

“I SAW A MAN FLY!! I AM SURE I DID!”

THE TRUE STORY OF SHREVEPORT BUSINESSMAN THOMAS H. THIGPEN

by Mack McCarter

His name is Thomas H. Thigpen and I saw him fly. I am sure I did. Thomas H. Thigpen and I shared two things in common. We were both born in the vintage years of the 1940's in Shreveport, Louisiana, and we both grew up on the easy side of the South's own bitter version of apartheid. Tommy's prominent family propelled him into a successful career within Shreveport's inner circle of business winners. I left the city to pastor cowboys in West Texas.

In the twenty-five year interim, within the crucible of my own desert of Midian, I had forgotten all about "Thigpen." After all, he was younger by two years and barely noticeable to the "older" high school crowd. Then I came home to Shreveport finally prepared for my life's work, that of serving a community which I had always loved.

Mobilizing "bridge people" all over the city for four years, quietly building foundations of loving relationships, and systematically following a simple but comprehensive strategy to restore "community" to a city about to bust, I was unknowingly put on a collision course with Mr. Thomas H. Thigpen.

Word had gotten out about me and about "us," the folks reaching out through Shreveport Community Renewal. Actually, it did not take long at all. Only four months after returning to Shreveport, I was visiting one of the black congregations that anchors the entire region, the Mount Canaan Missionary Baptist Church. I had heard of the Pastor, The Reverend Doctor Harry Blake. I had read of his association with King, but there was so much I did not know. I was only there to "build bridges," a kind of perfunctory ambassadorial tip-of-the-hat. Little did I know what deep water I was about to enter! Wholly unplanned and wholly unreasonably, I, the white visitor, was led to join Mt. Canaan that day! (This is another story in itself which continues to unfold in relational richness up to this very moment.)

Word spread. One year ago, the news reached a friend of Tommy's. He called me. He told me that he had a friend who was consumed by the gall of racial hatred. Would I call his friend and have lunch with him? He told me that Tommy Thigpen thought he remembered me as the guy whose football career ended with a leg bone splitting to the knee. That was me, but I could not recall "Thigpen." Still, I phoned him for lunch and we agreed to meet the next day.

Wednesday, January 18, high noon, we took a table Madison Square Garden. No sooner seated than Tommy said, "I hate -----s!" (And everyone knows the slur that dripped acidly from his lips.) "Now what are you going to do about it, because I believe that they are ruining everything/ and one other thing you need to know, two days ago, I pulled a gun out of my glove compartment and leveled it at two of 'em/and I'm scared of what I almost did/so what are you going to do?/ because **something radical has got to be done!**"

Frankly, my mind was racing like a blender. I was on overload and almost panicked for lack of an answer. Here sitting across from me in a booth was the personification of one of the monstrous evils pressing against the dike of today's America. I am supposed to give an answer to that huge need? I was blank. Yet I heard words speaking out of my own mouth.

"Tommy, tonight is our Prayer Meeting at Mt. Canaan. I want you to go with me." Thigpen jerked straight backwards like a steel rod had been shoved up his spine. He was quiet. Then he slitted his eyes and he said, "Alright, I'll go." It was more like a challenge than an acceptance. So I pushed. "And one other thing. I don't want you telling anyone that you are going to Mt. Canaan. You can tell them tomorrow, but not before we go. Agreed?" A smart, "Why?" shot back at me. "Because, I don't want you to tease about going to a black church with your friends. If you really want some answers, then you will agree." And like a man who believes he is holding five aces, Tommy agreed. "Good, I'll pick you up at six-thirty."

Thigpen got into the car that evening and he was quiet. While we turned at the downtown light that leads into the "Bottoms" of Shreveport, I said, "Now Tommy, you are going to see me hug the men at Mt. Canaan and you will see me kiss the cheeks of the ladies. So don't look shocked. And just remember that you are a guest, because that is how we do." He simply nodded.

I walked into the foyer of Mt. Canaan Missionary Baptist Church, where the Reverend Doctor Harry Blake is Pastor, with a dead man walking a step behind me. I was grabbed and hugged by the men and kissed by the ladies. Love rules there. And in their innocence, so often injured, they mistook Tommy for a friend and they hugged and kissed him, too. (They simply supposed a racist would never come to *their* Prayer Meeting, because forever they have watched the racists go to their own church meetings.)

We finally sat down in the pew. Tommy sat stiff with his arms crossed over his chest. Then we began to "chant" one of the long-metered songs that opens the service. If you close your eyes that pre-freedom old "chant" would take you to a brush arbor in the company of those who had "*stealed* away to Jesus" more than a century ago. I wondered what Mr. Thomas H. Thigpen was thinking. I dared not look. But I couldn't help it, I did kind of cut my eyes his way while still facing straight ahead. Out of the corner of my eye, all I could see was his elbow, folded chest-high resting across his heart, and it was shaking like crazy! Was he *laughing*?

