

# *Held in the Light*

Norman Morrison's Sacrifice for Peace  
and His Family's  
Journey of Healing

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WITH JOYCE HOLLYDAY

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## “What Can We Do That We Haven’t Done?”

*Without the inspired act, no  
generation resumes  
the search for love.*  
—NORMAN MORRISON

The clock read just shy of 5:30, but already darkness was seeping into the raw, early November day. Six-year-old Ben and five-year-old Tina played nearby, while I put the finishing touches on dinner. I wasn’t worried, just wondering about the whereabouts of Norman and our youngest child, Emily. Maybe they were at the Taylor Home? As the executive secretary of Baltimore’s Stony Run Friends Meeting, Norman made frequent visits to the nursing home the meeting sponsored. The residents of the home loved to see children, and Norman often took Tina with him. Perhaps he had taken Emily this time.

But it wasn’t like Norman to be gone after dark. Maybe he had been surprised by the early encroachment of night, as we had been caught two days before by the shift away from daylight savings time. We had forgotten to turn back our clocks and arrived at an empty meetinghouse an hour early for our weekly Quaker meeting on Sunday morning. Norman suggested that we take a drive out of the city and find a place to walk. Norman carried Emily, almost a year old, on his shoulders. Ben and Tina darted ahead, delighted to be “hiking” in their Sunday clothes. That dear image of us all walking and laughing is the last family memory I hold in my heart.

The phone in the hallway rang just after 5:30.

"Is this Mrs. Morrison?" an unfamiliar male voice asked.

"Yes."

"Are you the wife of Norman Morrison?"

"Yes."

For a moment, there was silence on the other end. Then the man identified himself as a reporter from *Newsweek* magazine. "Did you know that something has happened with your husband in Washington?" he asked. "I think it was a form of protest."

After a long pause, I mustered a "no." I felt as if everything inside my body stopped. I couldn't get my breath. The reporter became silent too, unable to say more. Immediately an image came to me of Norman, with Emily in his arms, wading into the Potomac River.

That surprising image was a picture of terror for me, connected to an old memory of watching my mother almost drown when I was four years old. We were in south Georgia. My family was at a picnic, surrounded by other families. Mother was swimming in the river, and I was sitting happily with my father on a blanket on the bank nearby. Suddenly Mother began screaming and waving her arms for help. Dad threw off his shoes and charged down the bank and into the water. Other men ran and helped him pull Mother out. Thankfully, she was OK, but my fear that I would lose her forever to the river stayed frozen in my memory. Now, all I knew was that something terrible had happened to Norman—and perhaps to Emily, too.

The reporter composed himself and interrupted the alarming thoughts that were overtaking me. "I think you'd better call the Fort Myer infirmary," he said gently. More than four decades later, I remain grateful for his merciful sensitivity, for not telling me what he knew and pressing to be the first to get my response. I wish now that I had taken note of his name.

Before I could focus on placing a call, the phone rang again. Another unfamiliar male voice was on the line. The man from the infirmary at Fort Myer, a military base near the Pentagon, informed me that Norman had been badly burned. He didn't tell

me—and I didn’t ask—if Norman had died. Intuitively, I knew that he hadn’t survived. I asked the stranger on the phone if Emily was all right. He said that she was fine. “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I managed to say, feeling as though the blood was draining out of me.

With trembling hands, I dialed the number of George and Eleanor Webb, close friends who were members of the Stony Run Friends Meeting. They were at our home within five minutes. I was still standing by the phone, paralyzed with shock. Eleanor gave Ben and Tina the supper I had made and what comfort she could. George and Harry Scott, another leader in the meeting who had arrived to help, insisted on driving me to Fort Myer.

I remember putting on my coat and walking out of the house with them. I had a sensation of being in a time warp—a moment so extraordinary that it is out of sync with real time—and then of walking off a gangplank. I didn’t think about what I was going to do next. I just left our home and walked into another world.

