

Evil and hatred have a way of leaving long-lasting impacts. But as Christians, we also know that the power of love and mercy can do so much to overcome that.

In 1939, at the age of 19, Eric Lomax joined the Royal Corps of Signals, part of the British Army, just before the start of the second world war.

Becoming a commissioned second lieutenant, he served in the Pacific Theater, and was captured by the Japanese following the surrender of Singapore in February of 1942. Taken to Thailand, he was forced to build the Burma Railway, which cost the lives of 83,000 people just to build due to the horrible conditions (as depicted in Bridge on the River Kwai). He was eventually released after the war, but not without going through incredible torture.

It was something he kept to himself after the war, struggling returning to civilian life.

In his own words:

“In 1945 I returned to Edinburgh to a life of uncertainty, following three and half years of fear, interrogation and torture as a POW in the Far East. I had no self-worth, no trust in people, and lived in a world of my own. The privacy of the torture victim is more impregnable than any island fortress. People thought I was coping, but inside I was falling apart. I became impossible to live with; it was as if the sins my captors had sown in me were being harvested in my family. I also had intense hatred for the Japanese, and was always looking for ways and means to do them down. In my mind I often thought of my hateful interrogator. I wanted to drown him, cage him and beat him – as he had done to me.”

Even with his wife Patti, who he met in 1980 when he was in his early 60s and she in her early 40s on a train, and married in 1983, he didn't mention it. She knew he had been in Singapore when it fell to the Japanese but he wouldn't say anything more about it. He'd tell her “I will tell you one day” but the day never came.

On their honeymoon, he had a nightmare. He and Patti talked about it in general terms the day after but she thought it was a one-off occurrence. But he had nightmares regularly. But still, he could not tell her why.

During the daytime, there were problems too. Something as simple as being asked for his name and address to open a bank account brought debilitating flashbacks of his time in the Japanese camp in Thailand.

Finally, after three years of his dark moods and nightmares, Patti persuaded him to seek help from the charity the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture.

Here Patti, who sat with him on those sessions, heard the truth.

He was a slave laborer on the 260-mile railway into Burma. The brutal conditions included working in 100-degree heat by day, overseen by soldiers who saw the POWs as less than human because they had allowed themselves to surrender.

Barely fed, Eric and his comrades suffered from malnutrition and disease – 60,000 of his comrades starved while 12,399 disease-ridden Allied prisoners of war put to work on the line died.

In secret, Eric built a radio so he could follow the progress of the war but in August 1943, the guards discovered it.

As punishment Eric and six other prisoners were forced to stand in the searing heat for hours without food or drink. As the sun began to set they were stamped on and beaten unconscious with pickaxe handles. Two prisoners died.

Eric was left for two days to die where he fell, his body a broken and bloody mess with his arms, hips and ribs broken. The guards then dragged him off for further interrogation and torture, including waterboarding. He was imprisoned in a cage the size of a coffin.

Finally he was sentenced to five years 'hard labor and spent the rest of the war in a disease-ridden jail.

As a part of his therapy, he was asked to write down as much as he could remember. He started writing as soon as the Japanese capitulated while he was waiting for release. The therapy helped, but the nightmares never went away completely.

Then, one day in the mail, he received a book, "Crosses and Tigers" by Takashi Nagase, sent to him by another survivor. That book was written by the man who had tortured him.

In the book, he describes his crimes and efforts at redemption. Towards the end of the book he is at a cemetery in Thailand and talks about how he felt a sense of forgiveness there. Patti persuaded her husband to write him a letter. He learned that he had built a Buddhist temple. Lomax admits he was skeptical, and could not at first believe in the notion of Japanese repentance. As he put it, "I strongly suspected that if I were to meet him, I'd put my hands round his neck and do him in."

His former torturer wrote him back. The letter he wrote back was full of compassion. And Lomax says at that moment when he read it, he lost whatever hard armor he had wrapped around him and began to think the unthinkable.

