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## Keynote Address

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## ANNOTATED REMARKS

JEANNE BISHOP\*

I am so grateful to be back here at St. Thomas. The School of Law, since its founding, has been living out its mission of integrating faith and reason in the search for truth, focusing on morality and social justice. You see it everywhere: in the school's community justice project, the immigration law clinic, and Professor Mark Osler's first-in-the-country federal clemency clinic. This day of discussion devoted to restorative justice is just another example of this school's commitment to the dignity and worth of every human being.

A special thank you to Hank Shea, whose commitment to this school and to restorative justice is only a part of his lifelong, relentless determination to do justice in a better way.

This is the first time I have ever spoken in public about the story I'm about to tell you. There is no more perfect place than this school, no place I would rather start. And so I begin.

Once, there were three families: Bud's, Bill's, and mine.

Each family had three children. Mine included my two sisters and me; we grew up in Oklahoma City, a place as sturdy as the red clay of its soil and as open as its wide horizons. Bud Welch, a gas station owner from Oklahoma City, had three children, two boys and one girl. Bill McVeigh, an auto parts worker from far-away western New York, had two daughters and one son.

Bud, Bill, and I are linked by tragedy; each of us lost one of our family members to a deliberate killing. All of them died young. I lost my younger sister, Nancy, in April 1990. A teenaged boy broke into her home on Chicago's North Shore and shot her and her husband to death. When Nancy died at twenty-five, the child she was carrying in her womb, my first little niece or nephew, died with her.

Five years later to the month, Bud Welch's only daughter, Julie, age twenty-three, perished in the Oklahoma City bombing. A truck full of explosives destroyed the federal building where she worked and took the lives of 168 people, including hers.

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The last to die was the man who, at the age of twenty-six, set off that bomb on the streets of Oklahoma City: Timothy McVeigh. The federal government executed him for his crime six years later. His father, Bill McVeigh, despite his pleas to spare his child, lost his only son.

The nexus linking Bud, Bill, and me is Oklahoma City, a place broken but unbowed by evil. Oklahoma City lost its children, too. Evil was not the end of the story, though. It never is.

Love did not leave me in the place I was when Nancy and her husband and their baby were buried in the earth. Love led me out of that deep valley to a mailbox where I stood with a letter in hand, addressed to the prison where the young man who killed Nancy was serving a life sentence, telling him that I had forgiven him and reaching out to reconcile. It was in the course of that trek from fear to freedom that I found Bud, and then Bill, two men who showed me what heartbreak and courage and love look like, my heroes of reconciliation.

We sometimes imagine that it is facts and argument that change us, but as a lawyer I know that isn't true. Few people are transformed by argument. Everyone, though, has been transformed by a story—our own lived experience or the narrative of a life around us. Those linger long after the telling is done. All of us long for stories that transport us, that dispel our fears, that inspire and illumine, stories that will live on in the heart.

I know such a story. It is a true one of a place in the heartland and the tragedy that struck there, and of the two good men, two fathers, who found each other in the tangled aftermath.

Vengeance begets vengeance; hate breeds more hate. Reconciliation is altogether different; it changes us and changes the world, one human heart at a time.

These two fathers, Bud and Bill, the father of a daughter slain and the father of her slayer, should have been enemies; earthly reason would have dictated so. But that is not what happened.

—the Preface of *Grace from the Rubble: Two Fathers' Road to Reconciliation After the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Zondervan 2020).

This story starts in the place where I grew up: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. My family moved there when I was ten years old; we lived there until I went off to college.

The day was long after I had moved away: Wednesday, April 19, 1995. It was a beautiful spring day, the kind of day you wear shirtsleeves and roll down your car windows on the way to work.

The mayor's annual prayer breakfast had taken place that morning; people who had just finished their coffee were heading downtown to work. At the federal office building on Fifth Street, the Alfred P. Murrah building, Florence Rogers was getting ready for a meeting with her staff of mostly young women in the federal employees' credit union. Dan Webber, a young

lawyer who was clerking for a federal judge, had just dropped off his eighteen-month-old son in the America's Kids day care on the Murrah building's second floor. Sheila Driver, who was pregnant with a child she had already named, was going to an office on the building's third floor.