On the drive to Washington, I sat in the back of the car, stunned and frozen, not knowing what to think or feel. None of us knew what to say. I stared out the window, mesmerized by the car lights playing on the darkness of the road. I recalled that Norman and I had been awed and moved by Buddhist monks in Vietnam who had protested through self-immolation. We had noted a small item in the newspaper in the spring about a Quaker woman in Detroit who had set herself on fire to protest the war. But these weren’t events we had talked about at any length.

I remember having the thought that if Norman had tried to immolate himself, he would have succeeded. Though he was often unsure of himself when relating to people, and conversation didn’t come easily to him, he was very confident with his hands; physical tasks were his strength. If he felt he had to do something, he would have found a way to do it.

I had no idea how to prepare myself for facing Norman’s death. Or—if my intuition was wrong—for finding him severely burned to the point that he had been disfigured. I knew that he

would have found that intolerable. So I prayed. I prayed for Norman. I prayed that his sacrifice would not be in vain. And I prayed for strength.

I retraced the details of our day together in my mind, searching for clues. Norman had woken up with a cold, so I drove Ben and Tina to school that morning. He stayed in bed most of the day, working on a New Testament class that he was to present to the meeting during the coming week. Emily played on the floor near us in our bedroom, until I put her down for her nap.

About noon I went downstairs and started to prepare lunch—French onion soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. Norman came down and perched on a stool on the other side of our big kitchen, talking about the Vietnam War, which we did regularly in those days. He mentioned an article he had just read about the bombing and napalming of a village by U.S. forces. He was particularly agonized by the suffering of the village’s children.

“What can we do that we haven’t done?” he asked. His tone was grave, but he didn’t seem distraught or depressed. He appeared quite calm. I kept stirring the soup and then responded, “I really don’t know.” We had done everything I could imagine doing to try to stop the war: praying, protesting, lobbying, withholding war taxes, writing letters to newspapers and people in power. I remember adding, “All I know is that we mustn’t despair.”

We went into the dining room to eat our lunch, and the conversation moved to more pleasant topics. We talked about Christmas, about our plans to go to Erie, Pennsylvania, to be with his mother. He asked me what I wanted for a Christmas gift, and I told him that I would like a suit, something nice from a consignment shop. We went back upstairs and sat on the bed, glancing through the day’s mail. Norman looked up at me and asked pensively, “What would you do if anything happened to me?”

“What a question!” I exclaimed. At first I wasn’t sure whether to take him seriously or not. But after thinking about it for a moment, I said, “I guess I would take the children to Dad’s, until I could figure things out.” My father was living in Granite Falls, North Carolina, with my younger brother Bill. I had concocted

the answer on the spot. I had never really contemplated not having Norman in our lives. Norman made no comment in response, and that was the end of that brief, puzzling exchange.

Emily was still asleep when I went to pick up Ben and Tina at school. Norman went back to preparing his class. He kept entirely to himself the mission he felt called to that day. If I had known what he was contemplating, I would have gone to any length on earth to stop him.

We were keeping a car—a very old, two-tone Cadillac—for our dear friends Harry and Mary Cushing Niles, while they were on a visit to India. When I got back home, the Cadillac was gone. I could not have imagined that Norman and Emily were at that moment on their way to the Pentagon. Or that our baby would be with her father right up to the fiery end of his life.

When George, Harry, and I got to the Fort Myer infirmary, we hurried in, pushing past the crowd of reporters that had gathered. The people who greeted us inside were very courteous. A man ushered me out of the lobby and into a small, private room, where he told me that Norman had died.

Soon a nurse came and handed me Emily, wrapped in a white blanket. She wasn't crying. She seemed serene and unaffected by the bright lights and strangers. Norman and I had faced the possibility of losing our youngest daughter even before she was born, and facing that risk again that day had seemed almost more than I could bear. I held Emily close, waves of relief flooding through me. After the nurse handed me her diaper bag, all I wanted to do was take her home.

