

## Introduction: The Faith Line

Someone who doesn't make flowers makes thorns.  
If you're not building rooms where wisdom can be  
openly spoken, you're building a prison.

SHAMS OF TABRIZ

Eric Rudolph is in court pleading guilty. But he is not sorry. Not for the radio-controlled nail bomb that he detonated at New Woman All Women Health Care in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed an off-duty police officer and left a nurse hobbled and half-blind. Not for the bomb at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta that killed one, injured dozens, and sent shock waves of fear through the global community. Not for his hate-spitting letter stating, "We declare and will wage total war on the ungodly communist regime in New York and your legislative bureaucratic lackeys in Washington," signed "the Army of God." Not for defiling the Holy Bible by writing "bomb" in the margin of his copy.

In fact, Rudolph is proud and defiant. He lectures the judge on the righteousness of his actions. He gloats as he recalls federal agents passing within steps of his hiding place. He unabashedly states that abortion, homosexuality, and all hints of "global socialism" still need to be "ruthlessly opposed." He does this in the name of Christianity, quot-

ing from the New Testament: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.”

Felicia Sanderson lost her husband, Robert, a police officer, to Rudolph’s Birmingham bomb. During the sentencing hearing, she played a tape of speeches made at her husband’s funeral. People remembered him keeping candy for children in his patrol car and raising money to replace Christmas gifts for a family whose home had been robbed. Felicia Sanderson pointed to Rudolph and told the court, “He has been responsible for every tear my sons have shed.”

Judge C. Lynwood Smith sentenced Rudolph to two life terms, compared him to the Nazis, and said that he was shocked at Rudolph’s lack of remorse. But many others felt a twitch of pride.

Eric Rudolph might have been a loner, but he did not act alone. He was produced by a movement and encouraged by a culture. In the woods of western North Carolina, where Rudolph evaded federal agents for five years, people cheered him on, helped him hide, made T-shirts that said RUN RUDOLPH RUN. The day he was finally caught, a woman from the area was quoted as saying, “Rudolph’s a Christian and I’m a Christian . . . Those are our values. These are our woods.”

Of all the information published about Rudolph, one sentence in particular stood out to me: Rudolph wrote an essay denying the Holocaust when he was in high school. How does a teenager come to hold such a view?

The answer is simple: people taught him. Eric Rudolph had always had trouble in school—fights, truancy. He never quite fit in. His father died when he was young. His mother met and followed a series of dangerous iconoclasts who preached a theology of hate. The first was Tom Branham, who encouraged the Rudolph family to move next door to him in Topton, North Carolina. Eric was soon drawing Nazi symbols in his schoolbooks at nearby Nantahala High School. Next, Eric’s mother moved the family to Schell City, Missouri, to be near Dan Gayman, a leading figure in the extremist Christian Identity movement. Gayman had been a high school principal and knew how to make his mark on young people. He assumed a fatherly relationship

with Eric, enrolled him in Christian Identity youth programs, and made sure he read the literature of the movement. Gayman taught Eric that the Bible was the history of Aryan whites and that Jews were the spawn of Satan and part of a tribe called the “the mud people.” The world was nearing a final struggle between God’s people and Satan’s servants, and it was up to the “conscious” Aryans to ensure victory for the right race. Eric took to calling the television “the Electric Jew.” He carved swastikas into his mother’s living room furniture. His library included virulently anti-Semitic publications such as *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, *Anne Frank’s Diary: A Hoax*, and *The International Jew*. Under the tutelage of Gayman and other radical preachers, Eric Rudolph’s hate did what hate always does: it spread.

I imagine these preachers felt a surge of pride when Rudolph responded to Judge Smith’s question about whether he set off the bomb in Birmingham with a smug, “I certainly did.”

Middle school students in Whitwell, Tennessee, are giving tours of one of the most profound Holocaust memorials anywhere in the world: a German railcar that was used to transport Jews to Auschwitz. The young people ask guests to imagine how it might feel to be one of the seventy or eighty Jews packed into that tight space, hearing the wheels clanking as the train took them to torture and death. They explain that the railcar is filled with millions of paper clips, each one a symbol of a Jew murdered by the Nazis. One student says that to see a paper clip now is to think of a soul. The sign at the entrance of the memorial reads: “We ask you to pause and reflect on the evil of intolerance and hatred.” The sign on the way out states: “What can I do to spread the message of love and tolerance these children have demonstrated with this memorial?”

