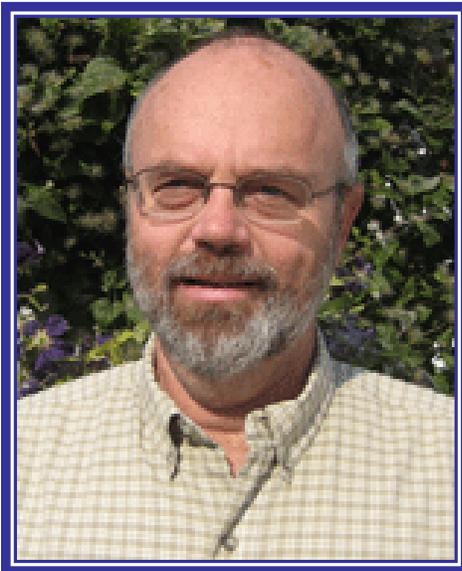


A Lifelong Pull into an Unlikely Dance

by

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*"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
or stand in the way of sinners,
or sit in the seat of scoffers....
But his delight is in the word of the Lord
and on these words he chews day and night,
He is like a tree planted beside streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season,
and whose leaves do not wither, whatever he does prospers."*

Psalm 1:1-3 (NIV)

*"You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever."*

Psalm 30:11-12 (NIV)

Saturday, June 7, 2008

Mt. Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Sandhill, Mississippi

"Mr. Clinton Taylor, Sr., the eldest of seven children, was born on November 14, 1929, to the late Noble and Zora Taylor. His sister Mary Mclin (1930) preceded

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him in death. Clinton was a blessing to everyone with whom...." Sister Fletcher's words began to shake, sputter, and then stop.

"That's alright." The audience assured; but not enough to jump-start the stalemate.

"Take your time." Another embrace, but no traction.

Silence. Tears. And now trembling...

The gathering breathed a sigh as a sister stood on cue in the choir loft behind the pulpit. She was in everyone's view. She stood still and erect in the middle of the pew about halfway up into the benches. She spontaneously picked up where the other had ended and read the obituary steadily, calmly, and clearly. Her voice carried a message of stability and strength. There was no need for her to move to the microphone.

"Clinton was a blessing to everyone with whom he came into contact..." Her calm cadence brought a sense that something good was happening. "All who knew him knew that when asked how he was doing, he always said, 'I've never had it so good!'"

Her words swept us upstream. And this is the way of creation.

Words bring form from formlessness (Peterson, 1989). Words bring light and definition into darkness. Words get us moving again when we are stuck. Words bring goodness.

Clinton Taylor's words became the choral response we could all call out this day. *I've never had it so good* became fruit-bearing words pulling us into personal and communal participation in the life of Clinton Taylor.

As the rhythm of his words pulled me in, I also desired to be carried along by their stream. But I knew many there did not see me as swimming in their waters. I knew the Taylor family, and they knew me, but many of the people packed into Mt. Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church saw only a white man dressed in a dark suit sitting beside a white woman-presumably his wife.

But it was my turn, and words were all I had. "I have had the privilege of being Mr. Taylor's pastor in Chicago for almost 30 years," I began, "And I invite you to enter into the life he lived by seeing his race, his Bible, and the lives of those who found shelter in his branches through my eyes."

"Now I hesitate to say anything further on the first item", I paused, "...for obvious reasons." A moment of silence followed by emotive laughter. I was

wading successfully through currents of color and culture, and now we were all swimming in the same stream.

Clinton Taylor had lived a productive life before I ever met him and long before he returned to Mississippi. For forty years he worked on his five-bedroom bungalow house in the Lawndale community. During that same time, he purchased and rehabbed a three-flat across the street for his children to live in. For most of his life, he was a construction laborer. And most days he wore a laundered blue employee shirt with the wrong name embroidered on it. Every day he worked, he carried a white five-gallon pail with the tools he needed. When he was out of work he found other work. He provided for his wife and a blended family of at least ten.

The community knew his integrity. When the gangs saw him coming, they yielded. He walked to church; where he was the repairman. He served as elder and Sunday School teacher. As a sometimes lonely voice, a Jeremiah, he built, bought and told fleeing people to stay in the community. Many laughed and ridiculed but Clinton Taylor stood firm. He laid the foundations for a community Christian School, and he saw his dreams bear fruit as a four million dollar home for his church and school.

