



Interview with Bill Pelke, Founder of the Journey of Hope

Ines Aubert spoke to Bill Pelke, Alaska, 2017

Bill, it is ten years since I made my first interview with you in 2007. It is still available [here](#). Your moving story about forgiving Paula Cooper, who, in 1985 at the age of 15, stabbed your grandmother Nana to death can be read in your book “Journey of Hope – From Violence to Healing” (2003). I know how important your encounter with Paula was for you and what it meant to you that – with your help – her death sentence was overturned into a sentence of sixty years. In our interview of 2007, you wrote “... I learned that valuable lesson of love and compassion in a way I could never forget. It was the most important lesson I ever learned because it brought forgiveness, peace, joy, and much more.”

After serving half of her sentence, Paula was released from prison in 2013 and had a seemingly good life with her own apartment, a job and a boyfriend. Then, in May 2015 she committed suicide.

What did this abrupt end of your relationship with Paula mean to you personally?

On the morning of May 26, 2015, I turned on my computer and the first thing I noticed was an email sent by my daughter with the subject “Dad, I am so sorry”. There was a link and when I opened the link it showed a TV breaking news story that Paula Cooper had committed suicide.

I was devastated and in disbelief. Ten Minutes later I received a call from the Associated Press. When they asked me how I felt about the news of Paula’s suicide, I told them I was devastated. The interview lasted about ten minutes and I answered all the questions they asked.

During the next few days, I went through a gamut of emotions. I was moaning, groaning, crying and wailing. I prayed and questioned God aloud. Why, why, why? I was at home on my own and felt free to express my feelings.

Paula had told me she wanted to join me on the Journey of Hope when she got out of prison and off parole. She was released on June 17, 2013, but was not allowed to have contact with the victim’s family including me during the two years of parole. I was looking forward to working with her. She was not the same person who had committed that terrible crime 30 years ago. Since we were not allowed to have contact with each other during that time I anxiously awaited the day we could meet again. I had visited her 14 times while she was in prison and she was only about two weeks shy of the two-year mark of parole.

I expected to have contact with her after two years of her release was up. She told me she wanted to travel with the Journey of Hope and speak with young people who had also been raised abusively. She wanted to let them know that how she reacted to the abuse was wrong and to show them another way. I really looked forward to helping her do that

and I was sure it was the path that God had set out for me. I was wrong. I was reminded of the verse in the Bible where God says that our ways are not His ways.

After two or three days of heavy grieving I found myself begging to God for mercy to ease my pain. The words of a hymn I learned many years ago popped through in my mind. The song “Showers of Blessing” talks about mercy drops falling around us, but sometimes we need showers of those mercy drops, not just a few. I begged God for those showers of those mercy drops. I began to heal with help of the words of that song and my constant tearful prayer.

I know that everything happens for a reason. I didn’t know the reason, and still don’t today, but I knew I needed to stay on the path of love and compassion - for all of humanity - that I had been following since November 2, 1986. And I have continued to do so. It has been over two years now and I am still grieving and find it very hard to talk about her suicide in a public setting.

After so many years in prison Paula was finally a free person and had options to choose from, even the one to commit suicide. With her own hand she wrote the last chapter of her life. Isn’t there something comforting in this thought also?

The last chapter of Paula’s life has not yet been written. She was able to let people know how she wanted her memorial service to be; things like food, flowers, balloons and whatnot, but I have not found anything comforting about her death, but I am pretty much at peace with it now.

For 23 years, a team of murder victim’s family members, under the roof of the “Journey of Hope” has been touring around the world to talk about forgiveness. How did Paula’s death impact your message and the content of what you teach people?

My message on the Journey of Hope has remained the same. Our mantra is “love and compassion for all of humanity”. I still talk about the healing power of forgiveness when telling my personal story. Often, I do not even mention that Paula committed suicide unless it is brought up during a question and answer session. There are several organizations of murder victim family members who are opposed to the death penalty, but we are the only ones who actively promote forgiveness as a way of healing. We want to let people know that healing is possible after a loved one has been murdered and that the execution of another person will not bring healing or the closure they are seeking.

The “healing power of forgiveness” is an outstanding power in my eyes. It refers to the person who forgives, doesn’t it? And it doesn’t matter whether the forgiven person regrets or developed some understanding.

You used the word “devastated” to describe your reaction on Paula’s suicide. The disbelief you described, was it about the possibility that she in turn wasn’t healed?

The Healing power of forgiveness does refer to the person who forgives. When forgiveness came to me it brought a miraculous healing. I knew immediately, that whenever I would think about Nana again, I would no longer think about how she died, but think about how she lived, what she stood for, what she believed in and the wonderful person that she was. That taught me the wonderful healing power of forgiveness, something I had heard about before, but never really experienced, especially to that extent.

At first, I didn’t want to believe it. I thought maybe someone else had killed her and made it look like a suicide. The news report stated “an apparent suicide” and I was anxious to hear what the forensic experts had to say. But it was revealed shortly after she died that she had written three suicide notes and left a recording.

Paula was a troubled person, but I thought she was doing okay. So did everyone else that knew her. It happened two weeks after the 30th anniversary of the crime and there had been a lot of media attention about that. She felt people would never forget what she had done even though she had paid the price of so many years in prison. Consensus was that even though a number of people had forgiven her, she was not able to forgive herself. She was never able to figure out why she had committed such a terrible crime.

