

Reflection on Picking Cotton

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Human Behavior/Social Environment (SWX471-(EX18)-X1, SP-2019-UNDG)

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The primary theme of this book is wrongful convictions and advocacy for exoneration. Since 1989 there have been 2420 exonerations in the United States (“Exonerations Dashboard,” n.d.). This number is staggering, and many of these wrongful convictions are not much different than our main character Ronald Cotton. Ronald was a victim of several factors related to human behaviors. The most significant human behavior that impacted Ronald’s life was racism. Racism is what I believe led to the way to Ronald’s conviction. Jennifer carefully and methodically worked with sketch artists to create a composite of her assailant. However, this was indeed a waste of her time as the police blatantly ignored it. They had their man already before they had the composite in my opinion. The man they knew had some incidents as a juvenile and an alleged intent to commit sexual assault.

There are so many areas of social work involvement throughout this memoir starting with the visit to the hospital by Jennifer. The social worker could intervene and walk with Jennifer through the process giving her someone that was a common and familiar as she went through the two rape kits, guiding her with counseling getting her set up with rape counselors as well. Helping her find a victims group if she needed or wanted it. Being a liaison at times between the legal process and Jennifer.

Once Ronald was convicting he had a case manager in prison which most likely would have been a social worker. This social worker would have done several assessments on Ronald as he came in, primarily some psychological evaluation. The case manager would also help find work in the prison and help along with the hiring process.

Once released there would be several opportunities for a social worker to be involved which will be discussed later in this paper.

As this story plays out with Ronald, we see several different systems that Ronald interacts with. His family is one of the primary systems; they were the ones that stood beside him all the way through. Ronald is immersed in community; community is a broad term, everything from the ones that lived around him, to the community in the courtroom, then the community he found in prison. All of these communities had different impacts on Ronald's life from being supportive to being the ones that are judging him not in a figuratively way but a literal sense. To the community, he found in prison the ones that became his friends and the ones he made enemies with. Finally, the community he made when he came out with others that have been wrongfully convicted. Ronald finds another system in the relationship with Jennifer the peer relationship became a valuable relationship.

There are times when every role a social worker may take on, but three are the most prevalent to me.

Beginning with the broker, the social worker as a broker would have a responsibility in making referrals as needed to bring Ronald to various resources he may need. The broker would also work with Ronald and ensure that the resources have been attained. The broker would be required to know what resources are available, what eligibility requirements for each resource and any fees as well as location. The social worker is involved in the process of making referrals to link a family or person to needed resources. Social work professionals do not merely provide information. They also follow up to be sure the resources required are attained. This requires knowing resources, eligibility requirements, fees and the location of services. The broker could

work with Ronald into finding him employment through employment agencies; the social worker would find counseling services that Ronald may need or want.

The second primary role I see a social worker could play is that of an advocate. The advocate would be essential in Ronald's case in helping fight for the rights of those wrongfully convicted. While Ronald would potentially be the mouthpiece for the cause, the advocate works behind the scenes to help Ronald for the resources that are needed for Ronald to get his purpose heard.

The last role I can see is the facilitator role; the facilitator would work to bring people together. The facilitator would be instrumental in bringing Jennifer and Ronald together. The facilitator may offer therapy services to groups of those exonerated through the work of Ronald and others.

Personally, I did not like this story to some extent, I like the testimony, but the emotions and feelings bothered me. I cannot explain, but maybe has something to do with knowing my wife was raped when she was a teenager I saw Jennifer's story through my wife's eyes, and it got to me. I had a tough time reading this book and found myself fully zoning out while reading which hurt me a lot this week. I even purchased the audible copy of the book and listened to it. I would play it when I went to bed when I had downtime I would listen. I would listen to certain parts over and over again. I still struggled with this book and the content.

A couple of things stood out to me first is how open and willing Jennifer was to talk about her ordeal to the police in the beginning. So many rape victims say nothing to anyone, my wife never told anyone until she told me 15 years after we were married. I cannot imagine having to tell that story over and over again or even worse holding it in silently often believing it is your

own fault. I put myself in her dad's shoes as my middle daughter is in school at Ball State; the threat is real, and it scared me.

Manipulation is a powerful tool, that is easy for many. I see manipulation with my students every single day in one way or another. But manipulating someone to persuade them to pick the wrong person, so that the wrong person would be convicted. Just so you could close the book on another case or is the reason to get even with a black man who dated white women at times, which would have been profoundly taboo in the south back in this time. Having live in the south (Alabama) for several years and marrying a woman who was born and raised in the south, I have seen how southerners react to interracial relationships. My wife's cousin was disowned by the family for marrying a black man, and she ended up leaving the state and moving to PA. The second cousin who was dating a black man and had a child by him was disowned initially, but she fought back, and now they are both accepted, but there is tension well there used to be I cannot say if there still is.

Then there was the forgiveness that Ronald had towards Jennifer; there was only one other story I ever read that had that level of forgiveness, and that was Amish Grace. I am not sure I could forgive as he did so apparently easy, I held a grudge towards one person for a long time and would not forgive this person finally I found my own forgiveness and was able to release them as well.

Faith was integrated into a few ways; maybe in ways, we don't consider. Jennifer had faith she was making the right choice when she picked Ronald. Ronald held faith in his lawyer would do right by him. Ronald had faith in him being exonerated. These are examples of faith that is not necessarily related to faith in God, but still examples of faith. I cannot help to think that there was faith in God that things were going to be right.

The amount of grace that Ronald had towards Jennifer is amazing. I once did a sermon simply called love, and in that sermon, I discussed agape love. I described agape love in many ways in that message, statements as simple as I will give up my seat so that you could sit, to I will step in front of a bus so that you will live, ending with the love that God had to give his son to die for us. It is rare to see that type of love, and many say it is impossible by mortal men, but I do disagree, I believe that level of love exists. Nowhere does the book state that Ronald would step to the side for Jennifer, but I believe that with the level of grace he has that his love has to be up there enough to say I will die so you may live. I will return to prison to keep you safe.

My faith in Christ and this story reminded me of Paul being imprisoned simply by being a Christian, where Ronald was imprisoned for being black. Paul never gave up, he kept his eye on God and eventually was released, Paul with Silas went straight to Lydia's house (after sharing a meal at the guards house anyways) where they met with other believers and used his trials to encourage them. Ronald goes to the press, and advocates for his beliefs and encourages others to stand firm and have faith. When Paul's words to the guard led him to not hurt himself, to not take the blame, but to convert and believe. Ronald did the same with Jennifer, he forgave her and brought her along to help in the cause.

There are so many examples where Ronald and Paul mimic each other, this was just the most prevalent to me.

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