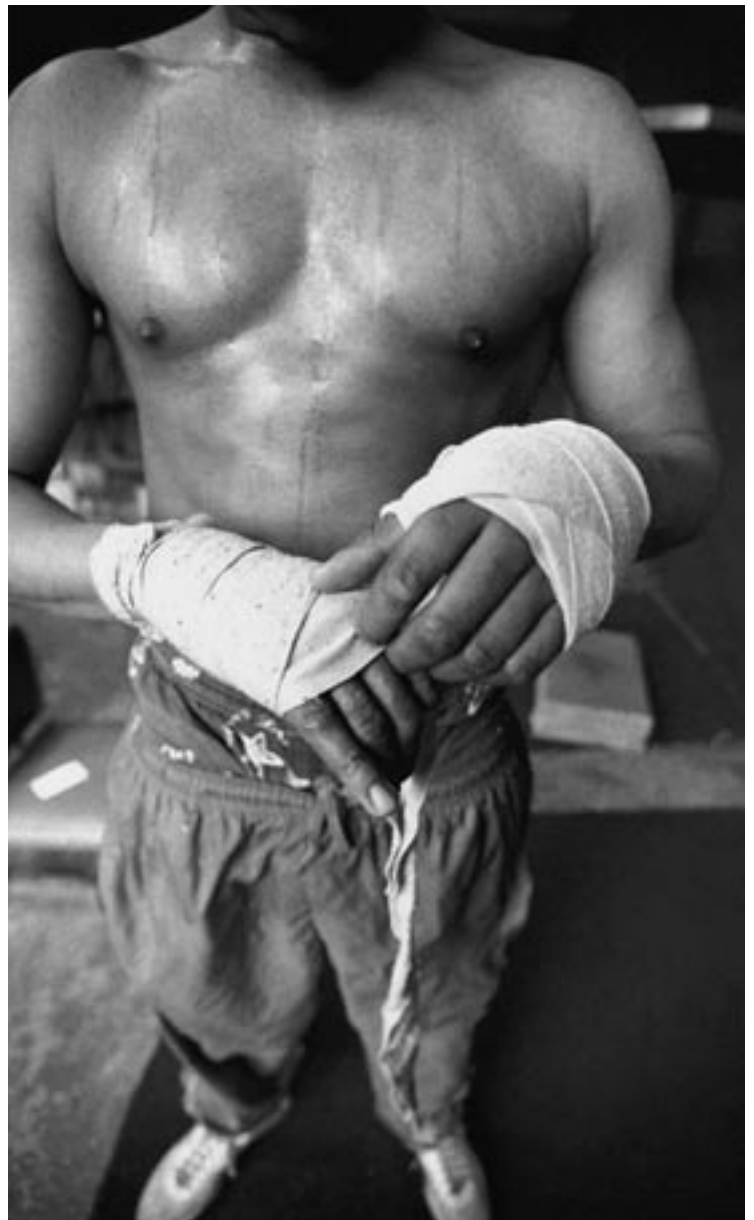


GOING THE DISTANCE

**RUBIN
CARTER'S
LONG
JOURNEY
FROM
CONVICT TO
CRUSADER**

an interview by KEN KLONSKY



PETER FOLEY

Growing up in New York City in the early 1960s, I sometimes watched “the fights” on Friday night. That’s how

I first became acquainted with a bald, baleful, angry-looking boxer named Rubin “Hurricane” Carter. Like Jack Johnson, another African American prizefighter, Carter had a knack for inciting the ire of white Americans. It’s this ire, he believes, that eventually landed him in prison for a murder he didn’t commit. “I was persecuted,” he says, “less for what I did than for who I was.”

Boxer, prisoner, writer, crusader — Carter has lived an epic life, at once controversial and inspirational. He was born in Clifton, New Jersey, in 1937 and had early troubles with the law. His youthful penchant for brutality resulted in a conviction for a violent purse snatching and mugging. (The memory of his crime still pains him today.) He spent time in the U.S. Army in Germany, where he learned to box. He became a middleweight prizefighter, and from 1961 to 1966 he was a relentless, straight-ahead competitor who was never knocked out. He amassed considerable wealth from boxing and was joint owner of a string of nightclubs in New York and New Jersey.

