

DREAM WITH ME

*Race, Love, and the Struggle
We Must Win*



JOHN M.
PERKINS



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To those who continue to believe
that multiethnic churches are possible
and to every person who ever has
or will participate
in the CCDA movement and has accepted
the Three Rs and eight key components
as integral parts of your ministry.
Thank you all.

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Appreciation

My good friend Jon Foreman, of the band Switchfoot, read my first book, *Let Justice Roll Down*, and was inspired to write a song about my life. When I asked him about it, these were his words:

“The Sound (John M. Perkins’ Blues)” is a very important song for us as a band. I see so much hatred and fear around me. I see so many people living out their pain. I hear it on the radio. I see it in the headlines. John Perkins’ story needs to be heard. This song was inspired by a man who sang a louder song than hatred. In a world where we are defined by our differences, Mr. Perkins’ life of service and compassion is a tangible demonstration of what it means to live a life of love. Love is the loudest song we could sing. Louder than racism. Louder than fear. Louder than hatred. John Perkins said it right: love is the final fight. We’re excited to hear this song on the radio, louder than pain.

Today I hope to return the favor, because Switchfoot’s song has inspired me to tell a little bit more of my own story—this time through the lens of their lyrics, “Love is the final fight.”

Foreword

Dream with Me is wonderful. I read, loved, and highly recommend it. The book speaks for itself, but far more if you know the man behind it. So it's John Perkins and how he's influenced me that I want to talk about. Mine is only one story. Thousands, if given the chance, would gladly tell their stories about John—and one day, at great banquets with Christ at the head of the table, they will.

There aren't many people—other than Jesus and my wife—who I can say changed my life. John Perkins is one of them.

In 1976, I read *Let Justice Roll Down*. It stunned me. In the book I learned that in 1946, when John was sixteen, his brother Clyde was shot and killed by a deputy sheriff while waiting for a theater to open. Twenty years later, John spoke out for voter registration and took on segregation when he enrolled his son Spencer in an all-white high school. After organizing a boycott, he was arrested. His beloved wife, Vera Mae, and his children, who were outside the Mississippi jail, heard him beaten and tortured.

I knew all this from reading that powerful book. But in 1988, I met John when both of us were speaking at a writers' conference. I took him to lunch and asked him questions. He told me he had dropped out of school in the third grade, but our coffee cups weren't half empty before I realized he was one of the wisest men I'd ever

met. John smiled a lot and then shed a tear. When he crossed his legs, his raised pant leg revealed a sizable scar. I don't know whether that scar was old or new, temporary or permanent, from an accident or surgery or torture—but to me it symbolized what he'd endured and gave power to his words about forgiveness.

I'm not easily impressed, but after two hours I knew John Perkins was the real deal. Jesus came “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14 NKJV). Christ's fingerprints were all over John. He could have been angry and bitter; instead, he embodied gospel grace. He was incredibly kind to me, a thirty-four-year-old white suburban pastor trying to understand the world. Jesus flipped a switch in me that day, as he has with countless others who've hung out with John.

A year later, not coincidentally, I became involved in peaceful, nonviolent civil disobedience, modeled after the civil rights movement. This resulted in multiple arrests, brief jail stays, the loss of my job, and decidedly unpopular news coverage. The cause was different (defending the rights of unborn children), but as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

When arrests and lawsuits kept me from continuing as a pastor, I started a ministry that gave away all my book royalties to kingdom causes. Besides missions, pro-life work, and helping the poor, some of my other central concerns were racial justice and reconciliation. This came about because of John's influence, and I've been honored to support the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation, Justice, and Christian Community Development.

When writing my novel *Dominion* in 1995, I made my main character a black journalist who grew up in Mississippi. I immersed myself in black history and interviewed many African Americans (including Reggie White, who was then playing for the Green Bay Packers). I contacted John's son Spencer, who lived in Jackson with the family of Chris Rice, a white brother. Chris and Spencer had coauthored *More Than Equals*, a book on racial reconciliation that I really appreciated.

I asked if I could meet with them and ended up in their home with their families.

I attended a Christian Community Development Association National Conference where John Perkins spoke. That afternoon as he walked me down the streets of Jackson, stories overflowed from his heart and mind. He took me into a thrift shop where he found an old hat that was tagged for twenty-five cents. He tried it on and asked for my verdict. I told him it looked snazzy. I'll never forget his delight at that treasure he'd found!

