

What Can Love Do?

by Amanda Hoffman

It is written in the book of Micah, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8)

On this Martin Luther King Day morning I received an e-mail from my friend and brother in the Spirit, Hector Black. His daughter Trish was brutally raped and murdered last year—"raped and murdered" being the basic, abridged version of what happened. To say that this was devastating to family and friends is proof of how inadequate words can be. From within that devastation, Hector emerged with a clear leading to work against the death penalty. From this powerful, emotion-packed, entirely integrated position Hector tried to talk the district attorney out of pursuing the death penalty for Ivan Christopher Simpson, the murderer of his beloved daughter. The D.A. was not receptive.

For some who were near and dear to Hector this decision was difficult to swallow. When I first heard of his decision, what flashed across the screen of my consciousness was William Penn's quote, "Then let us see what love can do." The first time I saw Hector after that, it became ever more clear to me that he hadn't hardened himself, burying his grief in order to do this work. Rather, his tears flowed freely as he stood firmly in the middle of who he is, in the center of his being, encompassed by his grief but not incapacitated by it. I breathed a sigh of relief as I recognized the healing potential of Hector's proactive stance, knowing that although he might not get what he wanted in the courts, he and his family were on the road to healing. The following is Hector's e-mail of January 20:

Notes written January 14 after the hearing on Patricia's case

When we entered the courtroom, there was a man who looked to be in his 30s sitting in the jury box. It occurred to me that this could be Ivan Simpson, the man who murdered and raped our daughter. At one point he looked in our direction, but I lowered my eyes, not wanting to look at him. If it was Ivan Simpson, I was not ready to meet his eyes. There were many familiar faces: Beona, Trish's father, two uncles, an uncle by marriage and his twin daughters, several people from Emmaus House where Trish went to church, some friends from Quaker meeting, and Harriet Coppage

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who also spent a year or more with us when she was a young girl.

There were two minor drug cases before ours and I studied this man who might be Ivan Simpson. His shoulders drooped, but he was strong. He hung his head except for the one time he looked over our way. I had written Judge Goger a 4-page letter about Trish and what she meant to us, and why we did not want the death penalty. I could see the judge looking over at us trying to take our measure.

When the hearing began, the man in the jury box moved to one of the tables in front of the judge, and I knew it was he.

The D.A., Paul Howard, who had been so cold to our request that this not be a death penalty case, sat next to me. After a couple of minutes he reached over and shook my hand.

I don't remember the sequence of events after this. The atmosphere was tense. I remember they wanted to be sure that

Ivan Simpson understood what he was doing by pleading guilty. Then the charges were read. There were several times during the more painful parts of the hearing, that I remembered the friends and family who were thinking of us, and holding us in the Light, and I felt uplifted. I thought of Trish several times and felt her close. The chronicle of all the terrible things Ivan Christopher Simpson had done to our daughter was extremely painful, although I had read most of them some months ago in the autopsy report. Carla Anderson, the Victim Witness person, told us that we should feel free to leave the courtroom if this would be too much to hear. I just held Susie's hand and we wept quietly. I was grateful for my deafness which made some parts inaudible to me.

At some point after this, one of his lawyers read out some of the things that had happened to Ivan Simpson—that he had been born in a mental hospital, that his mother had repeatedly tried to drown him and his three siblings, and had succeeded in drowning one while he was present. She had put another sibling into a coma from drowning. Ivan had been raped and nearly strangled to death by a brother. I could only hear parts of what was said.

I think after this Ivan Simpson was asked "How do you plead?" To each of the charges he quietly said "guilty" and the judge pronounced a sentence for each charge. "Life, 9 years, life, life."

At this point the judge asked if there were any victim impact statements to be read. Michelle, Trish's cousin, spoke first. She told of how she had learned of Trish's death watching the TV, of the agony she felt, the terrible loss, and she repeated several times, "I hate you Ivan Simpson for this! I hate you Ivan Simpson for this!"

She was standing with her twin sister weeping. After she returned to her seat it was my turn.

I had my briefcase because a friend had suggested that I bring a couple of photos of Trish to show the judge. I asked the judge if I could approach the bench. "I have a couple of photographs with me. I would like to show them to you so that you would have an idea of who we are

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Hector and Susie Black are members of Crossville (Tenn.) Meeting and attend Cookeville (Tenn.) Worship Group. Hector works at his organic orchard north of Cookeville.

