23

Refusing to Be Silenced

I will call my next storyteller Stoyan. The name means "stand firm" or "stay," and it is a common Eastern European name. Stoyan was about sixty years old, energetic and friendly. We met in the capital city of his country. After my usual explanation of who I was and what I was doing, Stoyan began telling me his story.

He began by talking about his parents. After the end of World War II, the communists began consolidating their power throughout his country. Eventually, they took control of the government. For decades, the authorities oppressed believers. When Stoyan was twelve, they imprisoned his protestant pastor father. His father remained in custody for ten years.

"At first," he said, "they held him in a secret police place in our city." "Every morning one of the guards would take some of his own human waste and spread it on the piece of toast that he brought to my father for breakfast."

Stoyan reported that the emotional and psychological impact of this persecution was even worse, and left deeper scars, than any physical mistreatment. Nine discouraging months passed with no word about his father. Stoyan's mother finally received notification that her husband was being transferred, with a group of other prisoners, to a distant labor camp.

The jailers allowed the families a one-hour visit before the transfer. Stoyan and his mother went to the well-known torture facility of the secret police on their assigned day. They were ushered out onto a football-sized field along with many other families who had come to see their beloved husbands and fathers and sons.

"Most of the prisoners rushed out to talk with their relatives from the other side of a long row of tables lined up to separate visitors from the inmates," Stoyan recalled. "But my father did not appear. My mother and I sat and waited. We waited for a long time. Finally, when our hour of visitation was almost up, another prisoner, evidently a trustee, walked through the visiting room door carrying what looked like a bundle of rags. He strode toward us and laid that bundle on top of one of the tables."

"My mother took my hand," recalled Stoyan, "and together we walked up to the table where, only because of the piercing blue eyes staring out at me from those rags, did I recognize this skeletal figure of a man as my father."

"I took my father's hand in mine and I put my face close to his. I whispered, 'Papa, I am so proud of you!' I was thirteen years old."

"Mama knew what my father would want most, so she slipped a little pocket New Testament under his wool cap. The jailer saw what she had done. He rushed over and took the little book, and then he summoned his commander. The officer took one look at the book before furiously throwing it to the ground. He screamed at my mother, with a great crowd of people around us, 'Woman, don't you realize that it is because of this book and because of your God that

your husband is here? I can kill him, I can kill you, and I can kill your son. And I would be applauded for it!'"

Stoyan was remembering something that had happened decades earlier. But he recited the words as if they had been spoken yesterday. "My mother looked at that prison officer and said, 'Sir, you are right. You *can* kill my husband. You can kill me. I know that you can even kill our son. But nothing you can do will separate us from the love that is in Jesus Christ!'"

Stoyan said, "I was so proud of my mama!"

After the communist government had transferred his pastor father to the gulag outside of the city, the authorities exiled the rest of Stoyan's family to a remote gypsy village in a distant corner of the country. The police knocked on the door late one night and gave Stoyan, his mother and his three younger brothers an hour to pack. They were allowed to take two suitcases each. They were loaded on a midnight train bound for a place that they had never been.

At some point on that lonely train-ride, frightened and feeling like they had lost everything, Stoyan's younger siblings began to cry. They pleaded with their mother: "What's going to happen to our house? Mama, where are we going to live now? How will Papa know where we are? What are we going to do? What's going to happen to us?"

Stoyan's mother had no answers for her traumatized family. All she could do to reassure them was to say: "God will have to provide, little ones."

Then she led them in singing a hymn. After they finished singing, as the train drew near its destination, a stranger approached the fearful family huddled together and spoke to the mother: "Are you the family of the pastor who has been imprisoned?" (As he asked the question, he referred to the pastor by name.)

"Yes, we are," she told him.

The man said, "Our church was meeting last night. During our prayers, the Holy Spirit told us to take up an offering, and for me to bring it on this train, to give it to you, and to escort your family to

your new home." He handed her a small cloth bag and lowered his voice to say, "Here's enough money for six months. We will bring more when this runs out."

