Volume 20
Issue 1 *Sacred Heart University Review, Volume XX, Numbers 1 & 2, Fall 1999/ Spring 2000*

Article 1

2000

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Helen Prejean

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Cover Page Footnote

This is a lightly edited transcription of the talk delivered by Sister Prejean at Sacred Heart University on October 31, 2000, sponsored by the Hersher Institute for Applied Ethics and by Campus Ministry.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN, C.S.J.

The Journey of Dead Man Walking

I'm glad to be with you. I'm going to bring you with me on a journey, an incredible journey, really. I never thought I was going to get involved in these things, never thought I would accompany people on death row and witness the execution of five human beings, never thought I would be meeting with murder victims' families and accompanying them down the terrible trail of tears and grief and seeking of healing and wholeness, never thought I would encounter politicians, never thought I would be getting on airplanes and coming now for close to fourteen years to talk to people about the death penalty.

I'm a storyteller. I'm a Southern storyteller to be exact, and I believe that through stories and by sharing our experiences with each other, we can help each other to come to a deeper place of reflection on the death penalty. Most of us are deeply ambivalent about the death penalty, because on the one hand we hear about these crimes: we hear about a mother stopped at a stoplight, and hear she is carjacked with her two children, and hear that she's murdered in cold blood, and we feel the outrage rising up inside of us. And then it's easy to go to the next step: whoever did this deserves to die, period, end of discussion, don't tell me any more. So on the one hand, we feel the outrage; on the other hand, we've got principles. Those of us who are people of faith, those of us who call ourselves Christians and try to follow in the way of Jesus, know that Jesus would never pull the switch on anybody. Jesus called us to forgiveness and to love. We can barely trust the government to collect the taxes or fill the potholes, much less be given a decision of who can live and who can die among our citizens. That's the way most of us come into this: we come into it ambivalent.

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But I believe there's a way, especially through spirituality, where

we can work through ambivalence. Our culture says to us that either you've got to be on the side of that death row inmate or of the victims' family. If you're against executions, then you must be against the victims' families. You can't be on both sides. Well, the incredible journey that I want to share with you is that I found a way to be on both sides.

Before I get into the core aspects of my own personal journey, I just want is tell you a few stories: one about the movie, one about the opera, and the other about the play of *Dead Man Walking* that Tim Robbins is working on right now, a play that can be performed in universities and little theaters all across this country, which can also help introduce a whole element of reflection.

First about the movie. I didn't seek for a movie to be made of my book. I was wary of Hollywood trying to do a story about a nun. If you know what Hollywood has done with nuns, we haven't done well in the Hollywood films. So my community, the Sisters of St. Joseph, said to me, ``Don't let Hollywood touch your book." They didn't even have to warn me: either you've got *Sister Act*, you've got flying nuns, or you've got a nun on a desert island with a Marine — and what are they going to do? I could see what they would do with my story. Here's a nun with a death row inmate: they'd have me eloping with the guy before the movie was ended.

Then one afternoon the phone rings, and I pick up and the voice on the other end says, ``Hi, I'm Susan Sarandon. I'm filming *The Client* in Memphis. I have to come to New Orleans for a couple of days of filming. I'm reading your book, and I'd love to meet you." I said ``Great." I had heard of Susan Sarandon, not because I had seen any of her movies, but through Amnesty International. I heard that she was good about human rights, she really stuck up for her principles and all. So I said fine. We settled on a restaurant to meet in, and I ran out and rented *Thelma and Louise*, to see what she looked like before she came into the restaurant. I didn't want to be the only one sitting there in the restaurant who didn't know who she was. Well, a whole group of us watched the movie, and lo and behold, in the first scene I get her mixed up with Geena Davis, so through the whole movie of *Thelma and Louise* I'm following Geena Davis. Have you seem *Thelma and Louise*? You know Geena Davis is that ditsy one who keeps doing more and more stupid things, and they get in more and more trouble

with the law, and I kept saying, ``I like Louise, I like Louise." So when she walked into the restaurant I said, ``Oh, thank you, Jesus, she's Louise." I was so relieved. Of course I told everybody this story but Susan, until after we got to be friends, and one day I said, ``You know Susan, I've got a confession to make." And she said, ``Geena Davis!"

So we have a meal together, and the one piece of advice I had been given was don't let anybody make a film unless you really trust them. Once you sign a contract, the first step is that they take an option out on your book, and once you sign that, they can do anything they want with this. So I'm talking with Susan Sarandon and within the first ten minutes, I knew I could trust her. She cared about the issue of the death penalty, she cared about human rights. She told me the story of how she and Tim Robbins, presenting one of the Oscars the year before at the Academy Awards, had used the occasion of one billion people watching the Academy Awards. To do what? As Susan said, ``Everybody was departing from the script to talk about baseball and their girlfriends or whatever. We departed from the script, we did."

And you know what they did? It was to hold up before the world the HIV-positive Haitian people that were being confined in Guantanamo. And they held them up: thirty-six words, they departed from the script, and held them up before the world. Two days later a judge signed papers to release the Haitian people. The Academy Awards people were furious at them, banned them, in effect, the next year from the Academy Awards, and I thought to myself, Wow, any actor would love to get an Academy Award, and they risked that. They risked making the whole Academy angry at them, because they cared so deeply about the human rights of HIV-positive Haitian people that most people didn't care about at all. When she told me that story, I was sold on that lady: I knew I could trust that lady. She took the book. She said, ``I'm going to present it to Tim Robbins. I think he's the one to make this film." And, of course, Tim was busy, he was doing other projects. And then finally, after six months, she prevailed on him. I call her the midwife of *Dead Man Walking*, because the movie wouldn't have existed if it hadn't been for Susan believing in it and getting Tim finally to read the book.

The Shawshank Redemption had just come out when we were beginning to have our first discussions about making this film, and then I go up to New York. We plan the film. Close collaboration. You

know what I found about really great talented people? They always work in community. You know, not the kind of person that says, ``Oh, I'm the screenwriter here, I'm Tim Robbins. I'm going to direct it, you're just a nun that the story's about," but consulting with me. I have a stack of the screenplays this high, working through all the steps of that journey. He talked to me for hours: ``What was it like? What's your relationship like with the men? Do they really undergo a conversion of heart?" All honest, good questions.

Then, when the screenplay was written, all the Hollywood studios turned it down. They didn't believe it could be a box-office success. You know the three magic bullets for box-office success in Hollywood: plenty of sex, plenty of violence, plenty of action. So they said, ``Well, Tim's got no romantic element in it, they got a nun and a death row inmate. Now if you let us spice that up a little bit . . ." He said, ``That's not where the story is. The story's not about a nun falling in love with a death row inmate, and it's not even about innocent people on death row. It's about when someone's really guilty. What do we do with them? Can we execute them?" They all turned it down, and PolyGram Film International, which had only had one successful movie, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, because mainly they did albums, picked it up. And now PolyGram's really glad that they picked it up, because it was a huge box-office success, and it made the American public reflect.

