

## MY SOUL IS A WITNESS

“They are bringing drugs and sending their criminals.” “Go back to where you come from.” “Go back to your crime ridden neighborhoods.”

The nation heard President Trump spit these perniciously racist and divisive words out with repetitive and unrepentant self-righteous rage and malicious intent. He followed this statement with another racist diatribe telling a cheering audience of teenaged White conservatives that “Representative Talib is a lunatic.”

Although these racist phrases by the President disturbed our moral equilibrium, we must view them as more than single events. We must understand them as part of a historical pattern of hate speech that continues a long White supremacist history of demonization, criminalization, degradation and fragmentation of the body and lives of Black and Brown peoples.

As troubling as this charge sounds, it is not hyperbolic. Nor am I spreading secondhand gossip to gin up racial controversy or angst. Rather and sadly, mine is a first-hand account. I speak from the deep throated voice of a survivor of an attempted assassination by a White supremacist segregationist in the light of day in Lowndes County, Alabama during the Southern Freedom Movement. I owe my survival and breath to Jonathan Daniels’ generous and loving instincts and actions. Jon, as we called him, was my dear White freedom fighter seminarian brother from the Episcopal Divinity School. He pushed me down and took the bullet that saved my life!

The hate speech that the White male assassin used when he attempted to kill me and when he assassinated Jonathan were not the words of a single and lone crazy southern White man. Rather, his words echoed the common White anti-Black hate speech that hung like a dangerous and menacing cloud over the South during the Movement. Larry Hancock and Stuart Wexler remind us in their book, *The Awful Grace of God: White Religious Terrorism, White Supremacy and the Unsolved Murder of Martin Luther King Jr.* of the deadly consequences of the marriage of White hate speech with state sanctioned violence during the Southern Freedom Movement. According to them, J.R. Stoner and the Reverend Charles Lynch told a packed church of White southerners that “the four young girls who died in the Birmingham bombing were not children, but little niggers . . . and if there’s four less niggers tonight then I say Good for whoever planted the bomb.”

As a Black woman who grew up in the segregated South, I first heard the terrifying sounds of White anti-Black speech coming from the police, ordinary White people, ministers and mobs when I was a young adolescent Tuskegee Institute college student during my first demonstration. The White hate noises grew louder and more strident when I left college to work as a member of SNCC in “Bloody Lowndes County” Alabama.

The city of my childhood although in the South differed vastly from rural Black Belt Alabama. It was located near one of the largest Army posts in the United States and was filled with Black men on active duty as well as Black veterans who fought in World War II and the Korean War. Many of them bore the visible and enduring scars of fighting for the ideals of democracy in a country where the guardians of Whiteness stripped them of their citizenship, made them sit at the back of the bus, lynched them and subjected them to police terror in bars, buses, jails and streets of America even when they wore the green and brown uniforms gleaming with brass buttons for bravery or outstanding service. After miraculously escaping death in foreign lands, they came home to a political death. Yet, they never gave up on this country or democracy -- both of which they loved and served but which did not love or serve them.

My father was one of those men. Even though he bore the battle scars of southern White supremacy, he kept faithful to the ideals of democracy. He was a part of a generation of Black women and men who were hopeful pragmatists. They clearly saw and experienced all the ugliness of White supremacy and the hatred that saturated it. Yet, they refused to grovel in cynicism and non-redemptive anger, hatred, or bitterness.

It was their pragmatic optimism and agape that my generation brought to the Southern Freedom Movement. Our mothers and fathers could not pass on to us the rites of citizenship or a guaranteed future. However, they bequeathed to us the belief that we had a charge to keep to upbuild democracy. So as did our fathers, we became freedom fighters for a country that we loved and wanted to serve but one which did not love us or want to serve us. We embarked on a journey of faith to help our nation to live up to its promise even though it did not see any promise in us.

We were not alone. Even in the midst of a long history of racism, White America produced out of its better and most ideal self a generation of White daughters and sons who believed their mothers and fathers that despite its documented history of racism America was large enough for everyone. Therefore, as did generations of their ancestors before them, they courageously broke with a culture of Whiteness to upbuild a counterculture of democracy.