Did Paula ever mention having other plans for her future like travelling the world or having children?

Paula never mentioned about getting married or having children to me. She talked about buying a food truck and cooking. She talked about traveling with the Journey in hopes of reaching young people, that had been abused as she was and point out the faults with her reaction and give the young people reasonable options as to how they could best respond.

In what ways do you see your commitment related to Restorative Justice?

I am a strong believer in Restorative Justice. I am on the advisory Board of [Restorative Justice International](#). Many people believe in retributive justice which to me is an eye for an eye mentality. Retributive justice is punitive and all about punishment. Individuals need to be restored to reflect their humanity. We are more than the worst thing we have ever done.

I know that Restorative Justice in their Victim-Offender Mediation brings together offenders and victims. They don’t necessarily have to be linked through their crime; they could be the victim or offender in another case. I’m wondering whether

another offender who has served his or her time could join your Journey instead of Paula.

I got to know Paula's sister after the suicide and have invited her to tell Paula's story, but she is still heavily grieving Paula's death and has withdrawn from all media attention in the last year. In some ways she wants everyone to forget what happened, but on the other hand she is torn and wants to tell Paula's story.

Our first Journey of Hope was over 24 years ago and a number of other people have joined with us sharing the Journey mantra of "Love and Compassion for all of humanity".

Would it made sense to ask a non-related offender to join the Journey of Hope instead of Paula's sister who is not an offender?

There are people who are guilty of the crime of murder like Rev. Billy Moore who made a powerful conversion to Christianity while on death row. Billy got off of death row because the victim's families pleaded for Billy not be executed because they had forgiven him and loved him. He had become like family to them and they also pled for his parole, and when he was eligible for parole he was released. Billy became a minister in Rome, GA and is an international speaker about love, compassion and forgiveness who shares his life changing experience. The Journey loves to have people tell their life changing stories of forgiveness like Billy does.

We are a non-profit as an organization for the purpose to educate to the people of the alternatives to the death penalty. That is the main requirement of the Federal Government. All our storytellers on Journeys fit into at least 1 of 4 different categories.

- Murder Victim Family Members (MVFM's)
- Death Row Family Members (DRFM's)
- Death Row Exonerees
- Activist and other death penalty experts like Magdalena Rose-Avila of Witness To Innocence, Sister Helen Prejean of Dead Man Walking and others.

As far as Paula or her sister, both could have fit into this picture. There are many people who join us on our Journey's, similar to interns, help us and observe. Oftentimes opportunity allows everyone to not only learn but to be part of discussions and Q & A segments where they can also share.

So, Ines, as a long way of answering your question "Would it made sense to ask a non-related offender to join the Journey of Hope instead of Paula's sister?" I would say of course everyone is welcome to join the Journey. To be a featured speaker on a tour the offender would have to fit in one of the four categories.

The Journey of Hope...from Violence to Healing is required by our by-laws, that the Board of Directors must have MVFM's as a majority. It was five MVFM's that started the Journey and this rule was set. We are the only murder victim family group in the world that promotes forgiveness as a way to heal and Restorative Justice as a way of life. Anyone who joins us will be touched in heart, mind and soul.

I'm a little hesitant to share with you a thought that goes through my mind.... Is it possible that you will need to forgive Paula another time? This time for not following through with the plan that you two had so great hopes in. The plan that she would join the Journey of Hope and help to teach the young people better and non-violent decisions.

Paula is forgiven. I believe in the seventy times seven kind of forgiveness. That is the way I try to live. I had a few angry moments looking upward cursing, asking her why, why? But I know she is forgiven to the hilt as far as I am concerned. I still don't understand why, but that is not as important to me as it once was. I just want to keep walking that path of love and compassion and enjoying the journey along the way.

How can your Organization help regarding or offer any advice as how to approach murder victims' families who, after many years, still hate the offender and cannot let go of their hate or don't know how to let go?

To me the best way is to share stories of victims who have forgiven and the healing that forgiveness brought. Forgiveness is very misunderstood by most people as we often hear statements like; "you must not have loved your mother, daughter, grandparent etc. very much if you forgive the person who killed them" or "I could never forgive the killer of my loved one."

They don't understand that forgiving the perpetrator does not mean forgive and forget. I can never forget what happened to Nana. Many think forgiving means you only want the perpetrator to just get a slap on the wrist for their crime. That is not true. There must be consequences for crime. Forgiveness benefits the forgiver much more than it does the offender.

Victims' stories of forgiveness speak of the healing power of forgiveness. That is why we promote forgiveness. It is not for the bad guy's sake; it is for your sake. Forgiveness is not always easy and often a process, but it is always right. That is why Jesus preached forgiveness to the multitudes, taught the disciples forgiveness and He even taught forgiveness in His death. Forgiveness is the most misunderstood principle in the Bible. It is the proof that one is following the precepts of love and compassion. Forgiveness frees you. If one does not get rid of the hate and anger it will become like a cancer and destroy you.

I would like to repeat what you said above: “Forgiveness frees you!” Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions, Bill. I look forward to talking to you somewhere and sometime again.

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