The girl at the counter recognized John as the founder of the ministry that owned the thrift shop and said, "Dr. Perkins, you shouldn't pay for that!" He insisted and then handed her the quarter and proudly put on his hat. I smiled every time I looked at him the rest of the day. What great happiness this man found in something so small—he saw life crowded with God's kindnesses, which helped me see the same.

My favorite character in my novels is Obadiah Abernathy, who played baseball in the old Negro leagues. He modeled dignity, grace, wisdom, and humor. My sports inspiration for Obadiah was Buck O'Neil of the Kansas City Monarchs, but my spiritual inspiration was John Perkins. Whenever I wrote dialogue for Obadiah, I asked myself, *What would John say?*

In 2008, the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association honored John Perkins with the Jordon Lifetime Achievement Award. I canceled whatever was on my schedule to attend the event at which he was presented with the award. After John spoke, I waited at a distance. Though ten years had passed since we'd last seen each other, his face lit up when he saw me, and he called me by name. A photographer snapped a picture of John greeting me, his hand on my shoulder, which appeared on the front page of a newspaper the next day. I still treasure that photo.

There's so much good in *Dream with Me*, because it flows straight out of John's heart. It's honest, humble, prophetic, and Christ-honoring. We need to hear it.

John, you've shown me Jesus. Countless people would say the same. I look forward to spending time together on God's new earth, where love, justice, and joy will be the air we breathe (see 2 Pet. 3:13).

Meanwhile, you have my heartfelt gratitude, brother. I'm encouraged by the words I believe Jesus will one day say to you: "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

Randy Alcorn
Author of *Dominion; Heaven;
Money, Possessions, and Eternity;*
and *If God Is Good*

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God bless you all! *Dream with Me* would not have come to fruition without your skills and expertise.

Introduction

At eighty-six years old, people tell you how much wisdom you have. I don't know about all of that, but I do know that God has done much in me and through me, and He's still working on me.

I never set out to record the events of my life—not on paper or on film or in some university's archives. Truth be told, I have forgotten more of what has happened than I can remember. I like it that way because I always seek to focus on God giving me new dreams. But as I talk and teach—and anyone who knows me well knows I love to do both—I have found myself reflecting, digging deeper, and reaching a few conclusions that have surprised even me.

I have always been a dreamer. It almost seems as if my life has gone back and forth between two worlds: the world that reflects reality around me and the world made by the dream I had of what life could be. My wife, Vera Mae, would always tell me to be careful because I would make people believe that the dream was already reality. When I was young, my dream was to get out of Mississippi and find a better life in California. After coming to know Jesus Christ and doing ministry in prisons with young men who looked like me and spoke the same broken English, I began to dream again. I dreamed of going back to my home state of Mississippi and sharing the love and joy of Jesus Christ that I had discovered in California.

I have continued to seek to live out that dream in my life—to fulfill the Great Commission—but I hope the dream world I long for now looks like the coming kingdom of God.

As much as we need to dream, we must also never forget what has happened in the past. We know how much farther we can go partly by seeing and marveling at how far God has already brought us. I have never stopped being amazed by God’s redemptive love and His willingness to allow us to participate in spreading that love. To think of what God has done for me—a poor, third-grade dropout from rural Mississippi—is truly amazing, and every day I have to recognize that all of what I have done and have been given is by God’s grace alone.

It’s thrilling to actually see happening what so many of us have been working toward for more than half a century—more freedom, more justice, and more love. So here, I glance over my shoulder not simply to rehash old news but as a way to push onward. I offer reflections on some small steps my friends and I have taken with God and ponder some big struggles we all face today as individuals, as the church, and as a nation. These are my memories, insights, and dreams, as well as some confessions. As I grow older, I think I become more and more aware of my own sinfulness and the sin that is all around me. But what a joy it is to offer up my confessions to God, knowing that I am forgiven and saved by His grace. I don’t want to pretend that I have lived a perfect life, and I hope this book will remind every reader that all the good that has been done through my life has been by God’s grace and not my own works.



Like many couples, Vera Mae and I watch the news on television. I often read the newspaper too—yes, I am what younger generations call “old school,” but I like the smell of newsprint and the sound of pages crinkling. We see the same stories you see—a tornado devastates a small town in Nebraska; the threat of war

simmers in a foreign country; another business fails; yet another Hollywood marriage gets messy; congressional approval ratings fall; hate crimes continue to rage in relation to ethnicity and religion; and in my hometown of Jackson, Mississippi, paramedics rush a pregnant teenage girl to a hospital after a drive-by, drug-related shooting—and we start to wonder if society has really come all that far. As I look back on my life, I see the many successes that have happened in my lifetime. But justice is something for which every generation has to strive. I may have helped win some victories for my generation, but it is time for the next generations to pick up the mantle and continue the fight. True justice isn't something we will see until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness. And until that day, we will call those under us to keep striving to right the wrongs for their own generation.