The theater managers all over the country where the film was showing said, ``Well, we never saw a film like that. Everybody stayed seated during the credits, and then filed silently out of the theater." And Tim knew: you don't make a polemic against the death penalty, propaganda, and put in the 1,482 reasons why *you're* against the death penalty. But what you do to take people on the journey is you bring them over to both sides, so that people can start reflecting on the ambivalence that so many people feel on this issue. And on the night of March 25, 1996, Susan Sarandon stepped up at the Academy Awards to receive the Oscar that she got for portraying me in that film, and 1.3 billion people were watching. And I kept thinking of the gospel of Jesus, how Jesus said to preach the good news to all the nations. That night, literally, the movie *Dead Man Walking* was brought to the world. It was mentioned four times because it got four nominations. And I have traveled now to many countries, been with a taxicab driver in Japan who said, ``*Dead Man Walking*." People know about *Dead*

Man Walking. And it's not because of me. We each do our part, our little part, but when you hear this whoosh, this big whoosh of power that takes what we do, that's God's spirit that works to bring things.

And now the opera of *Dead Man Walking* just opened in San Francisco. People say, ``An opera? Who goes to the opera?" Well, what some people are saying is that they reinvented the modern opera, because they took the story and they put it on the stage in a way to bring the audience through the whole journey. In the first part of the opera, everybody witnesses a crime, right there in front of us, and we watch two teenagers get killed, and so we are all at the same starting point in the audience of outrage, over what we have just seen, and we know who did it. We watch the people lurking in the trees, and we see this guy Joe de Rocher, as he's called in the opera, and we watch him participate in the raping and killing of this couple. And so we're set. We are at the place emotionally where we go, ``He deserves it." Plus when we meet him, we don't like him: he's got tattoos, he's tough, he's not remorseful, he's saying he didn't do it. We all know he did it. We all just watched him do it. And then we go into that journey with him, and then with the victims' families torn apart by this, their children killed, some of them wanting the death penalty, another one of them struggling with it, not sure what's going to give them peace, and even if watching this guy die is going to give them peace.

And a turning point in the opera comes. The lead opera singer, the most well-known person, is Frederica von Stade, who was given her first choice of all the roles in the opera. You know what role she chose? Not me, but the mother of the death row inmate, Joe de Rocher, as he's called in the opera. And a turning point happens when this mother comes before the Pardon Board of Louisiana to plead for the life of her son. Up to that point, all of our hearts are on the side of the terrible crime we've witnessed. Suddenly we're faced with another mother, who says, ``I never did anything like this before." And she goes [taps the microphone], ``Is this where I speak?" and she's fumbling through her purse, and begins to sing about her son, Joe: ``I know he did a terrible thing, if I were the victims' families, and they had done this to my Joe, maybe I'd feel just as you do, but don't kill my Joe. Don't kill my Joey." And then pitiful kind of like, showing a comb, a Japanese comb, made out of shell, she says, ``Look what he gave me for my birthday. Can somebody who's all bad give a nice gift like

this to his mama? Don't kill my Joe." And she begins to sing, ``Haven't we all suffered enough?" And you can feel that there are 2,348 people sitting in that building. The opera house was packed, and you could feel the breathing in the audience, because suddenly our hearts begin to turn: ``Oh my God, there's a family on the other side of this too." And we begin to go down that trail of tears with that family, and realize, ``What's going to happen to this mother and his two brothers now when this guy's executed?"

By this time, you come to the execution in the opera, and the gurney. If you've ever seen a picture of the gurney on which we're killing people in this country, it's shaped like an inverted cross. And they lift him up during the execution, where he sings his last words, and then they put him down to be killed, and there's complete silence in the opera. It's an opera with a minute-and-a-half of silence. Some people in the audience were losing it. One woman said, ``I'm sitting next to a man and he began to cry, so I'm holding his hand, the audience is holding each other's hands." You see, it's bringing us up close, up close to the reality of this. And we're not close to the death penalty: we're kept from the death penalty. We hear about executions, we know about the crimes, but we're not close to this thing. Some people are very close to this thing: all the people in the states that have to do the killing for us. I don't know if you heard on National Public Radio not long ago: they started talking to people that have to carry out the executions in Texas. Here's one guy that carried out thirty executions. His job was on that strap-down team to strap the left leg on the gurney. Everybody gets very task-oriented: you do the right arm, you do the left leg. And he's in his carpenter shop one morning and he starts crying uncontrollably. He comes into the house, and his wife says, ``What's wrong? What's wrong?" And he says, ``The thirty guys, the thirty guys I helped kill . . ." and he can't stop crying. He says, ``I can't do it anymore, I can't do it anymore." When it comes to the point of the death of the person, you are taking a perfectly healthy person who's been sitting in a cage, and your job is now to take these people out and kill them.

Now it's all justified, it's all legalized, and sometimes it's even sanctified by religion, by people quoting God, from the Bible, saying God wants us to do this, these killings are justified, this is what we have to do in this society. And then we give our reasons: to be tough on

crime, or they deserve to die — look at what they did! — or the justice that we need to give to the victim's family, or however we try to justify this thing. But there's some people in there that have to do the actual killing for us. We hire people to kill for us. And what happens to them? All of that is the story that the opera is now bringing to people.

And now Tim Robbins is writing the play. He's writing the play because the play is where this whole drama and journey can be depicted and performed live on stage, and it's not going to be the kind of play that only goes to Broadway, and only for people with a lot of money who can go to New York to see it. Tim is writing the play with all the directions in it so that it can be given out across the whole United States, and universities can perform it on a stage like this, and in little theaters or churches. You see, when you write a play, you can make a lot of money, and the way you make a lot of money when you write a play is in the royalties. But Tim's going to fix it so that there will be very little royalties: he doesn't care about making money. But what he wants to do is to help people to reflect, which is why he wanted to do the film. And he was really clear when we did the film. He said the essential moral question about the death penalty is not what to do with innocent people: we all know we shouldn't be executing innocent people. But when somebody's guilty of a terrible crime and we know they're guilty, what about them? Surely we can execute them.

And then also the moral question: he changed it. I accompanied people, the first people I wrote about in *Dead Man Walking*, to the electric chair. And one day about six weeks into writing the script he called up and he said, ``Helen, I know the people you were with were killed in the electric chair, but more and more states are turning to lethal injection, and they're claiming that it's a humane way to kill human beings. I think we have to explore that as a moral issue in this film: Is there a humane way to kill a conscious human being?" And so he changed to lethal injection. And it's true: it is what most states are doing. I mean, we're making it so clean, they put alcohol on your arm before they inject the needle. You've got a germ-free death. You've got a gurney with a white sheet on it, like in a hospital. We don't want to see any blood, we don't want to see any suffering. But is it the practice of torture, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations says, in Article 3 and Article 5? Article 3: Everybody has a right to life. Article 5: No human being should be subjected to cruel

and degrading punishment or torture.

