

Reflection: The Night of the Execution

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On a cold night in February 1999, I joined a group of students from the University of Dayton at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility for the execution of Wilford Berry. He would be the first person executed in Ohio since the 1976 reinstatement of the death penalty. Wilford was a “volunteer,” meaning he had given up the appeals process to be executed; some would say he committed suicide with the help of the state.

It was fairly clear he was guilty and deserved punishment. But I stood outside the prison with hundreds of other protesters, in solidarity for what I consider a distinct value—the value of human life. Across the way, other protesters were also standing for the value of life—the victim’s life. The difference? They were seeking vengeance, and we were seeking forgiveness. By standing in defiance of the execution, we no less valued the life of the victim; in fact, we sought respect for all human life.

That night changed me; it made me aware of the despair we face in times of death, whether it is the murder of a loved one or the execution of the perpetrator. After meeting some anti-death penalty activists, I asked some difficult questions and prayed about such a decision for myself. It struck me that Jesus’ execution was sanctioned by the state. His response was that of forgiveness—“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” I saw that many victims of violent crimes and those who have lost loved ones hold vengeance in their hearts, and I wanted to support them in overcoming such terrible hurt and despair.

In 2000 the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative formed a Death Penalty Issue Team, and I became a member. As the work evolved, we met others involved in the movement, including family members of murder victims who sought alternatives to the death penalty. Since that cold February night outside the execution chamber, doors seemed to continually open for me.

A major part of the Marianist charism is hospitality. As Marianists, we are rooted in a spirit of welcome and solidarity; for me, the death penalty has much to do with hospitality. Being a people of hospitality is more than welcoming people into our homes; it is a movement to solidarity and a deeper understanding of the complexities of life.

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Using Mary as my model, I see a mother who stood at the cross and watched her son die at the hands of the state. I stand at the cross each time the state kills another. And I stand at the cross each time I meet a family member who has lost a loved one to murder. At times, this “standing” becomes tiring and a bit overwhelming; however, the work of hospitality involves sacrifice of our time and energy. Hospitality is a total giving of one’s self.

I have served on the Board of Directors for Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing. The mission of this organization is to educate others about the inequalities of the death penalty by sharing personal stories of their journey. Family members of murder victims who have overcome vengeance and arrived at a place of healing, and in some cases forgiveness, are among the most incredible people I have ever met.

When I first met Marietta Jaeger-Lane, whose six-year-old daughter Susie was murdered on a camping trip in Montana, all I could do was give her a hug. This woman had literally been to hell and back. Now, over 20 years later, Marietta has dedicated much of her time to speaking about the power of forgiveness. Her life changed when she was able to look the killer of her daughter in the eyes and tell him he was forgiven. Marietta says, "It is difficult for people to understand what it takes to get past that initial response of wanting revenge, so they assume that my lack of feelings of revenge reflects a lack of love for Susie. All I can say to them is that I love her very much, and I hope they have do not go through what I did in order to able to understand what I am talking about . . . [Susie] had a sweet and gentle spirit. I don't want that spirit dishonored by having her death avenged with more violence."

Marietta practices hospitality every time she steps to a podium and speaks of forgiveness. She creates a place of value and welcome for all. She stands, as Mary stood, in solidarity with other victims of violent crime. A friend often preaches that we should "throw our bodies at the cross," meaning we should put our entire selves in solidarity with the sacrifice Jesus made for us. Marietta is a beautiful example of this movement to solidarity and deeper understanding.

As Marianists we are called to stand. Sometimes standing can be more powerful than the spoken word. But when we are challenged to speak, we speak only out of love.

Mary, be with us at the foot of the cross; teach us to be a people of hospitality and forgiveness. Teach us to follow your Son's path of healing and forgiveness. Renew in us our commitment to work for a just and equitable society.