In many ways, our nation appears to be more divided and hateful than ever. Stereotyping, profiling, race-baiting, and dehumanizing those we consider to be “different” from us mark our country instead of the grace and love we are called to demonstrate as Christians. Those of us in the older generations bear this cross. Yet as I travel from city to city, I hear a very different story from a small but growing number of young people, mostly college students and recent graduates. Their fervent passion, belief in change, and acceptance of one another have convinced me that America stands at the doorstep of a potentially historic and profound breakthrough for blacks, whites, Latinos, and everyone. I contend that these young men and women are the ones to take up the call for justice for their generation.



I tend to speak more Mississippi Ebonics than Ivy-League English, so I have asked my editors to *craft* (their word!) sentences and paragraphs that reflect my heart, but they also have agreed to let me keep my speaking voice throughout. So the result is a mixture. I like that. As you mull over what I have written, done, and dreamed, I

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hope you will say, “John Perkins tried to live out a Christian life in the days in which he lived.” That’s all. Just that I did my best to be faithful with what God has given me in the days He has allotted me.

This book is part of my attempt to do just that. So together, let’s dream a little . . .

Prologue

Unexpected Places

My grandson Big John and I made good time on the interstate. The slight drizzle that tailed us for most of the 188-mile drive south from Jackson held off until we reached New Orleans, where it became real rain, clickety-clacking on the hood of our car like a band of tap dancers in the French Quarter. Big John turned the wipers to fast, and we swished our way through the final few blocks to our hotel.

In a way, the downpour and clogged streets were a fitting welcome. You see, the Big Easy has always made me a little uneasy, though I am no stranger there. No doubt the voodoo underbelly and nonstop carnival mood feed my anxiousness. But I would like to think I am also moved by the pain I feel for my folks there: the poor who don't know they are poor and the downhearted who are still staggering years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Most visitors come to New Orleans to have a good time. Not me. It seems I always come on serious business, and this trip on a rainy day in November was no exception. An hour or so after we checked in to the Marriott, Big John and I found two empty, cushy chairs in the lobby. Finally, we could relax. As we sat and chatted, hundreds of people whirled past. Some, like me, were in town for a conference

of evangelical theologians; others had come to enjoy the jazz music or some Cajun cooking. I looked Big John square in the eyes and asked, “How in the world did I get *here*?”

At some point, we all ask this same question—or something like it. *What am I doing walking down the aisle to get married? Why was I asked to teach the Sunday school class? How did I end up living on the most dangerous street in the city? Why does justice matter to me?* The unexpected is precisely that: something we did not foresee or pursue, or an event or circumstance that unfolds in a surprising way. It may be an “aha!” moment or a sudden tragedy, an honor we never imagined or a challenge we never believed we’d be able to overcome. Whatever the specifics might be, these moments have a way of getting our hearts pumping and our nerves on edge—whether from joy, sadness, hope, or fear. They also have a way of defining our lives.

I’ve found myself in a lot of unexpected places—so many, in fact, that the question “How in the world did I get here?” has become a thread that runs throughout my story, just as much as justice and love run through it. As you read on, you will see what I mean.



I dropped out of school somewhere between the third and fifth grade, but now I have thirteen honorary doctorates. Colleges and seminaries invite me to speak to their students. And I have an academic center and two scholarship programs that bear my name.

I was sixteen when a white deputy sheriff shot and killed my twenty-five-year-old brother, Clyde, in New Hebron, Mississippi, where we had grown up. Clyde had returned home from fighting in World War II just six months earlier after being honorably discharged from the army, with combat ribbons to show for it. He and his girlfriend, Elma, were waiting in a long line with other blacks for the movie theater ticket booth to open (whites got their tickets at a separate booth in another area of the theater). The crowd was a bit noisy, and the deputy sheriff had instructed everyone more than once to be quiet.

