

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In climate of hate, can we learn from a 6-year-old?



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Lately I have been writing about the need for understanding, mercy and forgiveness in a climate of fear and hate. In the current issue of the magazine *Christian Century*, publisher Peter Marty reminds us of an earlier time when our society was divided to the point of hate. In his column he writes about 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, who in 1960 was escorted by federal marshals to a white elementary school in New Orleans. As the only black student in the all-white school, she studied alone that year with the one teacher who remained in the school when all of the other parents withdrew their children.

Her case became known nationally through news reports and later when the artist Norman Rockwell painted the event of her attending school with federal marshal escort. The painting, titled "The Problem We All Live With," was featured in *Look* magazine in 1964 and became an iconic representation of the school integration efforts of that decade.

The protests against school integration aimed at this young child as she went to school each day were truly disturbing, as hundreds shouted their threats and hatred. The child psychiatrist Robert Coles took an interest in Ruby Bridges and wondered how she could stand up to all of this pressure. He began meeting with her weekly to learn more about how she was dealing with it all. One day, her teacher

"Please, dear God, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing."

The prayer Ruby Bridges said daily for the people who taunted her as she walked to what had been an all-white school

mentioned that she saw Ruby talking to the protesters outside the school building. When Coles asked Ruby what she was telling them, she responded that she wasn't talking to them; she was talking to God and praying for the people in the streets.

Coles recounted in an interview available online (bit.ly/YouTubeRuby) that he asked her why she was praying for the people in the streets. She looked at him and said, "Don't you think they need praying for?"

When asked where she got that idea, she said she got it from her mother and father and from their minister. She said she prayed for them every morning on the way to school and also on the way home. Coles then asked what she prays, and she responded that she always says the same thing: "Please, dear God, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing."

This very young child had learned from her parents, who could not read or write, this truth which Jesus had said from

the cross and the Hebrew prophets had declared repeatedly. Forgiveness is also central in the Quran and taught by all of the religions. It is the key not only to peace among people but also the key to living with oneself without resentment and self-hate.

Robert Coles went on to teach at Harvard University's School of Medicine and to write the Pulitzer Prize-winning series "Children of Crisis," as well as books on the moral and spiritual intelligence of children. In addition to his more than 80 scholarly books, he also wrote the illustrated children's book, "The Story of Ruby Bridges." In that same interview, Coles exhorts us to not just strive to get an A in biblical literature, or an A in moral analysis, but to "get the kind of 'A' Ruby got" by living out this attitude toward others.

In our current environment, where disagreement, misunderstanding and conflict have turned ugly to the point of hateful talk and action, we need to learn again the simple truth that was expressed by this 6-year-old. As we examine our own attitudes toward those with whom we disagree, whether it is political or religious, we may need this prayer for ourselves.

As Peter Marty said in his column, "We ought to pray those Jesus words ourselves, speaking them with the confident spirit of Ruby Bridges: 'Please dear God, forgive us because we often don't know what we're doing.'"

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