

Angels, Yes, I Think It Was Angels

by Steve Saint

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I have concluded that my Dad's death was not the result of random circumstances. I believe it was a carefully orchestrated plan. It was a premeditated act of violence designed to shock the emotions.

The jungle warriors who drove barbed spears through Dad's body were not the masterminds behind this plot. They were incapable of even imagining the affect their dark act of hatred and the ensuing days of agonizing silence and wonder would have on t he "civilized world".

After years of investigation and searching for details, I have had to conclude that God planned my father's violent death. I am convinced He orchestrated it to elicit a response that only such a shocking event, surrounded by mystery and uncertainty, could evoke – almost fifty years later.

This is a masterfully written story that perplexes and continues to surprise even those of us who are a part of it.

Last week I was eating boiled fish and monkey meat from a common pot with the men who killed Dad. My son who dipped from the same pot looks so much like Dad that even these men who only met Dad in that one short and deadly encounter see the resemblance. Jesse calls one of those men "Grandfather".

I love these people. They are family. Not because I have adopted them but because they have adopted me. The forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation of this incredible tale have almost a miraculous power to capture and move men and women; young and old.

It is something very different, however, that causes me to wonder: "how could a loving God do something like this to His own people, his very own children?"

Before taking offense at this question as some will want to do, or arguing with it, which others will do – let me both defend and explain what I mean.

To those of you who will want to challenge my assertion that God could possibly have planned and orchestrated the death of five men who loved and trusted Him, I have a simple defense. Luke, an Apostle, asserts in Acts 2 verse 23 that Christ Himself was, "delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God," was "nailed to a cross by the hands of Godless men and put... to death."

To those who buy into the popular but historically unsupportable idea that a loving God could not do anything unloving and who might think that by my question I am in agreement, I wish to immediately set the record straight. My question is not an assertion of inconsistency between God's loving nature and a horrible act, which I believe He planned. My question is one of wonder, that God would sacrifice the lives of five loving sons and the security of five stoic and faithful women for a handful of "savages".

God doesn't owe us an explanation for His actions. But as a loving Father, the Bible tells us He is swayed by our petitions and our yearnings. For thirty eight years, from the age of five when Dad was killed until 1994 when I buried his only sister, my dear Aunt Rachel, less than a mile from his grave out in the Ecuadorian Amazon jungle – I wondered what really happened on that little beach named for the palms that bordered its edge that fateful day in January 1956. That day changed my life and that of thousands of others. I have heard the "why" as thousands of people from all walks of life have told me how this story has been a catalyst for good in their lives. In November 1994, God gave me the "how". After we buried Aunt Rachel, the surviving warriors who killed Dad, Jim, Ed, Roger and Pete told me how they killed the five "cowodi" (foreigners) and what led them to do it (see "Did They Have to Die", Christianity Today, Sept. 1996).

Last week God gave me another token of His love. It reminds me of the poem by William Cowper which begins, "God works in mysterious ways". In it, Cowper says "His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour, the bud may have a bitter taste but sweet will be the flower." It is man's curse to

wish to control his own destiny. We are so ready to arrogantly assert, "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul". We make the day sweet and life becomes bitter. The fundamental difference when we let God take His rightful place at the helm is that the day may be grievous but life becomes an adventure, full of hope and a sense of significance even under the most trying circumstances.

None of us is free from pain or grief. But our hope can be invested in eternity. Once in a while God gives us a glimpse of that mysterious and wonderful world that will very soon be our home.

A number of years ago Olive Fleming Liefeld and her second husband Walt visited the site in the Ecuadorian jungle where Olive's first husband Pete had been speared to death, along with Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Jim Elliot and my father Nate Saint.

Flying into a remote jungle airstrip they were met by my father's sister Rachel. Aunt Rachel and several members of Waodani tribe led Olive and her husband down to the sand bar my Dad named Palm Beach.

Seeing the place where her husband had been killed for the first time brought questions back to Olive's mind. Questions that had gone unanswered for over thirty years. Answering her questions with Aunt Rachel translating was Dawa, wife of one of the attackers who was present during the attack. Dawa, still a teenager at the time, hid in the dense cane bordering the far side of the river, opposite Palm Beach, afraid to actually watch or take a more aggressive role..

As Dawa recognized Olive's interest in what had happened that memorable day, a day that shocked and transfixed much of the world, both Christian and non, she began to volunteer information that she thought might be of interest.

In the middle of her commentary she pointed to a place above the jungle canopy bordering the ridge just south of Palm Beach. "That is where we heard the cowadi (foreigners) singing", she stated matter-of-factly. As Aunt Rachel translated Olive stopped her; "What does she mean she heard foreigners singing above the trees?"

Dawa said they were dressed in cloth like she saw a group of Cowadi do who sang in a church she visited with Rachel in the U. S.

Olive, Walt and Aunt Rachel wondered if it could possibly have been a choir of angels. What a wonderful and humbling tribute that would have been from a gracious God who had just had five sons killed, their spear-riddled bodies dumped unceremoniously in the river by the beach where they had just two days before had an exciting and completely friendly first contact with two women and one man from the same village where their killers lived.

