

On the Suicide of a Revolutionary

Julius Lester

Sometimes someone falls so deeply into the pit of self that there is no rope long enough for a friend to throw to him. There is no ladder with enough rungs that he can grab onto and climb out. And, there is no love vibrant enough to warm the chilly air of the night.

For most of my life I've lived at the brink of the pit, and sometimes, have lost my balance and fallen in. Each time (thus far) I have managed to emerge, mainly because of an uncommon fortitude which persists in maintaining my life even when all conscious desire and will is to the contrary. Bob Starobin wasn't lucky enough to have such a fortitude. Or, maybe he fell into a recess of the pit deeper than any I have ever explored. Maybe there is a corner of the pit from which no one returns, but once there, it is impossible to resist the seductiveness of death.

A .22 is such a tiny weapon. It is only effective at close range. Sirhan Sirhan used one on another Bob. It's such an ignominious weapon and is hardly worthy of either Bob. A samurai sword has more nobility; a .45 has more manliness. It's really difficult to take a .22 seriously. But, one is forced to, because it works. It exists to injure or kill and it is discriminate. Pull the trigger and it spits out a bullet, which spins through time, space and history until it explodes on contact with anything - a wall, a lamp, an arm or a human skull. It doesn't care. A .22 simply obeys whoever commands it.

Bob and I weren't close friends. If we were friends at all, it was only because he had a high regard for my writings, and in that way, knew me better than I had the chance to know him.

We met only once, at a meeting of historians at Wayne State University in Detroit in the spring of 1970. He read a paper on the attitude of accommodation in slave letters and I was on a panel with Sterling Stuckey and Eugene Genovese to respond to his paper with critiques. It was one of those situations that are unavoidable when blacks and whites come together in post-Black Power America, a situation in which people are not individuals, but historical entities, playing out a drama whose beginnings are now so submerged that we will never find them. And, in these days, any white man who devotes himself to teaching and writing about black history must have the fortitude and strength of a bull elephant, because blacks will let him know that his presence is unwanted and undesirable. Whether this attitude is just or unjust is scarcely a question. In absolute terms, it is obviously unjust. Historically, it is the present reality, and, that day at Wayne State University my heart ached for Bob, though I didn't know him, but I knew what I had to do to him. He had to be attacked, and I did so, employing every forensic skill which two generations of ministers in my family had bequeathed to me. I bowed to the demands of history that day and will loath myself forever for having done so. History makes its demands, but one does not have to accede to them. History is not just, but is as unfeeling and uncaring as a .22, and, unless it is questioned and challenged, it will function with the same vulgar efficiency. All too often we let ourselves be History's willing victims, and, that day History demanded that I treat another human being as a category and I, not without hurting inside, acceded.

It was fortunate for me that Bob and I had a close friend in common and through him, word reached me that Bob wanted to write to me. I was relieved to have the opportunity to try and undo what I had done, for Bob would have been more justified in hating me until the end of recorded time. We began writing each other and I apologized to him and told him that the incident had given me an idea for a short story in which I would explore how one can be black, in the fullest political sense, and yet, inhuman. He was kind enough to respond by saying of the story, "I hope I won't look as bad as I must have on that awful day." No. I was concerned about the danger I was in, recognizing the necessity for nationalism and yet not sacrificing my humanity to it as I had done that day. But, that was something I really couldn't explore with him, just as he couldn't explore with me problems he may have had as a white teacher and scholar in black history.

The last letter I recieved from him was in August of last year. He was very excited about the release of Huey Newton from jail. He was euphoric, in fact, and spoke of his increasing political commitment and of his fear: "I have been struggling all year, especially this summer, with the contradiction between my scholarly interests and profession and my desire to do more revolutionary deeds. The biggest hangup is, of course, the question of terrorism, for though I am armed to the teeth, I still can't figure out under what circumstances to use them, and I still am afraid of violence and death, though I guess this is related to my white privileges, my class background, and my loved ones."

I never answered the letter. I had been shoved into the pit once again and had found that it was deeper and more narrow than I had ever imagined. When his letter came I was struggling to reglue a marriage and realizing that this time it couldn't be done, struggling to reglue myself and discovering that before I could do that I had to find myself and there is no Keeper of Souls to whom one can go to see if any lost selves have been turned in. Eventually, I died and passively waited for the resurrection to come or for my death to be complete. So, I couldn't write Bob, but if I had been able to, I wonder if I would have. I wasn't sure that he could have heard what I would have told him: Bob, don't be ashamed of being a scholar. There is not contradiction. To be a good scholar, as you are, is to be constantly involved in committing revolutionary deeds. Don't let others tell you how you should express your revolutionary commitment. You must insist upon the right to define that for yourself. And, don't be frightened into a corner because you are white. Being white is a category; you are a person.