On the first floor of the federal building, twenty-three-year-old Julie Marie Welch walked into the Social Security Administration, where she worked as an interpreter. Julie had just come from morning mass at St. Charles Borromeo church in Oklahoma City. Julie was a deeply faithful Catholic who went to mass every day, either before or after work. Julie loved her job; she got to use her fluency in Spanish and other languages to help people who needed help. But Julie was already looking ahead to two things she dreamed of: getting engaged to her serious boyfriend, Eric, an Air Force lieutenant, and starting a job as a Spanish teacher at a local school in the fall.

That morning, April 19, Julie's father, Bud Welch, was at his home in Oklahoma City; he had not yet headed off to work at the gas station he ran. Julie was Bud's only daughter and his youngest child. Bud was a bespectacled man in his fifties who had grown up on a dairy farm and still walked with the bowlegged lope of a boy heading through mud to the barn. Bud had two other children—two sons, one of whom died as a baby. It made Bud a vigilant and protective dad: when Julie was away at college, he called her every single day. Bud knew everything was okay if she called him "dad" and that things were not if she called him "daddy."

Far away from Oklahoma City, in Pendleton, New York, a town outside of Buffalo, an auto parts worker named Bill McVeigh had just gotten home from his overnight shift at the Harrison plant, making radiators for GM cars. It was a job he would do for almost four decades. Bill McVeigh, also in his fifties, was a quiet man deeply rooted in his community—the guy who ran Bingo at his Catholic church, who coached Little League, who did the books for the American Legion, who volunteered for the local fire company.

He did not know then that his only son, twenty-six-year-old Timothy McVeigh, was at that moment headed toward Oklahoma City, driving a rented Ryder truck loaded with explosives. Tim's destination was the nine-story, multimillion-dollar structure where Julie worked, the Murrah federal building.

The truck was packed with 500-gallon barrels of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, designed and constructed by Timothy McVeigh to explode toward the building rather than away from it. He had built in two fuses in case one failed. He brought with him an ordinary cigarette lighter to light them.

The truck was also filled with hate. Timothy McVeigh hated the federal government. He believed the U.S. government was oppressing and killing its own citizens, especially the ones with whom this angry young gun-

loving white man identified: the white supremacists, the off-the-grid, highly armed separatists.

Timothy McVeigh had sympathized with the Branch Davidian cult, under the spell of leader David Koresh, who lived in a compound on the outskirts of Waco, Texas. When the FBI and ATF sought Koresh for weapons violations, he and his followers holed up in their compound, resulting in a stand-off with the federal government. After a long stalemate, the government fired tear gas into the compound, sparking a massive fire and shootout that took the lives of seventy-six people, including women and children.

Timothy McVeigh saw the carnage on television and was incensed. Something had to be done, and he decided he was the man to do it.

We know the profile; we have witnessed those angry, armed young white men strike again and again, in places like Newtown and Charleston and El Paso and Dayton.

Timothy McVeigh had met men like that while he was serving in the army during the Gulf War, two in his unit in particular that he befriended. One, Terry Nichols, was from the thumb area of Michigan, where paramilitaries opposing the federal government flourished. Nichols once tore up all his government-issued ID's and tried to renounce his U.S. citizenship. When he was summoned to court for unpaid credit card debts, Nichols refused to recognize the jurisdiction of the court over him.

The other army buddy of Tim McVeigh's, Michael Fortier, lived in Kingman, Arizona, also a hotbed of anti-government militias. Fortier flew a "Don't Tread On Me" flag outside his home and shared Tim McVeigh's obsession with weapons. Fortier helped Timothy McVeigh check out the Murrah building as a possible target. Nichols helped him build the truck bomb.

On April 19, 1995, the second anniversary of the Waco conflagration, Timothy McVeigh drove his rented truck to the federal building in Oklahoma City. He arrived there close to 9:00 a.m., just when the most people would have been present. That McVeigh chose that time, rather than the middle of the night, when he could have injured the building but not killed so many people, was so callous that he drew criticism even from the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, a notorious fellow murderer who would later be housed in the same prison with McVeigh.

Timothy McVeigh pulled into a loading area by the building, just under the windows of the second-floor day care, not far from Julie's office on the first floor. Julie and three female co-workers were cleaning up a stockroom in the back.

