



Video Story Transcript

Not By the Sword: How a Cantor and His Family Transformed a Klansman

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Pippa White. The story I have for you is a true story. It's about an incident that happened in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1991. Actually, it's a much truncated version of a wonderful book called Not By the Sword: How a Cantor and His Family Transformed a Klansman. That book was written by Kathryn Watterson. And I'm very grateful to Kathryn for letting me tell this story. Actually, there are two people in the story, Michael and Julie, who I know. So I'm grateful to them too. And I'm going to tell the story from Julie's point of view. I am now going to become Julie.

We had encountered anti-Semitism before. My husband was a Jewish cantor, he had had other appointments in other synagogues in other cities. Anti-semitism was not something we were unfamiliar with but this was different and especially upsetting. We had just moved into a new home in Lincoln, Nebraska after two years of renting. And one afternoon, my husband answered the phone to hear this harsh, hate-filled voice saying, "You're going to be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph Street, Jew boy!" Two days later we received a package in the mail. On the outside it said, "The KKK is watching you." Inside there were all these flyers, dozens of brochures and flyers, with ugly caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, African-Americans-race traitors, all of them being shot or hanged. And another message, "Your time is up and the Holo-hoax was nothing compared to what's going to happen to you!" This was too much. We called the police.

The police came and said they were 98% sure it was the work of one Larry Trapp, the state leader and Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. Larry and his Klansmen had terrorized many Jews, blacks, and Vietnamese in Nebraska and Iowa. And said the police, "He's dangerous. We know he has explosives." Now they explained that he was in a wheelchair. He had lost both legs to diabetes but they said he had firebombed four or five African-American homes in Lincoln and the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Center in Omaha. And, unbeknownst to us, the police felt Larry Trapp was planning to bomb the very synagogue where my husband was the spiritual leader. Last thing the police said was, "So lock your doors and don't open any more unlabeled packages."

Well, we didn't get any more packages nor did we get any more phone calls. But Larry Trapp had done his work very well. We had been terrorized. We couldn't open the mailbox without wondering if there was a letter bomb in there. We worried about our three children and every time a car drove slowly by the house, we had a little panic attack. Larry Trapp had done his work very well. Perhaps because of this, I couldn't get him out of my mind. But it wasn't just the fear, I was also fascinated. I kept asking myself what makes someone like that? I found out his address and I used to drive by his apartment every afternoon after work and wonder, what makes someone like that? And how lonely he must be isolated in all that hatred?

Not long after this we found out that Larry Trapp was on television. He'd gotten himself on some local cable access channel and he would sit there spewing all these white supremacist hate. It made Michael so mad that he said, "He called us. I'm calling him."

So he called this, *Vigilante Voices*. All he got was an answering machine but he said, "Larry, why do you hate me? You don't even know me. So how can you hate me?" Next day it was, "Larry, don't you know that you're going to have to answer to God someday for all this hatred?" The third day it was, "Larry, why do you love Hitler so much? Don't you know that in Hitler's Germany, one of the first laws the Nazis passed was against people like you, people with disabilities? Don't you know that in Hitler's Germany, you'd have been one of the first to go?" Every day Michael left a message. One day Michael said to me, "I wonder if he'll ever pick up?"

I said, "If he does, offer to do something nice for him. You watch, it'll throw him completely off guard."

One day in the midst of this message, "Larry, when you can get rid of all the hate, there's a world of love waiting for ya," Larry Trapp picked up, "What #@&%* do you want?!"

"I just want to talk to you, Larry."

"Why #@&%* are you harassing me? You're harassing me! Stop harassing me!"

"I'm not harassing you, Larry. I just want to talk to you."

"Are you black? You sound black."

"No I'm, Jewish."

"Well, what do you want? Make it quick!"

And then my husband took my advice, "Well, Larry, we know you're in a wheelchair. We wondered if we could help you in any way? Take you to the grocery store, that kind of thing."

Long pause. Michael says when Larry spoke again his voice was different. "That's OK. That's nice. That's been covered. Thanks anyway. Don't call this number again."

"We'll be in touch," was the last thing Michael said. I think it must have been Larry Trapp's time in life to be bombarded with love.

