

# Revenge, or Forgiveness? We are the possible.

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By Gary Smith

Mark Stroman led a hard life. His father taught him to always fight back and to exact revenge. By the age of 12 he took part in an armed robbery.

At 16, Stroman asked for his birth certificate to get a driver's license. He noticed a different person's name listed as his father. He asked his mother, 'who is this guy?' and she answered, 'that's your real father. When I was pregnant, I didn't want you. If I had had fifty dollars, I would have aborted you.'

As an adult, Stroman committed burglary, robbery, theft, and credit card abuse, became a White Supremacist, and served two terms in Texas prisons.

Then 9/11 happened. Stroman went looking for people in Dallas who appeared Arabic. In separate incidents, he shot and killed a man from India and a man from Pakistan. On September 21, 2001, he went into a convenience store and confronted Rais Bhuiyan, a recent immigrant from Bangladesh hoping to pursue a career in technology. At point blank range, Stroman fired a shotgun into Bhuiyan's face.

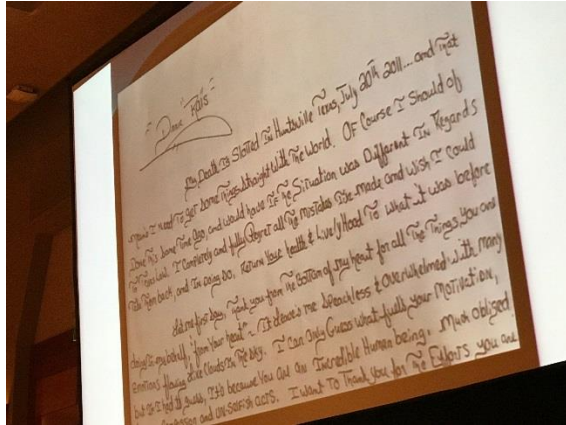
Although Bhuiyan lost sight in one eye and had more than 35 shot pellets imbedded in his face, he lived. He took on \$60,000 in medical bills but, lacking health insurance, couldn't afford the operation that would have saved his sight. He lost his job, his home, and his fiancé. A devout Muslim, when Bhuiyan bowed to pray, a pellet lodged in the center of his forehead caused him sharp pain.

Bhuiyan's upbringing was very different than Stroman's, however. His mother always taught him to "put a zipper on your mouth" when someone wronged him. His parents counseled him to be patient, don't make things worse, allow the other person time to reflect and come to you to ask forgiveness. Bhuiyan remembered the story of Joseph forgiving his brother. He recalled stories in the Koran about mercy and forgiveness.

Recovery was a long road, but these values led Bhuiyan to his life's purpose. He never felt hate for Stroman, and he forgave him. After Stroman received the death penalty, Bhuiyan gained the support of the widows of Stroman's other two victims and led a fight in the courts and around the world to save Stroman's life.



Bhuiyan was unable to meet Stroman face to face, but when Stroman learned of Bhuiyan's efforts, he burst into tears. "It's unbelievable," Stroman said. "I never even said I was sorry to him or the other victims, how come they are running a campaign to save my life?"



The state of Texas denied Bhuiyan the opportunity to meet Stroman, but eventually they corresponded. Stroman wrote "I didn't know what to say before, but once you reached out to me, you gave me the opportunity to...express my feelings and ask for forgiveness."

"In a free world I was free," he wrote, "but I was locked up in a prison inside myself because of the hate I carried in my heart. Hope was always a drop of rain to me, which I

never had, but in the course of time you gave me so much more hope than I have ever possessed in my entire life."

On the afternoon of July 20, 2011, 90 minutes before Stroman was set to be executed and while Bhuiyan was still in court fighting to save Stroman's life, the two spoke for the first time since the shotgun blast.

Stroman: "Rais, thank you so much for what you have been doing and are trying to do."

Bhuiyan: "Mark, you should know, I forgive you. I never hated you."

Stroman: "I love you, bro.' Thank you so much."

That evening, the state of Texas executed Mark Stroman. Rais Bhuiyan created a foundation, [World Without Hate](#). Bhuiyan has continued to travel the world, speaking on the futility of hate and teaching understanding and forgiveness, as he did to Seattle 4 this Wednesday.



When President **Mark Wright** met Bhuiyan a few months ago, he was deeply moved by Bhuiyan's message, in part due to his recent personal experience – Mark's son was present at a party in Mukilteo last July that ended with three young people shot dead and a fourth seriously injured.

The father of the young man who survived was also present at the Rotary meeting. Mark Wright introduced Paul Kramer as a fellow soccer dad. The two men have

remained close since their sideline Saturdays, and after their shared experience of the Mukilteo shooting, they have met to talk.

To close the meeting, Mark read from a poem by Maya Angelou that his friend Paul had brought to one of their meetings. "A Brave and Startling Truth," includes these lines:

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living  
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness  
That the haughty neck is happy to bow  
And the proud back is glad to bend  
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction  
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

...

When we come to it  
We must confess that we are the possible  
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this  
world  
That is when, and only when  
We come to it.

**Todd Summerfelt** opened the meeting with the invocation. He recounted that upon release from prison, Nelson Mandela was asked why he was not resentful. His response: "Resentment is like a glass of poison that a man drinks. Then he sits down and waits for his enemy to die. We must strive to be moved by a generosity of spirit that will enable us to outgrow the hatred and conflicts of the past."



General **Jimmy Collins**, accompanied by **Burr Stewart**, led the club in Let There Be Peace on Earth.

New Member, **Kathy Snowden**, was introduced by **Jane Tornatore**.