shirley and I sat upstairs, above Koinonia's dining room. Outside, in light rain, Simon and Marcus played soccer and stalked turkeys and chickens. Shirley said that meeting people on the Journey of Hope was the first time she really experienced acceptance. "I just can't believe the love of these people who have experienced a murder."

For all of us on the Journey, something incredible happens when we tell our story. It doesn't matter what the story is or who tells it, but whether people listen. Telling it, you are no longer in it, but outside it. Every time you tell it, it somehow comes out in a new, surprising way. It develops a symbolic meaning.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes refers to stories as medicine. "They have such power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything - we need only listen. The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories."

Much goes on as a story is told. The teller calls up a memory. The memory includes events which occurred, ways in which they occurred, people to whom the events occurred - all of it coloured by the feelings, the life experiences and most of all, the immediate needs of the teller, and our needs too. The teller must now find a voice, choose words, use language.

As soon as the story begins, the listener responds. The power of listening is as great or greater than the power of telling. Simply through out listening we have the power to injure, disfigure and kill a story. We can live a story life or revive a story. Through our listening and living we can transcend a story.

In Cormack McCarthy's novel, *Crossings*, Billy hears a *corrido* - a story song - being sung and recognises the hero as his brother. He notices the real life events in which he also participated have been changed, glorified. He tries to tell a friend what really happened, but the friend has a different way of listening to the *corrido*. He suggests to Billy the song was sung even before his brother was born. In 1993 I told my Journey story enough times that it changed, seemingly of its own volition. I began to find ways of identifying with all the characters, even with the murdered. They were all within me.

Seventy-one people took part in the Journey of Hope this past October in Georgia. We spoke at 151 events to over 9,000 people. Through the media we reached millions.

Today I got a call from Bill Pelke. Indiana is planning to execute Greg Teslover. He asked if I would go the the vigil?

Would you?

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