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**"LET US TAKE BACK
OUR COMMUNITY"**

By
Walter D. Travis

A PLAY IN ONE ACT FOR FOUR MEN AND THREE WOMEN

CHARACTERS:

CHARLES: He is a garbage truck driver.

DAVE: He is the Head Custodian on the local School Board.

SLIM: He is a city bus driver.

REVEREND WILLIE: He is fifty-six years old and the pastor of the community church.

MISS BETTY: She is a homemaker in her late thirties.

THANA MAY: She is forty and demonstrates with solid support for the community church.

MARY LOU: Reverend Willie's wife, she is fifty-three years old.

PLACE: A suburban community in Chicago, Illinois.

SCENE:

A community park – this scene takes place against an outdoors painting backdrop. The painting depicts children playing on swings and others playing kickball. Community park design is suggested with a picnic table and outdoor recreation equipment capturing a recreational environment. Six actors are standing around the picnic table simultaneously visible and located center stage. Standing on top of the picnic table is Rev. Willie.

Entrance is at upright.

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AT RISE

It is half past noon. The day is hot and muggy. Charles is a heavy-set, African-American man in his late fifties. He is a man from hard knocks with no patience or an engaging simplicity of leader-member relations. He is wearing a ball cap and jumpsuit. He has a towel hanging over his shoulder and a bull horn in his left hand. He watches from center downstage toward the foot lights. Standing on top the picnic table, he looks out over the six other actors. Dave is a well built African-American man, almost six feet six inches. His shoulders are broad, his waist thick by contrast with his thighs. He has long legs, seen from the muscles bulging through his trousers. Slim is about two inches shorter than Charles. He is very undersized. His hair is curly and he has a very distinctive mixed cultured face. He stands right of Reverend Willie, looking up at Charles; both arms are raised above his head. He has binoculars hanging from his neck. He is wearing blue jeans with no shirt. Reverend Willie is much shorter than Charles, Dave, and Slim. His head is bald. He is wearing a white dress shirt with a tie and a pair of trousers. He stands between Miss Betty, Thana May, and Mary Lou. His face is of wonder; his hands are down at his sides as he looks up at Charles prepared to speak. Miss Betty is a slender white woman in her late thirties. She is warm-hearted and kindly given. She is wearing a sundress. She watches upstage away from the footlights at Charles with a very concerned expression. Thana May is a heavy set African-American woman who has always been a sort of solid supporter for the Community Church. Her face shows all the hurt and agony her family has been through. She stands to the left of Mary Lou as she watches upstage away from the footlights at Charles. Mary Lou is an African-American woman, fifty-three years old, and the wife of Reverend Willie. Her leadership role is crucial to the group because it plays an important role in determining the community's success. She is wearing a blouse and a pair of shorts cut just above her knees.

ALL: (Glances up into Charles' eyes, expressing emotions).

CHARLES: I believe that the pain of the last killing serves another function beyond just telling us that something is wrong, let me speak...

ALL: Speak then, Charles.

CHARLES: (moves slightly closer to the edge of the picnic table) Gang violence in our neighborhoods... home invasions... (frowns dryly) Our community is in an uproar, people can't even walk the streets.

ALL: Action, action, let us take back our community!

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CHARLES: Something has to be done (a supplicant note in his voice), because we just can't sit back and let this madness keep happening.

THANA MAY: (Moves slightly close to the picnic table. She stands there and looks up at Charles as she puts both hands on the table.) The police ain't doing nothing. There ain't even enough police to police this community.

CHARLES: (nods understandingly) It seems we have to go beyond the police to gain control of our community. (His eyes travel swiftly around the group. He is lifting one hand above his head as he points over to the backdrop painting.) We have to stand up and fight. (takes a small step backward)

ALL: That's right, that's right.

REV. WILLIE: (walks right center to the front of the picnic table and stands next to Thana May) I'm setting up a meeting with the police department. (facing Charles, he continues) I said to the Chief of Police, we've started working on our community, but the group ain't what I wanted it to be. Could you help us? (standing still a moment) I said, "I have no experience in this area." The Police Chief said, "You're smart. You know the community." I said, "But, I want to save this community. I'm saving it because I see there's no future for the children."