Clyde and Elma, who were turned away from the sheriff, were talking, when the officer clubbed Clyde over the head. Clyde grabbed the deputy sheriff's blackjack—probably an automatic reaction intensified by his military training—and struggled with him. The officer took two steps back, pulled his gun, and shot Clyde twice in the stomach. The local doctor tried to tend to his wounds, but what he could do was limited. So my family carefully placed Clyde into my cousin's '41 Chevy and headed to the nearest hospital in Jackson. Clyde's life was drifting away as he continued to bleed during the entire car ride. He was taken to a treatment room at the hospital and some time later officially declared dead. My big brother, a heroic survivor of World War II, was defeated by the unspoken war at home. I was devastated. I was the youngest sibling and looked up to him more than my other siblings (Clifton, Mary, and Emma Jean).

My family sent me from Mississippi to California, fearing that I would meet the same fate as my brother if I stayed. To them, it looked like I might not make it out of my teens. As I write this book, I'm eighty-six years old, and I've celebrated sixty-five years of marriage and fifty-six years of Christian ministry.

When I was a boy, I was paid fifteen cents for a hard day's work hauling hay. Decades later, a just-elected United States president asked me for advice on how justice is an economic issue. As a civil rights worker in the '60s and early '70s, I was arrested and beaten for fighting for freedom in rural Mississippi. Twenty years later, I found myself on a stage just to the left of President Ronald Reagan when he gave his "Evil Empire" speech.

How in the world did all this happen?

I've traveled the world to cities such as Beijing, Tokyo, São Paulo, Sydney, Nairobi, London, and all the major cities in the United States, preaching about the human race, freedom, and faith. I have shared meals and conversations with governors, billionaires, sports stars, university presidents, megachurch pastors, and all sorts of so-called movers and shakers. I have received pats on the back, accolades, and

praise. I have written books, been interviewed on television, and even served on prestigious boards and panels.

I am tremendously grateful for these opportunities and for the wonderful people I've met along the way. But deep down inside, I'm still the kid who grew up in a family of sharecroppers and bootleggers in a small town in the Deep South. I'm still most comfortable picking greens with my childhood friend Ed, chatting with a single mother while waiting in line at Popeyes, or sitting on the steps of a row-house porch in Philadelphia with my friend Shane and some of his young neighbors as we enjoy a sunny afternoon together and wipe ice cream from the kids' faces. While I appreciate the attention I've gotten for my work and the kind words people have said about me, the look you see on my face most often is not so much one of accomplishment but, rather, one of astonishment.

How in the world did I get here?

The only answer I know to give is that these things can happen when you walk with God. It's easy to look at a person—to see where he started and how far he has come—and think you know how the story will end. But I've learned what Saul learned on the road to Damascus: when God's involved, everything can change in an instant. You may think you know where you're headed, but often God has a different plan—something “exceedingly abundantly above all that [you] ask or think” (Eph. 3:20 NKJV). Sometimes a light drizzle becomes a deluge. Other times you open your eyes to find yourself by still waters. Sometimes you hear thunder clapping along with the rain. Other times the clouds disappear so you can see a billion stars in the sky.

Just when I think I've witnessed every possible thing, something else comes along. Sort of like a rainbow appearing after a lightning storm. On the last night of that conference in New Orleans, a popular band called Switchfoot performed at the House of Blues, just a few blocks from the Marriott where I was staying. The music was too loud for my ears, but my daughter Elizabeth and one of our interns,

Nikki, went. Switchfoot's set included a song they say was inspired by my first book, *Let Justice Roll Down*. And, yes, Switchfoot put my name in the song title: "The Sound (John M. Perkins' Blues)."¹ Now, how did *that* happen?



Anyone who knows my story would expect this book to ooze with justice issues. After all, the pain caused by injustice has motivated me to spend a lifetime working for social change on behalf of widows, prisoners, the poor, and anyone who struggles. So how did someone who has experienced the anguish of poverty, racism, and oppression end up wanting to write a book about love as his climactic message? Good question.

For decades I've tried to meet people where they hurt. I've preached and desired to see "justice for all," and I still fervently believe in it. God loves justice and wants His people to seek justice (see Ps. 11 and Mic. 6:8). But I've come to understand that true justice is wrapped up in love. The old-time preacher and prophet A. W. Tozer had a way of making the most profound truths simple and palatable. He once said, "God is love, and just as God is love, God is justice."² That's it! God's love and justice come together in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and we can't be about one and not the other. They're inextricably connected.

God is holy and just. He is life. He is light. He is love. When we try to understand people's actions, whether at a crime scene or just in everyday life, the most important thing to look for is their motivation. John 3:16 tells us that because God so loved the world He sent His only Son to save us. Love is what brought God down from heaven and generated the incarnation. Love was always God's motivation, which is why it must be ours as well.

