

Bill Pelke, forgiveness, and leadership

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Tanner Vickers; Leadership 1301

November 3, 2023

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Seventy Times Seven, by Alex Mar, depicts a story of violence, suffering, forgiveness and influence surrounding the murder of Ruth Pelke and the death row sentence of her killer. In the spring of 1985, 15-year-old Paula Cooper along with three friends entered Ruth Pelke's home under the ruse of interested bible students; shortly there-after Paula brutally murdered the 78-year-old woman. With both internal and societal obstacles, Seventy Times Seven follows Ruth's grandson Bill Pelke, as he fights to forgive his grandmother's killer and save Paula from death row. This paper will highlight the ways in which Bill Pelke embodies what we have identified as a leader in our class.

The murder and what follows

May 14th, 1985 started like any other day, however when four students decided to skip school and steal money for the arcade— things took a turn for the worst. Denise Thomas, Karen Corder, and April Beverly accompanied Paula Cooper to Ruth Pelke's home in their Gary Indiana neighborhood to rob her. Once inside, Paula Cooper stabbed Ruth Pelke 33 times, and proceeded to steal \$10 and her car, which was ultimately what led to them being identified as her murderers.

During the late 1900's in Gary, Indiana, there was a great political and cultural push in favor of capital punishment. This 'tough on crime' mentality was adopted by politicians of all sorts, and support for the death penalty reached a high of 70 percent (Mar, 2023, p. 47). In addition to this heightened distaste of crime, Gary in the 1900's was a recognized as one of the most racist cities in the country, with author Robert Catlin stating, "While most US cities have been the scenes of longstanding racial conflict, few if any have seen worse than Gary's...The Gary-Post Tribune ran headlines such as 'City to Rid Itself of Worthless Negroes'", (Catlin, 1993,

p. 38). The social climate, mixed with the racial tension that was historically present in the town placed Paula Cooper in a harsh light following her crime. Paula Cooper was black, and Ruth Pelke was white.

People at Play

Paula Cooper

Paula Cooper grew up in an unsafe home. Her and her sister were raised by an unstable mother who, while they were young children, attempted to commit suicide while simultaneously killing Paula and her sister in a car in their garage (Mar, 2023). Paula's father was absent and there were often questionable men in their home as well. Paula was known for skipping class and causing fights, however at 15 the brutality of the murder she committed was nothing anyone could have anticipated.

Following her arrest, Paula Cooper was seen as unremorseful and hostile. During the prosecution testimony, it was noted that she had attacked several detention officers and as a result had to be moved to the county jail. A corrections officer said she, "bragged about the killing, said she would stab Mrs. Pelke again if she could and would stab the officer's grandmother, too. Both she and Miss Corder, officers testified, set fire to their cells and taunted corrections officers by saying: 'Give me the electric chair. Give me that shock.'," (Wilkerson, 1986). Paula failed to apologize to Ruth Pelke's family members for her death, and instead continued to make excuses for the ways in which her difficult upbringing put her in that position. The other girls who were present for the murder all received their convictions before Paula, and Karen Corder received a 60 year sentence for simply holding the knife during the robbery that followed the murder. At this point, no one believed Paula deserved less than death; even Bill Pelke had no objection to her death at this point (Mar, 2023).

Bill Pelke

Bill Pelke did not view himself as a religious man. He worked at a construction site, had a wife and no children, and was not looking to save anyone. The Pelke family was a tight-knit group, and Bill was close with his grandmother Ruth; he saw himself as somewhat of a black-sheep in his family, however Ruth was intentional in her relationship with him and always stayed connected to Bill. During the trial, Bill said, he “wants to be in the room for it. He tells himself that he does not wish anyone dead, but he wants the state to hand down the maximum penalty for the taking of his grandmothers life,” (Mar, 2023, pp. 75–76). During the trial, Bill’s father spoke up about what he saw as the Christian thing to do with Paula — give her the maximum punishment. Bob, “speaks of her lack of mercy, says she ‘revelled in her doing and enjoyed it’. He cites Genesis 9:6—whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind— a biblical support for the death sentence,” (Mar, 2023, p. 77).