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talking about here," I said. He indicated that this would be OK. So I showed him a picture of Trish taken the summer before she was killed, and explained that the young white girl in the photo was the daughter of the woman who had tutored Trish when she was a child. She had come with her mother to visit Trish in Tennessee that summer. The other photo was of Trish as a child, maybe 10 years old, together with her sister and our daughters—all in dresses made of the same color and pattern. The judge thanked me for bringing them, and looking at him, I could tell that I was dealing with a real human being who knew how much this pained me. That was a comfort.

Susie told me afterwards that a big sheriff had come up behind me to stop my approach to the judge, nearly grabbed me, but someone else restrained him.

Next I read my Victim Impact Statement. It reads as follows:

My name is Hector Black. This is my wife, Susie. We first met Patricia Ann Nuckles when she was a thin and neglected child of eight, living with her mother and younger sister, in Vine City. We moved to Vine City in 1965, working in a tutoring program established by the Atlanta Friends Meeting. Although Patricia was not our child by any claims of birth, she was our child by every claim of love. She lived with us and became a much-loved part of our family. She was one year older than the oldest of our three girls. Because my wife is handicapped and mostly confined to a wheelchair, our children all learned to help her with basic chores. Trish also took her turn—it somehow put her on an equal footing with our other children. I can still hear her scolding her sisters when they tried to avoid helping. Trish always took her responsibilities seriously. She became our daughter, our children's sister. We watched for 35 years as she grew into a beautiful woman, beautiful in every way. We thought we were helping her, but as can happen when we give, we received far more from her than we gave. She was God's gift to our family.

She was not ashamed of her background. Rather, she used this experience to help others—especially children in the Emmaus House program on Hank Aaron Drive, and in the Public Library in Kirkwood where she worked



Photos shown to the judge by Hector Black. Above: Trish with the daughter of her childhood tutor; left: Trish (right) with her birth and adopted sisters, with Susie Black's mother.

with children such as she had been. She wanted to make the world a better place. And she did.

November 21, 2000, was the darkest day our family has ever experienced. Our lives, mine and the lives of my wife and three daughters, were changed forever as we learned, piece by piece, what had happened to Patricia, our daughter, our children's beloved sister. Every day we struggled to try to remember the beautiful and loving person she was and drive out the horrible thoughts and visions of how she died. Many times it seemed as though the darkness was stronger than we were, that this terrible deed was so burned into our lives that we would never be able to celebrate who Patricia was, how much we loved her, and how much she loved us. I thought God had abandoned me.

About three months after Trish was killed I remember looking at the table we had set out with photographs of her from different periods of her life. The one that caught my eye was a picture of her at about 9 years of age looking back over her shoulder with such a sweet expression on her face, and I smiled for the first time remembering her as a child. It

was the first time I had looked at those photos without a stab of pain.

We were not abandoned. The love of family and friends surrounded us, and God worked through them. I knew that I could not live in this darkness. A friend had given us a book of writings for people who have suffered loss. Among them was the saying, "All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle." Those words helped us. They are written on her headstone in the little graveyard on our farm where Trish is buried, where my wife and I hope to be buried.

I know that love does not seek revenge. We do not want a life for a life. Love seeks healing, peace, and wholeness. Hatred can never overcome hatred. Only love can overcome hatred and violence. Love is that light. It is that candle that cannot be extinguished by all the darkness in the world. Judge Goger, that is the reason we are not asking for the death penalty. I know that "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" were not meant to be empty words. I don't know if I have forgiven you, Ivan Christopher Simpson, for what you did. All I do know is that I don't hate you, but I hate with all my soul what you did to Patricia.

My wish from my heart for all of us who were so terribly wounded by this murder, including you, Ivan Christopher Simpson, is that God would grant us Peace.

When I came to the place where I read the lines about forgiving those who trespass against us and I said, "I don't know if I have forgiven you, Ivan Christopher Simpson. I don't hate you, but I hate with all my soul what you did to our daughter," I was facing the judge and the microphone, but Ivan Simpson was behind me. Something made me turn around, so that I could speak directly to him.

When I read the last line, "My wish from my heart is that all of us who have been so terribly wounded by this murder, including you Ivan Christopher Simpson is that God would grant us peace," I was looking directly at Ivan Simpson and he lifted his head, our eyes met. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. Both of us were in great pain. It was one of those rare moments when raw wounds and pain will strip away all pretense, all falseness. It was somehow a moment of terrible beauty that I will never forget.