Over the remaining years of his father's imprisonment, Stoyan's family was allowed two visits. Each visit was for one hour each time. Somehow, the pastor and his family managed to survive. It wasn't easy for any of them.

Three times a day, Stoyan was required to report to the local police station. In 1955, the communist authorities expelled him from the university. Stoyan's father, like every evangelical pastor that the government had imprisoned, had been accused of being an American or British spy. Stoyan's father was called "a political prisoner." Because of his family connection, the secret police stamped "Enemy of the Republic" on Stoyan's university record, and declared him ineligible to graduate. He was then conscripted into military service. There, he received no promotions and was allowed to do only menial work in a supply unit.

More than ten thousand "political prisoners" died in Stoyan's country during those years. There was little hope that his father would survive his ordeal. Near the end, his guards made one last cruel attempt to break him. They informed the pastor that he was scheduled for execution. They took him outside, tied him to a pole, and offered him one last opportunity to deny his faith. If he would not deny his faith, they told him, he would be shot.

He straightened his back, stood tall and declared, "I will not deny Christ." The guards became furious with him. Evidently, they did not have the authority to carry out their threat of execution. And, evidently, they had actually been given very different orders. They continued to insult and curse him even as they began to untie him. Then, much to his surprise, instead of escorting him back to his cell, they took him to the prison wall, unlocked a gate, opened a door and literally threw him out of prison without a word of explanation. He

was so shocked by what had just happened that he didn't know what to do.

It finally dawned on him that he had been released. He began to walk. Much later, he found his way to his family's new home. It was a Saturday when he arrived, and no one was home. He then found the church and discovered his family and other church members praying for him at the altar. After a joyous reunion, he was finally able to preach again.

One Sunday, a few months later, an elderly woman asked the pastor for help. He did not know her. She told the pastor that she had a diabetic son—a son who had recently gone blind and was now close to death. He needed medication to manage his agonizing pain. Unfortunately, as a believer, there was no way for her to get that medicine for her son. Stoyan's father promised to try to help acquire the medication. And eventually he was able to do that.

When he took the medicine to the old woman's apartment, she led him into the bedroom to introduce the pastor to her son. She was grateful for the medicine, and she wanted the pastor to pray for her son.

When Stoyan's father entered the room, he got the shock of his life.

The blind, invalid, middle-aged man lying helpless in the bed before him was the prison guard who had spread human waste on the pastor's breakfast toast every morning for the first nine months of his imprisonment.

"Oh, Lord! Do not let me fail you now!" Stoyan's father prayed beneath his breath. Without identifying himself or saying anything that might give away the connection, the pastor granted his former tormenter forgiveness in his own heart, helped the old woman administer the medicine to relieve the man's pain, prayed for her son, and then returned home awed by a new and deeper understanding of God's grace. In fact, he was so overwhelmed by God's grace that the experience changed his life and the lives of his family members.

11

Brothers

My encounter with Senator Harold Hughes was arranged for an evening in late September. Harold, I later learned, had stoutly resisted the idea when Doug Coe first called him to suggest it.

"There isn't anyone I dislike more than Chuck Colson. I'm against everything he stands for. You know that, Doug," he protested.

Before Hughes hung up, Doug gently suggested that the senator's attitude was hardly Christlike. The next day Hughes called back and with a weary sigh relented. "All right, Doug. You set it up."

Fearing that a one-on-one confrontation between Harold and myself might be too explosive, Doug decided to make it a quiet evening with wives, at the home of the soft-spoken veteran Minnesota Republican congressman, Al Quie. He invited as well a former Democratic congressman from Texas, Graham Purcell. That made it two Democrats, two Republicans and Coe.