Olive wanted to include this account of angel visitation in her book "Unfolding Destinies", so she asked me to ask the three surviving Waodani warriors who had been part of that fateful killing party for verification.

The opportunity came when I flew to Ecuador to help members of the tribe bury Aunt Rachel after she died of cancer.

One by one, each of the three men told me that they saw what appeared to be lights in the same place where Dawa had said she saw the heavenly choir. They were further away, but which might explain that what they saw was different. But all of them said that they heard singing. Nevertheless, they were somewhat tentative in their description.

When a project was initiated to make a feature film and a docu-drama about the "Auca Story" very recently, the script writers wanted to include the "angels singing over the 'Palm Beach' martyrs." As I reviewed the script I felt uncomfortable including any detailed re-enactment of something that I was

sure had taken place but which had only been vaguely described.

In January 2002 I was asked to take the documentary film team to Ecuador to interview the Waodani who are the other half of this story. In the interviews with four of the 5 remaining Waodani survivors who took part in the Palm Beach attack in which my Dad and his four friends were killed, I tried to elicit more definition to what I had been told previously; but without success.

The day after wrapping up the filmed interviews with the Waodani the film group and I were joined by two friends of ours, Kevin McAfee and Steven Chapman. They had flown out to join us to do filming for Steve's upcoming tour which will feature the "Auca Story", as well as to film some footage for the documentary. Steven and I were sitting in the cooking house talking while Kimo, one of the warriors I had just interviewed, was trying to communicate with a member of the film team.

I was startled to hear music coming from the thatched long-house immediately behind us. Then I realized that Kevin was just checking out the sound equipment he had brought.

Suddenly Kimo turned toward the music and listened intently. After a minute he commented, "manami ihindabopa" (just like I heard it.)

I didn't understand what he was referring to until I put together the obvious fact he was referring to the music and remembered that I had recently asked him about what he had heard at Palm Beach.

Kimo resumed his sign language conversation. Suddenly he turned toward the music once again and very specifically affirmed "I have heard that before, long ago. That is what I heard, just like that, when your father died."

I explained to Steven Curtis what Kimo was saying, then called to Kevin to hold the music at that spot. It was clear that Kimo was referring especially to one motif in the music as being what he remembered.

I invited Kimo to enter the long house with us. Unfortunately Kevin could not tell us specifically where on the CD the music Kimo was referring to was located. Kevin started playing various pieces on the soundtrack. I couldn't remember enough of what it sounded like to identify it. As the fifth or sixth piece started to play, Steven Curtis said, "I think this might be it." Almost simultaneously Kimo said, "I saw lights like stars and that is what I heard." Then he added, "When I heard that long ago, I didn't know what it was. I was afraid. Hearing it I knew we had done a bad thing there. Now, no longer living angry and hating, I see it well that you have returning brought this (they don't have a word for instrumental music that I know of) back to us." Then he got up and left the long house.

Kevin pulled out the CD to find the title of the piece Kimo had identified. "You won't believe this" Kevin exclaimed. "Look," and he pointed at the CD, it is cut #8.

Jesus told us "Go into all the world and make Disciples of all the Nations." My father and his four friends joined the ranks of thousands of "God followers" who have given their lives to fulfill that commission.

The title of the sound track Kimo recognized as being what he heard after killing my Dad and Jim and Pete and Roger and Ed; a piece written specially for the Documentary film (being made to tell the story of God's plan to reach a tribe of people off in the Amazon jungle who were insignificant in almost every way except that God loved them and wanted them to know they could become His children throughout the sacrifice of Itota "God's only child, a son.") is "Every Tribe, Every Nation."

God has entrusted "His very good carvings" to us! But only the uninitiated or extremely unobservant are wont to believe that He doesn't still have His hand in seeing that His message reaches every tribe, every nation, every tongue and every people.

I have never questioned God's right to use my father's life. Dad turned his life over to God as a young boy. I have never asked for an apology from the men who killed him, and I have never received one. I have never forgiven them either. It never occurred to me that I should forgive them for something which, though they meant for evil, God very clearly intended for good.

But as a father, I have agonized over what I have thought must have been going through Dad's mind as he lay dying out in the middle of nowhere; betrayed by the very people he and his friends had so carefully and methodically befriended. His failure would leave Marjorie (my sweet Mom) a widow. He would never teach his two little boys to fly. His little girl would never sit on Daddy's lap to hear another original bedtime story. He would never again fly sick Indians to the new hospital he and Roger had been working so hard to complete. His passion for sharing the message that had set him free with people who had never heard was suddenly ended.

I have imagined all these years that this must have been the pain of Dad's last conscious minutes of life. But now I believe that I was wrong. If Dawa, Kimo, Yowe and Mincaye heard an angelic choir from the world beyond, I have no doubt that Jim, Ed, Pete, Roger and Dad were made even more aware of their presence. They didn't die alone. I do believe, now, that God sent a reception committee to sing for them and to escort them into His presence.

As I listened to music, just written, which Kimo clearly asserted he had heard at Palm Beach, my heart swelled with a sense of well-being. God took what five men could not keep and exchanged it for something they can not lose. It's our turn now, to make the same deal and give our lives away!