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Chris Vomvolakis: The lesson of forgiveness

Sentinel Staff Report

On Mother's Day, May 10, 1986, Joe was murdered while attempting to apprehend a thief who was burglarizing his girlfriend's automobile. Nineteen years ago, the world lost the pure potential that was Joe Vomvolakis, and I experienced the passing of my 21-year-old brother and best friend.

Joe was a naturally gifted athlete throughout his life. Growing up in Santa Cruz, Joe played football and ran track throughout high school followed by two outstanding years of junior college football. He graduated with awards, honors and accolades from Cabrillo College.

In late April 1986 Joe received word that he won a partial scholarship to play during the fall for the Hayward State Pioneer's football team. He could have not been more thrilled. He began running and working out harder than ever before to prepare for the intensity of college-level football.

During the spring of 1986, I was living at home with my parents in Santa Cruz. At 23 years old, I had also graduated from Cabrillo College with a degree in food service management and was intent on starting my career. I was searching for management-level employment in the restaurant industry. Joe and I were once inseparable but due to schedules and geography, we did not get to see much of each other that spring.

On Mother's Day weekend in May 1986 Joe surprised my parents and me with a telephone call announcing he was coming home to Santa Cruz for a visit. He said he had some good news to share with us. That evening we ate dinner together at home, as a family, and Joe told us about his scholarship. None of us could have been more proud or excited when he informed us of the wonderful news.

Later that evening Joe left home to visit with his girlfriend and her family. They lived in nearby Aptos. Together, Joe and the Hines family enjoyed the evening watching TV and talking. About 1:30 am Joe got up to leave and make the 10-minute drive back home to Santa Cruz.

Upon stepping outside of the residence and out onto the driveway Joe startled a man who was attempting to steal the stereo from a vehicle parked in the driveway. The man began to run and Joe, being the right-minded, dutiful citizen he was, gave chase. Though the thief had a sizable head start, Joe caught up with him.

It was there, on a dark street in the middle of the night that my brother lost his life. The thief removed an unlocked, fully loaded .25-caliber Beretta handgun from his pocket, turned around and fired on my brother. Two of the three bullets fired found their target. My brother was mortally wounded with shots to the head and abdomen. Joe died there alone on the dark street at 1:40 am while the thief fled into the night.

When my mom and I came out of the bedroom I remember my dad being at our front door with two Santa Cruz County sheriff's deputies. They were there to report what had happened. I painfully recall stumbling into our living room and seeing my father lying on the floor sobbing and screaming uncontrollably. Two days later the thief was apprehended. He was caught by Santa Cruz County sheriff's detectives. He had been hiding out at motel near the scene of the crime. The thief, Ken Luther, confessed to the crime and was booked into the Santa Cruz County Jail for murder with the use of a firearm .

A year later, Ken Luther was tried and convicted for the second-degree murder of my brother. He was sent to Folsom State Prison with a 19-year-to-life sentence.

The details during the trial in 1987 have become inconsequential all these years later. I only remember the sadness of Joe's memorial service, the agony of the trial, reliving the experience in the considerable daily media coverage and pain of watching the youth and vitality of my parents evaporate in front of me.

Life for me, for what turned out to be the next 14 years, was a blur. I kind of lived in a haze. I existed in a state of negative feelings of anger, rage, sadness and depression all rolled into one painful reality. It lived just below the surface of my outward exterior. As it turned out, my mom and dad were not well equipped, nor had they provided me with the tools of how to deal with any kind of feelings and emotions, theirs or mine. Nor did they believe in family counseling. I do not blame them; they were simply trying to deal with the grief of losing their child. As it turns out, I did not deal or really connect with my feelings and emotions for many, many more painful years to come.

The love and support we received from family and friends was overwhelming. It was wonderful. We received support for many years after Joe's death. In fact, we still do. It's nice to know Joe touched so many people. But inwardly, after his passing, I only felt non-located, indescribable pain, loss and loneliness.

Ten years later, in November 1997, about the time my family and I thought we were beginning to get a handle on, and individually and collectively processing our feelings, we were contacted by the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office and informed that Ken Luther was eligible for his first parole hearing. We learned that as victims, we had the right to appear at the Board of Prison Terms (Luther had been transferred to the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad) and express our position concerning the crime and the person responsible.

Without hesitation we decided to go with the intent to block his release. My parents mounted a letter-writing campaign, calling on all of Joe's friends and our family to write letters on Joe's behalf. I was working in the restaurant business in South Florida at the time. I quickly booked a cross-country flight to attend the hearing.