For forty years, Clinton Taylor worked. He worked hard during the day and came home to more, waiting to eat until his tasks were finished.

When I first met him, I was a 24-year-old student pastor. For the next twenty years Mr. Taylor was my elder and guide. Shortly after that, he and his wife moved back to Mississippi, and I felt it was time to pay my first visit to see the ground where this great tree originally took root, grew, and flourished.

I left the grey cold of Chicago and headed south just after Thanksgiving the fall of that first visit. The Mississippi sun still had strength, and it felt good to my skin. While I walked along the gravel road, I noticed a field with scraggly bushes just a little over knee high. A few dirty white clumps of white were hanging on some of the branches. “So that’s cotton,” I thought, and imagined the story those fields could tell. Pretending I was one of those cotton pickers, I was surprised at how far I had to bend over. The sun was strong but setting early, and I could feel a chill in the air. Though the place surely carried stories of anguish, it also had a calming effect—no cars with loud music blasting out of open windows, no sirens. And the only thieves were rabbits stealing into gardens.

But the waters of Mississippi are muddy, murky, and bitter, and I wondered then as I wonder now how a tree planted besides such a river could live, much less prosper and yield fruit. These waters are toxic, polluted by words of hatred and contempt, *segregation, colored and nigger*. How can any tree prosper drinking

the poisonous waters of betrayal? How could Mr. Taylor be nourished, thrive, and grow to nurture others from such a place?

During that visit, I had a chance to ask him first hand about this. “Mr. Taylor, how could you leave this quiet place and move into a concrete, crime-riddled, and congested place like Chicago?”

“It’s really quite simple,” he said, “Mississippi was no place for a Black man when I was coming up. Today that has changed.”

“It is not *that* changed,” quipped Mrs. Taylor.

“Well, yeah Mama, there are always a few bad apples around” Mr. Taylor said, and then he chuckled as he recalled a story. “When I was a teenager, I decided I wanted to go to the race track in Jackson. So I walked up to the man at the counter and said, ‘I’ll take one ticket’. That man looked at me and said, ‘We don’t sell tickets to niggers—niggers go in by the horses’.”

“Well,” he concluded, “that just goes to show you how stupid the man was, I saw the entire race for free and I had a front row seat!”

Then as now, Mr. Taylor’s attitude amazed me. Here was a person who wanted to pay for his seat at the table of the human race, and was forced to take his place with animals—race horses. But when I listened for bitterness, for at least some unleashing of the energy of revenge, it was not there. Rather than stepping toward retribution Mr. Taylor let the rhythms of grace direct his path.

Mr. Taylor’s wisdom came either from the Bible or from his daddy. This time, when it came to dealing racism, it was his father. “My daddy always said, just because they act stupid, doesn’t mean you have to join them.”

How can a tree flourish beside such streams? A daddy and horses can help, but Mr. Taylor himself did the growing. He took these words of wisdom, chewed on them and found a way to daily transform them into his own walk.

His walk led him back to where he began. A front row seat with the horses was not his last laugh. Fifty years later he came home to Mississippi, and this time he sat proudly on the porch of his new, freshly painted white wood framed house, looking over five acres. Clinton Taylor, the great-grandson of a slave and a son of a sharecropper now owned the same land his ancestors worked horses as slaves. Our country never delivered on its promise of 40 acres and a mule, but Mr. Taylor’s feet were pulled into a place even more expansive than a ranch home, a place where he became a personal participant dancing to God’s melody, which reconciles the world to Himself.

Even in Mississippi—with harsh memories of racetracks and sharecroppers—a place where two Americas collided—even in Mississippi the energy of the words of grace could not be stilled.

Clinton Taylor took wisdom from his father, and from his Bible. He used the book, and it showed. Dwight L. Moody used to say that every Bible should be bound in shoe leather (Peterson, 1993). Mr. Taylor’s Bible and work boots were both well-worn. And although Mr. Taylor would replace his shoes, whenever the time came, he would simply add another strip of duct-tape to his torn, tattered and Sunday School lesson stuffed Bible. Mr. Taylor’s Bible was chewed up! And just as he never had to prove how Black he was, neither did he sport “WWJD” bracelets. He just walked his daily walk, carrying a white five-gallon pail filled with hammer, crow-bar, right-angle and screwdrivers by the handle—and all anchored by his Bible on the bottom.

