

When a Bad Man Dies

By Robert Francis

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The neighborhood was poor, confined in the overpopulated inner-city. Slavery, forced segregation, dehumanization and marginalization were the legacy of the neighborhood. Faith, hope, love and the peculiar strength of a long-oppressed people formed another legacy, just as real, but less noticed, the focus being on the lack rather than on the abundance. And so the neighborhood watched and waited for a savior, not understanding that their salvation was in their own hearts, their own minds, their own hands.

The longed-for savior arrived one day, driving a big car and with money to burn. He seemed to be one of their own, one of the people, and he seemed to have all the answers. Many followed him. Those who questioned his authority or opposed his ways, means or ends, met with his wrath. Through deceit and violence, he took control of the neighborhood, the hands of all, the minds of most, the hearts of some. His power seemed secure until the day came when he found himself cornered against a chain-link fence facing a vengeful man wielding an assault rifle. A crowd gathered as the man threatened and pled for his life. No attempt was made to intervene. To the threats and pleas this answer was given: "Momma told me not to come home without killin' someone, and I ain't about to pass up *this* opportunity." To this was added the resolute speech of the rifle: "crack, crack, crack, crack." A cheer went up from the crowd.

When a good man, a holy man, dies, is killed unjustly, mysteriously his followers are remade after his image, taking on some of his holiness and power for good, through the shedding of innocent blood. So we have seen with Malcolm and Martin, Mahatma Gandhi and Tashunka Witco. So we have seen with Jesus of Nazareth. Even those responsible for the killing are sometimes transformed by the testimony of guiltless suffering.

Something similar happens when a bad man dies, is killed, however justly, whether by legal or illegal means. His followers become more firmly set in their course, emboldened by the awful power of greed and evil transferred to them through the leader's death. Even a bad man, an evil man may become a martyr to those who placed their hope in him, his life somehow, seemingly justified in the violence of his passing. And those who kill the bad man, shedding blood vile with guilt, and those who rejoice in his demise are also changed. Through the act of violence, they become themselves, in some way, just like the one they have hated.