

A Tribute to Rev. C.T. Vivian

By Rev. Paula Anderson

Recently, two very important civil rights' icons passed from our midst; 80 year old Representative John Lewis and 95 year old Rev. C.T. (Cordy Tindell) Vivian. Both men carried the flame of the civil rights' movement, working with Martin Luther King, Jr. and others to fulfill a vision of America where all are treated equally, justly, where the color of a person's skin is not important.

Reading C.T. Vivian's [obituary](#) along with descriptions of him provided by colleagues and family as well as viewing pictures of him in various situations and times of his life have brought back personal memories. For a few years in the 1980's, C.T. Vivian directed a workshop on racism for the middlers at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

In the fall of 1986, my middler year, the time arrived to take the workshop. Were we excited to be in the presence of such an important leader in the civil rights' movement? The answer was NO.

C.T. Vivian's verbally abusive tactics, insulting techniques, bullying style and offensive methods in that workshop were well-known. In our junior year, we had witnessed how drained the middlers were following that 2 day workshop. They were subdued for several days. So, the next year, some classmates tried to dodge the workshop, delay it to their senior year, but the seminary administration held firm to the requirement. ALL middler students had to participate, no exceptions.

Then some students including this ole Norwegian plotted to outwit C.T. Vivian, force him to treat us with respect. We laid our plans carefully. A woman named Sharon volunteered to speak up first with the rest of us following suit. WE would put C.T. Vivian in his place! He would not have the upper hand. WE outnumbered him!

Well, you probably have guessed what happened. As planned at the beginning of the workshop, Sharon immediately spoke up, defiantly confronting C.T. Vivian. That was our cue to join her. But he reacted in such a way that he frightened the rest of us into silence. We hung Sharon out to dry. She continued to try gallantly and C.T. thwarted her at every turn while the rest of us slumped in our chairs, too cowed to speak.

For 8 hours, C.T. subjected us to the treatment that blacks endure from the days of their birth to the ends of their lives. He laid our souls, our prejudices bare in ways that we, as white people, had never experienced before. He wanted us to know what it was like to live in a skin color different than white, to be judged as inferior, to be denied equal rights.

Yet, in the midst of those brutal 8 hours, something rather extraordinary happened. C.T. was a minister and a man of great faith. It seemed that the Lord indicated to him how to approach each of us in ways that suited our personalities and our needs. C.T. baited

and verbally lashed various students while dealing more gently with others. And he seemed to forget my presence.

Hours passed. It appeared that I would escape his notice, I thought. Just as I exhaled in relief, C.T. played a tape of a man speaking. Then C.T. directed his attention to me and asked, "What are you hearing?" I had not understood the man's words so I answered with the first words that I could think of. "The man sounds like Moses!"

C.T. snorted and replied, "You've been in seminary too long!" The other students giggled. (Well, the voice DID sound like the late Charlton Heston who played Moses on THE TEN COMMANDMENTS!) C.T. never spoke to me again or asked another question.

At the end of the 8 hours that first day, C.T. abruptly left the room. The other workshop leader, a white woman who had remained silent and taken notes, assured us that the rough treatment was over. From now on, C.T. would handle the workshop differently. We could relax. We sat in silence, drained, pale.

C.T. spent several minutes in solitary prayer in another room. When he returned, he went to each person and held their hands. He explained his approach to them, assuring them that he held no hatred towards them and asked them to forgive him. Most students looked uncomfortable and unwilling to forgive; it would take time to process his words.

When C.T. reached me, he grasped my hands and gently pulled me to my feet. "Look me in the eyes!" he commanded. Then he spoke in a soft, kind voice, "You have been sitting here very quietly, saying nothing, but you know exactly what is going on. You have such intuitive ability, a sense about people. But you must not be passive. You must not be passive. Don't ever be passive!" Then he tightly squeezed my hands and moved to the next person.

His words awakened something deep inside. Less than a year later, I went to Tanzania in east Africa as a student pastor. For many years, Tanzania had been ruled by the Germans and then the British. C.T.'s racism workshop had opened the eyes to the plight of the Tanzanian people who had been treated as inferiors, not even allowed to keep records of their births, their baptisms or any other special events in their lives. They existed to serve the colonials who took their lands and turned them into servants with no rights.

Now in the 1980's and independent, the Tanzanians were just beginning to rise from those colonial years and claim their rights as God's children, created in the image of God. But in spite of the discrimination they had endured at the hands of white people, they extended the hand of friendship, love and acceptance to me. Often I would be introduced as "she is from Africa" or "this is my daughter, Paula."

By senior year, C.T's racism workshop had been discontinued. His brutal tactics caused distress and harm to abuse survivors. So a different type of racism workshop was held. I never saw C.T. Vivian again in person.

But his words, "But you must not be passive. You must not be passive. Don't ever be passive!" have continued to resonate across the years and provide direction in life.

C.T. practiced what he preached.

Thank you, C.T.

Well done, good and faithful servant!

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