McVeigh lit the two fuses he had prepared to set off the bomb. He put earplugs in his ears to ward off the hearing damage he knew could come from the explosion (recall that among the gruesome injuries to victims of the Boston Marathon bombing was deafness from the ear-shattering sound

of the blast). Timothy McVeigh got out of the truck, walked to an alley to shield himself, then ran to the getaway car he had stashed nearby.

At just that moment, Julie Welch had been called to the front of her office to meet Emilio Tapia Rangel, a Spanish-speaking client and a father of five who needed her help. Her co-workers stayed behind in the stockroom. All three of them survived; they were rescued forty-five minutes later. As Julie headed toward the front, she did not know she was going to her doom, that her dreams of walking down the aisle to her beloved Eric, or of teaching a boisterous class of children, would never be.

Time was ticking down for Julie, for the children in the day care, for the women in the credit union. There was little time left for the bombing's oldest victim, seventy-three-year-old Charles Hurlburt, a doctor, or its youngest victim, three-month-old Gabreon Bruce, both of whom died in the first floor Social Security office where Julie worked.

At 9:02 a.m., the fuses Timothy McVeigh lit had burned down. The spark met the charge. The Ryder truck he had packed with explosives detonated with an almost unimaginable force.

The Official Record of the Oklahoma City Bombing reported:

The first wave of super hot gas moved at 7,000 miles an hour, fast enough that someone ten feet away would have been hit with a force equal to thirty-seven tons. In about a half second, the gas dissipated, only to be replaced by an equally violent vacuum. The resulting pressure wave moved outward, lifting the building up and causing beams, floor slabs and connections to weaken or collapse. When the pressure wave passed, gravity took over. Nine stories on the North side of the . . . Murrah building pancaked, creating a crater some thirty feet deep.

The entire glass front of the building sheared off. Survivors reported seeing people across from them with their arms flung up in the air, as if they were doing *The Wave* at a football game; in fact, they were falling through space. People on the ninth floor ended up on the first. Bodies were blown through cinderblock walls. A dentist who helped identify those bodies later, from dental records, said all the faces of the dead looked like Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*, with mouths gaping open. The force of the air in their lungs had frozen them in this ghastly final expression.

The young women in the credit union meeting with Florence Rogers disappeared before her eyes. All eight of them died. Florence alone survived, clinging to a precipice that once was the floor of her office. Sheila Driver, and the baby she was carrying within her, were buried in debris. First responders digging for her asked Driver to say her name so they could find her. After uncovering so many corpses, rescuers were elated when they pulled Driver out alive. They were devastated when they learned later that she died on the way to the hospital.

The young lawyer who had dropped off his son at the day care, Dan Webber, who would go on to become the chief federal prosecutor for the Western District of Oklahoma, heard the blast and bolted to the building where, thirty minutes before, he had left his child. The second floor where the day care had been was no longer there; in its place was a vast grey pile of ash. In the rubble, his son's tiny shoes were visible. When the toddler was pulled out, severely injured, but alive, his father described it as "the feeling of having everything you care about taken away, and then given back." Webber's son was one of only six children in the day care who survived. The other fifteen perished.

Miles away, Julie Welch's father, Bud, was at home. He heard an enormous BOOM, and then a second BOOM a few seconds later. Bud learned later that second eruption was the sound of debris returning to earth after it had been blown into the air. Bud's brother called from the road and told Bud to turn on the TV. Bud did, and saw a sight that made his heart sink: a news helicopter circling the Murrah building, its entire front torn off. The place where Bud's daughter, Julie, worked was a mountain of rubble.

That same day, in Pendleton, New York, Bill McVeigh watched the 6:00 p.m. news before he was due to go to help run the Bingo game at his Catholic church. He saw images of the devastated building in Oklahoma City and felt bad, wondering what had caused it. When he got to Bingo, he and the church ladies talked about it. Bill McVeigh thought it had been a gas explosion; the women told him, no, it had been a deliberate attack. Bill did not know then that his own son had been the attacker.

The bombing shocked the city, the nation, and the world. It was, at the time, the deadliest strike on American soil since Pearl Harbor. It still remains the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in the nation's history. And it happened in a place in the heartland, this modest city where I grew up, a place settled by farmers and ranchers who looked after one another, who would plow your field if you got sick, or help rebuild your barn if it burned down. Oklahomans were used to calamity coming at them from the sky: the tornado that ripped apart your house, the Dust Bowl that buried your land with topsoil, the hail that destroyed your crops. No one expected catastrophe to come from the ground, from something as ordinary as a man parking a truck on the street.