I whipped around to sting him, but I never got a chance. Tears were streaming under his glasses and dripping off his cheeks. The silent sobbing was shaking his whole body, elbows and all. He whispered because he couldn't speak. He said, "I feel like I've come home." And I knew he meant it.

Sharon Lattier brought the meditation message. She spoke on the hurt and the rejection that she feels every day because of the color of her skin in Shreveport, Louisiana. Then she, from experienced eloquence, told of the freedom that is hers when her soul soars in forgiving the littleness of small hearts. The Unseen Heart of All Love could not have used a more devastatingly effective scalpel in lancing the boil of hate within Tommy Thigpen than the sweetness of Sharon's spirit. He was absolutely ruined.

He cried all the way through the prayer meeting. At the end, Pastor Blake, by custom, said, "Mack, I see that you have a guest. Would you stand and introduce him?" We stood up. "This is Tommy Thigpen, an old friend from Junior High School." The irrepressible Blake laughed, "*Thigpen!* Every Thigpen I know is filthy rich! Would you like to give expressions Mr. Thigpen?" Tommy looked blankly at me, "What does he mean?" "He wants you to say something, Tommy." I saw Thigpen grab the back of the pew in front of us with both hands and I sat down.

Then Mr. Thomas H. Thigpen spoke. "I came here tonight with hate in my heart. But you have loved me out of that hate and I feel like I've come home for the first time in my life." And with that Tommy lowered his head and began to cry. We were all simply stunned. But Pastor Blake moved with the speed of an angel. Down the aisle into our pew he came and he reached out and clutched my new and old friend to himself and held him. Tommy put his head on Doctor Blake's chest and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. I was crying, too, I just couldn't help it. Blake was crying. Our whole church cried. That healing embrace must have lasted at least two full minutes. Then they broke and Pastor started back to the altar. But Tommy shot out of the pew after him, caught him halfway down the aisle, and almost desperately like a drowning man clutching safety, sobbed like a baby. Then the church started shouting.

Oh, by the way, what I did not tell you about Pastor Blake is that Harry Blake was the President of the NAACP in Shreveport in 1963. He was only twenty-five years old. When the madmen bombed Third Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and killed those four little beautiful girls in their Sunday morning pinafores, Harry Blake called for a Memorial Service here in Shreveport at the Little Union Baptist Church.

Shreveport's version of Bull Connor at the time was George Dartois. He told Blake there would be no meeting. Dr. Blake went ahead. Dartois and over two hundred policemen surrounded the church. They demanded that the mourners exit two by two and immediately. Then they dragged Pastor Blake outside and beat him with nightsticks almost to death.

Isaiah prophesies that "the wolf and the lamb shall lie down together." Well that does not ask very much from the wolf, but it asks *everything* from the lamb! My race has been the wolf to Pastor Blake's race. And here he came down the aisle to embrace a man who hated him without knowing him. Now, isn't that something?!

That night I thought I would never get Thigpen out of the church to go home. Tommy was hugging and kissing everyone in sight. When we finally got in the car, Tommy positively glowed. "I'm free!" he cried. Then he said it again as if he were tasting it, "I'm free. I feel filled up with love."

Thigpen began to show up every Wednesday night for prayer meeting. If someone got up during "prayer needs" time to tell of their needs, I would see Tommy with them after the services, likely as not with his arm around them, speaking quiet words of consolation. Tommy's wife, Frances, started coming, too. In fact, Tommy even brought Ron Mercer, the friend who called me in the first place. They all said, "This is the place where love is, and where love is, God is."

Last August, Tommy joined the Mount Canaan Missionary Baptist Church. He became the third white person in a congregation of over two thousand members. In December, Tommy was asked to be the Co-Chairman of the Men's Day Annual Celebration at Mt. Canaan. He called me immediately to tell of the honor. He was as thrilled as a child.

On Wednesday, January 17, Mr. Thomas H. Thigpen called me up for lunch. It was one year to the day that we had eaten together. We went back to Madison Square Garden. When we sat down, Tommy said, "Do you remember the first words I said to you a year ago?" "I sure do, Tommy. I don't think I'll ever forget them. You said, 'I hate -----s!'" "That's right, Mack." said Tommy, "Do you remember the second thing I said?" No, I couldn't remember.

Then Tommy leaned across the table and said, "I said that 'they've made a terrible mess and **something radical has got to be done about it.**'" Tommy leaned back and with a delicious blend of irony and wonder said something I will never forget. He said, "You know when I said that, I had no idea that **the radical solution to this situation was the radical transformation of this self.**"

Shreveport Community Renewal is deeply involved in helping peculiarly sick people to get well. I've seen many wounded souls become whole again. I am sure that you have, too. But if you think for one moment that folks can't fly, then come see me. I will take you to meet a man named Thomas H. Thigpen. I tell you, I saw that man fly! I have never been more certain of anything in my life.