

The Graceful Man

By Jack Ross

GEORGE FOX EXHORTS US TO “BE PATTERNS, BE EXAMPLES”. When I was a new Friend, I met Quakers who did that. But I felt that something was amiss: we were well educated, white, had good incomes, were not violent toward one another. The world that I saw around me was very different. It was Methodist clergyman, Paul Caton, who taught me most about how to live nonviolently every day in that violent world. He deserves to be better known; his way of life has much to teach.

House was nearby.

Paul could have successfully served any prestigious church. He was a superb preacher and had an excellent singing voice. His wavy black hair and handsome face drew stares. But he chose to go where God called him. Halsted Street Institutional Church was in a multi-ethnic ghetto, an area of light industries mingled with run-down dwellings. Beyond the boundaries there was trouble; inside there was poverty. Many residents never left the neighbourhood. There was tension between one Catholic church for Irish, and another for Poles and Lithuanians.

them spinning down a long concrete floor to smash against the wall. Paul entered, saw the familiar sight, and calmly told the youth that he must leave. The young man refused. Paul took him gently by the elbow and began to calmly walk him out. The youth took off his belt, which had a huge buckle, wrapped it around his hand and began to strike his escort on the face. The walk proceeded unhurriedly down the corridor, down stairs and out the door. Paul, I suppose, walked home where his wife, Inez, applied first aid.

A year later after other incidents and much counseling, that same young man accepted a job as church janitor. He and I worked on repair jobs together. Dottie and I invited him to our wedding. His signature is on our wedding certificate. That was the first time he had ever been out of his home neighbourhood.

Paul's principle here was rather simple. People using our facilities had to respect the rights of others. Do this and have a good time; if you don't, you lose your rights. If violence resulted, we were not to retaliate, but to try for a solution that was nonviolent and in the best interest of the violent person and others. Paul followed this redemptive sacrificial way of life for years, producing a myriad of small miracles, and many wounds and scars. Paul learned to think like

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Paul William Caton was older than me by a few years. He was in failing health when I last saw him many years ago. I have not succeeded in tracing him and presume he has died. Paul was born and, as a youth, lived on an Indian reservation in North Dakota. He graduated from Garrett Biblical Seminary in Evanston Illinois. When I met him in Chicago in 1952 he was pastor of an “Institutional Church”, Methodism's inner city urban mission analogue to the settlement house. The famed Hull

The Institutional Church had a small Protestant congregation, as well as a large recreation and social work programme for youth — mostly Catholic — in which I worked. It was from this base that Paul tried to apply Christian nonviolence to every day inner city life. As a new Friend, I found the interaction between the spiritual life of Meeting, and its testing in tense daily situations to be what I needed.

One day a troubled young man took some coke bottles and sent

the youth we served, and hence was present at some scenes of illegal actions. When confronted, the youth often tended to project blame on those who interfered. When Paul was threatened with violence he would deliberately take off his glasses, place them in his coat pocket and say “if you are going to beat me up, it will hurt a lot but I guess you might as well go ahead and get it over with.” (Decades later, I encountered similar approaches in nonviolence training.) Hands limp by his sides, he waited. Usually, he avoided injury; sometimes, he was beaten. A necessary later step was to find the violent ones and explain that they could come back, if they accepted our standards. Without this step, the perpetrator might have some kind of transforming experience but was cut off from learning better ways and feeling accepted.

In order to decrease anxiety about returning we had a policy of not calling police for personal hurts, though when a person did injury to others, we might. Our approach differed sharply from police who relied on kids’ fear of jail or of being roughed up at a notorious local station. Police wanted complaints to act on, and Paul refused to file them. Sometimes a case got to court anyway, and a judge would sentence offenders to work for the church, a sort of price one could pay for getting caught that did not produce a motive to change. Paul’s goal was a merciful and compassionate relationship among all of God’s children. Punishment did not fit this plan.

Paul was sometimes the target

of a familiar juvenile trick. One youth would kneel behind him and another would push him back. The idea was possibly to injure, but mostly to create loss of dignity. They underestimated him: when pushed, he would simply sit down on the person behind, then say “I

ables. His favorite adjective was “graceful”, meaning that God is present in our lives in spite of our faults. He brought a multi-racial staff into the all white neighbourhood. When a black family moved in, he announced happily to his white congregation

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am sorry you fell. Here, let me help you up”.

Youth gangs frequently broke our windows with a fist or palm. It made them tough guys. We did not want them to make destruction of property acceptable and laudable, so we replaced the windows at once, often working late at night. We did the same with stolen keys — with Paul’s instructions, we immediately replaced dozens of locks, so that the kids had no social rewards from their buddies for stealing.

Paul was no dour martyr with a masochist disposition. He was fun to be with. After we closed around ten p.m., we workers would gather in the Caton kitchen, drink coffee, swap stories and get Paul’s warm affectionate support.

His office desk was piled high with stacks of papers from his many interests. Once I came to see him about some staff issue, but soon found myself entranced with his bubbling enthusiasm for biology. Every growing thing was evidence of God’s mir-

that a new Protestant family had moved in. He became a leader in opposition to the crime-ridden political machine. He counseled abused women with compassion. The full list is a long one. I do not think he would find praise appropriate: he was just doing what a Christian should.

His acceptance of violence without retaliation or calling police brought sharp criticism from social work professionals, as did our very long hours and nights on the streets. This criticism was taken up by the church mission board who seemed to find inner city youth disagreeable, and staff too lenient. Paul was fired. Thus the attempt to put Christianity into the life of the urban mission church came to an end.

Later, Dottie and I went to see him in his hospital bed. His chest was caved in and one eye gone, due to his work. He enthused about new challenges in Alaska. Life was still full of Grace. ✨

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