After Paula was given the death penalty, Bill Pelke left the courtroom without a second thought. In a later interview Bill said, “It was okay with me that the judge gave that sentence. I knew different people who were being sentenced to death for crimes of murder and some were actually being executed. I thought, well if they're going to kill people for killing people, then they should kill the person that killed my grandmother,” (B. Pelke, letter, n.d.). One late night at work, however, Bill experienced revelation that changed his perspective and, eventually, the course of his life. He was recalling a picture of his grandmother that the family had— however his memory of a picture in which Ruth was smiling, actually portrayed her as crying. Bill was distraught, and unsure of what it meant. He believed she was crying because of the violence of her death, but in what he describes as nothing other than a revelation from God, he realizes she is

crying because she would have wanted her family to forgive her murderer. She was crying for Paula Cooper.

Bill Pelke then decided to write to her. He wrote Paula a letter saying she was forgiven, that it is what his grandmother would have wanted. Paula responded with a letter where she spoke about God, her life experiences and how she would understand if she never heard from Bill again. Despite this comment, Bill continued to write to Paula. They developed a friendship that laid the foundation for the future of his life. This public transformation started when he decided to go to the papers. Bill was published with a statement saying, “Paula Cooper is seeking a closer relationship with God and she has God’s love and forgiveness. How about yours? She has mine. Ruth Pelke would want it that way,” (Mar, 2023, p. 130). Bill Pelke went against his family, the community and the culture of the time to stand up for what he believed in; Paula Cooper’s forgiveness. He followed the footsteps of leaders in the faith and held fast to what he believed in. His ‘why’ did not stop with Paula Cooper’s death sentence revoking; he continued fighting against the death penalty world-wide, and later founded the non-profit organization Journey of Hope, which continues to fight against capital punishment still today.

How is forgiving a murderer being a leader?

Opposition, obstacles and pursuit

At the time of the trial, Jack Crawford was the prosecutor, and was seeking re-election. To inspire voters to back him, Crawford took a harsh stance on crime and supported capital punishment without exception. He knew there was potential racial backlash if the judge in Paula Cooper’s case was white, so he ensured that the only black judge in the county, James Kimbrough, would be on the case. Judge Kimbrough had never given the death penalty prior to Paula Cooper, however after sentencing her accomplices with the highest possible punishment

under the death penalty, he knew she deserved a greater sentence for actually committing the murder so he was left with no choice (Marc Biddle, 1987). For many, this left little to no options to oppose the sentencing.

Moreover, no one wanted to overturn the sentence in the first place. Papers during Bill's fight ran quotes of him asking for her forgiveness beside quotes from family members saying they did not agree with what he was doing. Bill "told one reporter that, in Lake County, he believes 'ninety-five percent of the people would like to see Paula burn and burn immediately', but if you live as a Christian, forgiveness should be a way of life," (Mar, 2023, p. 170). He fought through backlash and hatred from people in his community to stand up for what he believed in. Bill, however did not believe he was fighting alone.

Role Models and Inspiration

In Glanzer's *Building the Good Life*, he spoke about the importance of role models in leadership positions. He said, "The greatest athletes in the world still need coaches who can provide them with the wisdom to perfect their practice. The same proves true with any other human practice such as marriage, friendship, being a good citizen, or practicing life as a whole," (Glanzer, 2013). Bill understood the importance of being a leader, but all-the-more, he knew leaders first needed to be led. Bill found his role models in the life of Ruth and the example set by God.