Perhaps that’s all he would be remembered for had his life not taken an extraordinary turn. In 1966, Carter and a young athlete and admirer named John Artis were accused and convicted of a triple murder at a bar in Paterson, New Jersey. Though Carter and Artis have always maintained their innocence, Carter spent almost twenty years in prison for the crime, only narrowly avoiding execution.

In the midseventies, Carter’s case became a cause célèbre after Bob Dylan wrote the song “Hurricane,” proclaiming Carter’s innocence. The attention helped Carter get a new trial, but he was again convicted and returned to prison. It wasn’t until November 1985 that Carter was released from Trenton State Prison by Lee Sarokin, a federal judge, who found a “pattern of prejudice and racism” at the core of his previous trials. It was the longest-litigated case in the history of New Jersey.

What distinguishes Carter’s story from others about the unjustly accused is the personal transformation he underwent in prison. As he puts it, the man who entered prison was not the same man who came out. After many years behind bars, Carter saw what bitterness was doing to him, and he abandoned the angry persona he’d had most of his life. Then, following his second conviction, he had a vision that he would be freed not by the law, but by a miracle. He began to study the great works of philosophy and religion, which he says helped him “awaken” to a higher level of reality.



RUBIN CARTER

Carter moved to Toronto, Canada, in 1987, two years after his release, and he has lived there ever since. He is currently executive director of the International Association in Defense of the Wrongly Convicted (AIDWYC), an organization that attempts to save innocent people from execution or life imprisonment (www.aidwyc.org). AIDWYC is headquartered in Canada and has offices in the United States and Great Britain. Carter also sits on the board of directors for the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Death Penalty Focus of California. He takes no salary from AIDWYC or any other organization, making his living entirely as an inspirational speaker. Two years ago he spoke on the same stage with Nelson Mandela at the first World Reconciliation Day in Australia. “Once Nelson and I saw each other,” Carter says, “we just cracked up. We laughed. He said, ‘We’re here, man. We’re here. We made it.’”

Three books have been written about Carter’s life: his autobiography, *The Sixteenth Round*, published while he was still in prison (and out in paperback this fall from Penguin); *Lazarus and the Hurricane* (St. Martin’s Press), by Carter’s Canadian supporters Sam Chaiton and Terry Swinton; and the authoritative *The Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter* (Houghton Mifflin), by James Hirsch. This last title was the inspiration for the feature film *The Hurricane*, directed by Norman Jewison and starring Denzel Washington.

My recent acquaintance with Carter began when my high-school English students, so moved by the movie *The Hurricane*, invited him to speak to our class. To our amazement, he agreed. He gave a motivational talk, encouraging the kids to pursue their education, and his visit was a transformative event for every student in that overcrowded class. With his dynamic presence, Carter convinced them that their lives meant something.

Speaking to Carter, one is constantly reminded of his religious background. Though he maintains few of his minister father’s traditional beliefs, he will often, in his deep, rolling, sonorous voice, make his points through biblical stories. He acknowledges the influence of the Russian spiritual philosopher Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff and his student P.D. Ouspensky. Carter’s views are also akin to those of the American Transcendentalists, who understood our day-to-day lives as a kind of waking sleep and saw human errors as the result of our failure to look beneath the surface of things.

I interviewed Carter at his home over a period of three days, roughly coinciding with the seventeenth anniversary of his release. Made wary by his life experiences, Carter refuses to answer his front door himself, but his house, once one gains access, is warm and inviting. There is a room commemorating the children of the world, another devoted to black history, and a meditative flower garden in back.

Carter says he lives in “the eternal present,” yet his memory of past events is palpable, almost physical. (He recalled a boxing match with the great Ibo fighter Dick Tiger by reenacting feints and jabs.) Although his circle of close acquaintances

is small, he told me his life is full of “presences” who look after him. At one point, he joined my son Ray and me at a small Toronto restaurant for dinner. I discovered that, during his long imprisonment, Carter learned to live on a minimum of food. Yet when he does eat, he says, he is mindful of the food, savoring every bite.