Oklahoma City responded with unity and heartbroken, determined love. People poured in to give blood, to volunteer to help the families of the dead, to donate food to rescue workers or paw protectors to dogs sniffing for survivors in the wreckage of the federal building. When thousands of dollars from the credit union was blown into the streets, people collected the money and returned it. The sum of money collected was greater than what was lost. There was no looting: downtown banks whose windows were blown open by the blast had their cash drawers left open and unattended for days. Not one penny was taken. When firefighters streamed in

from out of state to try to help, they found when they ate at a restaurant or checked out of a hotel that no one in Oklahoma City would take their money. They called it an “Oklahoma dollar”; they left with the same dollar they had come with, unspent.

The tale of how the nation’s worst domestic terrorist was apprehended, against all odds, is one of an ordinary public servant doing his job faithfully and well. Oklahoma state trooper Charlie Hanger was on duty not long after the bombing and noticed a beat-up Mercury without a license plate driving on a highway about seventy-seven miles from Oklahoma City.

Inside the car was Timothy McVeigh. Trooper Hanger ordered him out of the car and saw the outline of a weapon under his jacket: a loaded .45-caliber Glock. The trooper arrested McVeigh on charges including the missing plate and driving with the concealed weapon. The trooper cuffed McVeigh and transported him to the Noble County Jail in Perry, Oklahoma. Timothy McVeigh was caught—but Trooper Hanger did not know then the significance of the man he had just arrested. No one yet knew that Tim McVeigh was the most wanted man in America, the man who had, in one shocking act, destroyed a government building and slaughtered scores of innocent people.

The FBI quickly managed to link McVeigh to pieces of the blown-up Ryder rental truck found at the scene of the bombing. Agents ran his name through a nationwide database of people in custody and discovered to their astonishment that, at that moment, there was a Timothy McVeigh in the lockup in Noble County, Oklahoma. An agent called Noble County and yelled over the phone to hold him.

Only two days after the bombing, federal agents rushed to Noble County Jail and took Timothy McVeigh out to transfer him to federal custody. McVeigh emerged into daylight wearing an orange jumpsuit, his hair in a buzz-cut, his eyes blinking in the sun. A crowd had gathered outside the jail when they learned who he was, shouting, “Babykiller! Murderer!” as he was taken from their midst.

That image was beamed around the world, including the living room of Bud Welch’s home in Oklahoma City, where Bud saw the scene on TV. The sight flooded Bud with grief and rage. He hoped a sniper would take Timothy McVeigh out right there, the way a lone gunman, Jack Ruby, had shot President John F. Kennedy’s assassin Lee Harvey Oswald when he was being transported after his arrest. In Bud’s anger and desire for vengeance, the death penalty was not swift enough for Bud. He wanted Timothy McVeigh dead.

The day after Tim’s arrest, the FBI flew his father, Bill McVeigh, to Oklahoma City to see his son in federal custody. Agents were hoping Tim would tell his father who else might have helped him commit this heinous crime. Despite Bill’s efforts, Tim refused to do so.



That same day, Bud Welch got the awful news he had been expecting: his daughter, Julie, was confirmed dead. Her body had been found. Bud and his family and Julie's boyfriend Eric went to see her at the morgue, one side of her head crushed in, her neck broken, her foot almost severed. Not until Bud saw her did this grieving father actually accept that his youngest child had been killed.

Bud descended into darkness. He was drinking every night and smoking four packs of cigarettes a day. Daily, Bud went to the site of the bombing, staring at the ruins through a chain-link fence at the site where his daughter died. His customers from the gas station told him he was killing himself; he answered back that the sooner he died, the sooner he'd join Julie in heaven.

But over time, Bud realized that hating Timothy McVeigh, seeking vengeance and retribution against him, were not healing Bud. Instead, they were killing him. He looked into *why* Timothy McVeigh had bombed the Murrah building and learned it was all about retaliation and revenge for the federal government's raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, that had killed so many women and children. *Retaliation, revenge—where will it end?* Bud thought.