Harold Hughes is indeed an extraordinary man, I discovered while reading about his past. Raised on a small Iowa farm, he fought his way through the mud of Italy during World War II as an Army infantryman, narrowly escaping death. In the postwar period Hughes became a truck driver and an alcoholic, brawling his way from one bar to the

next, sometimes gone from his young family for days on end and often waking up from a drunken stupor to find himself in a strange hotel hundreds of miles from home. Alienated periodically from family, imprisoned by whiskey, he often thought of suicide.

Alone late one night in 1954 Hughes cried out to God for help. When the fog lifted the next day from his whiskey-soaked brain, everything around him seemed new. He never took another drink.

Hughes achieved moderate success with a small trucking business. He and his wife, Eva, became active in the church. At first involved in Young Republican politics, the fiercely independent Hughes switched in 1957 to the minority Democratic Party and was elected state commerce commissioner. In 1962 he ran for governor. When a whispering campaign began about his alcoholism, Hughes met the issue head-on. Politicians didn't usually admit such things but he was what he was, he explained publicly, among other things a recovered alcoholic. The state's traditionally Republican voters elected him governor by over forty thousand votes, and despite his outspoken liberalism, reelected him twice, then sent him to the U.S. Senate in 1968, replacing a conservative GOP stalwart.

Ignoring unwritten traditions that freshmen members of the Senate sit quietly in the back row to learn from their elders, Hughes was quickly championing liberal causes and within a few months became one of the most outspoken advocates of legislation to end the Vietnam War. This was when we in the Nixon White House put him high on the "enemies" list.

Burning with idealism about the need for sweeping social reforms in American society, Hughes plunged into the race for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination. His charismatic personality won him some pockets of early support, but with no political base of his own, meager campaign funds and his blunt manner frightening many of the more orthodox politicians in his party, Hughes decided to withdraw from the race.

Meanwhile the senator was finding the demands of political life more and more in conflict with his own commitment to Christ. Though he was virtually certain of reelection, Hughes, in the summer of 1973, after deep soul-searching announced that at the end of his term in

January 1975 he would retire from the Senate. The announcement left political observers and the voters of Iowa stunned. Hughes stated that he felt he could do more for his fellow man out of public life, serving only one Master.

After reviewing what I knew about Senator Hughes, I found myself intrigued by his gutsy approach to life. At the same time my political instincts were preparing me for battle.

Doug was on the phone a few days before the planned meeting. "Brother, why don't I pick you up at your office?" he suggested. "Say about 8:00 P.M."

"Sounds good." Patty was to take Doug's wife, Jan, in our car.

At the selected time and place I spotted Doug's battered blue Chevy station wagon. Realizing someone was in the front seat, I climbed in the back. The someone was Senator Hughes!

I sat back and studied my longtime adversary. Hughes was dressed in a checkered sport shirt hanging loosely over a set of denim coveralls. His deliberate disdain of the attire considered proper by Washington standards had earned him the title of "worst-dressed senator" in the year's annual poll of Senate staffers. It was this very casualness plus the warmth of his deep resonant voice that made me lower my guard.

Yet I sensed that the senator was not making the same instant re-evaluation of me. Every now and then he would shift his husky frame, turning to stare into the backseat. His sharp features, black hair and deep-set eyes give him the appearance of American Indian heritage. His scowl as he measured me sent shivers through me. I noticed Doug's eyes glancing nervously first at me through the rearview mirror, then sideways at the senator.

Feeling uncomfortable in my conservative blue business suit, I removed my coat. Conversation fumbled along in safe areas: family and the few mutual friends I could only with considerable effort think of. As we pulled up to the front door of Al Quie's white Colonial home nestled among old oak trees, I could sense Doug's relief. So far, so good.

The Quies—Al and Gretchen—greeted us warmly. Al, a tall, rugged, athletic man and a former dairy farmer, flashed a shy smile that gave him the appearance of being younger than his fifty years. Graham Purcell, gray-haired and rangy, and his vibrant, attractive wife, Nancy,

arrived a few minutes later. We all gathered before a mammoth brick fireplace in the large paneled family room, its walls covered with trophies and awards won by Al and his prize horses.