Is the death penalty torture? Torture has been defined by Amnesty International as an extreme mental or physical assault against someone who has been rendered defenseless. Is the death penalty an imposition of a mental assault? Well, take any of us, put us in a cell or a room or whatever, for five years, five months, five days, tonight, to be told tonight at midnight you'll be given an overdose of sleeping pills. You won't feel a thing, but tonight you die. And we look at our watch, and we say, ``Hmmm, it's a little after four. Can I call my mother? Can I call my father? My sisters? My family?" And we start ticking off the hours. People on death row with imaginations and consciousness anticipate death and die a thousand times before they die. The five people I've accompanied to execution all have said to me, ``Sister, pray God holds up my legs. Just pray God holds up my legs." They don't want to faint, they don't want their knees to buckle.

But let's go back into the story. How did it begin for me? Purely and simply, it began for me because I got involved with poor people. As long as I wasn't involved with poor people and issues of social justice, the death penalty was very far from me. In fact, when I grew up in Louisiana, in the 1950s, we had executions, and you know what? I don't even remember them. The traditional teaching of the Catholic Church for a long time upheld the death penalty, and when I was educated in high school and in college, that's what the teaching was. I didn't even think about it. I thought, ``Some people do these terrible crimes, they deserve to die." The Church teaches that we can uphold it, and I didn't even think about it. When I did the research for *Dead Man Walking*, and looked in those years, I went, ``Oh my gosh, look, there were executions going on here." It wasn't even a blip on my radar screen, my moral radar screen. I didn't even remember it, I just accepted: ``Well, that's what we did."

But then I got involved with poor people. And specifically, I tell the story of the spiritual journey in *Dead Man Walking*, the gospel of Jesus. Finally I began to understand the gospel. Look who Jesus was with: Jesus was with the marginated people, and with the suffering people, and with the outcast people. Jesus touched lepers, Jesus touched the unclean, Jesus was with people and talked to people and met with people at wells, like women you weren't supposed to talk to, and he let a prostitute cry and wipe his feet with her hair at a public

dinner at the house of a very rich and respectable religious leader. Jesus *was* with those people, and how do we begin to translate that today? Well, I finally got it, and that's the first part of the story in *Dead Man Walking*: I got it. And then I realized that I didn't even know any poor people, because our society separates us from one another. We have become afraid of poor people. We don't go into certain sections of the city. It's like the little girl that time that wrote the essay called ``The Poor Family'': ``Once there was a very poor family,'' she said. ``Everybody in the whole family was poor. The mother was poor, the father was poor, the children were very poor.'' And then she adds: ``The chauffeur was poor, the butler was poor, the gardener was poor, it was a very poor family.'' Well, when we don't really know poor and struggling people, that's the kind of essays we write, and what I was doing the equivalent of.

But then I got it, and then I found my way into the St. Thomas housing projects and began to live among African-American people struggling for decency, to get out of poverty, to deal with the racism that was all around, and police brutality and policies in the city, like allowing the drugs to be open in the St. Thomas projects. But when the drugs would move to another part of the city, suddenly we'd read there's a full-court press on this drug problem. The mayor's office in New Orleans told one of the sisters who worked at Hope House: ``Now Sister, you know that every city is going to have its problem with drugs. At least we know where they are, we know where the drugs are.'' And we realize that they don't care as much about the kids in St. Thomas and what happens to them with the drugs as they do about what happens out in the suburbs. I began to see, to open my eyes, to see how tough it was to go against, to overcome poverty and all of this, working in the adult learning center, having people come in who had been in the eleventh grade in the public schools in New Orleans and they can't read at a third-grade level. And then I'm in touch with the excellent education I got: Sacred Heart elementary, St. Joseph Academy high school, St. Mary's Dominican College. I got an excellent education, I had resources, I had cushions in my family. Why was I given all these gifts? I didn't know I was privileged. When we're privileged, we don't know we're privileged. We always have a way of thinking about the things that are hard in our life, and what we're trying to do, and the conflicts and the tensions. Suddenly, I'm seeing people

who've been through eleventh grade and they can't read at a third-grade level, and I know why I'm there. And it's got nothing to do with a great white woman coming to save all these poor people. It was just about justice, and accompanying people, and beginning to understand the system of injustice that was keeping all of this in place.

While I was there that one day, I got an invitation to write to a man on death row, and believe me when I tell you that this was casual. Casual, providential: is there anything that's strictly an accident? But I was coming out of that adult learning center, and met a friend from the prison coalition. He had a little clipboard, and he was asking anybody he was seeing that day to participate in a project. He meets me, happens to meet me, and says, ``Hey Sister Helen, you want to be a pen pal to somebody on death row?" I said, ``Yeah, sure." I thought all I was going to be doing was writing letters to this person. You know, when we study theology, we ought to have a whole chapter to teach us about the sneakiness of God, who creeps up on us and captures us, because that's what happened to me. ``You want to write a letter to a death row inmate?" ``Yeah, sure. You know, I'll write a letter." It was 1982. We hadn't executed anybody in Louisiana since the 1960s. I don't have a clue that this guy is going to be executed in the electric chair two-and-a-half years from the time I'm going to start writing him a letter, April 5th, 1984, and that I'm going to be with him when he dies, and I'm going to be saying to him, ``Pat, look at my face when they do this thing, and I'll be the face of Christ for you, I'll be the face of love for you." But see, God's grace works in us step-by-step, like we have a little bitty penlight, not a great big old searchlight. God knows, if I'd had a great big old searchlight and knew what was going to happen to me at the end of this road, I never could have said yes to writing a letter to this man. But it all unfolded out of that human contact, and that's where the gospel happens, and that's where the power of things happens. It's through human contact. So when we're separated from humans, and we never meet them, that spark never happens, that passion can't happen, because we don't know any real people who are undergoing this, who are suffering this.

And so I write to the guy, and he writes back. And then I find out that he has no one to come and visit him. How many times had I meditated on the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25: ``I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was in prison and you came to me." And you

know, let's face it, we are all our own little spin doctors, with these Scriptures, if you know what I mean. Like ``I was in prison.'' Well, there are different ways that we are in prison, in ourselves, in our minds, psychologically, with alcohol. And there it is: ``I was in prison, and you came to me.'' But now I know somebody, and he has no one to come and see him, and he's been condemned to death, so I just say, ``Look, I'll come visit you.'' Not that I'm changing my whole ministry: I'm not changing anything. I'm staying on at the adult learning center, but I began to weave into my schedule a way to go visit this guy on death row, not knowing when I put my boat into those waters that the currents would began to kick up, and the next thing I know I'm going to be in white-water rapids, I'm going to be going through an execution with a human being and come out of an execution chamber changed forever. I didn't know that. But I go visit.