MARY LOU: (She walks right center to the front of the picnic table and stands. She stares up at Charles, and then stares at Rev. Willie.) There are too many killings. Please see what you can do. Through my leadership role, I've been educated to try to help when I can. It's not enough when you do for your own family. You have to try also to do something for people who are less lucky than you are or need your help and support the right way. You can't meet violence with violence. (in an uneasy tone) Around eleven o'clock last night, there were bullets being shot through windows and all kinds of noise.

MISS BETTY: (hesitates a moment, then speaks) No matter what the answer is, whether right or wrong, we still have to protect our children. Unfortunately, unlike rich communities, the police don't care about us. We're just ordinary people, working people. They just mind the rich with the big firms and the big businesses. (turning away from the picnic table, and quickly returning down left center, and stands with the group)

REV. WILLIE: (glances at his wristwatch as he wipes sweat from his face) I proceeded to find some of children's homes and knock on their doors to find out whether I could get them a job... cook, dishwasher, gardener, anything just to get them some work.

MISS BETTY: Them kids don't want to work. (she frowns and looks at the backdrop painting) They want to take!

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THANA MAY: (gives Rev. Willie a short outraged glance) If my child hadn't been murdered, I would never have felt the need for this guest. (the shock of remembering her child's death cast her into fear again and creates a powerful tingling in her legs) I wish she was here to ask questions. I wish I could introduce her to the police.

REV. WILLIE: Meaning....

THANA MAY: (she looks around, it is apparent from the serious look on her face, she's in pain) The first year of my child's death, it's difficult to reconstruct completely how I felt, but it was more difficult to understand that she was killed in a crossfire outside the uptown theater, it was a long time before I was able to collect myself. I didn't want to believe it then, that that would be the last time I held my daughter. But I suppose somehow I had an intuition that this day would come.

ALL: Yeah, you're right, girl.

CHARLES: It's impossible to find all those kids jobs.

REV. WILLIE: (he turns more directly at Charles) I was especially happy with the Chief of Police's response to my letter, he said other communities suffer from the same condition, but for the truth of policing neighborhoods there just ain't enough police officers to go around.

CHARLES: Crime is out of control, where are they while your lifeblood runs out on the ground in some dark alley somewhere. (he pauses and glances down at Rev. Willie) Better to look at it the other way and rise up against these knuckleheads.

REV. WILLIE: (he stares at Charles for a moment, then continues as Slim stands beside him, straining to look at Charles) He said that he'll put more cars and officers on horseback in our neighborhoods. You couldn't ask for more.

SLIM: (he turns to face Rev. Willie) What's more?

REV. WILLIE: (as they stare at each other) But he's totally in control of this situation.

DAVE: (takes a breath) We know what more is... our *actions*, we take into our lives in our own hands, our own control, our guns, and our knives.

ALL: (for several minutes they talk to one another about their emotions and concerns)

MARY LOU: We need not pick up arms. A community outreach program is now involved and they have their own armed security. (she pauses and looks at the group) We have to see what they can do.

MISS BETTY: They better hurry. (at once, not giving her a chance to continue speaking) I was woken up at two o'clock in the morning, a terrible banging on the door, and there were two uniformed cops shouting, there is a warrant for your son's arrest, have him put some clothes on and come with us.

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It was very cold, very dark night and they took my son to jail. The degree of despair to which a mother can be driven is best revealed by the reversal on one's normal feelings and principles. What's left to feel happy about? About seeing your son being dragged off to jail for trying to help feed his brothers and sisters? What can you say to a little boy sobbing his heart out as his big brother has been taken away? Whose sister has been gunned down and he has no father 'cause he's in prison, what can you say?

MARY LOU: Now, I don't want you to think the Reverend and I have all the answers. It's not an easy thing to deal with. I know a couple of kids who live in your neighborhood. One is little Tee who lives down the block from a kid he says is always bullying him. His father is in prison too. We can move forward a truly enlightened community, changing as many of these kids lives as we can.

MISS BETTY: I understand what you're saying. You mean, if he stands up and fights, that little bully would stop bullying him.

MARY LOU: I know this happens to other children somewhere else, but there are many ways to stand up to someone without fighting. The list could go on and on. That's why we have to put education first. There's an unfortunate perception that young kids today can rap better than they can read.