By this time, Timothy McVeigh's case was winding its way through the courts. McVeigh was found guilty of murder and other crimes and was sentenced to death. After the verdict and sentence, Ed Bradley of CBS's *60 Minutes* interviewed a few of the survivors of those who died in the bombing. One of those people was Bud.

Bradley asked the survivors, including Bud, what might they want to say to Timothy McVeigh if they had the chance before he was executed. Bud said that he would want to show Tim a picture of Julie, point out to him that they were almost the same age, that they could have been buddies if they had grown up together, and say that he wanted so much for Tim to ask for forgiveness before he died.

Bud never got that chance to speak his forgiveness to Timothy McVeigh before he was executed. Bud calls that "a hole in my heart." Before Tim McVeigh was killed by lethal injection, though, Bud did something astonishing: he reached out instead to someone who should have been his enemy, Timothy McVeigh's father, Bill.

Bud had first seen Bill McVeigh on television news shortly after his son's arrest. Bill had been working in his garden when a camera crew came upon him. Bud said he saw Bill, a large man, physically stooped over in his garden. Bud can't remember what Bill told the reporters, but what Bud never forgot was the look in Bill McVeigh's eyes when he turned his face to the camera. What Bud saw was a man in deep pain—a pain Bud recognized. Bud vowed that one day, he would tell the father of Timothy McVeigh that Bud knew how he felt.

Bud was true to his word. He traveled to the doorstep of that grieving father, Bill McVeigh, whose son was under a sentence of death. The two walked in Bill's big garden in back, sat at his kitchen table, talked for hours. They discovered how much they had in common: both born and raised on farms. Both were from Irish Catholic families, educated all the way through in Catholic schools. Both were working men who never got past high school. Both are the fathers of three children. Both were born only six months apart.

My book *Grace from the Rubble* tells the story of these two men, of how they met, what happened after that moment, and the lives they lived in the days that followed.

Bud went on to become one of the world's foremost spokespeople against the death penalty. He traveled the nation and the world speaking out about his good and feisty and beautiful daughter who died in the bombing. Bill McVeigh, by contrast, remained in his small town, where he lived for all his life but for his two years in the army during Vietnam. The two men have stayed enduring, lifelong friends.

Why does this matter for us?

This matters for us because we need to grapple with how to respond to evil. We know there is no shortage of evil in this world, of people who burst into a high school in Parkland, Florida, or an African-American church in Charleston, or a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh, or a gay nightclub in Orlando, or a Muslim mosque in New Zealand, or a Walmart in El Paso, and begin to shoot. Bud and Bill show us a way: not with distance and division, but with coming together, meeting, talking, seeking to understand, finding our common ground.

This story matters because we need to know how to respond to those who have hurt us. We can't hate and hurt our way out of it. We will stay broken that way—we will never be whole. Bud and Bill show us what this thing we call "restorative justice" looks like. It looks like two hurt human beings sitting at a kitchen table talking and coming away more healed and whole.

The story matters because it teaches us the futility of responding to killing with more killing. We executed Timothy McVeigh for his crimes on June 11, 2001—and three months later, to the day, foreign terrorists hijacked some airplanes and slammed them into the Pentagon, a field in Pennsylvania, and the World Trade Center towers. The death penalty did not deter Timothy McVeigh; he withdrew his own appeals from his death sentence and went voluntarily. It did nothing to deter people for whom killing is itself a solution to a problem they perceive.

This story matters because it teaches us that people can change. Bud changed: he went from hating Timothy McVeigh and wishing him dead to speaking out against his execution.

Why does this story matter? Perhaps, in the end, the answer lies in the way we think about time. The Oklahoma City bombing exists for too many of us as an event fixed in a single moment in time: a bomb exploding outward, a building collapsing, the dead being brought out. But truth exists beyond a single moment in time. Truth goes back to that moment when Bud's beloved daughter Julie went off to college, when Timothy McVeigh went off to war and came back a different person. And truth goes forward from that moment, too, to Bill McVeigh's garden where two grieving fathers met.

This story matters because of you. You do not have to be defeated by evil. You need not be turned into haters by hate. Like Bud and Bill, you can transform tragedy into redemption. You can break the cycle of retaliation and revenge. You can turn brokenness into unity, strife into peace. You can go out into this world, working to redeem it and make it whole. And may God bless you in the work you have before you.