

Dear Alan,

You have been so wonderfully supportive during this grieving period for the extraordinary person of Sheila Walker, my very good friend and fellow partner on the road to racial reconciliation. Thank you very much for asking to read my eulogy, which I gave last evening. Immediately below you will find the eulogy. I cannot predict how it will lay out in text and pagination since that is always unpredictable when one sends a long email like this. Maybe, I should have sent it as attachment. If you prefer, let me know, and I'll send it to you that way. In delivering the eulogy, I did fine with my emotions (no breaking of the voice nor extensive pauses) until the last three lines when I did both – yes, I became, for a brief time, a bit of a blubberer. No one, including me, seemed to be the worse for it. Again, thank you so much for your curative sensitivity. Warm and best regards,

Chester

P.S. How do I get a copy of the podcast in a form I can put on my website? Thank you!!!

In August, 2020, Sheila Walker and I gave a joint presentation for the Cathedral of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey. Upon Sheila's death, the Dean of the Cathedral in Trenton, New Jersey, the Very Reverend Rene John, referring back to the earlier presentation, said to me that Sheila's love of God and other people and her ability to communicate that love were reminiscent of his times with Desmond Tutu, which were many.

Three weeks ago, I sent out a mailchimp email announcing Sheila Walker's death, and the number and quality of replies were remarkable. I will read very short excerpts from four of those emails. I could have chosen many more and other excerpts with similar sentiments. The first one: "Sheila's death is a profound loss, not only to those who knew and loved Sheila, but to the larger community of those who believe in social and racial justice and reconciliation."

The second: "I'm grateful that I got to meet her once – I think she would've seemed too good to be true otherwise." The third: "Sheila modeled for all of us that the darkness of the past does not need to subsume us. If we choose to face it directly, the past can bring unexpected light and life."

And finally, "So often with death, there is a sense of a lost opportunity, but not about Sheila. That's another blessing she left us."

Of course, none of the above comments I just read surprise us one bit. They are consistent with all we have known, experienced, admired, and loved about Sheila Walker. While superlative words legitimately apply to her, they are also unbecoming and awkward, for she was simply too close to us all for superlative words, which, by their very nature, keep us at a distance. Another side, however, reflected her enormous power – namely, her directness, her comfort with herself which made us all comfortable around her, and Sheila's unlimited empathy. A word is used more and more frequently these days that links us with Sheila's reservoir of goodwill – the word, co-inherence, derives from biblical language: He in us, we in Him. She walked in the shoes of everyone she met and knew.

A short time ago, Sheila mistakenly dialed the wrong telephone number out of her directory and reached someone she didn't know well. As she apologized for dialing him, she also launched into a deep and empathetic conversation, discovering that he also suffered from a severe struggle with cancer. They talked for a long time, and she obviously left him in a much better condition. Was that experience abnormal for Sheila? Of course not!

A couple of years ago, Sheila and I were at the University of Arkansas in the northwest corner of the State speaking on the Elaine Race Massacre and its ramifications. A younger cousin of mine living and teaching in Kansas City drove down to be with me for a few hours. When I introduced Steven to Sheila, she grabbed his hand and never let go. I stepped away for a while, but when I returned twenty or thirty minutes later, she still held his hand in hers. For some, that sort of behavior may seem a forward and uncomfortable gesture toward a complete stranger, but she could just tell; she simply knew what to do. Steven returned that night to Kansas City a better and more loved human being.

In the many discussions Sheila and I had about the silos that white persons frequently inhabit when it comes to race, Sheila mentioned that white people do not usually have the benefit of spending large amounts of time around African-Americans, which affects the way white children often fear and react to Blacks, continuing in later life. Sheila conveyed to me that she went out of her way to spend even a little time with white children, even very young ones, when given a chance, for she believed that if they could see the love in her eyes for them, then those children would remember that moment with her, and the existence of fear of Blacks will have a better chance for dissipation, years later.