I find out that he has a brother in prison. First question about the legal system: two brothers are involved in a crime, and one got death, one got life. How did that happen? My daddy was an attorney. My daddy was a lawyer. Never dealt much with the legal stuff. You deal with the legal stuff when you need to deal with the legal stuff. You ever listen to legalese for longer than fifteen minutes? Lawyers talking? But now, here I am involved with him, and at first I didn't look into the case and the justice of it all. I really did presume, as many of the American public did when we started going down this road in 1976 with the *Gregg v. Georgia* of the U.S. Supreme Court, that it was OK to execute human beings. When we started going down this road, who didn't presume that the people were going to be guilty? We've got the best court system in the world. It would be a fluke if an innocent person was sent to death row. And I thought that too. Only from where we are now, eighty-eight innocent people have come off of death row. And of the five people that I've accompanied to execution, three of them, I believe, were innocent people. I'm writing that book now, about the innocent people I've accompanied, because we've got to expose this thing. But now 90 percent of the American public know that innocent people are going to death row along with the guilty.

And it's not as simple a thing as saying, ``Let's just give everybody the DNA tests in the beginning, and that way we'll have justice.'' It's much more complicated than that. The reason is because seeking the death penalty is a very selective process. Of 17,000 homicides in this

country every year, about 1.5 percent of the people who do those murders are selected to die. Can you guess who they are? Overwhelmingly the poor people. Overwhelmingly it's people who kill white people. Eight out of every ten people chosen for death are because they kill white people, whereas when people of color are killed, sometimes there's not even an investigation. Fifty percent of all homicide victims in this country are people of color. There's not the same press for ultimate punishment, sometimes not even a full-court press for investigation of the crime.

Some deaths in our society aren't easily accepted. We all know about Columbine, but what about the drive-by shootings that have been going on in black neighborhoods for the last ten years? Who knows about those? Poor people are slighted, and that's why we can't fix the death penalty, because inevitably more poor people are selected, and the reason that poor people and innocent people get on death row is the kind of defense they get. We're banking on justice happening by going into trial and having a full adversarial system. The prosecution presents evidence, scenario of crime, expert witnesses; the defense presents evidence, expert witnesses, scenario of crime. Both sides present, and then the jury is asked to be God, to go behind closed doors, twelve ordinary people. Now you go behind those closed doors and you decide, ``Does this human being live or does this human being die?" We are involved in things that are so beyond us. How do ordinary human beings decide these things? Well, the jury started to go by what they heard at the trial. And so just take the thirteen people in Illinois who came off of death row, Anthony Porter among them, the twelfth one freed off of death row. Not because the court system's working, because once the trial is finished and those judicial gates shut, you can't bring up into the court again about innocence. No court hears you. All those appeals you hear about are about certain constitutional issues, very rarefied and very selective points, not about whether or not you are innocent. So here's Anthony Porter, let's just hold up one, on death row in Illinois for twelve years. And he gets a stay of execution two days before execution, because they want to check out his mental competence. He had an IQ of 68. No question about innocence. Mental competence, because you are supposed to know that you are going to be executed: they don't want people going to be executed that don't know they're going to be

executed. That's how mentally competent you've got to be. So it's questionable. Ricky Gray in Arkansas saved the pie from his last meal to eat later. Duhhh. And they killed him anyway. They killed him anyway.

And so here's this guy. And journalism students take the case, journalism students from Northwestern. Maybe you heard about it. I met them at a dinner in New York. Amnesty International was having a dinner and they came up to the table, and said we're two of the journalism students that worked on the Anthony Porter case. I said, ``What did you do? Not even lawyers! You're journalism students! And you cracked open this whole case, and this man's been sitting on death row for twelve years." And this is what exposes how frail our system is, how fraught with error it is. ``We just went to the town and we started talking to people." You would hope the defense would have investigated, gone back to the scene of the crime, talked to people. Incredibly, within a few weeks the real murderer was exposed, the real murderer confessed, Anthony Porter was freed off of death row, reunited with his family after twelve years of sitting on death row. And then behind him, eighty-seven other people are telling stories like this. And some people say, ``Well, it just shows that the system is working." But you start digging into these stories, and you come to the Barry Sheck Innocence Project, where they get in there and they dig, and they go through the whole trial. They've been going through the appeals, and guess what they found? The DNA evidence shows that this man couldn't possibly be guilty. Eight people freed off of death row because of the Barry Sheck Innocence Project.

Some people, like Randall Dale Adams, in Texas, because a film director got interested in his story. He's on death row in Texas for the longest unsolved murder of a policeman in Dallas. We cannot discount social pressure in these cases. So you're the D.A. in Dallas, Texas, and you've got the longest unsolved murder of a policeman in Dallas, Texas, and the letters to the editor and the media people are calling for who did this, saying that we need to have justice for this police officer. And they pick up Randall Dale Adams, who's a drifter, and at his trial nobody was there to defend Randall Dale Adams. And they railroaded him right on through, and Randall Dale Adams is sitting on death row for killing this policeman. And here comes this film director, just kind of talking to people, meets him, starts

interviewing some people that Randy told him about, and goes, ``My God, this guy's innocent.'' That's the movie, *The Thin Blue Line*.

And that's what's begun to happen, a consciousness even among those who are in principle for the death penalty. Governor George Ryan of Illinois said, ``Look, in principle I'm for the death penalty.'' He calls himself a conservative Republican Democrat. But he said, ``I'm not for it like this.'' George Will, the political columnist, pundit, who called the death penalty noble: when Robert Lee Willie was executed in Louisiana, he said, ``It's a noble act of the community,'' to get retribution for the kind of death Robert Lee Willie did. Now he's stepping back from the death penalty, saying, ``But not like this.'' You see, we've been unaware, we've just been unaware. This has been going on around us, but who personally gets involved with the death penalty? Not many people. A few nuns in there, a few lawyers. Who gets involved? Well, thank God, we don't get people murdered in our family, most of us.

So I get into this whole thing and I go visit this guy and I go visit his brother. And I meet human beings. I mean, you know what blew me away? Other than the scariness of the prison, it was just looking through this heavy mesh screen, because toward the end when I was waiting for him, I was kind of nervous about him. I was thinking, ``It's one thing to write letters to somebody. I mean, everyone can be nice in a letter.'' And it's true, he wasn't asking me for anything, he was always grateful and all. But now, when I meet him face-to-face, what's he really like? Are we going to be able to have a normal conversation? I was blown away. I looked through this heavy mesh screen, and looked into the face of a human being. I couldn't believe how human his face was. And I'm glad he wanted to see me. He said, ``Sister, you came.'' He said, ``It's a two-and-a-half-hour drive. You drove all the way to see me.'' I met with nothing but appreciation from Patrick Sonnier. And if you see the film, *Dead Man Walking*, that line came from him, because Matthew Poncelet in the film is a composite character. And the line that came from Patrick Sonnier, who told me an hour before he died, ``Sister, I never knew love in my life. You're the first one ever to really love me. Thank you for loving me.'' And that's going to be the beginning of our journey together.