One Whitwell student tour guide, about to graduate from eighth grade, reflects, “In the future, when I come back and see it, knowing that I was here to do this, it will be not just a memory, but kind of like in your heart, that you’ve changed the way that people think about other people.”

Whitwell is a town of fewer than two thousand residents, located outside Chattanooga in the coal mining region of southeastern Tennessee, about a hundred miles from where the Ku Klux Klan was born. It has two traffic lights and a whole lot of GOD BLESS AMERICA signs. The mines closed thirty years ago, leaving the region even poorer than it was before. You can count the number of black and Latino families in Whitwell on two hands, and you won't need any of those fingers to count the number of Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, because there aren't any.

Why would white Protestant kids in a poor region with a history of prejudice care so much about educating people about Judaism? The answer is simple: people taught them. The principal of Whitwell Middle School, Linda Hooper, wanted the students in her school to learn about cultures and people who are different from themselves. "Our children, they are respectful; they are thoughtful; they are caring. But they are pretty much homogeneous. When we come up to someone who is not like us, we don't have a clue."

She sent a teacher to a diversity conference, and he came back with the idea of a Holocaust education project. "This was *our* need," Hooper said.

Over the next several years, the students at Whitwell studied that horrible time, met with Holocaust survivors, learned about the rich tradition of Judaism, and taught all the people they touched about the powerful role that young people can play in advocating for pluralism.

Lena Gitter, a ninety-five-year-old Holocaust survivor, heard about the project and wrote the students a letter: "I witnessed what intolerance and indifference can lead to. I am thankful that late in life I can see and hear that the teaching of tolerance is alive and well and bears fruit. When you ask the young, they will do the right thing. With tears in my eyes, I bow my head before you. Shalom."

Eric Rudolph and the young people of Whitwell are two very different responses to one of the most important questions of our time: in a world of passionate religiosity and intense interaction, how will peo-

ple from different faith backgrounds engage one another? Rudolph responded to people who were different by building bombs of destruction. The students of Whitwell responded to diversity by building bridges of understanding. Rudolph is a religious totalitarian. The students of Whitwell are religious pluralists. They are on different sides of the faith line.

One hundred years ago, the great African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois famously said, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” I believe that the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.

Religious totalitarians have the unique advantage of being able to oppose each other and work together at the same time. Osama bin Laden says that Christians are out to destroy Muslims. Pat Robertson says that Muslims want only to dominate Christians. Bin Laden points to Pat Robertson as evidence of his case. Robertson points to bin Laden as proof of his. Bin Laden says he is moving Muslims to his side of the faith line. Robertson claims he is moving Christians to his. But if you look from a certain angle, you see that they are not on opposite sides at all. They are right next to each other, standing shoulder to shoulder, a most unlikely pair, two totalitarians working collectively against the dream of a common life together.

The outcome of the question of the faith line depends on which

side young people choose. Young people have always played a key role in social movements, from the struggle against apartheid in South Africa to the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. We live in an era where the populations of the most religiously volatile areas of the world are strikingly young. Seventy-five percent of India's one billion plus are not yet twenty-five. Eighty-five percent of the people who live in the Palestinian territories are under age thirty-three. More than two-thirds of the people of Iran are under age thirty. The median age in Iraq is nineteen and a half. All of these people are standing on the faith line. Whose message are they hearing?

Watching *Paper Clips*, the documentary film made about the Whitwell students, I could not help but wonder: What if Linda Hooper had gotten to Eric Rudolph before Dan Gayman did? What if Rudolph had attended the First United Methodist Church in Whitwell, which hosted the events for the Holocaust project, instead of Christian Identity youth programs, had helped collect paper clips with the other kids at Whitwell Middle School instead of studying with bigots, had read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* instead of *Anne Frank's Diary: A Hoax*? Eric Rudolph the religious terrorist was not inevitable, just as the teenage bridge builders of Whitwell were not. They were each carefully and intentionally nurtured.

