

## *After A Violent Death*

Hank “Henry” Lloyd, Jr., was killed on a summer night by a gunman who fired wildly into a crowd of young men sitting on the steps of a Washington, D.C. church. Bullets also grazed my nephew, Brian, in four places and two of his friends were shot in the legs. Hank, who had just turned 19 and was headed for college, had stood up to make a point, the way boys do when they tell stories. Some believe that when Hank stood up, separating himself from the others, the gunman was able to shoot him in the head.

My nephew and the other boys remember the heat of the bullets as they sped past their skin. They didn’t recognize the popping sound of the gun at first nor did they know the gunman, whose skin was the same color as theirs.

Hank was one of the young guys who hung out with Brian at my sister’s house, eating, listening to CDs, playing Sega Genesis. He was always happy, polite and well mannered, and he attracted little children like the Pied Piper, probably because while everyone else talked over their heads, he bent to speak to them and listen to what they had to say. When he was around, my 2-year-old niece giggled constantly, purring his name, “Haannnk. Haaannnk.” My sister, Shelia, and I realized that her daughter had developed her first crush.

My first thought after Hank’s death was that I wanted to kill the gunman. The word on the street was that he had mistaken Hank for someone else. I believed I could kill him myself if I could find him. Finally, in my emotional, irrational state only my fear of prison stopped me.

I tried to find comfort in the spiritual books that have carried me through other difficult times. I read poems by Lucille Clifton, from a book with a title that pounded in my head: “Next.” But I still felt empty. I wondered how I could be healed.

The day after Hank was killed, Shelia and I walked from her house to mine, and we had to walk over the spot where Hank died.

“I wish I had some flowers to put there,” Shelia murmured. So we went to a nearby store, bought bouquets of carnations and sprinkled them on the steps of the church and on the corner. She was careful to place a flower on the exact spot where Hank was lying when she’d rushed to the corner that night.

Soon other people, looking for a way to express their grief, placed flowers on the church steps, too. The neighborhood also held a candlelight vigil in his memory. On a white sheet, people painted messages to help the bereaved heal.

At Hank’s funeral, the minister said he was “weary” of burying young people. And he preached to the teenagers, who he said, had thought they were invincible until a friend was gunned down.

Rededicate your life to Christ! Turn a tragedy into a victory!” the pastor said, explaining that he wasn’t asking them to join his church, but rather to live better lives and to establish a relationship with God. One by one, my nephew and the other boys who had been with Hank that night walked to the front of the altar.

“Oh my God, look at what he did for them!” my sister cried out.

In all, 75 young people walked up, and as they stood the minister prayed for forgiveness for the gunman. I, a woman who looks for wisdom wherever she can find it, found it in these children. I thought I had searched everywhere for peace, but I had overlooked one place. The church would not bring Hank or catch the murderer or stop the wave of violence with one prayer. But who could make these boys feel safe and give them peace when they walked the streets? Could I? The police? The mayor? Their parents?

Outside the church, I had nothing to give these young people but kisses, hugs and tissues to wipe their eyes. I looked at them and asked myself: What did Hank Lloyd’s friends do when he was gunned down? I realized that they had stood at an altar and vowed to establish a new relationship with God.

It was a good answer.

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