They wrote for a few weeks, and eventually would meet a few years later in 1988 in Kanburi, Thailand.

When they met, Nagase greeted Eric with a formal bow. He took his hand and said in Japanese, "Good Morning Mr Nagase, how are you?" He was trembling and crying, and he said over and over again: "I am so sorry, so very sorry." Lomax says he had come with no sympathy for this man, and yet Nagase, through his complete humility, turned this around. In the days that followed they spent a lot of time together, talking and laughing. It transpired that they had much in common. They promised to keep in touch and remained friends ever since that day.

Lomax, who died in 2012, said that after their meeting he felt he had come to some kind of peace and resolution. He says Forgiveness is possible when someone is ready to accept forgiveness. As he puts it "some time the hating has to stop."

Jesus, in summarizing the law into love of God and neighbor, shortly will be tortured and killed after this Gospel scene. The Cross reveals to us kind of creature that people can be. But, Christ's cross is, in this fallen world, also what love of God and neighbor leads to and looks like. The question is how

do we love our neighbor? And the answer is found in looking to how Jesus lived; namely that love entails challenge, acceptance, and a forgiveness.

The challenge is both for ourselves and for others. Sin's effects had wounded Lomax; it's what caused the flashbacks and his feelings of hate for Japanese people in the years that followed. It was through therapy and looking inside of himself but also through reaching out that he changed. We need to always be looking at ourselves and asking ourselves where do we cross the line from not liking actions, or disagreement with someone, over into genuine anger or hate. Maybe it's someone who wronged you. Maybe it's a rival at work or school. Maybe it is someone you disagree with politically, someone you know or even someone running for office. Maybe it's family members. Is there racism in your heart? Is there jealousy there? Sometimes our frustration or anger at others, justified, can snowball into hate, but it can be concealed or buried as it was for Lomax for so many years until he dealt with it.

There's the challenge part for others too. If we love one another and will the good of one another, sometimes we have to challenge others to grow. It took Patti, Eric's wife, to get him to go to therapy and confront the past.

Every parent knows you can't always tell a child what they want to hear but what they need to hear. This is true for all of us too. We should want people to grow, which means supporting, but also challenging them as I said last week whether we are trying to articulate what the Church teaches, or expressing a concern if we see someone going down the wrong path in life.

Loving neighbor also means acceptance. With so much polarization, people can be at one another's throats so much. But tolerance is a part of our faith too. Sometimes a person can't be convinced to make important changes, or to agree with what we believe. But with patience, maybe they eventually come along. And as someone who has strong political beliefs but has friendships across the spectrum, I can also say it's important to agree to disagree at times, and look for what we share in common, and strive not to hate those who are different from us but to try to co-exist, because whether it's politics, rivalries at school or work, not getting our way on a project or something we want to see happen at home, church, work, etc., there is so much out there that divides us, which is just augmented by social media. Anger is powerful, and while it can be justified, so often we just get angry over our differences which can obscure our humanity.

And lastly, forgiveness, the hardest part of loving our neighbor. As I said, the Cross shows us how evil we can be, but so too does it show us our potential. When we are wronged by others, we can look to the Cross as a reminder to strive to forgive. As with Eric Lomax, it doesn't come instantly; but when we ask God for the strength to take the first steps, when we extend an olive branch, when we open our eyes to both the power of others to do evil but also to change, we can see how love can truly transform hate. Again, Loomax says it best: there is too much hate in this world.

Jesus, whom we momentarily celebrate here coming to us on our altar though, shows us the way things out to be. Through Jesus 'act of selfless love, God's will for us has been revealed. By sharing in his Body and Blood, we are made adopted children of God. The love that invites us into his embrace also sends us out to restore what is broken, find what is lost, and bring light to those in darkness - something we do with our own souls, and with one another. As God's children, we are to live so lovingly that the world may see in us the face of our heavenly Father.