DAVE: That's right.

MARY LOU: The United States Department of Education established training, assistance, and scholarships for low-income students pursuing doctorates in Math, Science, Technology, and Health. It's up to us as parents to push them in those directions. (she follows Dave's eyes and also focuses on the others, she continues) I think we could bring community vision, or resolve some of our concerns. We have to try to send these kids love and energy. Coming into awareness and breaking free of a control drama always feels anxious at first, because the compulsion has to lift before the solution to the lostness can be found.

CHARLES: Can we move forward and truly change these children's evil deeds? Do you really think enough people will take a stand? I don't see anyone behind me. (he shakes his head) The only prophecy that's being played out in my neighborhood is man's greed and corruption trickling all the way down to our children.

MARY LOU: I understand why you say this.

CHARLES: We realize you and Rev. Willie are living good compared to the conditions in which we live. It's a hell of a difference even in my neighborhood with the majority of two parents, and one of

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them not working. We have problems in our neighborhood that the middle class face and the rich don't. War on drugs in the streets with law enforcement running up in apartments with guns drawn out, inner city crack babies, schools being defunded, and prisons are becoming an extension of the community!

MARY LOU: Keep in mind that in a real sense, there are as many neighborhoods as there are police. Each of us has our own reasons for belonging, and each of us measures our thoughts on security by a different yardstick.

CHARLES: Our problem has been trying to depend on the government to police our state, but there will never be enough government regulation to prevent this illegal madness,

MISS BETTY: I can't wait to get rid of my source of frustration. Unfortunately, I don't know how to fire a gun.

REV. WILLIE: It ain't always about a gun.

DAVE: You know it, and I know it, but it seems the children don't know it.

REV. WILLIE: (for a moment he stands still, then nods, a short succinct motion) That's the problem. Maybe, just maybe neighborhood programs are the answer.

SLIM: What effects do you believe neighborhood programs would have on the children in our community?

MARY LOU: (looks thoughtful) Let me answer that question, Reverend. The increase of jobs and after school programs will have a great impact on some of these kids.

SLIM: What are some of the programs?

MARY LOU: Computer training programs, and the Reverend and I are also pursuing strategic alliances with other helpful organizations. But we haven't established criteria with these organizations as of yet.

MISS BETTY: But when you do, what will some of the hot topics be?

MARY LOU: Survival Motives, Social Motives, Success Motives, and Progress Motives with features in Education and Knowledge, Change and Advancement, and Efficiency and Practicality, to name a few. I thought you were moving away. You were so sure.

MISS BETTY: I know I was going to move, but I... well, I had a dream that disturbed me. I thought I'd better stay and try to help. The housing authority people thought I was crazy, but then I ran into a deputy from the County Sheriff's Department. He talked me into staying put.

REV. WILLIE: Good. Fear is still rising and if we are to resolve it and get this community back, each of us must participate personally. In the meanwhile, we must watch each other's back. Our responsibility is to check on our neighbors. Don't open doors until you know for sure who is on the other side. Watch those who watch you because they could be casing your homes.

CHARLES: Bull! This idea is a metaphor, a symbolic way of trying to get us to look to the police and government, not our own urges.

REV. WILLIE: Fearful people want to control others (he looks around the group and then stares up at Charles) That's why gangs try to pull you in and convince you to follow them, and they ask you to submit to their authority, or fight you if you try to leave. Whether it's violence or just drug addictions, these kids come from environments where life is abusive and dysfunctional.

THANA MAY: But that still don't give them a pass to kill others.

REV. WILLIE: Nor does it give us a pass to kill them. (after a slight pause, Rev. Willie continues to speak, he notices from down low right center other people are coming behind them widening and spreading out until each one of them touches the other's hand forming a circle around them. The coverage seems to jolt Rev. Willie into an even higher awareness. (he takes a breath and then he speaks again) There is no natural community, no structure as we have here today, that serves as a stable platform, a background stage that is common to all of us. Whether it's right or wrong, we affect what happens on this stage, but ideas manifest much slower and we must reach some agreement on what we want to happen in the future. It's this agreement, this consensus, this unity of vision in our community, which will also hold us together.

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