It was also the first time that I met Jan Coe, whom Doug married when they were both freshmen in college during the late forties. She is graceful and ageless like Doug, with the same effervescent personality. In fact, I was startled by how much they look alike.

Whenever two or more politicians gather together during a Washington social evening, the conversation quickly turns to the latest fight on Capitol Hill, upcoming elections and the fall from or rise to power of the current political personality. The men congregate together, leaving the ladies to fend for themselves. It is important to get the first cocktail in hand quickly, followed by a second and a third. Each man tries to impress whoever will listen with how close he is to the real source of power. "You know, my friends in the White House tell me . . ." The scene might be cast in Greenwich, Connecticut or Winnetka, Illinois, and the conversation about the latest gyrations of the stock market or who's on the way up the corporate ladder.

This night instead we sat in a large semicircle around the fireplace, sipping iced tea and lemonade. Husbands and wives were together, and the talk was about Al's horses. We might as well, I realized, have been in the living room of the Quie farm a thousand miles from the hubbub of the nation's capital. I marveled at the warmth and hominess, all the while keeping a wary eye on Harold Hughes. Gretchen, even more of a Scandinavian beauty with an apron around her waist, brought out piping hot, homemade apple pie with ice cream and smiled appreciatively as Harold devoured the first helping and asked for another.

It was all so new to me I found myself squirming in my chair a few times. We had come together for me to meet Senator Hughes and the others. They were also to expose me to the nebulous concept that Doug had called "fellowship". I sensed that Hughes was becoming a little impatient, too, since he was not known for socializing, particularly without Eva, who was ill at home.

In one sense, Hughes and I were like two boxers in separate corners, restless, awaiting the moment we knew was coming when we would be sparring together. Everyone there knew the two of us would have our

confrontation sooner or later, but I was not prepared to have Harold Hughes abruptly put me onstage.

"Chuck," he said, "they tell me you have had an encounter with Jesus Christ. Would you tell us about it?"

I was not ready for this—to talk about Christ to a roomful of people I hardly knew. Even Doug had not heard in detail what had happened at Tom Phillips's and later on in Maine. For a fleeting moment I considered ducking, then from inside me came reassurance. Harold's expression was open—not warm, not cold. Patty looked nervous. The rest seemed very friendly.

Though I considered myself a veteran speaker in the political arena, this was different. The words came out haltingly. But to my surprise there was no embarrassment, simply a feeling of inadequacy in talking about the most intimate experience of my life. In the middle, I almost bogged down as I wondered, *Are they going to think I'm some kind of nut? Do people really go around talking about their personal encounters with God?* I stopped momentarily and looked around the room. No one spoke but their expressions told me to keep going.

"That night with Tom Phillips broke down some kind of lifelong barrier," I continued. "Yet I had to wonder the next day if all the Watergate unpleasantness had left me so shell-shocked that I was just looking for a way out—any way out. It was the week in Boothbay where I put it together in my mind, not just in my emotions. I really was able to see who Jesus is and my need for Him—then I could give my life to Him." Just saying the words brought the emotion back and I choked up for a minute. "As a new Christian I have everything to learn, I know that. I'm grateful for any help you can give me."

For a moment there was silence. Harold, whose face had been enigmatic while I talked, suddenly lifted both hands in the air and brought them down hard on his knees. "That's all I need to know. Chuck, you have accepted Jesus and He has forgiven you. I do the same. I love you now as my brother in Christ, I will stand with you, defend you anywhere and trust you with anything I have."

I was overwhelmed, so astonished, in fact, that I could only utter a feeble, "Thank you." In all my life no one had ever been so warm and loving to me outside of my family. And now it was coming from a

man who had loathed me for years and whom I had known for barely two hours.