Mr. Taylor *chewed* on the Word. Yet from physical exhaustion, he more often than not would fall asleep during my sermons. In fact, over a twenty-year period I don’t recall him one time getting excited about anything that I ever preached on. An ego-deflator for any pastor—yet instructive.

I was taught Greek, Hebrew and infinitive constructs, Mr. Taylor simply read the passage and then attempted to live it. Far too little effort for my Dutch Reformed training! I thought that I needed to study and analyze the stream and its entire ecological context; before I would think of swimming in it. Mr. Taylor just jumped in the river feet first! He knew the stream was good—bringing refreshment and buoyancy to his life. Elder Taylor’s *chewing and jumping* taught me the organic unity between the word read and the word lived.

While Mr. Taylor did not have a well-formulated Black and Reformed theology, his ability to put one foot in front of the other was amazing...and disarming. When the Lawndale Church alarm rang in the middle of the night, Mr. Taylor would meet me in front of the church.

“Mr. Taylor, let’s wait until the police arrive before going in.” “If God is with us what is there to be afraid of...” he replied, as he ran up the front steps and I stood holding the door.

Foolish, irresponsible, crazy....all of the above. Yet the irresistible fruit of a good life in rhythm with God’s Word. An attractiveness which pulled me up the church stairs too.

The leather of his Bible did not escape the wear and tear of the 1960’s. While our higher church assembly exegeted into the early morning hours what Paul’s words meant: *“all things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient”* (1

Corinthians 10:23, King James Version), Mr. Taylor’s interest was not on what the text meant as much as how it was going to be lived. The debate concerned busing Black children to a neighboring white suburb. And for Mr. Taylor the discussion was anything but abstract....for him it was personal; *“Will I be able to send my children to this school?”*

In the end all the lengthy posturing and pontificating mattered little. Mr. Taylor retorted, “What was the use of all that talk, those guys had their minds made up about what they were going to do before they started.” Mr. Taylor experienced firsthand, but not for the first time, the disconnect between word read and word lived. And while my tradition was strong in the discipline of analyzing abstractly, the leather of Mr. Taylor’s faith was as well-worn as his shoes.

Truly, Mr. Taylor’s faith helped him to grow and prosper. The tree of his life provided shade and fruit. His life was a kind of “Tree-House Bed and Breakfast” that pulled in birds of every kind! Even strange birds like myself. When I came that first time to visit, the Taylor kitchen and the Mt. Pisgah Church were large enough for one to nest and eat freely.

And there I was reminded that Jesus and Mrs. Taylor shared a similar story line....fish. For Mrs. Taylor—Catfish! Hot, moist, lightly breaded surface, with a flakey white flesh inside, and sprinkled with a red Tabasco...I loved the shelter of these trees. I ate. Mr. Taylor talked. Mrs. Taylor cooked, grateful to have someone else listening to her husband.

When we went to church together during my first visit, Pisgah’s shade proved to be just as protective. I could sense the pride in the Taylors as we went to Sunday School; it was not every day someone could bring their preacher from Chicago. Now I come from a tradition where a visiting pastor attempts to stay in the background; but I knew it was different in the Black church...and this despite my experience still made me a bit uneasy, not to mention I was the only white person in attendance.

My fears were not unfounded. “Now we are going to call on our visitor, Rev. Wolff,” the minister said, continuing, “I always thought the Taylors came from good stock but now I know they do when I see their preacher come all the way down from Chicago.”

I tried to lower the hype about myself and claimed that I came just to eat Mrs. Taylor’s catfish and pigs feet. They believed me on the catfish but laughed in disbelief about the pigs’ feet—all except their pastor.

“Now I’ve been here for 3 years and I never had any of those pigs’ feet!”