On a cold, dreary November morning, my mom and dad and I drove two hours south of Santa Cruz to the Soledad Correctional Training Facility to face the person who had destroyed our lives. Vengeance drove our emotions. Reflecting on it, it was a terribly depressing time. While the experience of walking into a prison is bizarre enough in itself, try combining that eerie feeling with confronting your deepest, darkest nightmare in the form of Ken Luther, and you have the perfect recipe for fear, condemnation, judgment and hate.

I remember the sickening, nerve-racking, heart-pounding feeling of being in the room with Ken Luther again for the first time in 10 years. It was as if the past imploded into the present. It felt like the last 10 years had been erased in one single moment and I had crashed headlong into all those feelings of sadness that had been created May 10, 1986. Simply put, it was horrible. As for my parents, they could not even find the strength to speak at the hearing. All they could to was sob. So I stepped up and did the speaking on behalf of my family. Luther's parole was denied.

Five years later, in February 2002, 16 years after the murder of my brother, Ken Luther was again eligible for a parole hearing, and again I found myself traveling across the United States from South Florida. While we prevailed again when Luther was denied parole for a second time, later I began to notice a shift in my attitude after returning to South Florida from the hearing in 1997. On this occasion, since Luther had never apologized to me or my family or showed any outward signs of remorse, I presented the board with the question, "Is Luther himself ready to be forgiven?" Apparently, or so the board determined, he was not.

Unfortunately, what is most sad and apparent to me is that since Ken Luther first entered our lives 19 years ago (approximately 6,935 days behind bars), through his initial incarceration in the Santa Cruz County Jail, the murder trial in 1987 and now with his third parole eligibility hearing pending, he has never, ever accepted responsibility for his crime, acknowledged, shown remorse or even offered an apology for his actions to my family or me.

During the past three years, since that day in February 2002, with the love, support and patience of my wife, Shelly, I have done a considerable amount of intense internal self-exploration and spiritual work. I feel I have made more strides in healing my wounds in the past three years with Shelly's love and support than I had during the entire previous 16 years. Through the healing work of an amazing pastoral counselor, Maya Malay of the Padmasambhava Buddhist Center in West Palm Beach, Florida, and many authors, sages and masters from around the world, I finally discovered the greatest healer of all: forgiveness.

Ken Luther is scheduled for his third parole eligibility hearing on Monday. At that time he will have been incarcerated for 19 years, since 1986. And again I plan to attend the hearing along with my parents.

I know and understand what my parents are going to recommend to the Board of Prison Terms. However, what I will say to Ken Luther on this occasion will be different and from past hearings, different than those of my parents. I will be present only to read to him a letter I have written that neither recommends the denial of parole nor continuing his sentence (as this no longer concerns me). Rather I will use this third opportunity to forgive him for his actions of 19 years ago.

Now, 19 years later, it is not a question of "is Ken Luther ready to be forgiven?" Rather the question for me has evolved and become: "Am I ready and willing to speak my truth and forgive Ken Luther in order to heal myself and my own wounds?"

Every spiritual tradition, every psychology, every how-to, self-help book, all of them in some way talk about how the energy of forgiveness is healthy, how it is good for you, how it is a good habit. All things considered, there is no downside to forgiveness. In fact, what it does is it creates a new infinite quantum field of possibility in us because it releases the

energy of resentment we were holding on to. Some people talk about how forgiveness energy creates in us the potential to be more prosperous. To me, forgiveness is not about forgiving Ken Luther for murdering my brother, but rather it is retaining the wisdom of what I learned through the experience and taking steps at the same time to release the pain that is associated with it.

There is a distinct difference in just saying, "Oh, what happened is OK," and true, heartfelt forgiveness. I am in no way endorsing what happened as being OK, because with as much pain, anguish and heartache it has caused my family and me it is not OK. Forgiveness is not about making bad behavior OK. Instead, forgiveness is a feeling or a thought that rises up inside of you at the right time and says, "I'm ready! I'm ready right now, in this moment in my life, to let go of what happened because there is something in me that wants to move on!"

Through this experience, I ultimately arrived at a point where I was simply not willing to let what happened absolutely rule my life anymore, not for one more second. This is mainly due to the fact I no longer want the energy from May 10, 1986, to infect my present or future anymore. I now know from personal experience that there is a freedom in that, it has provided me with the ability to take risks again, to be liberated, and to experience being a whole person again.

It has taken many, many years to arrive at this place of healing my heart. When this journey started I had absolutely no idea where it would end. And what I once considered to be my worst possible nightmare has now transformed into the greatest lesson I have ever learned. The gift my brother offered me is etched deep in my heart. The power of love and forgiveness is truly the greatest healer of all. While I still miss my brother every day, I believe I am now nearly healed and I am feeling nearly whole once again.

Thank you, Joe, for the lesson you taught me. I will be forever grateful.