Held in the Light: Norman Morrison's Sacrifice for Peace and His Family's Journey of Healing

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In Review

Held in the Light: Norman Morrison's Sacrifice for Peace and His Family's Journey of Healing

Anne Morrison Welch with Joyce Hollyday
Orbis

The name Norman Morrison appears often as a hushed aside in discussions of self-sacrifice; it is a footnote in the history of the Viet nam War.

On November 2, 1965, Morrison, a 31-year-old Quaker from Baltimore, drove with his one-year-old daughter, Emily, to Washington, D.C. In protest of the war, he doused himself in kerosene and set himself on fire outside Robert McNamara's Pentagon office. Emily was unharmed.

Morrison's self-immolation was seen as both a hopeful and a desperate act, sparking feelings of empathy and outrage across a nation. At the time, little was known of his life other than his religious affiliation and the graphic nature of his protest. Even less was known about the family he left behind.

In her memoir, Morrison's widow, Anne Morrison Welch, paints a stark and deeply moving picture of her family's private world and of the void left by his death.

The memoir—an astutely detailed articulation of ideas first presented in a 2005 pamphlet published by Quaker-affiliated Pendle Hill Publications—dodges the cliché of optimism in the face of adversity. Welch methodically details the disparate

intimacies and decades-long unraveling of a family facing the worst kind of despair.

Welch’s story of her family’s journey to Vietnam 34 years after Morrison’s death serves as a prescient reminder of the lingering wounds of the Vietnam War. Her family’s struggle to make peace with his act is a personal quest that is nonetheless a microcosm of America’s struggle to heal from that war and to cope with the new wounds it is suffering from Iraq.

For Welch, life after Norman was made up of strange minutiae and startling dichotomies. The night of his death, Welch focused on the objects left behind: his wallet, his wedding ring, his barely singed Harris Tweed jacket. The couple’s last meal, a simple lunch of grilled cheese and French onion soup, became a totem of pain: “To this day, I cannot eat French onion soup. It tastes too much like loss,” writes Welch.

Welch found grief unbearably cold. It is an evocative and haunting metaphor. As she rode to Washington to pick up Emily, she was “stunned and frozen, not knowing what to think or feel.” Welch found that she could not shake that glacial remove, even when she had to tell her children of their father’s death.

“I know now that we should have cried our hearts out together,” she writes. “Because we did not, our family remained in a state of frozen grief for years.”

Welch attempts to fit these stark images of the first days without Nor man into a larger framework: memories of their childhood, their romance and marriage, and the years after Norman was gone. Some of the narrative threads, such as descriptions of their upbringing and their marriage, feel rushed, more like the obligatory imparting of facts than revelations of character and motivation. Others, such as the description of her son Ben’s battle with cancer and the family’s 1999 trip to Vietnam, are absorbing, brimming with emotional detail that Welch masterfully prevents from veering into sentimentality.

The joining of competing narrative threads in Welch’s memoir is ambitious, if not always successful. Though the narrative is compelling, it is sometimes unevenly paced and plotted. Still, the story far outweighs the book’s minor structural flaws. The text is peppered with excerpts from letters, song lyrics and poems, and the integration of these works provides a diligent witness to truth and communicates that Norman’s story belongs not just to Welch and her children, but to the world.

Welch’s description of 16-year-old Ben’s deathbed scene is one place where the profound and the profane are interspersed. Amidst his final breaths, Ben screams, “It’s not fair!” His nurse, meanwhile, does her job, giving him medication to help him relax and making sure he is comfortable. Welch’s account of that loss is achingly simple: “I had grown up believing in a fair and reasonable world,” she writes. “But my trust in such a world was shattered again by Ben’s death, as it had been by Norman’s.”

Welch’s lush descriptions of Viet nam, from subtle evocations of place to the stories of how Vietnamese people were touched by Norman’s sacrifice, naturally evolve into a catharsis in a Hanoi hotel room. “I began to grieve deeply, to moan and keen Norman’s passing,” she writes. “I let out all the collected emotions—grief, bitterness, guilt, sadness, and, yes, anger. I wailed and raged at Norman for leaving me at the age of thirty with such challenges, and for abandoning his children. I felt completely alone.”

Welch writes that she has made peace with the story. Norman’s sacrifice, she finds, has proven not to be just a brief, terrible flame from one November day in 1965, but a lasting light, “a candle, perhaps, in the darkness—that shows the way that we cannot foresee.” Norman’s life, she writes, bears witness to the Quaker philosophy of “letting your life speak.”

After so much loss, says Welch, this is a relief: “The pain, or fear, or hate, has to be acknowledged and given to God. Then grace comes like a balm, like holy ointment that can start the healing process.”