A nurse wrote him a letter, and because of his very poor health he was in and out of doctors' offices all the time, and she said, "Larry, if you could embrace God the way you've embraced the KKK, He would heal you of all that hurt, anger, hatred, and bitterness in ways you won't believe."

And one day when Larry was leaving the eye doctor's office, he felt his wheelchair being pushed from behind. He turned around and there was a beautiful young woman. And she said, "I help you. I help you. In elevator." A Vietnamese woman. And Larry and his followers had been brutal to the Vietnamese community in Lincoln Nebraska.

Michael kept leaving messages and one day, mid message again, Larry picked up. "I'm rethinking a few things."

"Good," said Michael, "Good." Two days later, there he was on television, on the cable access channel, ranting and raving about...well, using every horrible, racial epithet you can think of. Made Michael so mad that he called and say, "You're not rethinking anything and I want an explanation."

"I'm sorry," said Larry. "I'm sorry. I've, I've, ah, I've talked this way all my life. I can't help it. I'll, I'll apologize."

That night, at the synagogue, Michael asked the congregation to pray for someone who is sick with the illness of hatred and bigotry. "Pray that he can be healed."

And across town, Lenore Letcher, an African-American woman who had been on the receiving end of Larry's hatred, prayed, "Dear God, let him find you in his heart." And that night, the skin on Larry Trapp's fingers burned and itched and stung so badly he had to take his Nazi rings off.

The next night, Michael and I were just sitting down to dinner when the phone rang. "I want out and I don't know how." Michael suggested we get together and break bread together. Larry hesitated and then he agreed. We were rushing around, packing up the food, and I thought to myself, we should take him a gift. And I found a ring of Michael's that he never wore.

It was a silver friendship ring. All the silver strands wound together. Michael said, "That's a good choice. It's always reminded me of all the different kinds of people in the world." To me, it represented something twisted could become something beautiful. The last thing we did before we left the house was to call a neighbor and say if we're not back in a reasonable amount of time call the police.

We got to Larry Trapp's apartment knocked on the door, the door swung slowly open. There he sat. In his wheel chair, bearded. On the door handle on his side, hung an automatic weapon, behind him was a huge Nazi flag. Michael reached forward and touched Larry's hand. He winced as though a jolt of electricity had gone through him. And then he began to cry. "Here!" he said. "Take these! take these! I don't want 'em anymore!" And he put the Nazi rings in Michael's.

We were speechless but not for long. I remembered my gift. I got down on my knees and slid the ring on his finger saying, "Here Larry, look, we brought you a ring." He began to sob and sob, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, for all the things I have done."

We hugged him and pretty soon there were three people crying. We left Larry Trapp's apartment four hours later, with the Nazi rings, the Nazi flag, all his KKK paraphernalia including the hood and the beret. And we left with all his guns.

Over the next few weeks, Larry Trapp's transformation was so complete that the KKK began harassing *him*. He began to write personal letters of apology to many of the people that he had threatened. He joined the NAACP. He began to go to schools to talk to school children about tolerance. And he and my husband, Michael, were interviewed by Time magazine.

On the very last day of the year, Larry learned from his doctors that he had less than a year to live. We asked him if he wouldn't like to move in with us. He agreed. Now this was not easy. We had three teenage children,

a dog, a cat. I gave up my job to stay home and take care of Larry. But we all chipped in and, and made it work. As Larry grew weaker, he would listen to books on tape. He listened to books about Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Malcolm X, and he began to read and study Judaism.

And one day he surprised Michael and me when he announced that he wanted to convert to Judaism. We said we thought it was wonderful that he wanted to embrace a faith tradition at this time of his life. But if he wanted to embrace a faith tradition closer to his own roots we would understand that. "No. Judaism." So in June of 1992, in a beautiful ceremony, Larry Trapp converted to Judaism in the very synagogue that a year earlier he had planned to blow up.

In September of 1992, Larry Trapp died in our home. Michael and I were with him, each holding a hand. Before he got too weak, Larry was asked to speak at a celebration for Martin Luther King Jr. This is what he had to say, "I wasted the first 40 years of my life bringing harm to other people. But I believe that God sent Cantor Weisser to me to show me that I could receive love and I could also give love. I've learned now that we're all the same. White, black, brown, there's no difference. We're all one race." Larry Trapp, the former Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan said there is only one race.