During this exhilarating and high-spirited season of hope young Black and White people walked across hundreds of years of segregated walls to find each other. We engineered a new moment of intimacy and community where we became our brothers' and sisters' keepers united in a common vision and common struggle.

It was not easy. Daily we faced torrents of White hate speech. Our lives were constantly at risk from White men in pickup trucks who chased us at ninety miles an hour with their shotguns dancing out the windows or visibly displayed on gun racks. We sat in quiet fear as the drivers tried to outrun us often on country dirt roads where they were determined to terrorize us, shoot us, or run us off the road. Our fates lay in the hands of young drivers barely out of their teens who suddenly had four or five lives in

their hands. In our duty as freedom fighters on the front line, we learned the art of survival by staying on full alert to every sound and signal that resonated danger.

We learned early that hate speech is not benign without context or consequences. The realities of our lives taught us that hate speech is a preamble to White anti-Black state sanctioned and vigilante violence. Despite our youthful idealism, we grasped the hard and dangerous American truth that a White person's first amendment right to speak hate can mean the mark of death for Black and Brown peoples.

This truth stared us in the face on a hot summer day in August when SNNC members joined local Black youth who organized a protest where they courageously and lovingly on behalf of their elders took on the predatory system of sharecropping. On the day of our protest, an angry mob of White men of all ages hurled hate speech at us. They armed themselves with guns, baseball bats, garbage can tops, and any other weapon they could find. They surrounded us and threatened to kill us while yelling, "nigger, monkey, bitches, go back to Africa or wherever you come from."

The presence of our two White companions who walked the picket line with Black demonstrators further escalated their anger. With voices hardened by years of misplaced grievances and internalized self-hatred for their failure to economically achieve what they were told was their birthright as White men, they lashed out with venom yelling, "nigger lovers" and "outside agitators, communists, traitors." I am convinced that if the sheriff had not arrested us, these White men raving with hate speech learned from the lips of slick race baiting politicians, teachers and preachers would have tortured and murdered us as they did Viola Liuzzo, Jimmy Lee Jackson, Medgar Evers and the four little Black Birmingham girls.

In jail, we endured growing anxiety from the menacing threats and psychological terrorism of the armed White deputy sheriff who promised to make us drink toilet water and to make Black male prisoners rape my three female cell companions and me. We could hardly breathe from the stench and smell of rancid food and broken unflushed toilets.

On the 6th day the White sheriff forced us under gun point and hate speech to leave jail. He would not let us alert anyone that he was releasing us. We hesitated to leave because all of us knew the story of the young freedom fighters Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner whom a gang of White men murdered on June 21, 1964 after the sheriff forcibly released them from a Mississippi jail in the deep darkness of a Southern rural night.

In the Alabama summer heat of the day and because we refused to eat for six days while in jail out of fear for our safety, we were thirsty and hungry. The group designated Jonathan Daniels, Father Richard Morrisroe, a White young Catholic priest from Chicago, Joyce Bailey, an 18-year-old local Black youth and me, to get drinks for everyone.

When we reached the front door of Cash Store where the White female owner had always graciously served us without incident, a White man stood in the door waving a shotgun at me when my foot touched the first step leading to the door. His words, “bitch I will blow your goddamned brains out” greeted me. Before I could react or even process the danger right in front of my face, Jonathan swiftly and instinctively pulled me back. I fell backwards to the ground, and Jonathan’s action placed him straight in the line of fire. I heard the loud roar of the blast that sent his body flying into the air, dead as it hit the ground.

I lay stiff on the ground thinking that I was dead, and dead meant that one could see and hear but could not move. Out of the edge of my eyes, I saw Father Morrisroe holding Joyce’s hand, protecting her by refusing to let her go as they ran for their lives. The assassin whose voice dripped with the poisonous breath of hate speech aimed his gun and hit Father Morrisroe in the back. He fell down from the blow and begged for water.

