

Through My Enemy's Eyes

Troy Chapman



Sentenced to die in prison 16 years ago, I set out on a path to find and live within the truth. Having just turned 21, I had spent the past nine years on an insane roller coaster of addiction, violence, and despair. The death of another human being in a bar fight and my sentence of 60–90 years were the tragic and too-predictable end of the road I'd been traveling. In passing this sentence the judge said, "There's no hope that you can ever be rehabilitated."

No hope. If he was right, there was no point in going on, and I quite logically considered taking my own life. But in the end I determined that the judge could not be right and I would live. I don't mean I decided merely not to die, but to really be alive from that point on, to embrace life and find some meaning and truth I could live by and for. That was the beginning of a journey that would take me to a place I think of as the "third side."

It began with me. I had to honestly confront and condemn what I'd become, what I'd done, and my whole perception of reality. I became obsessed with the question of what went wrong and how to set it right.

Over the next few years I began to read—the Bible, Dostoyevsky, Gandhi, Camus, Dickens, Steinbeck—anything I could get my hands on. I took up meditation, began observing myself and others and writing down anything that seemed important.

I was being pulled by the future but also pushed by the past. My crime, and later my sentence, stood at the center of all my examinations. Slowly I came to understand my need for redemption and true atonement.

I realized that nothing could atone for what I'd become better than simply turning away from it with my whole being, and this is what I did. I repented in action. I changed. This decision opened up a new turn in my search for truth. I began to look outward again, to re-examine the world around me, but now I looked from this new place within myself.

It sounds as if these are two different pursuits—looking in and looking out—but really they're not. Understanding community and my role in it was simply the next step in my own healing.

I wanted to know if the origins of my insanity were completely within myself or was I, at least in part, a product of a sick culture. Having confronted myself thoroughly I could now ask that question objectively, not looking for excuses or trying to diminish my own accountability, but simply and sincerely, looking for the truth.

I looked at my fellow prisoners, the insane things they'd done to get here. I looked at the prison itself, our "solution" to violence, and saw it to be just more of the same thing it was designed to respond to. I looked at the growing insanity outside prison, the despair, rage, addiction, denial, lies, and deceit.

And I knew that I couldn't maintain the integrity of my search without admitting that while something had definitely gone wrong in me, something was also very wrong in our culture. To deny or overlook this would be like finding hundreds of three-eyed toads in a pond and never thinking to check the pond for its contribution to the phenomenon. The individuals who are going spiritually insane in droves in our culture are not coming out of a

void. As I began to wake up I found myself concerned for these individuals and for us as a whole. I was developing social consciousness, which soon turned into social activism.

My activism was an extension of my spirituality. When I stood up for some cause, such as prisoners' rights, I felt it was an expression of morality. I "fought the system" by writing grievances, filing things in court, and writing the media. When my jailers retaliated by tearing up my cell, destroying my work, or transferring me to another prison, it wasn't something I liked, but I considered it a mark of my success and evidence of why I was fighting. I was a warrior on the "right" side of the matter.

This view served me for a while, giving me a sense of moral order. But my continuing inward growth demanded a corresponding outward growth—a change in my view of the world. It started with the recognition that my activism wasn't very different from my earlier anger. In fact, my anger had crept back in, only now it was wrapped up in the sense that I was doing good and fighting evil. I hadn't gotten rid of my anger at all, only justified it. I still had enemies, was still locked in opposition to them, and I still wanted to win, to destroy them. I'd moved from seeking my enemies' physical destruction to seeking political, intellectual, social, and philosophic destruction, but it was still about enemies. My activism, like my previous thinking, was very dualistic.

Over time this dualism gave way to my hunger for simple goodness. The catalyst for this change was nothing more noble than exhaustion. I was simply tired of being angry all the time, tired of waking up every morning to a battle. I needed some rest. This need led me away from easy moral certitude. I developed the ability to see things through the eyes of my enemies. I saw in them the same fear that had so long governed me. The same confusion, the same grasping for security, the same hunger for love. I saw their humanity, and this ruined me as a warrior.

When a warrior begins to see the enemy as a human being, he begins to hesitate, to wonder if there's another way than war. He is no longer fit for battle and if he doesn't leave the field he will be taken from it by the very people he sympathizes with.

But is this the end of activism? For a while I thought it was, for who can be an activist without decisively taking sides? How could I fight against prisons when I empathized with the jailers?

I knew that if I'd been in their circumstance I would probably have done the same thing. If things had been different and I'd ended up being Joe Citizen instead of Joe Criminal, I would not have exhibited any more wisdom, foresight, or sense of the big picture than these prison builders. I knew that in some sense, they were me.

I had arrived at the third side.

I had spent most of my life splitting the world up into two sides, then fighting to defend one against the other. It was a game in which there were strategies, a clear objective, a field of play, and an opponent. The game has rules and no matter which side we're on, we're bound by the rules. The poet Rumi pointed to something beyond this game when he said, "Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing there is a field. I'll meet you there."