Carter never hesitated to answer a question. While he may have had a brutal streak once, he impressed me as a generous and caring person today. He is charismatic and sharp-witted, still in good shape, with powerful hands, arms, and chest. His confinement, he says, terrible though it was, probably saved him from the fate of many boxers who never knew when to quit. He can be reached at forevercarter@sympatico.ca.

Klonsky: As a person who was unjustly imprisoned for almost twenty years, how do you manage to avoid bitterness?

Carter: If I learned nothing else in prison, I learned that bitterness only consumes the vessel that contains it. I was angry for a very long time. I was madder than a black bear in mating season who isn't getting any. I was eating hatred and bitterness and envy as if they were succulent morsels of buttered steak. I was angry at everything that moved. I was angry at the two state witnesses who lied. I was angry at the police who put them up to it. I was angry at the judge who allowed their testimony. I was angry at the prosecutor who sanctioned it. I was angry at the jury who accepted it. I was angry at my own lawyer for not being able to defeat it. I was furious at everyone who helped to put me there.

Bitterness is a part of society's conditioning. We were all born conscious beings without a single fault. But we were born to people who had already been conditioned by society, and they, in turn, conditioned us. In our society, people are conditioned along tribal lines. I use the word *tribalism*, not *racism*, because *racism* presupposes that there is more than one race of people on this planet: That's one of the lies we live with. There is only one race of people on this planet, the human race. We all belong to it. What we really have in this society is not racism, but tribalism, and it's killing us.

One day, I was flying back from the West Coast, and in the seat pocket in front of me was a newspaper folded open to an Ann Landers column. In that column, Landers printed a poem by an anonymous author [later found to be James Patrick Kinney]. I memorized that poem, because it fit my understanding of tribalism. It was called “The Cold Within”:

Six men trapped by happenstance
In dark and bitter cold;
Each one possessed a stick of wood,
Or so the story's told.

Their dying fire in need of logs,
The first man held his back,
For of the faces 'round the fire,
He noticed one was black.

The next man looked across the way,

Saw one not of his church,
And couldn't bring himself to give
The fire his stick of birch.

The third man, dressed in tattered clothes,
Then gave his coat a hitch.
Why should his log be given up
To warm the idle rich?

The rich man sat back thinking of
The wealth he had in store,
And how to keep what he had earned
From going to the poor.

The black man's face bespoke revenge,
While fire passed from sight.
Saw only in his stick of wood,
A way to spite the white.

The last man of this forlorn group,
Did nothing but for gain.
Give only unto those who gave
Was how he played the game.

The logs held firm in death-stilled hands
Was proof of human sin.
They died not from the cold without
But from the cold within.

That is the problem of tribalism. It cannot be any different as long as people remain asleep. Sleeping people fight one another. Sleeping people hate one another. Sleeping people go to war with one another. Sleeping people rob, rape, and plunder one another. But there is also a circle of humanity that has woken up and is saying, “I want to know what this is all about and where I am.” These are conscious people. We don't know these people. We don't see these people, because we are asleep, and they are awake.

Klonsky: When you say that we're “asleep,” you mean that we haven't fully awakened to reality.

Carter: Exactly. Everyone is acting like something that they're not. The Russian spiritual teacher Gurdjieff tells a story about a magician named Kundalini who owned a flock of sheep, but his sheep kept running away. They didn't like the fact that the magician wanted to get rich off their wool and fat off their meat, so they ran away. One day, he called all of his sheep together, and he hypnotized them. He told one sheep, “You are no longer a sheep. You are a lion. You're the king of the jungle.” To another sheep, he said, “You're a tiger.” To another sheep, “You're a wolf.” Another sheep, “You're a bear.” Another sheep, “You're an antelope.” And on and on and on. After that the magician had no more problems with his sheep running away. They just waited for him to come and take their wool and eat their meat.

On this level of life, we are under the spell of the magician. Whenever we try to identify ourselves, we do it by color, by

nationality, by religion, by politics — by words, nothing but words. We act as though we are these things because we don't know who we are in the first place. Nobody has ever taught us who we are.

When you spend a great deal of time in darkness, in solitary confinement, where everything blends into one, if you're fortunate, you'll begin to see things more vividly than you've ever seen them before. It may take days, weeks, months, years, but you'll begin to see things as they really are. You'll begin to see yourself as you have never seen yourself before. Because when you can't see outside, you can only look inside.