This is a book about how some young people become champions of religious pluralism while others become the foot soldiers of religious totalitarianism. Its thesis is simple: influences matter, programs count, mentors make a difference, institutions leave their mark. When we look back in the lives of young religious terrorists, we find a web of individuals and organizations that shaped them. These young killers are not, for the most part, dramatically deranged individuals. They are kids who fell into murderously manipulative hands. Every time we see a teenager kill someone in the name of God, we should picture a pair of shadowy hands behind him, showing him how to make the bomb or point the gun, giving him a manual with the prayers to say while committing murder, steadying his shaking hands with callused, steely

ones, blessing him as he resolves to do the deed. And then we should ask: why weren't the hands of people who care about pluralism shaping that kid instead of the hands of religious totalitarians?

Religious extremism is a movement of young people taking action. Hindu nationalists, hate-filled rabbis, Christian Identity preachers, and Muslim totalitarians prey on young people's desire to have a clear identity and make a powerful impact. We see their successes in the headlines of our newspapers every day.

Interfaith cooperation is too often a conference of senior religious leaders talking. No doubt these leaders play a crucial role in religious bridge building. They have broken important theological ground, articulated frameworks for interfaith understanding, and sent the signal that cooperation with the religious Other is not only possible but necessary. Yet few in my generation have been involved.

I am an American Muslim from India. My adolescence was a series of rejections, one after another, of the various dimensions of my heritage, in the belief that America, India, and Islam could not coexist within the same being. If I wanted to be one, I could not be the others. My struggle to understand the traditions I belong to as mutually enriching rather than mutually exclusive is the story of a generation of young people standing at the crossroads of inheritance and discovery, trying to look both ways at once. There is a strong connection between finding a sense of inner coherence and developing a commitment to pluralism. And that has everything to do with who meets you at the crossroads.

When I was in college, I had the sudden realization that all of my heroes were people of deep faith: Dorothy Day, the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, the Aga Khan. Moreover, they were all of different faiths. A little more research revealed two additional insights. First, religious cooperation had been central to the work of most of these faith heroes. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. partnered with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the struggle for civil rights. Mahatma Gandhi stated that Hindu-

Muslim unity was just as important to him as a free India. Second, each of my faith heroes assumed an important leadership role at a young age. King was only twenty-six years old when he led the Montgomery bus boycott. Gandhi was even younger when he started his movement against unjust laws in early-twentieth-century South Africa.

I attended my first interfaith conference when I was twenty-one and discovered that I was the youngest person there by some thirty years. The more conferences I went to, the more I found that general pattern held true. I could not help but reflect upon the young King in Montgomery or the young Gandhi in Johannesburg. I knew my generation had faith heroes of courage and vision. Why weren't they more visibly involved in the crucial project of building religious pluralism, resurrecting the tradition of Gandhi and King in a global era characterized by religious conflict? The faces of religious fanatics were young; the faces of interfaith cooperation were old. Something had to change.

Change happens internally before it takes place in the world. My transformation was catalyzed by a moment of failure.

In high school, the group I ate lunch with included a Cuban Jew, a Nigerian Evangelical, and an Indian Hindu. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about our religions with one another. Often somebody would announce at the table that he couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than "my mom said," and nobody ever asked for one.

This silent pact relieved all of us. We were not equipped with a language that allowed us to explain our faith to others or to ask about anyone else's. Back then, I thought little about the dangers lurking within this absence.

A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend reminded me of a dark time during our adolescence. There were a group of kids in our high school who, for several weeks, took up scrawling anti-Semitic

slurs on classroom desks and making obscene statements about Jews in the hallways. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. I knew little about what Judaism meant to him, less about the emotional effects of anti-Semitism, and next to nothing about how to stop religious bigotry. So I averted my eyes and avoided my friend, because I couldn't stand to face him.

A few years later, he described to me the fear he had experienced coming to school those days, and his utter loneliness as he had watched his close friends simply stand by. Hearing him recount his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life. I did not know it in high school, but my silence was betrayal: betrayal of Islam, which calls upon Muslims to be courageous and compassionate in the face of injustice; betrayal of America, a nation that relies on its citizens to hold up the bridges of pluralism when others try to destroy them; betrayal of India, a country that has too often seen blood flow in its cities and villages when extremists target minorities and others fail to protect them.

My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. Pluralism is not a default position, an autopilot mode. Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach. You have to *choose* to step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism, and then you have to make your voice heard. To follow Robert Frost, it is easy to see the death of pluralism in the fire of a suicide bombing. But the ice of silence will kill it just as well.

This is a story of returning to faith, of finding coherence, of committing to pluralism, and of the influences I owe my life to.