

Reflection and Prayer time: Holding on to Hope with Both Hands

January 11, 2021

It is challenging to know what to say or where to start today. Coming back from holidays in which we celebrated holy days of our faith traditions and hopefully able to rest and restore ourselves with family and friend connections in the safest ways we can. And yet I am still reeling from what I observed last Wednesday at the US Capitol. It's a lot to take in and process. So I'm still in process mode and imagine you might be also.

So here are random thoughts swirling in my head from the events of January 6:

- 1) I hope we have already seen the most extreme of what we are to see. Of course this may not be the end of it and we nor anyone should assume so, but you can't fully address what you don't know the extent of. It's one thing to know you have cancer and another to know the staging and prognosis so appropriate treatment can begin. We have a national behavioral health problem.
- 2) I shared initial thoughts last week at a Ministers' meeting that now more than ever we need to have crucial conversations with people who see the world differently than we do and make it a priority to engage with people. In the midst of a pandemic when it's so easy to avoid others we disagree with with an easy out and we're tired and exhausted, we need to invest the energy to make the time happen for conversation and less polarization where possible. We need to listen and we need to approach people from the starting point of everyone is a beloved child of God. We need to look them in the face and in the eyes when talking whenever possible. I subscribe to the belief stated by Bryan Stevenson in his book "Just Mercy" about working with prisoners on death row that each one of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. That needs to be at the forefront of our conversations and the starting point. In pre-civilization days being ostracized from the community equaled certain death and carries over to today.
- 3) Seeing someone as beloved child of God does not mean in my view avoiding accountability for behaviors and actions that harm. Any of us who have children know that sometimes the most loving thing we can do in parenting is setting limits, helping our kids know the boundaries of their behavior and consistently and with unfailing love applying appropriate discipline and creating a culture that leads to the ability to self-discipline. I believe we can embrace the complexities of seeking to understand and engaging in conversation and dialogue with respect while still supporting consequences for behaviors, actions, and harm done. It just shouldn't end at consequences. The research behind our Restorative Justice program would support this.
- 4) I believe our country is strong and will see its way forward. I believe we have roles to play in creating positive change and to support prevention of violence through supporting people in trauma before they find belonging in extremist, violent groups and I believe we have responsibility in seeing and addressing the racial injustice that we saw in the discrepancies in the law enforcement response January 6 compared to similar events in 2020.
- 5) I had the pleasure of attending a conference at University of Louisville where I heard a presentation then had a conversation with Tony McAleer. Tony grew up in a financially stable middle class family but experienced turmoil and trauma as a child and extreme harshness in a school system where he felt powerless when he was physically punished for bad grades and was seeking a sense of power and belonging. Today Tony has written a book, "The Cure for Hate: A Former White Supremacist's Journey from Violent Extremism to Radical Compassion" and he provides leadership to an organization Life After Hate in which he works with extremists to leave their hate groups.

A former organiser for the White Aryan Resistance (WAR), Tony McAleer served as a skinhead recruiter, proprietor of Canadian Liberty Net (a computer operated voice messaging center used to disseminate messages of hatred), and manager of the racist rock band, Odin's Law. It was love for his children that finally led Tony on a spiritual journey of personal transformation.

Tony shares: I have to go back to my childhood to understand how I became a violent extremist. Many other former white supremacists came from really rough neighbourhoods but I grew up in a middle-class doctor's family.

The trouble was that my father was an emotional bully and so being a very sensitive child I learned from an early age to use my intellect to suppress my feelings and disconnect from my emotions. It was the only way I knew to avoid being shamed by my father and it became my survival mechanism.

I have two distinctive memories from my childhood which have left a deep impression on me. The first is from when I was about eleven and walked in on my father with another woman. It seemed to flip a switch in me and from that moment on I became disengaged and angry. The second memory is from my Catholic private school where I got bullied and where corporal punishment was the norm. The result of both these experiences meant that by the time I reached my teens I felt unlovable, insignificant and powerless.

I only gained a sense of power when I got involved with punk rock. Within the punk rock scene was the skinhead scene and it was here that I gained the most notoriety. I mistook my ability to get angry and to cause fear in others for real power. Unresolved anger always expresses itself as violence and I chose to express my violent behaviour within this huge skinhead subculture.

The problem was that as a teenager I went into the world emotionally hungry and therefore I made some really bad choices which caused hurt to a lot of people. The acts of violence that I committed against people who had done nothing wrong were horrific.

There is one event I'm still haunted and shamed by. There was this young gay guy who we chased until he ran into a construction site and hid behind a porch. We couldn't get to him so instead we hurled stones in his direction. Although we couldn't see him we could hear his cries every time a stone hit its mark. I should have felt sorry for him - after all I'd suffered enough bullying myself - but by now I was so disconnected from my own feelings I couldn't feel compassion.

Eventually I got involved in some of the most radical far-right groups in the United States such as Aryan Nations and White Aryan Resistance. I used to participate in paramilitary training and I owned numerous assault rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Robert Matthews, the leader of **The Order** (an American **white nationalist** militant group) was my hero and my plan was to prepare for the inevitable race war. I believed I would either be dead or in jail by the age of 30 and I was OK about that.

I became an accomplished propagandist and at the height of my arrogance my head was so far up my ego that I was on national television harming millions of people at a time with my words and ideology.

What turned it around was becoming a father. As I was holding my beautiful, new-born baby daughter her eyes opened and for the first time since my own childhood I felt connected to another human being. I felt deeply moved by this experience but even so change didn't happen overnight.

What ultimately changed me was becoming a single parent and raising two children on my own. A child is not capable of rejecting you and so now I felt safe to open my heart and learn to love again.

In that process I learned that to hold the ideology of separation, or racism, you have to have a closed heart. An open heart makes the ideology irrelevant.

My hope now is to inspire people to a place of compassion and forgiveness. When we have compassion for everybody else but not ourselves; that's about ego. But if we have compassion for only ourselves, and no one else; that's narcissism. The more I can have compassion and forgiveness for myself the less likely I am to harm others. Forgiveness is not about letting someone off the hook, it's about releasing yourself from that angry energy. But it has to come with healthy boundaries and understanding consequences. If you forgive violent behaviour and put up with it that's not forgiveness - at that point you need to walk out of the door.