

HOW TO REMAKE THE WORLD
NEIGHBORHOOD BY
NEIGHBORHOOD

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Introduction

We Can Grow a More Caring World

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 born in the vintage years of the 1940s in Shreveport, Louisiana. And we grew up on the easy side of town. The South has its own bitter version of apartheid, its tribal separation a lifestyle, and we happened to be born into the more privileged tribe. 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, living in a place distant from the business and politics of my hometown, I had forgotten all about Thigpen. After all, he was younger by two years and had been 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 city of everybody, a city I had long loved.

By mobilizing other “bridge people” all over the city for four years, quietly building foundations of loving relationships across all the variables of human diversity, and then 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 Thomas H. Thigpen.

Of course, word had gotten out about me and about “us,” the folks reaching out to one and all through Shreveport’s Community Renewal. Only four months after returning to my hometown in 1991, 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 close association with Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights era, but there was so much I did not know. I was only visiting 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 Mount Canaan that day. (This is another story in itself, which continues to unfold in relational richness up to this very moment.) The word spread.

Not long thereafter, the news of my spending time in a prominent Black church in town reached a friend of Tommy’s. This friend 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 was talking about Tommy. 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. He was right. I phoned Tommy for lunch, and we agreed to meet the next day.

On Wednesday, January 18, high noon, we took a table at the Madison Square Garden. No sooner were we seated when the dam burst and Tommy spewed, “I hate ——s!” (Everyone knows the slur that dripped acidly from his lips.) “Now what are you gonna do about it? ‘Cause I believe they are ruining everything, and I moved to the lake to get away. 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 gonna do, because something radical has got to be done!"

Honestly. I just sat there, but 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 a guy who quite simply personified one of the most monstrous evils pressing against the fragile dike of today's America. I was blank. Then, by the grace of God, I heard words coming out of my mouth.

"Tommy, tonight is our prayer meeting at Mount Canaan. I want you to go with me."

Thigpen jerked straight backward as though a steel rod had been shoved up his spine. He was quiet. Then he snake-slitted his eyes and said, "All right, I'll go." It was more of a challenge than an acceptance.

So I pushed: "And one other thing, I don't want you telling anyone that you are going to Mount Canaan before we go. You can tell 'em 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. When we turned at the downtown light that leads into Allendale, the Black neighborhood where the church is located, I said, "Now, Tommy, you are gonna see me hug the men at Mount 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 the church, 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 because he was with their friend Mack. So they hugged him and kissed him too. We hug our family. We hug our friends. (They simply assumed that 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, his arms crossed over his chest. Then we began to chant one of the long-metered songs that open 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 Thomas H. Thigpen was thinking. I dared not turn to look. But I cut my eyes his way while still facing straight ahead. And 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 the 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 breathed, "I feel like I've come home." And I knew he meant it.

That evening, Sister Sharon Lattier brought the meditation message. She spoke of the hurt and the rejection and the soul pain that she feels every single day because of the color of her skin in Shreveport, Louisiana. Then, from experienced eloquence in expressive "love living," she told of the freedom that is hers

when her spirit 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 Thomas H. Thigpen than the sweetness of that Love mediated through Sharon's whole being. He was absolutely ruined.

Tommy cried all the way through the whole prayer meeting. And as we closed our time together, at the end of the meeting, Pastor Blake, by custom, said, "Mack, I see that you have a guest. Would you stand and introduce him?" Tommy and I stood up together. "Pastor and church, this is Tommy Thigpen, an old friend from high school." The irrepressible Blake laughed, "Thigpen! Why every Thigpen I know is filthy rich! Would you like to give expressions, Mr. Thigpen?" Tommy looked blankly at me. "What does he mean?" "Tommy, he wants you to say something." I saw Thigpen grab the back of the pew in front of us with both hands to steady himself. And I sat down.

Then, Thomas H. Thigpen, white, rich, businessman tribe, 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 those expressions, Tommy lowered his head and began to cry.

We were all simply stunned. We couldn't move.

But not Pastor Blake! He flew with the flash of an angel. Down the aisle. Into our pew he flew before reaching out with strong arms and clutching my new and old friend to himself and just holding him and holding him. Tommy put his head on Pastor 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 hug must have lasted at least three full minutes. Then they gently broke and Pastor Blake 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 a lifeline—sobbed again like a baby. It was then that the church started shouting.

Now you need to know about the Reverend Doctor Harry Blake. He was reared on a plantation north of Shreveport, the son of a sharecropper trapped by the company store all of his life. When Pastor Blake was twenty-five years old, he was the president of the then-outlawed NAACP in Shreveport. It was 1963, and that was when the monsters bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and killed those four precious little girls all dressed up in their Sunday best: Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins. And Harry Blake called for a memorial service for them to be held here in Shreveport at the Little Union Baptist Church.

The politicians were usually no help. There was Bull Conner, the white supremacist Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety who had fire hoses and attack dogs set upon civil rights activists in his town, and in Shreveport at that time we had the miserable George D'Artois. He told Blake that there would be no meeting. But Harry Blake went ahead anyway. D'Artois and over two hundred policemen surrounded the church that afternoon. They demanded that the mourners exit two by two and do so immediately. Then they went in and dragged Pastor Blake outside and with their nightsticks and billy clubs beat him almost to death.

Isaiah prophesies that “the wolf and the lamb shall lie down together.” Well, I figure that this asks the wolf only to change its appetite. But it asks everything of the lamb! My race and Tommy's race has been the wolf to Pastor Blake's race. And here Blake came down the aisle to hug and embrace a man who had

hated him without knowing him. Now isn't that something? You and I know that it is!

Yes. I saw a man fly with angel's wings that night. I am sure that I did.

It sure was true for Tommy. That night I thought that I would never get Thigpen out of the church to go home. Tommy was hugging and kissing everyone in sight. When we finally got into 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 lives, and where love is, God is."

Tommy soon 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 Mount Canaan. He called me immediately to tell of the honor. He was as thrilled as a child.

A year later, Thomas H. Thigpen called me for lunch. It was one year to the day that we had eaten together. We went back to the 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 talked about hating a group of people."

“That’s right, Mack,” said Tommy. “Do you remember the second thing I said?”

No, I couldn’t remember.

Tommy leaned across the table and said, “I added 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.”

A hug and an embrace. While we hug those who are close, we must embrace all. And we can never truly embrace all unless we hug those who are close. Pastor Blake’s courageous embrace was a healing hug for Tommy! And Tommy’s willing hug led to a healing embrace of all. Because Pastor Blake flew to Tommy, Tommy now flies.

I’ve seen many souls afflicted with the “narrows” and the “limits” and the “littles” when it comes to others. I’ve seen them become whole and large in life and soul. 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 see Thomas H. Thigpen. I tell you, I saw him fly! I have never been more certain of anything in my life.



Our organization, Community Renewal International, is deeply involved in helping peculiarly sick people to get well. In what follows, I share with you how we are building the foundations of an ever-caring world and multiplying stories like Tommy’s.