

Soul Force

By Cynthia Stateman

The phone call came just after dinner. It was my cousin Philip. He said, "We need you to come home. Daddy has been killed."

I had just been to Kingston the previous summer for the fabulous celebration my hometown had put on to honor Uncle John on his 75th birthday. He had been Kingston's first black physician, and had served that town for 50 years.

How could Uncle John have been killed?

When I was a little girl, I liked to ride with him on Saturday mornings as he made his rounds in his big red Edsel station wagon. We would start off with visits to his patients in town, and then head out on dusty tobacco roads to the shacks and trailers where the sharecroppers and mill workers lived. Folks would pay him whatever they could- money if they had it, a handful of eggs, firewood, a handshake, a prayer. Who would kill my Uncle John? He built a clinic on Reed Street. It was the very first, and for many years it had been the only clinic or hospital where Black folks could go without having to wait until last to be seen by a doctor. Why would anyone kill my Uncle John?

Some punk kid, poor white trash, had broken into the clinic with a gun in his pocket, looking for something to steal. Uncle John caught him by surprise, and was shoved hard against the wall. He fell to the floor, gasping for breath. Yeah, the kid dialed 911, and then he tried to run for it. But it was too late- Uncle John was dead and the cops were at the door.

My cousins were arguing with one another when I arrived. Shock, fatigue, heartbreak, anger, and grief. Visitors had been stopping by to let them know that the whole town was outraged by the crime. My cousins had been assured by one and all that the DA would do as he had promised – send that good-for-nothing poor white cracker punk kid straight to death row.

But the public defender had come by, too. He confirmed that the DA was planning to charge the kid with a capital offense, and said that the kid had made up his mind to plead guilty. He said, "The charge doesn't fit the crime. That boy committed a crime for sure, and it is a terrible tragedy, but it would be a real stretch of the law to call it a capital offense." He had a question and a favor to ask. Did our family want justice or did we want vengeance? Shock, fatigue, heartbreak, anger and grief. Would the family be willing, he asked, to speak to the DA on behalf of justice? Would we be willing to ask the DA to file charges that were truly commensurate with the crime? My cousin threw him out the house.

Donny shouted, "What a lot of nerve!" Rhonda asked, "What do you think Daddy would have wanted?" Philip asked, "But, would it hurt to talk to the DA?" Donny bellowed, "Over my dead body!" Frank said, "It's not fair. It's not our job to tell the DA what to do." Ellen insisted, "I think the public defender is right, and you know it too!" "I don't care!" Donny cried, "A punk like that is going to end up on death row sooner or later anyway. Our father is dead because of him. Don't talk to me about justice. Where was the justice in Daddy dying like that?" Rhonda said, "I don't know what the right thing to do is." I asked, "Has anybody considered the possibility of talking to the kid?"

We piled into the van and headed for the jailhouse. Donny stayed behind. We bullied, badgered, threatened, and made a whole lot of noise before the attorneys would agree to

set up the visit. It was awkward at first. The punk sat on one side of the table, staring down at his hands. We sat on the other side, taking in every detail: blue eyes, thin lips, pointed nose, dimpled chin, brown hair, crooked teeth, high forehead, ragged fingernails bitten down to the quick. Rhonda broke the silence. "You know, the DA is calling for your life. And your lawyer said you're going to plead guilty." He nodded. "I need to know what happened. We need to know why. We need to understand this thing." He was silent. "Tell me!" He raised his eyes, "I'm sorry about your father." "It's too late for sorry." Rhonda said. "How old are you?"

His name is David. He had just turned 19. He'd grown up in the trailer park known as "The Bottoms," down by the river, just outside of town. Squalid. Ignorant. Dangerous. Crackerville. We asked questions, and he talked for more than an hour. He told us what happened. He said he owed a guy some money; money he didn't have; money he had no legitimate way of getting; money the guy was willing to kill him for. "Look. I'm sorry about your daddy. I really am. He was a good man. I remember him coming down to the Bottoms a long time ago, knocking on doors, letting people know that us kids could come to the clinic and get shots and such. My mama took all of us. Said there wasn't too many people around like him that cared anything about Bottom folks."

