

The Passing of Tookie Williams and My Experience with the Gift of Deep Sorrow

by Thomas Razzeto

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This essay is a chapter in my book, *Living the Paradox of Enlightenment*.

In late 2005, I became aware of a man on California's death row named Stanley "Tookie" Williams. He was scheduled to be put to death in mid-December and there was an effort to prevent this. By this time, Tookie had written or co-written about a dozen short books which spoke out against gang violence and especially warned children about the false promise of gang life. His work was so influential that many people wrote him letters of gratitude. He was even nominated to receive a Nobel Peace Prize. Children and young teenagers wrote to say that only Tookie's work had kept them from joining a gang.

I did not know much about Tookie's past but I did know that he was one of the founding members of the Crips and had been involved in a very violent lifestyle, as you would expect from a man at the top of one of Los Angeles's most notorious gangs.

Yet his books, which he wrote while in prison, seemed to reveal that he was a changed man, with compassion and a strong desire to make the world a better place in ways that only someone who had been in the darkest shadows could. He could talk about gangs because he had been involved since he was twelve. He could connect with the black community of South Central Los Angeles because he was one of them. And by extrapolation, he could connect with people in other cities across the country and around the world.

In a December 2005 interview, with his probable death just hours away, Tookie said:

[Regarding] my lack of fear of this barbaric methodology of death, I rely upon my faith. It has nothing to do with machismo, with manhood, or with some pseudo former gang street code. This is pure faith, and predicated on my redemption. So, therefore, I just stand strong and continue to tell you, your audience, and the world that I am innocent, and yes, I have been a wretched person, but I have redeemed myself. And I say to you and all those who can listen and will listen that redemption is tailor-made for the wretched, and that's what I used to be. That's what I would like the world to remember [about] me. That's how I would like my legacy to be remembered – as a redemptive transition, something that I believe is not exclusive, just for the so-called sanctimonious, the elitists. And it is not predicated on color or race or social stratum or one's religious background. It's accessible for everybody. That's the beauty about it. And whether others choose to believe that I have redeemed myself or not, I worry not, because I know and God knows, and you can believe that all of the youths that I continue to help, they know, too. So with that, I am grateful. I say to you and everyone else, God bless. So take care.

I am not sure if I heard that specific interview but I did hear Tookie speak on the radio a few times that December and I imagine that he offered basically the same message each time he spoke.

His reference to being innocent stems from his claim that the charges that actually put him in prison were the result of being framed. Yet it cannot be denied that his past was filled with violence; this is beyond question.

The debate about whether Tookie had really changed did not matter much to me since in my view, he *was* a changed man. Most of Tookie's books were for children and often only about 25 pages long. In my view, those books were basically about peace and they were having a very positive effect on the lives of thousands of people. I am happy that Tookie was able to get those books into the hands that mattered most. In this way, he had been transformed and his work was a priceless contribution to society.

So on the day the execution was supposed to take place, I could only hope that the governor of California would understand the immeasurable benefit of Tookie's excellent work and stop the execution. Just to be perfectly clear, no one was asking for Tookie to be set free, only that he be allowed to continue to live and work inside San Quentin State Prison. How could that be too much to ask?

It might be hard for me to convey in words all the beliefs that came into play for me that night. Was the state of California a heartless, cruel machine that just destroyed anything that seemed dangerous, even though this supposedly dangerous man was now completely disarmed? Were the forces of darkness so strong that peace was not even allowed to be discussed? Wasn't Tookie's track record of social benefit now obvious?

Over the course of several decades, I had learned about the murder of President Kennedy and it seemed to me that the powers that pushed violence and war kept gaining more and more ground. My hopes and dreams from the Sixties for love and peace seemed to have evaporated right before my eyes. I had been working hard on my writing for over five years but that was not getting any attention. And yet here was Tookie, getting the job done beautifully! Surely he should be allowed to continue! In fact, the prison system should be promoting his work throughout the entire country and beyond!

That night I went to bed around 11 PM and I knew that the execution was scheduled for midnight. I fell asleep not knowing what to expect. Inexplicably, I awoke a few minutes before 1 AM. I knew that the news would start at the top of the hour and that most likely, if I turned on my clock radio, a man would come on and tell me whether or not Tookie had been saved. I slowly but anxiously reached for the button, already very concerned since I had never heard of anything like this being prevented at the last minute.

Sure enough, the lead story was about Tookie. A man just reported without emotion that Tookie was now gone, no longer available to help us all, and no longer there for his family and friends. I was crushed. The flood of emotions was much stronger than I could have expected. After all, this was a man I had never met and only heard on the radio for no more than an hour.

John Kennedy stood up tall for peace. He was struck down. Tookie Williams stood up tall for peace. He was struck down. If I stood up for peace high enough to be seen, would I, too, be pushed aside? What was going to happen to humanity's peace project? Could we really bring peace to the whole world, one person at a time? Was there really something that we could do to help make this happen or was I just holding false hope? Why had there been this senseless killing of such a beautiful person, this man of peace? Why? When the state of California executed Tookie, I felt as if this callous institution had crushed all the hope that I held for a better world. In fact, it was almost as if they had crushed me, all my work, and everything I dreamed about. Who was going to correct our "correctional" institutions? Who? And when?

My crying started immediately and quickly it was so deep that I did not know anyone could cry that hard. The tears poured from my eyes like a dam had burst. My breathing had a staccato pulse and my voice could only send out the painful wail of my breaking heart. This was genuine human sadness at its deepest and it was natural. I certainly was not thinking, "If I were more spiritual, I would be happy all the time." No, this sadness flooded my experience in an overwhelming yet natural way, without any extra thoughts about what sadness should or should not be.

While I was crying, I had the thought that I wanted to know what this deep sadness really was. It seemed that it was as big as a mountain and as solid as a rock. My desire to really know the truth about this was intense. So I pulled it towards me – towards my awareness. And as I pulled this sorrow into me, it simply dissolved, much to my surprise. Yes, it dissolved and it did so rather quickly. What was left was just me, just my awareness.

The sadness dissolved in a way that made me recognize that it was dissolving back into me because that is where it had come from. It was born from my awareness and it was returning to my awareness. I instantly knew intuitively that all my emotions were like that. They all arose from my awareness, were witnessed by my awareness and then dissolved back into my awareness. In this way, I also recognized that everything that I had ever experienced arose from my awareness and then dissolved. Everything. All the sensations of the five physical senses, all my thoughts, my nighttime dreams, all my intuitive feelings and all my inner senses. Everything physical and everything spiritual.

And there was more. I intuitively knew that the awareness that was looking out of my eyes was the same awareness that looks out of your eyes. There is only One Awareness, the Divine Awareness, and as such, it is the only Reality that was not created. This is the One Self that arises as all apparent selves. In this way, the One becomes the many.

As I reflected back on what had just happened, I recognized that while my body was still crying, I was not dissatisfied with being so sad. I accepted it as perfectly natural and appropriate. While there had been this human sadness for me to witness, I learned that I could hold it within the larger framework of Divine Bliss.

This is like a mother who knows how to stay centered in her Divine Bliss while holding her crying child in her loving arms. She would never push away her dear child or judge it as undesirable in any way. You can be like the combination of this mother and child as Divine Bliss holding your human sadness.

This was the gift that I received from deep sorrow. Tookie's passing gave me a new understanding. His death gave me a new life. Now I know a little more about who I really am and I know the Divine Bliss that holds all human emotions. I had heard Timothy Conway talk about this for months, but now I knew it from my own personal experience.

Perhaps you will be inspired to ponder this deeply.