Then we were all on our knees—all nine of us—praying aloud together. As I got to my feet, Harold lumbered toward me, a smile slowly spreading over his face. As he wrapped his arms around me in a great bear hug, I needed no further explanation of what *fellowship* meant or what Paul meant when he wrote, "Let us have real warm affection for one another as between brothers" (Romans 12:10, PHILLIPS).

The others also offered their support and counsel. "Politicians are wary of anyone who faces indictment, but Christians stand together," said Graham Purcell, a judge in Texas before his election to Congress. "That's right," chimed in Al Quie. "We'll be with you. Stand tall."

My Son Shot 10 Amish Girls In a Pennsylvania Schoolhouse

After her son committed a horrific crime, Terri Roberts expected rage and calls for vengeance. What she was greeted with instead healed an entire community.

BY TERRI ROBERTS Feb 19, 2016

GINA LEVAY

On October 1, 2006, my son Charlie, his wife, Marie, and their children came over to our house in Strasburg, PA. Later, as we said our farewells, Charlie seemed quieter than usual. It would be the last time I'd see him alive.

The next day, on my lunch break at work, I heard sirens and wondered what could be happening in our small rural community. Just as I got back to my desk, my husband, Chuck, called. He asked me to come immediately to Charlie and Marie's home. As I hurried down the stairway from my office, a sense of foreboding squeezed my stomach.

The drive was only 10 minutes, but I heard on the radio that there had been a shooting at an Amish schoolhouse nearby. Children were among the dead and injured. Charlie drove a truck for his father-in-law's business collecting milk from area dairy farms, and he often parked right near the school. Fear clutched at my heart. Could he have intervened to help and been killed? As soon as I got to his house and pushed through the crowd of police and reporters, I asked a trooper if my son was alive. "No, ma'am," he responded somberly.

I turned to my husband. With pain in his eyes, he choked out, "It was Charlie. He killed those girls."

All I recall is falling to the ground in a fetal position, wailing. Eventually, we were walked to the police cruiser and driven home. My husband is a retired police officer. I could not imagine his feelings as he was escorted out like a perpetrator after 30 years of being the one who did the escorting.

Absorbing the truth

Chuck sat at our breakfast table, crying. I had not seen my strong, protective husband shed tears since his father passed away years before. Now he could not even lift his head. He'd covered his face with a dish towel to control the flow of tears, his eyes sunken and dull.

And I had no answers. Even after hearing from police what the survivors saw, I struggled to accept the reality: My beloved son had walked into the schoolhouse with an arsenal of guns, boarded up the windows and doors, bound and shot 10 girls, ages 6 to 13, then killed himself. Five of the children died.

A makeshift memorial in Nickel Mines, PA, near the school.

CAROLYN KASTER/AP PHOTO

Later, anger set in, mixing with my pain. *Where were you, God?* I found myself screaming out in my head. *How could you let this happen?* I didn't understand how Charlie could leave his children fatherless, to face the shame and the horror. And the gentle Amish families—what darkness had so possessed Charlie that he would want to rip away daughters as precious as his own? And I felt enormous self-doubt. I didn't know what kind of mother could bear a son who could perpetrate such horrible deeds.

The first miracle

As we sat and sobbed, I looked through our window and caught sight of a stalwart figure dressed in black. It was our neighbor Henry Stoltzfoos, whom we'd known for years. He is an Amishman, and was dressed in his formal visiting attire and wide-brimmed straw hat. Striding up to the front door, Henry knocked.

Mind you, Henry had friends and relatives whose daughters had died in that schoolhouse, at the hands of our son. Like all the Amish, he had every reason to hate us.

But as I opened the door, I saw that Henry didn't look angry. Instead, compassion radiated from his face. Walking over to Chuck, he put one hand on his shoulder. The first words I heard him speak took my breath away: "Roberts, we love you. This was not your doing. You must not blame yourself."

"We had never needed curtains, because we live in the country," says Terri. "But we had to hang up sheets in the windows.