According to the following story relayed by Sheila, she first felt the terrible brunt of racism, more directly and viscerally, in September, 1955 at the age of seven. Sheila's mother, Sara Black, had previously moved the family from Arkansas to Chicago, and Sheila said that in the City, residing in a decidedly African-American neighborhood, she didn't feel the sting of racism so personally. However, Sara Black attends Emmett Till's funeral in Chicago with the open casket and then sees unshielded Till's tortured and mutilated body. Sara Black returns home shaken and distraught, and Sheila then realizes, from the story her mother told, that Sheila's skin color could get her killed, even savagely murdered. Sixty-six years later, she departs this life in the midst of another African-American murder, of George Floyd, having been also tortured and killed. So, how much had changed in her lifetime – from Emmett Till in Mississippi to George Floyd in Minnesota – from Mississippi to Minnesota? How much had changed in sixty-six years? Yet, the answer didn't distract Sheila from principles of love, hope, and reconciliation – she stood firm in Martin Luther King's belief in the weapon of love, and a supreme exercise of forgiveness.

My maternal grandfather, Lonnie Birch, the most important person during the first few years of my life, participated in the Elaine Race Massacre where Sheila's ancestors were victims, with great uncles being shot numerous times and left for dead, though they survived. Soon after we became friends and began our journey of reconciliation, Sheila announced in a symposium at St. Paul's Chapel in downtown New York City that she had

forgiven Lonnie more than I had. She frequently stated her mantra for that forgiveness of Lonnie this way: All people, Black and white, she would say, are born good, but bad circumstances make good people do bad things. Indeed, she always talked with me about her belief that Lonnie was a good person.

The only time she demonstrated significant irritation, yes, real anger at me dealt with my inability to forgive Lonnie fully for his role in the Massacre. Sheila told me, in no uncertain terms, the best of who I am did not reflect well in my inability to forgive him. In response, my argument that Lonnie had become the face of racism, increasing my problem with forgiveness, carried little water with her. Now, look closely at this nexus. Here is a woman whose ancestors were victimized at the hands of white men, possibly by my own grandfather, but she expresses considerable irritation, true anger, at me for not forgiving Lonnie for his role in the terrible event. My friends, that's sainthood.

On March 15, 2014, Sheila Walker and I are to meet for the very first time face-to-face. At Bob Whitaker's instigation, the author of ***On The Laps Of Gods***, a splendid book about the Massacre, Sheila and I had talked for two hours a few short weeks previously. While we each enjoyed our phone conversation – and we each said so – we both wished to come together for a longer time, and to share much of all we knew about the Massacre and our respective antecedents. Whitaker picks me up at the Boston train station and drives me to the home of Sheila's son, Marcus, his wife Franzi, and their two sons. As Bob pulls up in front of the house, I inadvertently peer at the second-story windows, and my eyes meet those of a person I know to be Sheila. How long had she watched for us from the window?

Upon greeting each other, Sheila and I embraced for a very long time. From the very beginning, we meant to be the obverse, the alternative to the attitudes and episodes that so characterized those early fall days of 1919 in Phillips County, Arkansas. Her embrace on March 15, 2014 that later led to her forgiveness of Lonnie opened up the way for our journey on a road to reconciliation. She removed a continuing pall – that is, Lonnie's role in the conflagration – that could have existed between us. But since Lonnie remained for me divided between my beloved grandfather and a participant in the murderous racial event in Phillips County, Sheila proved to be a Godsend. Through her forgiveness, she circumvented my struggles with the riven composite of Lonnie's two personas and deflated the potency of the damaged part of my heritage.

With all that being said, what made her eyes really dance was the family: Ivor, Apryl, Marcus, Aubrey, Adelyn, Franzi, Oskar, Till. Sheila's family enjoyed a special blessing, so close and so prominent to her world. They have clearly acknowledged that blessing to become the extraordinary people they are.

I loved Sheila Walker, and she loved me. I will think of her every day of my remaining life. We are normally mere mortals, my friends. I am sure Sheila Walker was more.