We later found out that the White man’s name was Tom Coleman who appointed himself as a deputy that day so that he could kill under the cover of law. He had a reputation for hating Black people. Rumor had it that he had previously murdered several Black men. Despite his lethal carnage that day, his anger, and blood lust were insatiable. Like a madman guarding his prey, he stood over Father Morrisroe’s body wildly waving his shotgun at Jimmy Rogers and Gloria Larry who rushed to Morrisroe to comfort him and to quench his thirst. Richard later told us that White men put him in a hearse where they placed Jonathan’s dead body dripping blood in a rack on top of him. At the hospital White doctors refused to attend to him and called him a “nigger lover.” A White army general finally agreed to attend to Father Morrisroe. The doctor’s intervention and care saved Richard’s life. However, the trauma and physical devastation did not end that day. They remain today as a constant reminder of the hate that nearly killed him.

Every one of us who witnessed Tom Coleman’s bloody rampage never shook off the residue of trauma. Additionally, our daily experiences in the crucible of White nationalist violence as freedom fighters in the southern valley of death buttressed by hate speech would abide in our minds and hearts forevermore.

Every August I still hear the vile racist hate speech that Tom Coleman flung at me that accompanied his shooting rampage. I still hear the voice of the White man who shouted “bitch, I will cut your throat” as I walked into the courtroom to testify at the murder trial of the State of Alabama vs. Tom Coleman. An all-White jury found Tom Coleman not guilty of the murder of Jonathan Daniels. When interviewed twenty-five years later when he was an old man, Tom Coleman said if he had it to do over, he would do it again.

It is August again more than fifty-five summers later, and I tell my story during a blistering national heat wave of White supremacy, hate speech and White state sanctioned and vigilante violence at the borders, in sites of terror called detention

centers and in public spaces throughout the country. Once again Black and Brown communities whether citizens, immigrants, migrants, or refugees face a White supremacist reign of terror. Today the White nationalism and hate speech is the official state language. It is here again disguised as populism and national security.

Today I sit on my front porch three scores and ten looking through the lens of history with hindsight, insight, and foresight. I have the eerie and unsettling feeling of historical *Deja vu*. I remember how police tortured Black children with high-speed water hoses that took the bark off trees. I also witnessed White police who commanded German Shepherd dogs to attack the delicate throats of Black children. I witnessed White police beating and stomping the stomachs of pregnant Black women.

Although I have not allowed the events of that August to capture my soul or to encase me in anger and bitterness, I am especially in this virulent season of White supremacy reminded of how the currents of White violence and hate speech traumatize us despite the life jackets that we wear. Because we are fully human, these assaults leave us all spiritually wounded and hurt.

Contrary to the claims of politicians, pundits and social critics who contend that Trump's hate speech and White nationalism are distractions that steer us away from focusing on urgent and more important bread and butter issues, it is from my vantage point in history that I strongly disagree. To them I offer both a strong rebuke and my unequivocal dissent. To them I say that they are enablers when they refuse to take seriously the mark of death that hate speech places on Black and Brown peoples. It is the enduring reality that Rima L. Vesely-Flad astutely observed in *Racial Purity and Dangerous Bodies; Racial Pollution and Black Lives, and the Struggle for Justice* that "Black people are constructed as internal enemies that threaten the moral foundations of white, Christian, democratic, capitalist nations." I agree with her observation.

Given her observation, America must ask the following questions. What is more important than the efficacy of Black lives and bodies and our right to life, liberty, and access to the rites of citizenship? What is more important than the right of our children to grow up without the state seeing them as enemy combatants who threaten the future of White power and the culture of Whiteness? Finally, we must resolve the questions of White supremacy that have been on the table since the Doctrine of Discovery and enslavement. Who owns the bodies and lives of Black and Brown people? Was Chief Justice Tanner right when he ruled in the Dred Scott Decision that Black people have no rights that White men are bound to uphold?

These are more than transactional questions. They are transcendent ones that determine the soul of America. How we finally resolve these issues as a nation will determine whether democracy dies a premature death or whether we will create an outward world where we continue to labor to build in the words of Vincent Harding "an America that is yet to be born."

The continued state sanctioned violence against people of color by police as well as the rise in White mass murders and political violence underscore the urgency of the moment. We face a similar choice that Martin Luther King Jr. faced when White liberals, moderates, and conservatives as well as members of the media demanded that he slow down the wheels of the Southern Freedom Movement. His answer in a letter from a Birmingham jail recorded in his book, *Why We Can't Wait*, is still appropriate today. "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"

So it was then, and so it is now.

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