As I sat down, relieved to return to the shadow behind the large pulpit, Mr. Taylor shot up out of his pew. With his arm extended and pointing with his finger to give emphasis, he said, "I just want everyone here to know that he wasn't like a lot of these ministers living out in the suburbs and driving in all the time—*he and his family lived in the community.*"

Mr. Taylor's vote of confidence pulled me in further, and I said, "Permit me one story about the community. One night while my family was sleeping, the community crawled through a window. Among other things they helped themselves to a TV, VCR, vacuum cleaner, and adding a final exclamation point they used my car to move their newly acquired merchandise."

As the country audience gasped at the stereotypes of the big bad city confirmed, but Mr. Taylor brought the final word. "*And he still did not leave!*"

That Sunday afternoon we sat in the shade, enjoying catfish again, and I reminded Mrs. Taylor that now she was going to have to cook for her minister. She laughed, "I ain't having that man over here for no pig's feet."

Shade. Shelter. A strange bird in the Mississippi sun was pulled into a far larger world than the Pisgah and Taylor hospitality. This was a surprise pull into participating as a partner in community created by God's movement.

And many others found enough space in these branches to place their nest.

Ten years later, the day I rose to speak in his honor, Mr. Taylor had 67 children, grand and great-grandchildren gathered under his tree, not to mention all the others who had squeezed under the shelter of the Mt. Pisgah roof.

"In the end, what makes a man prosperous?" I asked, "How does one measure the value of one's life...Houses, land, investments?"

"No, not by how tall the tree is, for some trees rise very high yet provide little shelter. No, their value is in their branches. Limbs that are expansive and strong enough to invite birds of every kind to find a place and flourish, participating and contributing in the prosperity of life. Look around you and see all the birds that have found a nest in the branches of Mr. Taylor's tree."

"Pastor Wolff," a voice came from behind me as I walked back from the grave dug in the reddish ground nestled under the trees not fifty yards from the church. I turned and saw in the distance three of Mr. Taylor's grandsons coming my way. Their ground was very different from their grandfather's. Theirs was not dirt but the concrete. Most of their energy was being put into finding *any soil* fertile enough to grow in and to become more than a seedling before being mowed

down. Their threat was not the race-track man telling them to go ‘in with the horses’, they found themselves already in the stall.

“Pastor Wolff,” Johnnythan, the one I knew best spoke for the three. “Man, did you ever get granddaddy right...you made it for us!” All three gave me a brother-to-brother handshake and hug.

“It’s not hard to say good things about good people. Besides how many pastors can say they knew someone for 30 years.” I fumbled for something to say because I knew then that my previous words had crossed the goal line.

A preacher’s tool is words. When there is a congruency between the words of our lives and the Word of Life, trees prosper—including the pastor’s. It is an amazing event when the Holy Spirit connects the word read with the word lived. It can also be humorous. The grandsons were partially laughing as they embraced me...chuckling...because I was white. *I was not supposed to connect.* While Black people have been forced to adapt to White society, for the most part White people have not returned the favor. I did not fit into their landscape, yet I had paid close enough attention to the way things were arranged to be added and embraced.

I was embraced yet continued to catch glances. As I sat with my wife at Mt. Pisgah, Asia, the 7-year old great granddaughter of Mr. Taylor’s, sat three pews in front of us. Her hair, pressed, and curled, curiously peering just above the top edge of her pew, caught my attention after I saw her dark eyes staring at us for the fourth time. Asia was in the first grade and attended our church’s school in Chicago. She was accustomed to seeing me and my wife. White people fit for her in Chicago at school and church; but not at Mt. Pisgah, in Mississippi. *What were we doing there?* Already at seven she was asking the question we had asked ourselves over the past 30 years. *What were we doing there?* Johnnythan’s laugh and Asia’s glance, two who had found the shelter of Mr. Taylor’s tree, helped move us closer to some clarity.

The branches from Taylor’s tree had built a strong bridge across a crevasse cutting across our nation’s history. The branches were strong enough to connect the incongruent worlds — of Jim Crow’s cotton and Johnnythan’s Chicago, and of Asia’s precociousness and our puzzlement. While Mr. Taylor did not remove the chasm, his broad branches spanned far enough for us to travel back and forth.

How does one recognize a prosperous tree? By the lives pulled its way. Taylor’s life was a *long pull in the same direction!* (Peterson, 1980). When solid trees and satisfying streams intersect, a pleasing product appears. God’s words absorbed into living, as a fine grain seamlessly embedded into wood, is a beautiful life. An

attractiveness is loosed that will not be ignored. An aroma bypassers cannot resist pulls them into participation.