A couple of months go by. I was in the prison coalition office, and I didn't want to be naive. I know that he had done a crime, and I

wanted to know the other side. I wanted to know it. And I said, ``Didn't I see some background information on the Sonnier case?" And they go, ``Yeah, sure," and they bring out all these manila folders, legal folders, stacks of them, and I open up the one on the top of the heap, and looked down into the faces of two beautiful teenage kids, Loretta Bourque, eighteen years old, David LeBlanc, seventeen years old, in their prom outfits, on the front page of the *Daily Iberia*, November 5, 1977. And they're on the front page not because they got an award, but because they had been murdered. And there was the headline, ``Teenagers Found Murdered." And then I read the story. These two guys that I'm going to visit, including the man whose dignity I believed in, these two guys, Patrick and Eddie Sonnier, were rabbit hunting that night in a sugar cane field near St. Martinville. The two kids come to park after a football game on a Friday night. The brothers approach the car. They make like they're security guards. The kids are trespassing. Four other teenage couples came forward, when David and Loretta were killed, to say, ``They did that to us." And what we have is aggravated rape, because it leads to ``Hey, look, you kids are trespassing. Tell you what, if you have a little sex with us, we won't report you." The kids are coerced, they've got guns, they're scared, they're embarrassed. But this night, these two teenage kids are found lying face down with bullet holes in the backs of their heads, and I know I'm visiting the people who did this. Who doesn't feel outraged when we hear this? Beautiful innocent kids, just beginning their lives, just budding into life, and they are ripped out of life by this act.

The letters to the editor poured in to this little newspaper, which is in Acadiana, Louisiana, letters from New Iberia, Lafayette, St. Martinville, all these little towns where Cajun people live. Outrage of the community pouring in. ``What kind of animals, what kind of scum would do this? They deserve the death penalty." The outrage of the community, which of course I feel too. How could you not feel that? And then I think of their parents, and I make a terrible mistake. I had a good editor when I wrote *Dead Man Walking*. He said, ``No, don't just share the good parts, share your mistakes." This is a bad mistake, because when I think of the parents, and I think that I'm being spiritual adviser to the two people who kill their kids, and I try to picture myself meeting them, I think, ``Oh, they are going to be so angry, it might push them over the edge." And what if they say to me,

``Sister, you care about our son? You care about our daughter? Well, we want to see this SOB fried. We're going to sit on the front row, where Louisiana allows us to sit to watch this execution. Can you be there with us that night? Can you be for justice for our kids?" And that's why we feel this deep ambivalence on the death penalty, because we're so emotionally outraged over what people have done, we're holding on by our fingernails to our principles, and one of them was in me. I did not believe that the State of Louisiana should imitate this violence and kill these human beings who had killed these other people, I didn't believe in it. But I'm picturing myself in the presence of these people and their pain, and I hadn't lost anybody. They had been the ones to lose someone, and they'd be saying to me, ``Can you stand with us? Can you?" And I didn't know how to handle it. Plus I was scared.

My editor, when he looked at the first scripts where I kind of downplayed a little bit, you know, the being scared part, he said, ``Well, Helen, it was cowardice, wasn't it? I mean, you *were* scared, weren't you?" I said, ``Yeah, big time." He said, ``Well, write that. Tell people about you, but don't just take them on the peaks of the waves, where you do everything right." Boy, this is a big mistake. I didn't reach out to those victims' families. And I meet them at the worst possible time you want to meet victims' families. It was during the Pardon Board hearing before Patrick Sonnier was executed. And one brother got life, one brother got death. Patrick Sonnier was the one up for death. The last act in Louisiana is a Pardon Board hearing, which I've since found out is not about pardon at all: it's about people appointed by the governor who do whatever the governor wants them to do. But I thought then you really had a chance if you appealed for clemency.

So at the Pardon Board meeting: me, one lawyer, one psychiatrist, and all the rest of the people in the room wanting to see Patrick Sonnier dead, including the two victims' families, who were there with all of their friends. The Pardon Board goes behind closed doors to make their decision, we are outside. The Bourque family, who had lost their daughter in this murder: we were walking along the sidewalk and I met them first. They were so furious at me, they couldn't even see. They just avoided my eyes and they walked past me. And right behind them are Lloyd LeBlanc and his wife, whose son David was killed.

And I braced myself for their anger, because I had a supposition that all murder victims' families are for the death penalty.

Up they come, and Lloyd LeBlanc says, ``Sister, I'm Lloyd LeBlanc, this is my wife Eula. It was our son David was killed. Sister, *where have you been*? We haven't had anybody to talk to. You can't believe the pressure on us, with the death penalty, all this time you've been visiting Patrick Sonnier, and you didn't once come to see us too." And he had just spoken for the victims' families at the Pardon Board hearing, because Godfrey Bourque, whose daughter had been killed, said, ``I'm too emotional, Lloyd, I can't do it. You've got to speak for our families." Lloyd LeBlanc had just spoken to the Pardon Board. ``What is the wish of the victims' families?" He expressed it for both families: that the execution proceed. And now he is looking into my eyes, and he is saying to me, ``Sister, *where have you been*?" And I was so wrong. I said, ``Mr. LeBlanc, I'm so sorry. I didn't think you wanted to see me." He said, ``Sister," — he's Cajun, very direct, beautifully simple and to the point — he said to me, ``Sister, you don't know what I think, unless you're going to come sit down with me and find out what I think." I wanted to say, ``Mr. LeBlanc, I'm such a coward." He is the first that takes me by the hand and begins to bring me along the road of the murder victim's family. He gave me the grace. He's the hero. He's the graced one, not me. I did it wrong.

And so I begin to go and pray with this man in this little chapel in St. Martinville, where he keeps vigil on Friday mornings from four to five. And I pray with him. We say the Rosary together, Catholic prayer, and it's on Friday mornings so you can remember the sufferings of Jesus, meditate on his sufferings. And here I'm kneeling on the side of the man whose son went through the same sufferings, his own kind of crucifixion and death at the hands of people when he was an innocent victim. And I gradually begin to realize that I'm in the presence of a human being who is practicing the gospel of Jesus in a way I never had encountered before. When we pray, before we begin the Rosary, we state our intentions, and he says that of course he prayed for his son David, that he would be at peace with God; of course he prayed for his wife Eula, who he said cried for three years after the death of her son; of course he prayed for Vicky, their daughter, and their grandchildren; of course he prayed for the Bourque family, whose daughter had been killed and who were having

trouble with some of their other kids. But I was not ready, that he began then to pray for Patrick Sonnier, for every Sonnier, for Mrs. Sonnier, the mother, and all that she must be suffering.

Gradually the stories made their way back to me about this man. The sheriff's deputy knocked at his door that fateful Saturday morning, and said, ``Mr. LeBlanc, would you come with me to the morgue? We think we have someone who may be your son." And here he is going to the morgue, and pulling out the tray with his beautiful young son David, and he says, ``That prayer that rose to my lips was a prayer I learned as a child from my Catholic mother and father, from the Christian Brothers who taught me: `Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.' " And when he comes to the words, looking down at David's body, ``Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he says the words. He said, ``Sister, Jesus told us to forgive. I knew that's what I had to do." Not at once. It's never all at once, people would have to be mentally unstable. Everybody, all the victims' families I've known always go through the rage, the grief, the anger. And in a way I've come to discover, they need that anger. If they didn't have anger, they could commit suicide. They couldn't get out of bed in the morning: anger gets you up, anger gets you doing things.