Someone appeared with Norman's jacket, the Harris Tweed that we had bought in Scotland in 1957, right after we were married. It was his favorite. It symbolized his Scottish heritage, of which he was very proud. He loved to wear that coat. I remember thinking that it was right for him to want to die in his Harris Tweed. I was astonished, but somehow relieved, to see that it was only slightly singed.

Then I was handed Norman's wallet, comb, and wedding band. "Yes, these are his things," I confirmed to the infirmary

officials, giving them the positive identification they needed. I remember thinking, “It’s over. It’s all over.”

In the meantime, George and Harry had consulted. One of them said to me, “There are all kinds of media outside, and we probably should think about saying something.” I knew they were right. “Yes, we should,” I agreed.

We huddled in a corner. George had a spare envelope with him, and a pen. Heaven and my friends helped me to find the words to say. I spoke, and George wrote my words on the envelope. Then he went out and read my statement to the media: “Norman Morrison has given his life today to express his concern over the great loss of life and human suffering caused by the war in Vietnam. He was protesting our government’s deep military involvement in this war. He felt that all citizens must speak their true convictions about our country’s actions.”

I’ll never know exactly what happened outside the Pentagon during rush hour on November 2, 1965. Eyewitness reports conflict. What seems clear is that Norman—with Emily, her diaper bag, and a gallon-sized glass jug of kerosene in his arms—went to the river entrance of the Pentagon at dusk. He poured the kerosene over himself and struck a match on the top of one of his shoes.

A traffic policeman recalled seeing a man with a baby walking along the low parapet of a walled garden outside the Pentagon, and some onlookers claimed that Norman stood on that wall and shouted at the gathering crowd while he burned. Other witnesses reported that Norman and Emily were behind the wall, inside the raised rectangular garden laced with brick walks. A Pentagon guard who raced to an alarm box to call the fire department said the flames shot ten to twelve feet into the air.

At great personal risk, two military officers leapt over the wall and tried to smother the fire with their hands and coats, burning themselves in a futile effort to save Norman. He apparently fell forward then into a narrow trench and was trying to utter his last words, which none of the eyewitnesses could understand. A young doctor on duty at the Pentagon dispensary got a two-word

summons: “Somebody burning.” Norman was unconscious but still alive when the doctor got to him. He was gasping for breath, according to the doctor, and died a few minutes later in the ambulance, on the way to the infirmary.

Much later, a doctor told me that Norman probably died of suffocation rather than from burns. The fire consumed all the air around him. When a person dies this way, it happens very quickly. I was thankful for the mercy of that. I wanted desperately to believe that Norman hadn’t suffered long.

In an office inside the Pentagon, an aide interrupted Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, to tell him that something was happening outside. McNamara, who later declared that Norman had set himself on fire within forty feet of his third-floor window, saw the last of the flames and the two ambulances that had arrived. “It’s what?” he asked the aide, according to one report, the color draining from his face when he saw paramedics bundling Norman’s near-lifeless form. Another “What?” was all that McNamara could muster when the aide mentioned that there was also a child.

What of Emily? That remains the great mystery. Some eyewitnesses reported that Pentagon employees poured out of the building toward the pillar of fire, yelling to Norman, “Drop the baby!” and “Save the child!”—prompting him to throw Emily out of his arms. Others say Norman set her down, and still others that he handed her over to an unidentified woman in the crowd. The coroner’s report stated that he dropped Emily, who landed unharmed in a bush.

What I believe is that Norman held our precious youngest child as long as he dared, then placed her on the ground and struck the match. What I know is that Emily, dressed in light-blue coveralls under the white blanket, had no cuts or bruises, no singes or burns, on her small body. She seemed miraculously calm and well when I gathered her into my arms at the infirmary. I held her as close as I could, as if I would never let her go. Then it was time for me to take her home and face a future I couldn’t begin to imagine.