

Protagonist Corner

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Last summer, my wife Murphy and I departed the Three V Motor Court (the oldest motor lodge in America) for the 19,000 acre, 5,000 inmate Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana. It was named for the West African country where the majority of slaves were stolen until Abraham Lincoln rode east out of Illinois, changing the war aims in 1862, and Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman knew it had been worth it after all the taking of toast and tea and the wealth of whites in black flesh and labor too. Today the majority of slaves (4,500 are African American men) come from New Orleans and Baton Rouge and little black bayous around and about where the abandoned and forgotten live and die here and there and in Iraq and Angola.

We began, Murphy driving as always, Aaron Neville lamenting hell and prison with his powerful song “Angola Bound.” We were ready, hopeful, loving, and believing to be with our partner, son, friend: Thony Lee Green, 102340.

We started off on the famous highway of Delta blues and Bob Dylan’s first truly great album, Highway 61, then turned onto Louisiana 66. Thousands of African Americans took Highway 61 to Chicago, but the lash of the whip, white hate, and the sin of segregation rode right up that highway too. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said Chicago was the meanest city he had ever seen, and he included Bombingham, Alabama, and St. Augustine, Florida, when he said it. We saw only old plantations and signs celebrating the three months of James Audubon’s life and painting in the area until he was fired and told to leave Oakley Plantation before the sun set behind the graceful, blood-dripping magnolias. *Strange Fruit*.

Entering the processing room for visitation, even before we stood in the small booth to be sniffed by the dog (not my copilot) for drugs, I said to the black staff of three, “We have come to visit George Bush and Dick Cheney.” After a second of silence, laughter broke out and roared down the hallway. A minute later the single man officer roared across the room: “They are in J. House.” Again, laughter rolled down the hallway like a big wave hitting the Mississippi coast. (We all understood that J. House is death row.)

I wore our Open Door Community “No War” tee shirt with an additional “no hand gun” sticker which I wear daily now as the only feeble response I know how to make to the Virginia Tech Massacre. Many folk were rejoicing to see the tee shirt and affirmed the message.

Thony came with gifts for Murphy and me, beautiful wooden roses, a carved cross with prayer hands, and himself. Funny how this black man was kidnapped by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation from our soup kitchen in 1982, taken to St. John the Baptist Parish Jail, and then to court to be given 481 years of hard labor for soft white folk—cannibals really—of the domination system of American slavery and prisons. Funny how this Christ figure has shaped and reshaped our lives. So we sat in the visiting room with 100 other folk, black and white together. Murphy and I were the only ones in the room who were not from the poorest of the poor or working class.

We had attended Eucharist Service at Grace Episcopal Church the evening before

journeying to Angola. Now, with Eucharistic crawfish etoufee, garlic bread, coffee in styrofoam cups, Jesus fed us and we experienced again the substantial character of love, body broken, cup shared. Bonhoeffer joined us for a moment, reminding us from his time in prison, “only a God who suffers is a God worth knowing.” Justice is important, but meals in prison are essential.

2:55. Thony had been funny, playful, and shared a soliloquy (and would not look at us though we saw his eyes break water) on the waste of his life and his fear of dying in prison. Time to go. Thony and I always kiss several times upon parting. I am so joyful to stand in that place and kiss this black man in front of the guards and visitors. (The guards, more gracious than those I know in Georgia, allow kissing, knee presses, and an occasional tender touch. Hurts to see.) Later Murphy and I held each other in the dark—very still, very silent. What can we do? What can we do?

By 3:30, we were out of the prison bus, back on Highway 66. We were heading home again.

Reflection: The hard truth for Christians is how easy it would be to tear this system down. If we could get 100,000 liberal, college-educated, engaged people to visit state prisons in America, we could change the system toward justice. But we cannot. Conservatives visit prisons all the time. The Christianity in prisons is far right, fundamentalist, and evangelical. The fundamentalists visit prisoners as Jesus said do. The Christian Right has curriculum for convicts, and they have houses for prisoners upon release. And they, in the Radical’s name, teach submission, Republican politics, and acceptance of the domination system. Oh, how I wish you could have experienced with Murphy and me the hunger prisoners have for the Word of liberation, justice—an alternative to this system. But then the Pope, upon arrival in Brazil last spring, said the most important issue in Christianity and the world today is abortion. Good-godalmighty. Don’t these men who never have made love, raised a child, or been married know that the American prison system is murderous? Sure, these 5,000 men at Angola made it out of the uterus, but what about now? How the hell is it that the embryos are so much more important to these folk than Thony Lee Green, 102340?