And here's Lloyd LeBlanc, now, explaining to me the road of forgiveness. He says, ``People in our society, they seem to think forgiveness is weak, like you condone what they did. Condone what they did! Condone Eula's tears? Condone that we had to move David's grave from Thibodeau, Louisiana, to have it close to the house so that Eula can visit that grave every day of her life to make it through her day? Condone what they did? Every time David has a birthday, we lose him all over again. By now he'd be married, by now he'd be standing at our back door with little children around his knees, we lose him over and over again." He's the hero of the book, *Dead Man Walking*, and the last lines are about him. Here are the last lines of the book: ``And forgiveness was never going to be easy, and each day it must be prayed for and struggled for, and won." And I'm in the presence of a man who is doing it. ``Condone?" he said. ``It doesn't mean condone. But I tell you this. If I let that hatred and I let that bitterness get a hold of me, it was going to kill me, and I had to be there for Eula and for Vicky and for my grand-kids." It was the power

of love in him that did not let that power of evil overtake him. So he set his face to go down the road. He said Jesus told us to forgive. And the grace of God met him on that road.

One of the things that comes out in the opera, as I told you, is the character played by Frederica von Stade, based on the mother of Joe de Rocher, the death row inmate. Mrs. Sonnier, who lived in this town, and her sons had been the ones involved in this murder. Can you imagine the hatred of the community and the anger and the rage of the community coming down on that whole family, not just the one on death row? Mrs. Sonnier wouldn't even go into the town to do grocery shopping, because she could overhear people saying, ``There's that white trash mother. It's her two sons who killed the Bourque child and the LeBlanc child." She became like a little hermit. She cut off her phone, she unplugged her TV, she didn't go out. And we forget, or we're just not attentive to her every experience: there are two families here that are experiencing this: the family whose loved one was killed by an individual, and the other one whose loved one is about to be killed by the state.

One afternoon, Mrs. Sonnier's doorbell rang, and she went to the front door, and stood there. She had people cutting up dead cats and throwing them on her front porch. Every morning, she'd wake up and there's another dead cat, there's another dead animal. And so she looked out before she went to see who was at the front door, and lo and behold, who's standing there, Lloyd LeBlanc with a basket of fruit. She opens the door for him, and he says, ``Mrs. Sonnier, may I come in?" She says, ``Yes," and he comes in. He says, ``I brought you this fruit." He says, ``Look, I just want to say that those of us who are parents, we never really know what our kids might do, and I don't hold you responsible for what your boys did to our son." That's Lloyd LeBlanc.

After him, I go on to meet many people. I just gave talks with Bud Welch, right here in Bridgeport, whose daughter Julie was the last one dug out of the Oklahoma City bombing rubble. And this man talks about his incredible journey, wanting to take Timothy McVeigh in his bare hands and kill him. He said he understood why when they brought Timothy McVeigh into trial, they had a bulletproof vest on him, because if he could have got his hands on a gun, he'd have been waiting for him and he'd have taken him out right there. He didn't even

see why there had to be a trial, because the rage and the anger was so great. And then his own incredible journey of turning on the car radio, five months afterwards, and remembering this conversation with Julie, his daughter, who spoke four languages, who was a beautiful girl, who was in the American building that morning because she was helping some Mexican-American person translating from Spanish to English to get his Social Security straight. He remembers being in the car with Julie, and they had the car radio on, and it was about an execution in Texas, and Julie had said to him, ``That's about nothing but vengeance," and he realized Julie would not want the execution of Timothy McVeigh, and neither could he.

I've also met victims' families on the other side, and who doesn't understand? Here they've had their child killed, and here's the district attorney sitting in there with them, saying ``We're going to seek the death penalty for the death of your child." It's a way of showing status, how much we value the life of your child. Like to seek a lesser punishment looks like you don't really value it. And so you can get caught up in it very easily. Yes, indeed, we're going to seek the death penalty, and here was a family, the Harveys, whose daughter had been brutally killed by this man Robert Willie, the second person I accompanied on death row, with another man, Joseph Vaccaro. I remember seeing these people with their own press conference a week before the execution saying they couldn't wait to see him die. Who didn't understand that pain was speaking in every word? You could see their loss, you could see their grief, you could see their outrage, calling for the death of Robert Lee Willie, and Vernon Harvey, the stepfather, saying ``I wish they'd let me pull the switch. I want to see smoke flying off his body." And then they're there at the execution, and I tell this story too in the book, *Dead Man Walking*: what I always remember was afterwards. There are all the TV cameras. It was the first time the state allowed a victim's family to be present at an execution. It was in 1984. And so of course all the reporters were asking, ``How do you feel now, Mr. and Mrs. Harvey? What's it like for you now? Are you satisfied? What did it do for you?" And to hear Vernon Harvey say, ``Anybody got any whiskey? Anybody want to dance? We got the SOB." And then to add, ``You know what? The SOB died too quick. I hope he burns in hell." And at every execution, there they are at the gates of the prison, with their aluminum fold-out

chairs and a little water cooler, watching another murderer getting his due, and justice for the victim's family, and they couldn't break out of it. Even if they could watch Robert Willie die every week, the fact is, that chair was empty at the dining room table. And that's the tragedy, and that's the horror, and that's the outrage, when people are taken from us by violence: there *is* no way to replace them. We cannot put somebody else in the empty chair.

That's the genius of the memorial that they have at Oklahoma City. For the 168 people who were killed in that bomb explosion that day, there's the sculptures, 168 empty chairs — the chairs of the children are little bitty chairs — because there *is* no replacing a human life that has been taken. But the road we've been going down as a society is to say to only a select number of families, 1.5 percent as I mentioned, ``OK, we're going to give you justice, we're going to give you closure." And what happens to these families when they have the death penalty? They wait, they go through the trial. And at the time they can't express any emotion. The prosecutor pulls them in before they go into the courtroom and says, ``No emotion, because they'll call it a mistrial." So they are forced to sit there and listen to the terrible details of what happened to their loved one, and they can't show any emotion. And then when the person gets the death penalty, then they begin to wait. And every time there's a change in the legal status of the case, the media call them up: ``What do you think? He got another stay of execution, what do you think?" The media have access to them, and their grief is made public, splayed out in public.