As I think about what I want to say to people—from a pulpit, in a book, at the dinner table, in the lobby of a Marriott, or in line at Popeyes—at this point in my life, it's all about love. As I look back

over my personal journey—the highs, the lows, and everything in between—it’s all about love. Love is the first, middle, *and* final fight.

We live in a broken world. How should we react? No doubt, some actions lessen the pain—and that’s a good thing. But neither clenched fists nor helping hands alone will bring about the complete transformation God wants. Only love can touch us at the point of our pain and begin to heal us and make us whole—individually and collectively. We are called to love. To love God, to love our neighbors, even to love our enemies. Yes, love can be a real struggle. Anger is easier. Even a tireless, lifelong campaign for justice might be simpler.

I often tell people that justice is a stewardship and economic issue, but truthfully, I think love is as well. Justice and love are intimately tied together in this way. Caring for those who have the least, loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, showing mercy to those around us—these are all issues of love, but they are also issues of justice. We cannot have true justice unless it is motivated by love, just as God’s greatest act of justice, sending Jesus to die for us, was motivated by love.

Years ago, before the emancipation of slaves, Frederick Douglass described the contradiction and failure of the church in America, saying:

Fellow-citizens, I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad: it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing and a bye-word to a mocking earth. It is the antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your Union. It fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement; the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet you cling to it as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes. Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible

Prologue

reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy it forever!³

Today I fear we can say the same thing in regard to the racism that is still deeply ingrained in the church in America, and I think I can use these same words as an indictment of the church today. But it is time to repent. It is time to forgive. It is time to move forward from the racism and bigotry that we have allowed to define us for too long. It is time for love, rather than pride and division, to be our final fight.

1

Side by Side (but Not Together)

Desegregation was one of the big goals of the civil rights movement. “Separate but equal” in the South became “separate and unequal.” The disparities were in things as small as water fountains and as vitally important as education and health care.

In fact, when we black patients were sick, we had trouble getting to see a doctor. We had to be to the doctor’s office by 8:00 a.m., because if we weren’t, other black patients would get there first, and we might not get to see the doctor that day. If a doctor did see us, it would always be in the afternoon after the white patients had left. People would sit all day at the doctor’s office and still not see the doctor that day. Our time meant nothing to them.

In the case of an accident, or if the doctor had to rush to the hospital, none of us black patients got treated. We had to return the next day and start over again. Appointments didn’t exist for blacks.

My son Phillip had polio as a child, and we learned that we could get some of his medication through the March of Dimes. They told us they had a representative in every county and sent us to a health clinic in downtown Mendenhall, Mississippi.

We had to go in through a back door and wait for hours in a separate waiting room to get my little boy's medicine. I didn't think about it too much. That's the way things were, and the important thing was to take care of Phillip.

In the years since then, I often have thought about those walls that kept black people and white people apart, even in places where we had so much in common. And yet we were treated as if we were two different species.



In 1973, Voice of Calvary Ministries, the ministry Vera Mae and I started after we moved back to Mississippi in 1960, opened a health clinic in the black section of Mendenhall. We had an X-ray machine and all new equipment. We were thrilled about our clinic, but we had barely gotten it open before a terrible flood caused thousands of dollars of damage to our equipment and the facility. We needed to find a location on higher ground.

The white doctor who had run the clinic up by the courthouse had died, and according to his wishes, his widow was to sell the building only to someone who would use it as a medical clinic. The property was located uptown, in the white section of town, and no property had ever been sold to a black person there before. The widow sold us the building because we convinced her we were committed to using it to provide health care for the community.

I'll never forget the day we took possession of that building. We paid her \$75,000 cash, and she deeded the clinic over to Voice of Calvary.

As soon as we had the keys, a bunch of us went inside. The first thing I noticed was the wall that divided blacks and whites. Many times I had stared at the wall from the black side. For the first time, we were able to look at both sides of the wall, and it confirmed what we had already assumed: the white side had nice, beautiful paneling; the black side was bare and worn.

The stark contrast was symbolic of how everything we blacks had was inferior.

I picked up a sledgehammer and started slamming it against the wall with all my might. We tore down that dividing wall in less than thirty minutes. It felt good! It also reminded me of something the apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:14–16: Christ has made peace between Jews and gentiles, and He has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us.

It was an emotional experience, and I didn't care that we had ruined nice paneling that, under other circumstances, we would have reused. From that time on, we determined there would be only one waiting room—open to blacks and whites.