But I didn't write it, and, of course, now, I must live with the thought that maybe it would have made a difference. I don't think so, however. If his politics couldn't save him, how little, then, could they do who cared about him. It was his politics which served as the

motor of his life and it is in that motor one must look for the defects which stopped the life. To say that he was killed by the forces of death which permeate this country is all too convenient. It is true, but only partially. Those same forces of death also permeate the politics to which Bob was committed, and, the ultimate responsibility for his death must be charged to those politics.

It is a politics which has no place in it for a quiet scholar like Bob Starobin. It is a politics which regards violent rhetoric and military action as the sine qua non of revolution. It is a politics which made Bob feel that he had to have guns in his house, though, in his uncommonly honest words: "I still can't figure out under what circumstances to use them." The revolutionary politics of our time made him feel that without a gun, he couldn't be a revolutionary. His weapon was his mind, and, there is a certain poetry in the fact that when he found the circumstances in which to use his gun, he killed himself by shattering his brain.

The revolutionary movement had no place for a Bob Starobin, but, because he cared, because he was committed to revolutionary change, because he couldn't exist without doing something to bring about that change, he had to twist himself out of shape to fit the accepted definition of what a revolutionary is. He had to abuse his soul, because the revolutionary movement could not provide a welcome and a home for that soul. And, it is only a short step from violating one's soul to destroying one's physical being.

Bob wanted to "do more revolutionary deeds," and the revolutionary movement did not tell him that a typewriter and a keen mind are revolutionary weapons. The princes of the revolution told him that if he wasn't part of the solution, he was part of the problem, and, not wanting to be part of the latter, he tried to be part of the former as it was defined by others. He didn't make it and has told us so in the most direct way he could.

Suicide is the ultimate act of anger. The one thing each of us truly possesses is our life, and if we find that there is no space anywhere in society where that life can breathe, we take a .22 and kill ourselves, because we have been given no other option than to deprive others of our self. Suicide is a totally selfish act, too, which is why there is such a strong taboo against it in our society. No individual is to feel so strongly about himself that he would totally remove that self from the world. He is to go on because he has a responsibility to others. But, the person who commits suicide knows how ridiculous that is. The suicide victim exercises that responsibility in the most hurting way possible. Generally, the overwhelming emotion he feels is complete despair and hopelessness, but beneath that despair is rage and anger that he has not been given the psychic space he needed to live. Without that space, he has no choice; he must die.

The first stage of that death is spiritual, the descent into the pit, there, to struggle, as Jacob struggled with God. It is the Armageddon of the Soul, and, if one is able to identify and slay his attacker, he ascends from the pit, like the phoenix from the ashes. Death and resurrection. It is the life process itself. Most, however, die to themselves and passively wait for their bodies to cease functioning forty or fifty years later. Some, however, cannot accept a compromise. Their bodies are mere repositories for their souls, and, if they can see no way to rise from the death of self, they will not tolerate the blind functioning of their bodies. Suicide has its own integrity.

Revolutionary politics should have within it the nourishment and comfort necessary to sustain us when we enter the inevitable dark nights of the soul. And, the fact that those politics could not sustain Bob Starobin is the most serious indictment possible of those politics. To be deprived of life is to be deprived of what is vital in ourselves.

And, that vitalness, as he exemplified it, cannot be replaced. Each individual is unique, and the revolutionary movement must have within it the space to allow each individual to express his uniqueness. If it does not, it is not revolutionary. Bob has hurt us in the best way he could; he has absented himself permanently from our midst.

If the finest in our ranks take their lives, have not, then, our politics become the politics of death? Our rhetoric may blind us to that reality, but it was reality, like tsunamie, which engulfed Bob. If his death is to be something more than a cause for momentary sadness and despair, it is the reality of that politics of death which the revolutionary movement now represents that we must confront. We must descend into the pit and be re-born. If we don't, then we will be writing eulogies for people like Bob Starobin for a long time to come.

Bob Starobin was a post-doctoral fellow for the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University last year, and he had been active in the movement there. His book on Denmark Vesey, American slave rebellion leader was serialized in the Black Panther newspaper. He donated half the proceeds from the book. Since this past fall he had been on the faculty of Harpur College in Binghamton, N.Y. and active in the Panther Defense Committee formed there in the fall.