When I began to see myself in others—even in my enemies—I found myself heading for Rumi's field. Here the game is not a game. No one wins unless and until everyone wins. The line between victim and perpetrator no longer runs between "I" and "Other." It now runs right through the center of my soul. I am both, as we are all both.

What then is left to fight for? Where does an out-of-work activist go? Well ... God is hiring, and God is on the third side. Not the prisoner's or the jailer's side. Not the pro-choice or the pro-life side. Not the Left or the Right.

The third side is that little-represented side of healing. It's the side that cares as much about the enemy as the friend, that says love is the only justice, the only victory there is. It does not want anyone destroyed. It does not want to win if someone else must lose. It wants something much larger than winning and losing.

But what's larger than winning? Especially when we're fighting for the "right" cause? Well, I've watched the game of winning and losing from both the inside and the outside. From inside, each win seems like a step forward, but when we get outside the game we see that it's circular. People have been playing this game forever, yet good isn't any more pervasive in our world than it was a thousand years ago. "Activists" back then certainly thought the "big win" was just around the bend. They believed they were moving forward, just as we believe we're moving forward, just as a hamster inside a wire wheel believes he is moving forward.

But where is the evidence? Do our Right/Left debates ever produce anything useful to humanity? Is it really the "enemy's" fault that the world's in the shape it's in, or is it partly our fault? What's the motive behind our activism? Is it truly a love of goodness or do we engage in battle in order to distract ourselves from the hard work of love, from the bitter pill of looking at ourselves?

Asking myself these questions, I realized that enemies always serve a purpose. The war relationship is a symbiotic one in which the enemy on one side serves some need within the enemy on the other side, even while both protest this fact and claim they only fight because they have no choice.

I realized I do have a choice. Indeed, the freedom to choose how to respond may be the only total freedom we have. The world outside isn't within our control, but this freedom always is.

One of the first times I exercised this control, a man was trying to walk me off the

sidewalk. This is common in prison as scared and angry young men try to show how tough they are. Having dealt with similar situations for years, I'd always seen them in terms of two choices: back down or go on the offensive. This time another option suddenly occurred to me.

I still remember the confusion in the man's eyes as I stepped off the sidewalk, touched his elbow, and said, "How's it going?" I stepped aside, but I didn't back off. I engaged him, but on a different playing field. He was at a loss and simply mumbled some reply and kept walking.

But I had told him in a language we both understood, "I have no need of an enemy," and I've been telling the world that ever since. Whenever I catch myself thinking of someone as an enemy I ask, "What in me am I trying to avoid or distract myself from?" Inevitably I find my own impotence, my own frustrations, my insignificance, my sense that nothing I do will ever really matter. Ultimately I find my own mortality and the seeming futility of most human endeavor. I find my own self-absorption, my resistance to setting myself aside and truly caring about the other.

Does this mean that I have no work to do but inner work? Not at all, but it does mean that I must face myself. Part of facing myself is responding to the injustice and destruction of our world. Why? Because it's mine, and that is really the essence of third-side thinking.

Denying ownership of the insanity "out there" is the root of all violence. Dualistic activism isn't really a step away from this denial, only a more sophisticated expression of it. To step to the third side we must truly own those aspects of our world that we hate most.

Will war, violence, injustice, greed, and all the rest magically disappear if we own them and embrace this kind of activism? I can only say this: they will end in me. I will continue to step off the sidewalk, but I won't avert my eyes. Quite the contrary. I will confront you with a bigger vision of your own humanity. I

will throw hope in the face of the enemy, and I will subvert anger with sanity and humor.

I have no delusions that pie-in-the-sky “love” will change our world. If I know anything from my years in prison, it’s that evil is a real thing. However we explain it theologically or philosophically, there is behavior that is toxic to the planet and to other human beings and it must be dealt with. I’m not talking about giving those who act out this behavior a hug, then calling it good. That’s old-style “liberalism,” and it’s been as destructive to our world as its now- popular counterpart, so-called conservatism. These two represent a false choice between ineffective permissiveness and arrogant intolerance.

We can and must move beyond such false choices to a place where love and justice not only balance one another, but are, in fact, one thing. A place where confrontation and good will—even good humor—sit together comfortably; where holding people accountable is considered a complement, not an opposite, to helping them. The only conflict between these many “opposites” is within our own minds, and that is where reconciliation must occur.

With each inner reconciliation we create a new option, a third option where before there were only two, locked in eternal conflict. We create, then are able to stand on, the third side.

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About the Author

Troy Chapman, 39 years old, is a writer, artist, and songwriter currently incarcerated at Kinross Correctional Facility, Kincheloe, Mich. He is serving the 18th year of his 60-90 year sentence and is not eligible for parole until 2045. Almost from the date of his sentencing, Troy has committed his life to showing how love—given unconditionally and creatively—is the only avenue to true peace and justice. As part of this effort, he is co-founder of The Lifeful Way and its newsletter:

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