

Jackson Said, 'Take My Hand'

By Melvin Konner

You'd have to say it was before the transformation — before he was a major force in Presidential politics, before he had kissed thousands of white babies. It was 9 o'clock on a Sunday morning last August. My brother, Larry, and I were on the eighth floor of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, a place we had left only rarely in the preceding two weeks.

Following surgery to remove a blood clot in her brain stem, my brother's wife, Ronnie — 44 years old, mother of two and a successful screen writer at the top of her form — was in a nearly "locked in" state: Her mental functions were presumed to be there but she could barely move a muscle. Only slight movements of her right hand and her eyelids showed she was in contact with the world outside her body. Nothing had changed in many days.

Suddenly a group of men emerged from the elevator corridor. After a brief puzzlement — they were moving quickly — I recognized the man at their head as Jesse Jackson. He was handsomer and bigger than I had imagined. He reached across the low table to shake hands with us, and we both were on our feet.

"Jesse Jackson," he said commandingly. He was large, muscular, graceful, extremely charismatic. "Don't worry, Jesse," I said. "You've got a whole family of liberals here."

"Get their cards," he said over his shoulder to an aide. I gave the aide my card as the phalanx moved down the main corridor.

"The Rainbow Coalition," I said to my brother with a smile as we sat back down — there were six black men and one Asian — but my brother knew the remark was benign. In spite

of being Jewish, we were leftover 60's liberals, and Jackson represented much of what we believed in.

The Hymietown remark had bothered me very little, and although I was deeply disturbed by his having embraced Yasir Arafat, and by his failure to repudiate the viciously anti-Semitic Louis Farrakhan, he did seem to be moving toward the center on those questions, and I am not a one-issue voter.

It was quiet again in the waiting room. "He must be visiting Bill Cosby's mother," my brother speculated, a guess that later turned out to be right. After a long pause, he said, "Do you think I could maybe get him to visit Ronnie — say a prayer for her?"

Between one atheist and another this suggestion still made an odd but apt sort of sense. We had reason to hope that Ronnie would know what was happening, and we knew that if she did, she would love it. As for the effect on the morale of everyone on the floor — everyone involved in her care — it could be incalculable.

"Ask him," I said. "What do you have to lose?" After five minutes had passed, we spotted the phalanx moving toward us. Heading the men off, my brother fell in step with Jackson while I fell in with the others.

"Excuse me, Reverend Jackson," my brother said quickly, walking beside him. "My wife's in intensive care — she may not make it. I was wondering if you could stop in and see her for a minute. Maybe say a prayer. It would mean a lot to her. And to the family."

"What's wrong with her?" Jackson asked. He never broke his stride. My brother described the problems, and a series of rapid, gentle questions from Jackson produced her name,

facts about the children, her career and more. The knot of men, us included, moved straight past the elevators without slowing down.

"We can't do this," said an aide to another. "It's the only plane today." But by this time it had already been decided. At the same striding speed, following my brother's lead, the group had negotiated three turns and ended up at the door of the intensive-care unit. Jackson pulled on the door handle. He had never turned, even to glance at an aide. He had never hesitated or slowed down.

My brother said, "We can't go in with all these people."

"Just my son," said Jackson. He entered and swept past the nurse's station to Ronnie's bed. He went to her right side, which he had learned

was the better one. "Ronnie, it's Jesse Jackson. Take my hand, Ronnie."

He took her hand, and with his other motioned to form a circle around the bed. Jackson, Ronnie's sister, my brother, the nurse and Jackson's son all held hands and hovered over the still, slight form

with the bandage-swathed head. In a way that clearly was second nature to him, Jesse Jackson then spoke directly to a presence that at least he felt clearly.

"Lord. You're the God that parted the Red Sea, the God that helped Daniel in the den." He mentioned only Old Testament miracles — this was, after all, a Jewish hospital. "We need a miracle. Touch this room. Touch this woman. Give strength to the family."

By the time he said "Amen," my brother was sobbing loudly. As he pronounced that word, Ronnie opened her eyes. It was not unusual, but the timing was remarkable. The circle broke up, but Jackson did not leave. He took my brother in his large,

strong arms and held him until he stopped crying.

That was all. It took only a few minutes. But what we could not stop talking about during the next few days was not what he had done but how he had done it. How often do you get to see a candidate for office respond to a completely spontaneous challenge?

Here he was walking quickly from one scheduled event to another, his mind presumably on some tactic or strategy, when suddenly a strange man came up to him and asked him for a favor. He did not just do the right thing, and do it beautifully. He did it without hesitating even for a second, without consulting, without time to think.

Many weeks later, after she had recovered her speech, Ronnie told the story of the visit over and over again. "Jesse Jackson came to see me," she delighted to tell visitors.

We could not even tell what part of the event she had remembered and what part was what she had heard from others. As for the rest of us, I don't know if God gave strength to the family, but Jesse Jackson's visit certainly did. We speculated that it was his experience in the ministry, not his confidence as a candidate, that made what he did possible. In any case, we were grateful.

Last month, still bothered by the questions about Arafat and Farrakhan, I cast a ballot for him on Super Tuesday. Even now I waver, searching the news for some definitive statement that will set my mind at ease about Jesse and Israel, Jesse and the Jews. I haven't found it yet, and I am still disturbed. But I was not the one who was held crying in his arms.

The day after the visit, my brother said mysteriously, "Well, at least there's one problem I don't have to solve anymore." Wondering what, among the vast array of family, medical, economic and career problems he might be referring to, I set myself up. With a smile, after a well-timed pause, he said, "Who to vote for." □

Melvin Konner is an anthropologist and nonpracticing physician who teaches at Emory University.

A scene
in a
Los Angeles
hospital
room.