For more than an hour, Henry stood by my husband, consoling him and affirming his love and forgiveness. Chuck kept saying that we had to move away from the people Charlie had hurt. But Henry reassured Chuck that there was no reason for us to move. The Amish did not hold our family responsible for Charlie's actions. "I think the devil used your boy," Henry said.

By the time he left, my husband was sitting up straight, some of the burden eased from his shoulders. To this day I call Henry "my angel in black." But he was far from the only one to show tremendous grace and forgiveness in the face of loss. The next day, a group of Amish leaders walked into the yard of Marie's parents' house. Every one of them had a family member who had died in the schoolhouse. But they did not raise fists in fury. They reached to pull Marie's father into their embrace. Together, the families of the victims and the father-in-law of their killer wept and prayed.

Forgiveness in action

While I was grateful for the reaction we received, I can't say I understood it. "If we will not forgive, how can we be forgiven?" a spokesman for the Amish said on the news shows covering the shooting. "Forgiveness is a choice. We choose to forgive," another spokesperson added.

But these were not just words. The Amish insisted that part of the funds donated to help the victims' families go to Marie and her children—for they'd lost a husband and father. And one grieving father of a girl Charlie had killed visited us. I shared how brokenhearted I was that our son Zach would not attend Charlie's funeral—he couldn't forgive him. I asked him to pray that Zach would have a change of heart.

The media converged to cover the funerals of the Amish children. Terri didn't leave her home for days. "We had never needed curtains, because we live in the country," she says. "But we had to hang up sheets in the windows."

TIM LANDIS/SIPA/NEWSCOM

"Of course," he said. Then, "Would you like me to call him?"

The Amish don't keep phones in their homes and have a distaste for such technology, so his offer deeply touched me. He left a message asking Zach to forgive his brother and come support his family.

A few days later, Zach was there. He told us later that our pleas had softened his heart, but his turning point had been that message.

Lesson learned

And there was still more kindness. After my son's service, at the grave site, the media jostled to take pictures. All at once, at least 30 Amish emerged from behind a shed, the men in their tall, wide-brimmed hats, the women in white bonnets. The group fanned out into a crescent between the grave site and the photographers, their backs offering a solid wall of black to the cameras. They did this to show compassion for the family of the man who had taken so much from them.

Four girls the day after the shooting.

MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

Fresh anger shook me then. I could think only of the terrible wrong Charlie had done. At that moment I was not sure that I could ever forgive the unspeakable evil he'd perpetrated on these young parents, his own children, our family. Yet neither could I stop loving Charlie. He was my son.

I held on to my composure as our Amish guests stepped forward to express their condolences. Among the first to approach us were Chris and Rachel Miller, whose daughters, Lena and Mary Liz, had died in their arms. Murmuring a greeting to Chuck and me, they added softly, "We are so sorry for your loss."

Sorry for our loss. I could barely choke out a response. Our son had taken the lives of their daughters. And here they were comforting us!

It was a moment of sudden, healing clarity for me. *Forgiveness is a choice.* The Amish had made that very clear, but now I knew what it meant: Forgiveness isn't a *feeling*. These sweet parents were as grief-stricken as I was, their hearts broken like mine. I did not have to stop feeling anger, hurt and utter bewilderment at the horrific decisions Charlie had made. I only had to make a choice: to forgive.

And I understood the other part of what the Amish had said: *If we cannot forgive, how can we be forgiven?* I am not a murderer, but I have committed wrongs as well. And I was forgiven! How can I, in turn, not offer the forgiveness I've received—even to my own son? Especially to my own son.

Over the last decade, the love our family was given has inspired me to spread the message of forgiveness wherever I can, often hand in hand with the Amish families my son had harmed. October 2, 2006, brought a tsunami to my world. But I've learned that without storms, there'd be no rainbows. I don't know what is coming, but I am not afraid. I've come to trust my life to the God of both storms and rainbows.

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