

A Death Row Chaplain Pauses to Weep at the National Lynching Memorial

By: Brother Dale (Recinella)

The mid-May drive from my home in Tallahassee to an Indiana monastery in order to lead a four-day clergy retreat on prison ministry offers an opportunity to spend a day at the newly opened *National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, popularly known as the *National Lynching Memorial* in Montgomery, Alabama. Some have advised that one should be accompanied – best by a friend or loved one -- on the first encounter of the *Memorial* because it can be a troubling, devastating experience. *Perhaps so, for the uninitiated*, I shrug. *Surely, I am prepared to handle it*, after 30 years in prison ministry in the Deep South – including 20 years of cell-front on Florida’s death row and long-term solitary confinement.

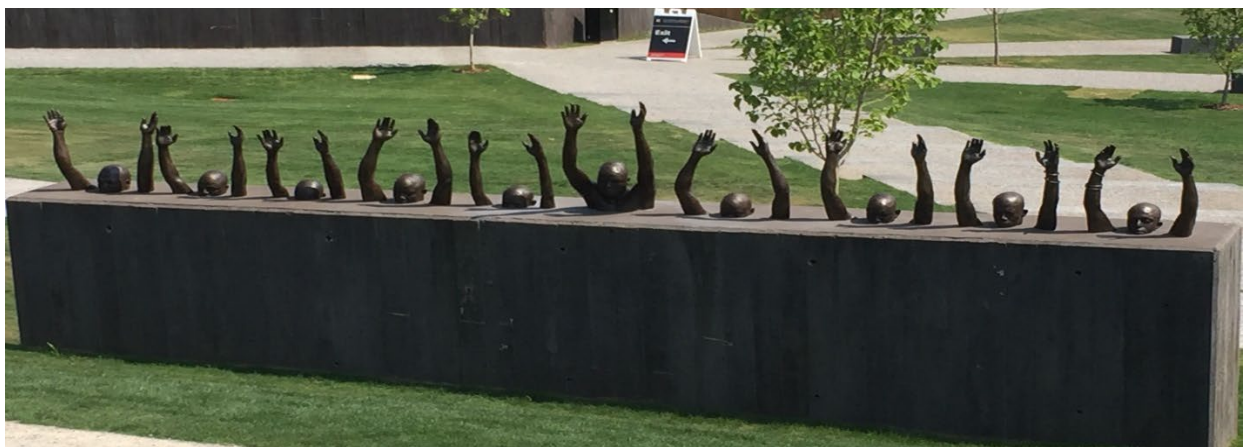
I am not. The *Memorial* wrecks me – mercilessly wrecks me -- unleashing waves of sobs and tears. Like a contemporary incarnation of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Billy Pilgrim*, I find myself frozen in place while unstuck in time. The past refuses to stay put. The present refuses to stay cloaked in our civil euphemisms and justifying platitudes. And the future screams with the looming horror of unlearned lessons and disastrous choices, our worst history repeated with gusto.

From the first encounter with lifelike sculptures of human beings in shackles and chains, to the labyrinthine walk under perilously perched boulders, named for Florida counties and suspended by chains above our heads, the imponderable weight of historical sin threatens to crush me the very instant that moral gravity



overcomes the weakening links of denial. This is no *Sword of Damocles* on a taunt slender thread but rather an Everest-sized mass of human agony conceived and perpetrated by human greed and hate, all threatening to unleash a tsunami of accumulated wretchedness. When? When the reckoning? Then? Now? It has come. It is still coming. Even now we are immersed in it.

Most disturbing of all, the voices and faces do not feel like strangers. They seem vaguely familiar yet inscrutable. A billowing fog of collective memory building thicker with each step, but refusing to be named. Then, as I enter the far-side of the *Memorial*, the sculpture suddenly in view, paralyzes me.



It is Hank Willis Thomas' *Raise Up!* I believe in *Resurrection* and speak of it often. In writings I use Lazarus raised from the dead and walking out of his tomb as a metaphor for restorative justice, especially



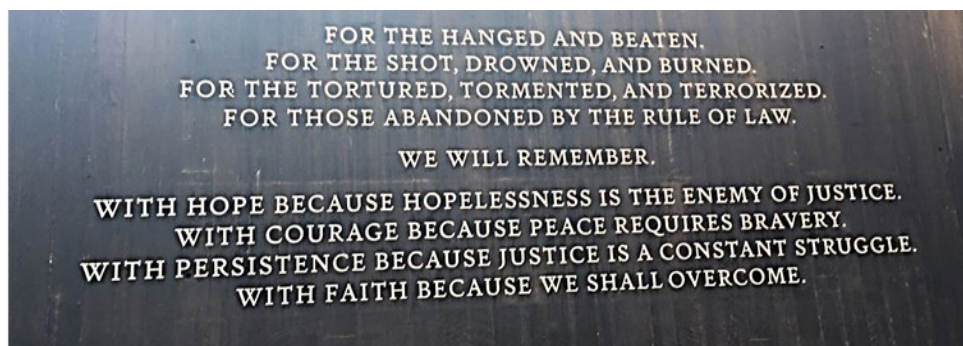
for the formerly incarcerated. That is not my paralysis. As I struggle to absorb the artist's solid rock of living death grasping to hold each crafted figure, I see our massive edifices: death row, solitary confinement, mass incarceration. Killing throwaway people in the bloodsport of political expediency can be done with a noose or a needle or a number of years. The

faces escaping Thomas' granite of living death are so familiar I can name them. Billy. Paul. Johnny. Antonio. Jacob. Ricky, Stephen, Darius, Quinn, Kahlid. And hundreds, thousands more. Time is unstuck. This is our past. Our present. And—barring radical repentance and conversion—our future.

My mind wants to flee, to find solace in some notion or theory that excludes my country, my region, my state. But no plausible pretext exists. My country has hosted over a century and a half of energetic lynching, executions and mass incarceration. The epicenter then and now is my region. And my state is drenched in blood. A scholarly text from 1933, screams out our present and our future:

Florida, with its phenomenal population growth in recent decades, shows a lynching rate of 4.5 per ten thousand Negro population during the 1900-1930 period, a rate nearly twice as high as that for either Mississippi, Georgia, or Louisiana, more than three times the rate for Alabama, and six times the rate for South Carolina. Other Southern States where the Negro's life has been least secure from the mob include the newer states of Oklahoma, with a rate of 3.9; Arkansas, 2.9; and Texas, 2.5. [Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1933) p. 28.]

Ninety year old numbers, but disturbingly parallel to the prevalencies of modern executions and mass incarceration. We have tried not remembering and not talking. Nothing changed except our methods. Now, like the prophet Nehemiah, we must remember and confess and weep bitterly in order to break free of the ruins of our past. That is the reason for this place. We must face before God what we have done to our brothers and sisters.



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