Including this pastor. The life and joy of this “tree planted beside streams of water” rekindled my passion for the two lovers who originally attracted me to ministry: God’s Word and God’s People. Correct that, really I had only one lover I wanted to actually live with: the story—the story of God’s word breathing life into the seemingly ordinary lives of God’s people. The story of the Trinity’s “will being done on earth as it is in heaven.” My heart has longed to hear, to touch, and to see what for the most part is inaudible, untouchable, and invisible. But the eye wanders, and pastors rather than being pulled into the way which leads to life, push their way onto the Olympic awards platform of “pastors you should know.” The adrenalin high of swank sanctuaries filled with burgeoning bodies swelling the church’s bill folds is too intoxicating for pastors to push back from.

On top of this, despite our deepest desires, we find ourselves courting other sweethearts. Our mistresses demand surrender to the ways of the world. The small, the nuanced detail have little appeal. They want a big rock! Big plans are insisted on, so that they too may be lifted out of the ordinary. The pull is strong and seductive but if pastors surrender to this way, they perish.

Pastors work with ordinary trees. God hands us the seemingly small and often invisible details of story. Ours is the task of uncovering the gift in the give-ness. For the most part, what we do will go unnoticed and we will need to develop habits which intentionally disappoint our mistresses. All the while, acting as a tour guide accenting what appears to be a plain landscape, into a scene that comes alive with the energetic God. Our job is to show the “ordinary sacred” (Peterson, 1989, p. 50).

John Calvin frequently refers to creation as a “theater of God’s glory” (Peterson, 1989). This arena gives us “a good look” (Greek-theatron) and we see that everything carries the signature of the Creator. Pastors are given the theater of the narrative: God’s stories and people’s stories. And pastors have been gifted with the task of paying close attention to His signature on both believing the words of God, as in the beginning, continue to breathe life into the tohu and bohu (Hebrew: translated - *formless and empty* - Genesis 1:2).

I don’t have much rhythm. In fact, on the dance floor, I am a hopeless white man, the very embodiment of tohu and bohu. But the Black community pulled me on the floor and patiently showed me that there was rhythm hidden deep within us all. They taught me by inviting me into the narratives of their lives, and I was pulled into the dance.

And this dance is not exclusively ours; it is a Trinitarian dance.² The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost moving “swiftly with and between and among one another...holding on and letting go...making it impossible at times to distinguish one person from another.” God is alive “creating, saving, and blessing” (Peterson, 2005, p. 45). God calls us in the everyday, to participate in his dance. Pastors are pulled daily and pulling others to participate in this dance—the word read and the word lived. The Trinity’s words link arm in arm with the participant’s words, and pastors have the privilege to use both, in order to breathe life into the dance.

Why did Mr. Taylor’s life pull me and others into the dance? The primary pull was not because he had made it out of the sweltering kitchen of Mississippi to taste a piece of the American pie, nor because he could articulate clearly this week’s Sunday School lesson. No, he pulled us into the Way with his story. His narrative segued into God’s, a life melded to the dance.

His was a long dance. The pull of one whose dignity was betrayed by a nation worshipping color more than persons. The pull of one who learned the difficult steps of reconciliation instead of seeking revenge. The pull of one who finished with the energy and power of forgiveness. Clinton Taylor’s story pulls us into God’s life-giving streams.

And it pulled me into an unlikely dance. A dance whose rhythms appeared to be chaotic, contrapuntal, even subversive. A dance with an ever-present hand inviting me to a partnership of movement that is far larger than I could of imagined on my own (Peterson, 2005). This dance invited me to set aside what I was doing and partner in what God was doing—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit calling me “to participate in the energetically active life of God” (Peterson, 2005, p. 46).

Mr. Taylor’s life was *a long pull in the same direction...*

Not only did I get a front row seat, I got to dance.

*“Walk with me and work with me- watch how I do it.
Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.
I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.
Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”*

Matthew 11:29-30 (The Message)

² In his book, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A conversation in spiritual theology, Peterson stated that John Damascene in the 8th century used this metaphor for the trinity. The Greek word, Perichoresis, is broken down into Peri=around and choresis=dance.

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