In a very real sense, going to prison was the best thing that ever happened to me. Without it, I would never have been able to find myself. I would've been a baldheaded, mean-looking ex-prizefighter talking through a screen of conditioning, anger, and bitterness.

Klonsky: So, paradoxically, prison made you free.

Carter: Not free, but awake. Freedom doesn't really exist, because it implies separation, and everything in this universe is connected. There is no separation. This is Nicaragua. This is Israel. I see and feel everything on this earth. When somebody is facing execution, I know it. I feel what that person is going through, waiting to be killed: the ritual, the humiliation. When bombs drop, I feel the pain and the suffering of people. There is no such thing as freedom. What we can have instead is "free from." We could be free from pain, free from suffering, free from illiteracy, free from poverty, free from violence, free from any of those things.

If you want to escape prison — and we're talking about a universal prison as well as a physical prison — you've got to be very quiet. You can't alarm the guard. You can't let the guards know you're going to escape. You've got to find other people who have escaped prison before you and who know the way, and you dig tunnels to go under the wall, or build ladders to go over it. There are physical, mechanical guards that keep us where we are.

Klonsky: You resisted the prison system every step of the way.

Carter: Yes, because I entered prison knowing that I was innocent. I knew that I had committed no crime, and that it made no difference how many juries said I did. I knew I had not done what they said I had done, that I could not have done it. Because I was innocent, I refused to act like a guilty man. I refused to obey the prison rules. I refused to wear prison clothing. I refused to wear the stripes of a guilty person. I refused to eat their food. I refused to work their jobs. I would have refused to breathe the prison air if I could have done so and yet kept my innocence alive. Because that was the only thing I had: my innocence.

My attitude and my belief in my innocence earned me many, many trips to solitary confinement. I spent close to ten of my twenty years in prison in darkness — no lights, no sanitary conditions, no toothbrush, no running water, five slices of stale bread to eat and a cup of water to drink. There was no morning, no noon, no night, just different shades of darkness. There's a smell down there, down under the ground, filthy

waste buckets not emptied in three or four days. It really is a hole. Every fifteen days we were allowed to take a shower, and every thirty days we were given a medical examination.

On my way to one of these physical checkups in what they called the "hospital," I happened to pass a mirror, and the grotesque image that glared out at me from that glass shocked me back to life. I saw the face of hatred in that mirror. I saw a monster, and that monster was me. And I knew at that moment that if I was going to survive that prison, I had to change. Hatred and bitterness were eating me up.

Klonsky: Why do you think you were kept in solitary for such a long time?

Carter: I was born in 1937, into an openly segregated society where certain people were told, simply because of the color of their skin, "You can't live here; you can't work here; you can't sleep here; you can't go to school here; you can't eat here; you can't drink out of this water fountain; you can't ride on this bus." Even in the North it was very clear how America felt about Africans in this country. And then I went into a white prison — at that time they had no black guards in the penitentiary — as a triple racist murderer who would not admit his guilt and would not wear their clothes and would not eat their food and would not even talk to a guard. What do you think they're going to do to that person? They're going to try to murder that person. They're going to try to break that person down to the lowest level they possibly can.

Let me tell you, television representations have nothing to do with the reality of prison. All you have is raw, naked hatred and violence and bitterness. Every day in that prison, my life was threatened. Without question, my being alive at this moment is a miracle. The fact that I am alive and free is a double miracle.

Klonsky: The word *miracle* comes up often in relation to your story.

Carter: A miracle is nothing but higher laws made manifest on a lower level. When we awaken, we can perform miracles on this earth. That is the kingdom of God: being awake. You have access to it only through yourself. Nobody is going to give it to you. The priest can't give it to you. The priest doesn't know. The priest is asleep, and so is everybody else on this level of life. In prison, condemned by history, repudiated by the courts, I was in the one environment that could help me wake up.

I had nothing, absolutely nothing. I was trapped at the bottom, the lowest point at which a human being can exist without being dead: solitary confinement. It wasn't the end of the line, but I could certainly see the end of the line from there. I had nothing to hold on to, no family, nobody to do anything for me. I asked God to let me understand what was going on, because if I understood it, I thought, I'd be all right.

(end of excerpt)