At our new clinic, all patients came in through the same door and sat in the same waiting room until a doctor was ready to see them. From the beginning, even some poor whites used our clinic.

The first physician to work at the clinic was Dr. Kevin Lake. For a while volunteer doctors came to help out for a few months or a year or two. Dr. Gene McCarty was the clinic's first full-time doctor. He stayed for two years and helped expand the clinic's capacity as a medical facility. Dr. Dennis Adams, a young black man from New York, joined the clinic staff because he felt God was calling him to serve with us in Mississippi. He's been at the clinic for more than forty years. He and his wife raised their kids in Mendenhall. People love him. He has black and white patients.

When I visit Mendenhall, I love to watch people going into that integrated clinic. I smile because it's in the shadow of the courthouse.

Tearing down the wall in that health center was for me what refusing to give up her seat on that bus must have been for Rosa Parks. That is something I look back on and think, *Because of what we did, things are different. Life is better now.*

To this day, every time I see the building, it brings me great joy to know that the wall that once separated the races came tumbling down.



Discrimination was prominent in restaurants, hotels, and bus depots. Black citizens weren't allowed to participate in the society they had spent centuries helping build.

Segregation was wrong, so we fought it with all we had.

In 1968, civil rights hero Andrew Young, who stood on the balcony with Martin Luther King Jr. when he was killed, spoke at Jackson State University, a historically black university. The organizers printed 3,000 posters promoting the event. The auditorium where Mr. Young spoke could seat about 1,500 people.

Fewer than 400 attended. About 250 came from the community, leaving about 150 students from a campus of 3,700 undergraduate and graduate students. I don't blame the students for not coming. I blame the professors for not making the event a priority.

Two days before Christmas in 1969, I was jailed for protesting the beating of a black boy who supposedly telephoned a white girl to ask her for a date. Vera Mae helped organize a shopping boycott of white-owned stores in Mendenhall to protest. In February of the following year, I went to the Rankin County Jail in Brandon to visit nineteen Tougaloo college students who had been arrested after a protest march. I was subsequently arrested and tortured by white police officers. We as a society have failed the students of today if they don't understand and respect the leaders and martyrs who worked tirelessly for the cause of equality.

Courageous men, women, and children who were willing to give their lives for the cause of equality led the civil rights movement. Young people were often the hands and feet behind the vision of the adult leaders. They made sacrifices and provided energy for the movement.

I'll never forget one Sunday in 1964 when a bunch of kids met up together and decided they were going to integrate the movie theater in Mendenhall. This was fairly early on in the integration efforts,

but they had a pretty good idea that integrating meant going to jail and getting beaten up.

The kids tried to keep it a secret because they knew their parents wouldn't want them involved. But word got out, sending numerous parents into a fearful panic. They feared not only for their children's safety but also for their own livelihoods. People whose kids went to jail for trying to integrate a whites-only facility risked losing their jobs, their insurance, and their homes.

I attended the meeting, not to try to talk them out of anything, but to listen. My eldest children—Spencer, Joanie, Phillip, and Derek—were there. Vera Mae and I wanted the kids to go even though, like the other parents, we were concerned for their safety. We didn't have to worry about the other threats because we didn't work for white folks, the bank didn't have a lien on our house, and our insurance agent was a fairly decent white man.

At the meeting, I listened to the organizer talk to the kids. He told them the truth—they might go to jail, get beaten, or, worst of all, killed.

Finally, he said, "It's time to go." The way he said those words was as powerful as if he were saying, "Even if no one comes with me, I'm going."

As I recall, Spencer, who wasn't more than eleven at the time, was the first to stand and go with him. (Although it may have been Joanie—she was always a rebel.) Derek also was a rebel, and Phillip would do anything Spencer did. All four of my children, along with fourteen others, tried to integrate the theater.

That event was a pivotal moment in my life. I had to make a choice, and that choice revealed a lot about who I am. *If my kids are ready to give their lives for the cause, I'm willing to let them do it.* Some parents might not have agreed with that decision, but my children understood that some ideals are important enough to risk their lives for.

I was proud of them for that stance.

The theater owners must have also recognized the determination of these young protesters. When they heard the kids were coming, they closed the theater.

Permanently.



Not long ago, I went back to Mendenhall and crossed paths with Bettye Norwood, who had been part of our ministry. After being employed with World Vision in California for twenty years, she came back home and worked in the Simpson County district attorney's office.

When she was growing up, it was unheard of for a black woman to have such a position. "I never thought that I would be in this courthouse working with a top official," she said.

