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Memoir on Birmingham bombing a study in forgiveness

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This year, my summer reading included Carolyn Maull McKinstry's memoir, *While the World Watched: A Birmingham Bombing Survivor Comes of Age During the Civil Rights Movement* (Tyndale, 2011, 301 pp., with Denise George), which I picked up at the Civil Rights Institute on a recent visit to Birmingham, Ala. I was profoundly moved by her story about the infamous Sept. 15, 1963, Ku Klux Klan bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which killed her four girlfriends. She tells of the long aftermath of pain, grief and resentment that led to her astonishing turn toward forgiveness and universal love. Carolyn McKinstry, I believe, is a rare Gospel witness of truth and love, and I highly recommend her book.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of that bombing, which came just weeks after Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on the Washington Mall. It was one of the most horrific tragedies of the era.

Carolyn, her family and friends were devoted members of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The pastor's sermon that morning was called "A Love that Forgives," and was to be based on Luke 23:34 -- "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." They were all looking forward to it.

Fifteen-year-old Carolyn was just a few feet away when the Klan bomb exploded, killing her best friends: Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley. They were in the bathroom preparing for the church service, which was to feature them. She had spoken to them only seconds before. The bomb killed them instantly. One side of the church was badly damaged. The beautiful, large stained glass window of Jesus was untouched, except that debris blew a hole right through Jesus' face.

Earlier that year, Carolyn had skipped school to march with Dr. King and hundreds of other young people in the massive spring protest against segregation. Like every other African-American in Birmingham, she

had experienced and witnessed firsthand the white racism, the evil system of segregation, the ongoing bombings and the inhumane injustices. But that day, she herself faced down Bull Connor's vicious German shepherds and white police officers, then received the full force of the water hoses, which tore off a large patch of her hair.

"These children -- unoffending, innocent, and beautiful -- were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity," Dr. King said a few days after the church bombing at the memorial of the little girls.

And yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. ... They did not die in vain. God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. And history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city. The death of these little children may lead our whole Southland from the low road of man's inhumanity to man to the high road of peace and brotherhood [and sisterhood]. This tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience.

In the years that followed, Carolyn Maull fell into depression, despair, alcoholism and bitterness. She attended Fisk, got married and had three children. But the bombing destroyed her spirit. For decades, the murderous Klan members who planted the bomb and killed her friends walked about freely. Terror, fear and hatred haunted her soul.

Years later, in a moment of despair, Carolyn wrote a letter to God, and found herself writing down God's response (a good prayer practice I have used for decades). "Carolyn, I need you tell people that this is not about skin color or ethnicity or religion," God told her. "It is about love, it is about forgiveness, it is about reconciliation. I need you to be my messenger, my ambassador. They will know I allowed you to live. I saved you so you could bear personal witness to my power to restore and forgive and draw people to me. Tell them about me. Tell them about Cynthia, Addie, Denise and Carole. Tell them that when they are reconciled to me, they can be reconciled to each other."

Then one day 10 years ago, Carolyn was shocked to receive a subpoena in the mail, ordering her to testify at the trial of Bobby Frank Cherry, one of the KKK men behind the bombing. During that terrifying ordeal, she faced the bombing for the first time in decades. She told her story, this time under oath in court, within a few feet of the Klansman. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison, then died shortly afterward from cancer.

But by then, she had made the choice to forgive. She became a leader in the church, led the fundraising for its \$4 million restoration, served on the board of the new Civil Rights Institute, received her divinity degree at nearby Beeson Divinity School, and started traveling the country to tell her story and the spiritual lessons she learned. She appeared on Oprah, CNN, 20/20 and many other shows.

"The deaths of my four girlfriends left me with a pain I cannot describe," Carolyn Maull McKinstry writes. "But something beautiful has come of it, and that's the vision God has given for reconciliation. My passion is to see people learn to work together and appreciate the diversity God created among us. This has become a calling for me, and I think about it all the time."

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She continues:

In the 1960s, it seemed as though reconciliation was primarily about blacks and whites. But today it's even broader and it really comes down to interactions between individuals. The core of the issue is still the same, however. I believe that if we can't learn to live with our brothers and sisters here on earth, how will we get a chance to work it out in heaven? I also believe that one good deed begets another good deed and that if we all adopt a spirit of love toward our neighbors and toward each individual we encounter, we can slowly make this world a better place -- a place of reconciliation, as God intended. It has been more than forty years since my friends were killed, and we've made some progress in that time. But I have a great vision for the next forty years -- a vision of building a society where the lamb can truly lie with the lion and there will be peace.

Toward the end of her story, she shares her long meditation on the crucifixion of Jesus and his surprising words of forgiveness. She prayed for the grace to forgive the KKK bombers who killed her friends. As she forgave them, she realized the hatred and resentment within her had been eating away inside her for decades, literally destroying her. Forgiveness brought unforeseen healing.

Jesus forgave the men who crucified him as well as the thief who hung beside him. Pondering that scripture, I came to understand that I, too, needed to forgive those who had hurt me and my family and friends. And that forgiveness was more important for me than for them. It allowed me to move forward with the life God had planned for me. Once I forgave, the burden I had carried in my heart lifted. I began to see people the way God sees them ... At its core, forgiveness is a spiritual act -- it's not something we can do in our own strength. I know that because of the way Christ has forgiven me, I have no option but to forgive others who have intentionally hurt me and those I love.

While the World Watched is a moving Christian testimony about the evils of racism that killed four little girls in Birmingham. But it also tells about a journey to forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. Carolyn Maull McKinstry concludes her beautiful memoir with the statement of commitment, "the Birmingham Pledge," that the city endorsed calling upon individuals to fight racism and uphold equal justice for all. It reads:

I believe that every person has worth as an individual.

I believe that every person is entitled to dignity and respect, regardless of race or color.

I believe that every thought and every act of racial prejudice is harmful; if it is my thought or act, then it is harmful to me as well as to others.

Therefore, from this day forward I will strive daily to eliminate racial prejudice from my thoughts and actions.

I will discourage racial prejudice by others at every opportunity.

I will treat all people with dignity and respect;

and I will strive daily to honor this pledge knowing that the world will be a better place because of my effort.

"For many years we have seen the effects of hate on our world," Carolyn Maull McKinstry concludes. "Now it is time to prove what love will do." I recommend her heartbreaking yet inspiring book and urge everyone to join her campaign to reach out with inclusive love toward everyone that we might eliminate prejudice and racism, be healed of violence and bombings, and welcome God's reign of peace and reconciliation.

This week, John Dear is on a national speaking tour in England. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling

humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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