There was such torment in his look. How could I hate this man? Certainly I could hate what he had done, but hate someone who had suffered so much as a child, someone tormented by what he had done and filled with remorse? Even Carla Anderson, the Victim Witness person who must have seen countless cases of false remorse and stony silence, said with awe "This is something we rarely see, genuine remorse."

After Ivan Simpson was given a life sentence without parole and was being led away, he said he wanted to say something. He turned and faced us and said twice, with tears running down his face "I am so sorry for the pain I have caused. I am so sorry for the pain I have caused."

As we left the courtroom, Paul Howard, the D.A., shook my hand. I thanked him, but I could tell that he was not happy with the outcome. Outside the courtroom people were seated on some benches and Carla Anderson was asking if we had some questions. I saw Michele, Trish's cousin who had said how much she hated Ivan Simpson, sitting with an empty seat beside her. I thought she might feel that what I had said somehow invalidated what she had said, so I sat beside her, told her how sorry I was about her mother's death (about a month after Trish's) and we hugged each other.

Debbie, the priest from Emmaus House, asked if any of us who wished would like to say a prayer together. We all

held hands—it took her a few minutes to get control of her voice.

Quite a few people thanked me for what I had said. I talked to Ivan Simpson's lawyers, Susan Wardell in particular. She told me how important she felt my letter to the judge was, because otherwise he would not have known how we felt about the death penalty or our relationship with Trish.

I could not sleep that night. I kept thinking about what had happened. It was as though a weight had been lifted from me. I knew that I had forgiven Ivan Simpson, that I must write to him and tell him this, and encourage him that his life is

I could not sleep that night. I kept thinking about what had happened. It was as though a weight had been lifted from me. I knew that I had forgiven Ivan Simpson, that I must write to him and tell him this, and encourage him that his life is not over.

not over. That he can help others also in prison, perhaps especially in prison, where there is so much darkness. This forgiveness, like everything before, does not seem to be something I have "won" or "earned." It is a gift of grace.

I cried throughout the reading of this e-mail. I was flooded with a deep sense of gratefulness for Hector's courage as well as his ability and willingness to be articulate with such raw honesty. I prayed that those very qualities would become stepping stones towards the healing of a ravaged heart. George Fox's proclamation that he "lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars" came to me. And I know now that I've witnessed in my friend what that looks like in the living of an ordinary life.

I consider the ongoing repercussions of September 11, not the least of which is the war in Afghanistan. I am challenged to reconsider how I can "walk my talk" in this world where I dwell, in a daily way, such that my living can make a difference as I let my light shine.

February 7 brought an e-mail from Hector that read in part, "I've had a letter from Ivan Simpson. . . . I'm more stable in my emotions now—for a time I was finding it

very hard to think that I could be concerned about the man who destroyed Trish. It's an awful stretch." Following is the letter, post-marked January 23, 2002.

Letter from Ivan Simpson

Dear Mr. Hector Black/family,

I first want to say God bless you all in all things. Second I have to go straight to the point. I know God has forgiven me, you have forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself, not yet anyway. I have so much anger at myself right now it's unbelievable.

This hardness I have against myself is a sort of strength to help others, that I draw from when I'm witnessing to others about God's love for them. From the moment I came to realize the hurt, pain, grief I've caused others from the evil act I did, I do things for others now. I used to pray for myself, but I realize it's not about me, it's about giving God all the Glory. I only pray for others now. I like writing. I should be asking is it alright to write you all?

I don't know the level of Love Mrs. Patricia had, but if it's anything like your example of it, it's great. God comfort you all, in everything. Feel free to ask me anything you like. If I can I'll try to answer it. They should be moving me somewhere else in about 3 weeks. When I get there I'll write again.

Even if I forgive myself one day, I'll always be remorseful. Maybe that's my thorn in my side, like the Apostle Paul had, that always reminded him about God's Love. I read Psalms 88 everyday for the rest of my life. I used to hear God speak to me all the time. I used to see his Spirit in my dreams and visions, but I guess after I did what I did he took away his touch from me, for right now I miss his voice. I heard it in you that day in court in the way of compassion. I'll talk later. Take care.

Sincerely,
Ivan Simpson

I share with you the heartbreak and inspiring story my friend Hector has to tell not to idolize him or his actions, but rather, to honor him and to give testimony that all things do work together for good, for those who love God. Let this be a story we tell to our children, that they may know that heroes are living people who struggle. Let it be a story we tell ourselves to give us each the courage to regularly ask the question: "What is this leading that I feel and how am I to walk it out?"

May God bless us all and grant us Peace. □

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