When he would pray, Bill said he would pray that God would show him how to love Paula, how to forgive her. He said, "I promised that any success that came into my life as a result of forgiving Paula Cooper, I would give God the honor and glory. Second promise I made was that any door that opened up as a result of forgiving her, I would go through that door. That was November 2nd 1986 and to this day I've kept those two promises. That's why I'm here

today.” (B. Pelke, letter, n.d.). Bill knew the value of being led by God, and saw being a follower of Christ as far greater than being a leader of man himself. Above all else, Bill notes that the only reason he forgave Paula was because of the example of love and mercy set by his grandmother Ruth. He knew she would have wanted it because her life was an example of her faith — an example that inspired others like Bill to follow in her footsteps.

How does Bill Pelke live out the qualities of a leader.

Leadership in his relationship with Paula Cooper

Bill Pelke led selflessly. In *You are what You Love, We learned that “the gospel is the way We learn to be human,”* (Smith, 2016, p. 8). This is exactly what Bill embodied in his work for Paula Cooper. He based the entirety of his work for her on Matthew 5. His actions were a way he attempted to reflect the gospel in his life. In doing so, Bill was able to follow the example set by Christ and lead in a selfless way. He understood that the things you love affect the way you behave, and Bill prayed often that God would help him to love Paula Cooper (Mar, 2023). Additionally, his leadership story follows him as he works through moral dilemmas similar to what we read in *Building the Good Life*. Bill was able to identify his role as a son, grandson, Christian and Gary native, and found a way to manage the moral conflicts between each role and doing them well, which allowed him to build a framework for his later leadership roles., like founding Journey of Hope; an organization that works internationally to fight against the death penalty, and is run by family members of murder victims (FMMV). Bill was able to create a new categorization to combat his moral conflict, because no matter what he was a Christian, and also someone who suffered the loss of a family member to violence. (Glanzer, 2013, p. 181).

Leadership after Paula Cooper

I spoke with Bob Gross, the current Executive Director of the organization founded by Bill Pelke. He worked closely with Bill while he was alive, and said that even before he was nearing death, Bill knew he wanted the organization to be board run. His hope was for others to be equipped to step into roles in which they could lead both inside of the organization, and in the world around them. Bob said “Bill always wanted to open people’s minds. He wanted to show them that the biggest thing for FMMV is to show people that killing the person who killed our loved one wouldn’t do anything except inflict more pain,” (B. Gross, letter, October 23, 2023).

Bob also noted that Bill’s “single belief” was that the answer to violence is compassion to everyone. He gave his whole life to his mission, inspired everyone he came in contact with, and was sure to foster relationships with those he worked with. Though he often travelled and met people in passing, Bob said he was “sure to keep in touch with people. He would call you on a random Wednesday to see if he could pray for you and hear about the work you were doing. He had a pastoral way about him rooted in checking in, supporting and encouraging us. He never forgot anyone,” (B. Gross, letter, October 23, 2023).

Bill Pelke most embodied transformational leadership and team leadership. Transformational leadership is described as being “the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower” (Northouse, 2015, p. 186). Bill did this through the way that he encouraged those who disagreed with him to understand the moral reason behind his mission, and motivated those who agreed with him to act on their beliefs. He embodies team leadership because of his focus on a unified commitment and standards of excellence (Northouse, 2015, pp. 465–469). Bill was able to guide his team to a common, selfless goal, and was able to stay connected with

members of his team despite distance to unify them and push them toward excellence so that they could continue his mission without his guidance once he passed.

Conclusion

Bill Pelke took a bad situation and turned it into something with a positive affect. Despite the pain caused by the loss of his grandmother, Bill was able to get Paula Cooper off death row and develop an organization to help later FMMV and those who committed the murders. Bill used his life to help others. He led by example, showing others that forgiveness is possible, and beauty out of our pain is within their reach. Bill's foundation still travels to reach different populations, and this year alone they will be visiting 24 different locations across the United States. He invited people into his why, that Jesus said to love and forgive, and allowed them to be transformed in a way that passed his why onto them. Bill led by lighting the fire on his mission, but he did so in a way that other people were able to carry a torch with him. He transformed the people around him, and loved his followers in a way that encouraged them to go out and love others.

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