He said that he wasn't scared of prison. No, he hadn't been "inside" before; had never been caught. "I been in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, for the wrong reason plenty of times." He said that prison didn't seem like it would be too bad; he's lived a lot worse. He said his daddy was inside, and so was an uncle and one of his brothers; maybe they'd hook up. Death row? "I ain't never expected to live to no ripe old age anyway." He had quit school in the 9th grade. He said that, if he had it to do all over again, he would join the military. He had tried to enlist, but had failed the test. He said, "you got to have your reading up to be in the Army nowadays."

We sat in the van and talked. "Jeez, what a loser." "Uh huh." "He's only 19." "Face it, David doesn't have a snowball's chance in Hell of turning his life around." "He's illiterate." "Yep." "Pathetic." "Uh huh." "I hate to say this, but prison just may be a step up for him." "He could learn to read in there." "Right, Rhonda. What are you doing?" "I'm making a list of books. What if we suggested that he had to learn to read, and finish a long list of books, and had to get his GED as conditions for parole? And what if, as a condition for probation, he had to learn a trade, and keep a job, and do some serious community service work for 5 or 10 years after he was released?" "Well, he is only 19." "Add the Autobiography of Malcolm X to your list." "If David could make good somehow, then maybe Daddy's death would have some meaning." "This is crazy." "Yep." "Do we talk to the DA?" "Uh huh." The DA was incredulous. But we stood our ground and made our case. He agreed to reduce the charges against David and to submit our recommendations to the court.

Donny was so angry at us all that he had threatened to boycott the memorial service. His wife had only been able to talk him into coming at the very last minute. To make matters even worse for Donny, the court had, with the family's consent, granted David's request to attend the service. It had been agreed that David and his mother would join us in the opening procession, and would sit with us during the service. There were hundreds of people in attendance. The aisles were filled, and every seat was taken. One after another, Uncle John's family and friends stood and came forward, to tell a story, to share a song, to recite a poem, to remember him, to speak of loss, and to say good-bye. When

David stood, I was confused at first, and I had thought that perhaps he was preparing to leave. But no, he turned to the congregation and began to speak. “A good man is dead because of what I did. I’m sorry.” He gestured towards my cousins. “They spared my life. I didn’t deserve that. I’m going to be in prison for a very long time, but I’m not being sent there to die. What I want to ask all of you here is: Is there any way you can forgive me?”

The pastor reached out to David and asked him to kneel. He called for a laying on of hands, placed his right hand on David’s head, and began to pray. The pastor prayed for forgiveness. Ellen was the first to rise and place her hands upon David’s back. The pastor prayed for mercy. Philip and Rhonda rose and joined them. The pastor prayed for reconciliation. Donny stood and added his hands. He prayed for young people like David whose lives we’ve given up on. The rest of the family rose together, and we added our hands. Before too long, the entire gathering had come forward; laying hands on one another until we were all connected as one. The pastor prayed, and we prayed with him. We prayed for David to be healed, and we prayed for ourselves to be healed; and when it was done, we sang “Amazing Grace.”

I conducted a workshop on active nonviolence, what Gandhi called “Soul Force,” a few months ago. My audience was a wonderful group of Christian activists, fully committed to working for social justice. When I asked them how they had applied the principles of active nonviolence, and what effect it has had on their lives, they spoke of sit-ins, marches, leafleting, demonstrations, petitions, civil disobedience, boycotts, and arrests. They spoke of civil rights, women’s rights, human rights, peace, and justice. I asked, “What about your personal lives?” They were puzzled by the question. I tried to clarify. “What are the ways in which the principles of active nonviolence have affected your relationships at work, in church, in school, with family, with personal friends and enemies?” After a moment of silence, one of the participants said, “I’m not sure I understand what you mean.” We spent the rest of the time we had together discussing the principles of active nonviolence, and the implications of Soul Force with regard to disarming our hearts. It didn’t occur to me to share this story until after the workshop had ended. That’s why I am sharing it now. Let us not every forget that the whole point of active nonviolence is to open up the possibility to heal and to be healed.