And you know what I think happened to the Harveys? Once they declared they were for the death penalty publicly, how do they get out from under that without looking like they were betraying faith? And people like Bud Welch, who choose to go down the road of forgiveness, sometimes he says he has people say to him, ``Well, didn't you love Julie? Didn't you love your child? Here society is offering you the ultimate punishment and you're not going for it? Something wrong with you?" Is this the only road we know to go down as a society? All the human victims' families, these 1.5 to 2 percent of people that we give this so-called ``justice" to out of all these homicides? Or are we further wounding them, or giving them the false illusion, the illusion that they will be healed by watching the person die who killed their loved one? Is this all we know to do? Are we not

multiplying victims' families? Usually you hear about the victims' families that go and get to sit in a room and watch the person die. Sometimes we hear the statements they make afterwards, like ``All right, we finally got him, now we can move on," or whatever they say. Did you know that in Texas, where there's been over 144 of these executions, there is another room without even a chair in it, where the mother of the one to be executed can stand while she watches her child get killed by the state? Is this the only road? Of course it's not the only road. And tomorrow morning, at 9:00, when the people of Connecticut are ready, we can change this thing. And there's a growing awareness in the country that we don't have to keep doing this. We can go down a life road, we don't have to keep going down a death road.

How do we even make a list of who deserves to die? For whose death will we demand the death penalty? Look what happens when we even try as a society to make a list. OK, policemen. New Hampshire has the most restrictive laws. I don't know what Connecticut has. I know you haven't been really keen on executing people in this state, and I think you're close. You can work with your legislature, you can push it over the edge and be done with it. OK, policemen. Yes, right, everybody agrees with that. Policemen risk their lives. Anybody that shoots a policeman. Well, then suppose you are having your hearing and a woman comes, and she says, ``My husband was a firefighter. He was going up a ladder to save somebody in a burning building, and a sniper killed him. Are you saying we don't have the death penalty for my husband, who was a public servant, who was killed in the line of duty, just because he's not a policeman? Isn't he worthy of the death penalty?" And look what happens when we go through the list: the death penalty for anybody that kills a child, for example. You have to define child. Twelve or younger. And here come these parents before you, they talk about their son Paul, who was the light of their lives. And then they say to you, ``But he happened to be fourteen years old when he was killed. He's not legally a child, but are you saying our son Paul isn't worth the death penalty?" And you just start going through it. All human life is precious, and invaluable, and we can't say, ``Well, for the lives of *these* people we'll seek the death penalty but not for the lives of these other people."

And, in fact, when we go to practice it, as I said before, it depends on whether or not you're white or you're a person of color or you're a

homeless person or you're a suburban housewife or you're a judge. *Nobody* should be killed. We should not involve ourselves as a society in going down the sorry road, and this most expensive road. I mean expensive morally, but I mean financially too. Where is New York five years after Governor Pataki ran on a campaign to bring the death penalty back to New York, where are they today? Five years later, they have spent $80 million, they've been through two hundred possible capital cases, and they've got five trophies. And I use that word designedly, because it's nothing but symbols. Five people they've condemned to death, and that's what they've done in New York over five years to bring the death penalty back. It's always going to be selective. We have to clean up the soil from the very roots, to clean up the racism and the way we treat poor people over against people with resources who can get good lawyers: we've got no way of doing this thing ever. And then to be God, to decide *you* have lived long enough, you have done a crime, and you will never be transformed or redeemed, and so we're going to kill you now: who knows that? Who knows when the point of human transformation stops in human beings, and that we can kill them?

One hundred and eight other countries in the world have now abolished the death penalty. We are part of the recalcitrant minority now holding onto the death penalty. I witnessed this in Geneva, with the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, and watched as country after country was getting up to declare a moratorium on the death penalty, including the countries of the former Soviet Union, including Turkey, who refused to execute a Turkish rebel, a Kurdish rebel, known as the key terrorist in the country, because they know their future is aligned with Europe and the European Union has a high bar of human rights, which is that they are not going to torture and execute their citizens. You can watch people line up to come to the microphone. You can see the wave breaking on the shore right in front of you, and it has a name: human rights. You see the other countries of the world adopting it. And here's the United States, as they say in prison, stuck out. But just for now. It's all now a movement, and you can sense it, and it's palpable.

And on December 18, we're going to present close to three million signatures to Kofi Annan of the United Nations, of people around the world and in the United States who have signed this

petition, calling for a moratorium on the death penalty. And see, a moratorium is a graceful way out. It doesn't mean we're not going to work for abolition. Maybe in Connecticut, with your legislature, you can just go for outright abolition. You may be ready to do that. Moratorium, though, first, like Governor George Ryan did in Illinois: stop killing people. He said, ``I'm troubled by what we're doing here. We can't be executing the innocent along with the guilty." A moratorium is not a strong hard position, stating in principle that we can never torture and execute a person, but strong enough to stop the killing. And do you know that 80 percent of the people in Illinois backed up Governor Ryan when he did this? He got 80 percent support from the people of his state when he declared a moratorium on the death penalty in Illinois.

Now George W. Bush said, ``Well, we don't have any innocent people on death row in Texas." Right. Who doesn't have innocent people? Everyone has the same system, and you know innocent people are in there along with the guilty. And I urge you, if you know where you are on this issue — and I respect that maybe some of you may be sorting it out, not sure where you stand, feeling that ambivalence, and you've got to sort it out, I respect that — if you know where you are on this issue, I urge you not to leave this room without signing that petition, and taking some blank ones with you to get other signatures. And you can sign online. They're getting 2,500 signatures a week coming in online. Sixty-three percent of the American public now say they support a moratorium on the death penalty in the United States. It's part of a wave, it's part of a movement of consciousness that's broken. Once this wave of consciousness comes, then we move to a new day. And it's beginning to happen right now. You can sign online at www.moratorium2000.org. I want to urge you to do that, and to give the names of other people too so that we can swell up these numbers, so that we can build the wave, so that we can end this thing.

In the end, I accompanied Patrick Sonnier. He was the first. I didn't dream there would be four others. I accompanied this man to the electric chair. It was the most surreal experience I ever had in my life in that death house, because it looks like life all around you: the tiles are polished, the coffee pots percolating, little birds in the eaves of the windows chirping, people coming in and out of the door, secretaries typing. What is the secretary typing? Well, she's typing up

the forms the witnesses are going to sign after the execution tonight. And Patrick Sonnier waiting behind this mesh, heavy steel door, can hear the typing, hear the coffee pot, hear the people coming in, see the lights dim as the electrician comes in to test the electric chair, make sure the juice is working, and all the lights dim. Watching the process for his death happening all around him. And I kept feeling like I was in a hospital. All the protocol, people coming in, prison psychiatrists: ``How are you doing, Sonnier? You want a Valium? You want anything?" They'll do anything, as long as people are calm. They don't want any emotion. They don't even let radios or music be brought to the death house, lest the music stir emotions. They want no emotions, on *either* side. And when the witnesses sign, they are instructed not to express any emotions. That cleaning up of the death penalty, making it antiseptic, making it clean, no emotions: we almost have it down to a fine art. Almost.