As we talked, we reminisced about the time a group of us integrated a local truck stop.

I was terrified, but I was the leader, so I tried not to let it show.

The employees at the truck stop finally decided to serve us, and we sat while they put the plates and forks in front of us. I tried to pick up my fork, but I was shaking so badly, I couldn't do it.

Afterward, people asked me, "What did you do?"

"We integrated. That's what we went there to do."

Fear or no fear, we had made up our minds that we were going to keep pressing on until we were allowed to sit at tables just like the white people.

If you want to see how much Mississippi has changed in the last fifty years, look at the restaurants. Pictures of the group that integrated the Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown Jackson back in 1963 remain etched in my mind.

"A huge mob gathered, with open police support while the three of us sat there for three hours," a member of that group, former Tougaloo College sociology professor John Salter, said. "I was attacked with fists, brass knuckles and the broken portions of glass sugar containers, and was burned with cigarettes."¹

A few blocks from the location of that Woolworth's is Hal and Mal's. The place features live music and is regularly filled with both black and white customers. A few blocks in the other direction is the King Edward Hotel, which reminds me how far we've come.

According to the *Jackson Free Press*,

Built in 1922, the current iteration of the hotel was a favorite watering hole for white state legislators and other dealmakers during the days of Prohibition and after. The hotel fell on hard times midway through the 1950s, and the King Edward remained segregated after other downtown hotels integrated. When it finally began admitting black guests, the hotel's remaining white patrons jumped ship, and in 1967, the King Edward closed its doors.²

In 2009, the hotel reopened after the building was renovated by a group of investors, including a white attorney, a black professional athlete, and a black rap artist. In the remodeled building, anyone can rent apartments, stay in hotel rooms, and eat at the restaurant, bar, and coffee shop. This truly is a testament to progress and transformation.



I like to talk about the positive changes of integration. However, it's harder to talk about the costs and unintended effects. Take, for example, the schools.

Six of my children—Spencer, Joanie, Phillip, Derek, Deborah, and Wayne—were among the first black children to attend the all-white school in Mendenhall. But while they were there, their white teachers did not treat them the same way they treated the white children.

Phillip's teacher wouldn't allow him to answer questions in class. For two years Spencer went to the school and no one talked to him. The seat next to him was always left empty, and as far as people at school were concerned, both his first and last name were a racial slur.

Whenever one of my kids did make a white friend, it wasn't long before that friend would come to school and say, "My parents said I can't play with you anymore."

Phillip was probably hurt the most by his school experience. Because he was sickly, I had always given him a lot of love. He grew to expect that other people would love him too. When he went to the white school and the people treated him with hatred, the rejection almost destroyed him.

I didn't even know several of the stories until many years later because our children had tried to keep some of the hatred and rejection they had experienced from hurting me and Vera Mae too. Deborah remembers some of this well and says,

My first day in class with all white students, I walked in and was assigned my seat. Of course, everyone was staring. Even the teacher seemed to be a little shaken presenting her lesson plan. Confidence was rarely a problem for me as a kid, with three athletic older brothers, but this day I was all alone. Not one student said a word to me, nor did I see a smile. It seemed that I could feel their eyes while reading their thoughts. I was alone on the playground. I ate lunch alone. If I got on the monkey bars, the kids got off. When I jumped on the merry-go-round, my classmates jumped off. I would hear people say, "My dad is going to kill your dad." This was my life in first grade, only six years old. The end of the day, the school bell would ring, and I would pack my books under my arm and walk toward the big magnolia tree where we were to be picked up and wait—alone.

One afternoon, as I was standing there, two white older boys who must have been in third or fourth grade slapped my books out from under my arm. The books spread out on the ground. As I stood in slight shock, I told myself not to cry. Before I could bend down to pick up the books, the two white boys reached ahead of me and were starting to pick them up. As I glanced over my shoulder, I saw two of my older brothers standing behind me. I stepped back. The white boys picked up my books and returned them to me. My brother told me not to tell Mom and Dad about the bullies.

I sometimes question my motivation for letting my kids endure the kind of torment they experienced to desegregate the schools. Did I send them out of pride? Was I wrong to let them suffer for a cause I believed in? Maybe.

At the same time, it was the natural step to take as a leader. I was a leader in the movement, so shouldn't my family be pioneers in integration efforts? How could I ask other families to send their kids to those schools if I wouldn't send my own?

It was the right thing to do, but I'm still troubled at times. I put my children in harm's way.

