

Artists against the Death Penalty

Performance monologue.

The first time? Yes, I remember the first time. Father Conrad had been taken ill and so I had to take his place. Until then, I had only dealt with short-term prisoners and their families – helping where I could to give them the strength to stay together, to help the wives with the children, so many of whom couldn't understand, and so became ... but yes, the first time!

I had no time to prepare – I did not know the man, only that his last appeal had been turned down and that he was to be executed in a week's time – seven days – possibly the longest seven days of my life.

I had never been to that part of the prison before - the condemned calls - not that it was the worst part. They keep that for the really troublesome prisoners and the mentally disturbed. But so many of them. In cages stacked in the center of a huge area with the guards patrolling the periphery with machine guns. The light, what there is of it, filters in through dirty windows. The first time I went to visit him, many of the cells were empty because the prisoners were in the exercise yards. Not all of them though. I found out later that many of them had given up going the exercise yard because of the chimney.. On one side of the yard is the execution cell, topped by the large chimney where they vent the gas after the execution. For many of them the sight of that chimney was too much for them to handle, looming over them, a constant reminder of their fate. So they don't exercise any more.

I saw him first through the grill, lying on his bed, stripped to his underwear. It was hot, very hot and the air did not move. He looked pale, like a ghost already. There was very little else in the cell. The prisoners can buy radios or televisions if they have access to any money. If not, there is just the cell. Four feet by ten feet with a metal platform for a bed and a thin mattress on top of it. Nothing sharp, nothing that could be used as a weapon - not against the warders, but against themselves. Most of the condemned men have been there for years. The man I had come to see had been waiting for over ten years. It had taken him at least five before he had managed to find a lawyer to handle his appeal, I found out later. Some of the prisoners wait even longer - many are still waiting. For some, it all becomes more than they can handle - they are condemned to die -sometime - and although the process may take more than a decade to work through the system, their lives continue as if it were to take place the next day. And for some of the prisoners, despair takes over and they seek ways to - accelerate the process - and the resourceful can always find ways - even down to provoking the guards in the exercise yard - not all the pockmarks on the walls came from warning shots.

At the door to the cell, the guard shouted an instruction and someone, somewhere, pushed a button and opened the cell door - is hissed on its hydraulics and then shut behind me with a heavy finality.

He looked at me - even focused on me for a moment - then his gaze moved on - through and past me.

I remember how difficult it was - that first time - he never spoke to me - he only occasionally glanced at me. I talked to him - now I cannot even recall what I said. Eventually I ran out of words - he didn't seem to notice. When the guard indicated that I should go, he didn't acknowledge my leaving - and all I could feel was relief.

And so it continued for three days. I would arrive at his cell - he would ignore me - I would talk to him - he would ignore me - I would leave - he would ignore me. I wondered how I could reach him through the last few days of his life so that I could - what? - I didn't know - the weight of that finality seemed to silence us both. I remember one of the guards told me not to worry - that I should be grateful the man was calm. I almost asked him what he meant - but at that time, I - feared the answer.

By the fourth day, I could see a change. His eyes, till then still and fixed had begun to flicker restlessly about the space he inhabited - never resting on any one place for long - seeking - I don't know what. He seemed to acknowledge that I was speaking but showed no awareness of what I was saying.

It seemed so unreal - of course I had sat vigil at a death bed before, but then - death had been a form of release - of pain, of weariness - a moving on. But this man was no older than I and no matter what he had done we, all of us, we had held his moment of death over him for more than ten years - relentlessly - and had kept him in a cage for all that time - like an animal - no we do not even keep animals like that. Even that law to which we cleave distinguishes levels of cruelty - between those who kill in the heat of passion and those who plan and scheme - but nowhere is there a provision of punishment for keeping a human being in a featureless steel room for more than a decade before taking their life. All this came to me that day as I watched his face - emotions flickering across it - none lasting more than a few seconds.

On the next day, the day before he was due to be executed - I approached his cell with some trepidation. One of the guards had told me that the man was moving about - pacing. He had begun to hit the walls of his cell the previous night. They had tranquilized him somewhat I was told but he was still - unpredictable was the word he used.

When I entered the cell, for the first time the man was standing - he turned and stared at me with an intensity that was difficult to bear. I spoke to him - the usual words and his gaze flickered past me - and he began to move erratically about the cell - occasionally colliding with the bed not stopping quite in time before he hit the walls. He even collided with me - the first time, my heart raced but he acknowledged my presence no more than he had noticed the walls or the bed. When the guard announced that I must leave, the man turned and spoke to me for the first time. At the sound of his voice, I froze. After a long moment when we stared at each other he repeated the question that must have heard but could not recall. "Why are you here" and I was lost for words - and I said - where I snatched the cliché from I do not know - I said "for the sake of your soul, my son" he stared at me, then his eyes moved over my shoulder to the door and the guard who stood there and he said "mine?, or theirs?" and then he continued his relentless movement round the room.

Mine , or theirs!

Those words stayed with me all that night - and longer.

The next day I was to accompany the prisoner on his last walk. They warned me that during the night he had become worse and they had had to tranquilize him further. When I saw him I could see that he was already beyond any need for me. His eyes were far away - who knows if he saw anything - or even knew what was happening any more.

The rest was simple uncomplicated - an anti-climax. He was strapped into the chair, the electrolyte solution and the electrodes applied, and, at the appointed time, his life was taken from him. As his remains were removed I looked at the faces of those around me. The appointed officials mandated to monitor the event, to ensure that all was done according to the law ... and those words I had heard the day before sounded out again “mine, or theirs” As I turned to leave, the governor of the prison took my hand briefly and turned to go. “Mine or theirs”

So long ago - that first time. It becomes easier with time only, I think, because I know better what is expected of me.

But still I cannot answer the question - “Mine, or theirs”

The events are horrific, no matter how you look at them, but that is not the real reason why capital punishment must end. It's really much more selfish
It was best put by an English preacher nearly 400 years ago.

In his Devotion upon emergent occasions #17, John Donne wrote

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind: And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

And so, when the plunger descends in the syringe, or the gas billows into the room, or the current surges through the chair; when the rope tightens with a snap or the rifles crack at dawn and the prisoner dies, a part of each of us, of our humanity of our essential civilization, dies also.

Copyright Angus Hepburn 2009

Please contact for permission to use text for performance or distribution.