Then it was midnight, and they came for him. I had known him for two-and-a-half years, and we had prayed together. When you read *Dead Man Walking*, you'll see he was a man, he truly was remorseful for what had happened. You'll have to read the whole story. He got the death penalty, his brother got life, and it was his brother who had killed those kids. He wasn't innocent. Patrick Sonnier wasn't innocent. He had engaged in aggravated rape, he had done terrible things. First-degree murder? He wasn't guilty of first-degree murder, but he never claimed innocence. I think he felt as guilty as if he had pulled that trigger himself, because he was always the one that was supposed to keep Eddie calm. Eddie was volatile, and Eddie had a gun in his hands that night. Evidently, something happened. At one point David LeBlanc, not realizing what a volatile person he was, had said to him, ``Put down that gun, and I'll show you who's a man," and Eddie told me, he said, ``I just started firing." Because his flashpoint was ``Don't look down on me because I'm poor." That was his flashpoint. That doesn't excuse Eddie Sonnier. He took the life of two innocent teenage kids that night, and it all happened in a very emotional moment, and he shot and he killed both of them. And here we have one brother going to death, one brother in life.

One of the moments I'll never forget is after Pat was executed, the warden let Eddie Sonnier come to the funeral of his brother. And when he walked into that funeral home, surrounded by those guards,

and walked up to that coffin and looked down at Pat in that coffin, he said ``Now three people are dead because of me." How Eddie didn't go crazy! I know how he didn't go crazy: because before he died, Patrick Sonnier wrote him a note which Eddie read every night before he went to bed for three years: ``Dear brother, Don't worry about me. God is going to take care of me. But Eddie, you've got to control your temper. They are going to kill you in this place if you don't control your temper." And he signed it, ``Your loving brother Pat." I accompany that brother Eddie. I go to see him. He's really like my brother. Our family is like his family. He's serving two life sentences. He's never going to walk out of prison. And you've got to know this. People say, ``Yeah, if we don't execute them, they're going to get out in a few years and kill again." Not anymore in this country. Most state legislatures have tightened up sentencing for first-degree felony murder. People are not walking out of prison who get sentenced under that. So the question of safety is not the question. We can be safe. Retribution is another question. Eddie Sonnier works in the welding shop, and hasn't had a disciplinary write-up in over ten years. He has a family now. He has people who love them. I've watched him settle. I've watched him learn love, how to take care of the older man in the dorm they call ``Pops." When he gets a little money in his account, he's capable of love, he's capable of being a human being. What if we had killed him too?

And then to be with Pat. He had said to me, ``Look, Sister, you can't be there at the end because it could scar you to watch this, because it's electrocution." All I knew was that there was no way this man was going to die alone. I said ``No, Pat, whatever it does to me, God's grace, and I have a good loving community, I have a good family, even if I'm hurt, even if I'm scarred, I'm going to make it, Pat. You are not going to die alone." And I said, ``You look at me, you look at me, Pat, when they do this." And I was there for him. I carry his face inside of me, and the four other people I've accompanied to execution. But I carry Lloyd LeBlanc's face too, and the other murder victims' families who I have met, so many of them saying after the funeral, ``Nobody came to see us. People don't know what to do with our pain. They stay away from us." And those of us who belong to faith communities, we've got to reach out our arms on both arms of this cross and embrace both, including our victims' families, including

them, putting our arms around them and having prayer services of healing, and bringing them into the arms of the community, accompanying them through their grief and their sorrow and their rage. Both sides. We have a symbol of the cross of Christians. Do you know it took four hundred years for the followers of Jesus to use this as a symbol? Because the shame of the cross and execution was so terrible that they couldn't bring themselves to wear it around their necks or to use it as a symbol. They use the fish, they use the shepherd: four hundred years it took for the community of believers in Jesus to appropriate this as a sign of salvation, because it's a sign of execution. And it has two arms on it.

The death penalty challenges us, and it's not easy to be Christian, because we have the culture that sanctifies vengeance, or retribution. It says, ``Make my day," and that's a good thing. We don't have to go that route. People quote the Bible to support the death penalty just like people used to quote the Bible to support slavery and the way they used to quote the Bible when they were having a fierce debate in this country about whether or not they could let women vote. Let women vote? Emotional, hysterical women are going into the voting booth? People pull out the Adam and Eve story: ``Look what Eve did in the garden. We're going to trust women to vote?" People have been pulling out the Bible to quote it selectively every time there's been a big moral issue in this country, and they do it on the death penalty too.

You know the favorite? You can tell me: we can do it in a chorus. What's a quote from the Bible you most often hear from people who support the death penalty? ``An eye for an eye." How often is that said in Scripture? Three times. And the third time is by Jesus, who said, ``You've heard it said an eye for an eye. But I say to you, don't even let the sun go down on your anger." This pushes into our hearts that we are never to return hurt for hurt, pain for pain, but that love is the strongest force in the world. And we believe that. Or do we see love as weak, and do we see vengeance as strong? Remember the words of Lloyd LeBlanc, saying, ``People think forgiveness is weak." He said, ``Forgiveness isn't weak. It's a stronger love inside you that won't let that evil overcome you." How many times is mercy talked about in the Bible? Over two thousand.

But here's what I've discovered, and it's a real human thing: when we get into debate with each other, who doesn't want to quote God? I

mean, excuse me! When we're having this big debate and I want to settle it, I say: ``As God said, who agrees with me." And so we can go into the Bible and we can quote it selectively. We can fish out all the parts. The Hebrew, the Old Testament, is filled with killing, coming from the mouth of God. We've got primitive societies: they had thirty-seven different crimes for which you could get the death penalty in the Old Testament. And you can either hang or strangle people to death, stone them to death, throw them in the river, or burn them to death. And it's all coming from the mouth of God. But they didn't have prisons, they didn't have alternatives: punishments were harsh and swift. You could get the death penalty not only for murder but for adultery. Do we want to do that? How are we going to do that?

Sometimes those radio callers, when they call in, and say, ``Well, as it says in the Book of Exodus, those that shed blood shall have their blood shed too." I say, ``Yeah? Well, what about adultery?" Pause. And you just start ticking off, look at all the crimes: sassing the priest; touching sacred objects in the temple; not keeping holy the sabbath. For homosexuality you get the death penalty; for having sex with an animal. The animal got the death penalty too. All of those crimes are in there. Do we want to do that? But you see a progression in the Scriptures. Remember, the Bible was written over 2,000 years. It's people's religious experience. By the time you come to the later prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, more and more, the face of God begins to be revealed as a God of compassion, and by the time you get to the Gospels, by the time you get to Jesus, it's pushed over the edge.

As Jesus was executed, he said, ``Father, forgive them," told us not to have any enemies, to love your enemy, never to return hate to them. Jesus pushes us, pushes us, pushes us. And it's so easy to make Jesus kind of conform: ``Well, Jesus didn't mean that literally. Later, when we have a better society which is less violent, we can afford the luxury of compassion. Meanwhile now we have to be tough on crime, we've got to fry these people." Like Christianity is for later. It's for *now*, and it's a challenge, and I invite you to the fight.