It's also painful to think about the way the schools have resegregated themselves. And the church has helped.

When the federal government ordered desegregation, many white parents decided to keep their kids from going to school with black kids. During the first year of integration, they formed all-white private academies. After the government said that was illegal and wouldn't give them tax-exempt status, they turned the schools over to the churches.

Today the public school system in Jackson is about 98 percent black. Some of this resegregation came about simply because of where people live—after all, the population of Jackson is about 80 percent black. *But about 20 percent of Jackson's population is white.*³

So where are those white kids going to school? Most of them attend private Christian academies, many which were established in the '60s, after schools were forced to desegregate. Academically, these academies are among the best schools in Jackson, so I understand why parents want to send their children to them. I don't want to condemn that choice, and as I mentioned before, I still question my own choice to send my children to integrate the schools in the early '60s. I do not believe our children should be used to make political statements or pacify the guilt parents might feel about having the ability to send their children to better schools.

However, I also see an undermining of the purpose of integration, resulting from decisions to move children out of the public schools. The most obvious sign is a weakened resolve by the community to see that all children receive a top-notch education.

A separate and unequal education. Many Christians who send their kids to private schools don't understand how this decision affects the quality of education for black children. It's a major blind spot.

I want to make people aware of the effect this choice has on our black children in the public schools. It is still resegregation, which was proved by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* to be inherently unequal. If we continue to separate our children based on race and social status, particularly keeping poor blacks in inferior conditions, how can we ever expect them to learn to reconcile? It will just lead to more violence, hatred, and crime.

I pray that parents of schoolchildren will wrestle over their decision about where to send their kids to school and realize it's not just their children who are affected by their choices.



Not long ago, I was invited to Mendenhall High School, which is truly integrated now. I told the students about myself, especially my conversion, my experience in Mendenhall, and how I spent eleven years working for civil rights in their hometown. When I finished, those kids broke into applause that went on for a long, long time.

After they were dismissed, many kids—both black and white—asked me to autograph anything they had in their hands. It was an emotional moment that made so much of the suffering and pain I had experienced disappear. The love they showed me testified to the redemptive work God has been doing in the community.

In Mendenhall, where the schools have actually integrated, we are seeing real equality form in the hearts of members of this new generation, and it is enriching for the entire community. When the

schools stay separate, people in the community don't learn how to talk to one another. We don't learn to overcome our differences and get along. We don't learn to love. We may think we are keeping the peace by creating separate schools. In reality, we are taking away from a deeper peace that can come with developing close relationships with those of a different skin color.

A year after schools in Mendenhall became fully integrated, it came time to vote for the high school's homecoming queen. The school had about four hundred black students and only three hundred white students. Not surprisingly, a black girl won the title because of the majority of black students. The next day, though, the principal expelled the girl who had won, claiming she had once stolen from a white lady she had worked for years ago and was unfit for the title. However, the following day all of the black students stood up and walked out of the school in protest, along with a good number of the white students. The white teachers and principal may not have realized it, but a year of attending school together, playing basketball together, and learning to live and study with one another had changed those students' hearts. Integration may come with a cost, but when it leads to reconciliation, it is worth it.



Did desegregation fix all the racial problems in Mississippi or in America? No, it did not.

Did it change the world we live in for the better? Looking out at those kids at Mendenhall High, I believe it did.

Was it a goal worth the suffering and sacrifice? Everyone who participated in the effort has to answer that question for themselves, but for me, yes, it was.

Perhaps the best question to ask is, "Would you do that again?" The applause and the love and acceptance those children showed me would make me want to do it again. Yes, I would endure the pain and suffering for that redemptive, loving moment.

People like me, Martin Luther King Jr., and a few others sometimes earn a hero status for things we did during the civil rights movement, but really the daily, faithful acts of ordinary black and white folks made the movement what it was. The many people committed to marching and boycotting—who got no recognition but, rather, rocks thrown at them—were instrumental in tearing down the social walls of segregation. I am thankful for my chance to be a leader, but I cannot tell my story without acknowledging how much I depended on others. The names of many humble and courageous people might never be known, but the stories I tell are representative of their indelible work.

During the mid-1950s boycott in Montgomery, Mother Pollard, an old lady with blisters on her feet, was asked at the end of a march if she was tired. She responded by saying, “My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.”⁴ I think that is representative of how so many of us felt. The reality of life is that joy often comes out of pain and suffering—and that is the only way progress happens. While the pain was hard back then, I am thankful to have experienced some of the joy that has come out of it today.