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## Capital Punishment: The Humanistic and Moral Issues Address.

Helen Prejean

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# ST. MARY'S LAW JOURNAL

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## ADDRESS

### CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: THE HUMANISTIC AND MORAL ISSUES

#### THE SIXTH ANNUAL DEAN'S LECTURE, ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW\*

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN, C.S.J.\*\*

I am really pleased to be here with you. We are Catholics together. I want to tell you a story today because I think I am more of a storyteller than a lecturer. I guess everyone is a storyteller in Louisiana.

Many of you are in law school. My daddy was a lawyer and I have come to learn a lot about the law, especially as it affects poor

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\* To preserve the style of the speaker, this address has been published in essentially the same form in which it was given.

\*\* Helen Prejean, C.S.J., is a writer, lecturer, and community organizer who was born in Baton Rouge and has lived and worked in Louisiana all of her life. She has lectured extensively on the subject of capital punishment and has appeared on *ABC World News Tonight*, *60 Minutes*, BBC World Service radio, and an NBC special series on the death penalty. Her articles have appeared in publications including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *St. Anthony Messenger*. She is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille.

people. I have made some amazing discoveries that I want to share with you.

First, I would like to tell you a little about the death penalty. I believe that executions boil down to a way for state legislatures to get political points by showing that they are tough on crime—by advocating the death penalty. Ultimately, however, executions boil down to twelve people whose job it is to take a man from his cell in the middle of the night and walk him across one hundred feet of polished tile floor to the death house, where he is strapped to a chair and killed.

Killing people with abstract rhetoric is easy. Killing people in the concrete is difficult. I have found that the death penalty issue has to do with justice. What makes injustice possible? What makes killing people in electric chairs possible? What about the common debate you hear now about welfare reform? Most people who have these discussions have never looked into the eyes or heard the stories of those who struggle directly with the issues. In the abstract, we can do anything to each other.

I decided to write my book, *Dead Man Walking*,<sup>1</sup> because the only way that I knew how to bring people close to the killing was to write about my experiences. People ask me why I as a nun, am involved with death-row inmates and how I got involved with all of this. Sometimes I tell them, “Well, you know, it is the *upward* mobility in the gospel. You know whom Jesus got involved with, right? Read the gospel and you will see to whom He reached out and whom Jesus was with.”

I began the journey that led to the writing of my book by getting to know the poor. During the whole first part of my religious life, I was never in direct contact with poor people. I brought my canned goods at Thanksgiving like everyone else to send in baskets to the poor, but there was never direct contact. In 1980, the sisters and I met a wonderful sister, Sister Marie Augusta Neal, who truly inspired me to find my way to the poor. We had a conference with her for three days in Terre Haute, Indiana. During this time, I

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1. SISTER HELEN PREJEAN, *DEAD MAN WALKING* (1993). Sister Prejean's book, *Dead Man Walking*, is being made into a motion picture that will star Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Susan Sarandon will play Sister Helen Prejean, and Sean Penn will play a death row inmate. The movie is scheduled for release at the box office in early January 1996.

guess the water rose up in the cup. There are moments of grace in our lives when things unfold for us and we are ready for another level. Sister Neal spoke to us about the poor—the move for justice—and inflamed my soul. I was never the same after I left that conference. Something was ready in me, and when I left there, I knew that I had to start finding my way to the poor because I had never met them.

I started by making my way into soup kitchens. Then I made my way into the St. Thomas Housing Project, an inner-city housing project in New Orleans. I lived there among the people. I was standing on the shoulders of religious women like Sister Lory Schaff, who began this work in 1969 and had been doing it long before I arrived at the projects. The first time I walked through those projects, the word “sister” never sounded sweeter in my ears. The people in the projects presume that any white person they see walking through the projects is a sister. Brother Joe Porter has a beard and they even called him “sister” for the first three weeks.

So, there I was in the St. Thomas Housing Project working in an adult learning center for high-school dropouts. What that experience did for me! It made me realize all of the protections, cushions, and resources that I had been given. Many of the men who came into the adult learning center had dropped out of school before the ninth grade. It was a miracle if the girls had not become pregnant and dropped out of school by the tenth grade. When they resolve to get their high-school diplomas, they do not realize how long the road will be. They have high expectations when they take the placement test. Some go as far as the eleventh grade, but are reading at a third-grade level. They just do not realize how much they do not know. It is a long, hard road. People drop out, come back, drop out, and come back again.

The people in the projects have so many things going on in their lives—they already have children, they must go to charity hospitals for care, and sometimes there is trouble with the law. I thought, My God! I went to St. Joseph’s Academy and had a place to study in my bedroom. I had a father and mother who taught me to value education. I could be focused and I could learn. I then realized how much the children in the projects have to deal with just to go to school.

It is so different when you go down that road with them and see all of the things that they struggle against. You see these kids and

then you see the drug dealers coming into the neighborhood. The drug dealers are the ones with the gold chains and the nice cars. These kids know that if they get a job at McDonald's, their pay will be taken off their mother's welfare check, which is already just one-third of the poverty level in the United States. Yet, the endless rhetoric about realizing the great American dream persists—come on kids, you can do anything; you can be the president of the United States; you can be a bank president if you want. I would encounter the same things on death row that I encountered at the projects, except that death row illustrates a more dramatic version of the rhetoric.

My contact with death-row inmates began while I was working at the projects. The St. Thomas Housing Project was right around the corner from the office of the Louisiana Prison Coalition, where a friend of mine, Chava Colon, worked. He asked me one day if I wanted to be a pen pal to someone on death row. I said, "Sure." I knew that any inmate on death row in Louisiana would be poor, and I was there to serve the poor. Chava Colon wrote down the inmate's name, prison number, and address. His name was Patrick Sonnier and his address read: "Death Row, Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, Louisiana."

Everybody in Louisiana calls our prison Angola. The prison is made up of 18,000 acres that were once three cotton plantations. The name Angola is a reminder of the slaves from Angola, Africa who once worked these plantations. At the prison, there are two columns of men walking out to the fields, with an armed guard on horseback in front of them, and an armed guard on horseback behind them. The men march out to do their work in the fields. Most of them are black, and very few are educated beyond a fifth-grade level. You begin to wonder how much has really changed. The next time you read the Thirteenth Amendment,<sup>2</sup> which abolished slavery, notice the fine print. Even on the books, slavery has not been abolished for those who are incarcerated in the United States of America.

So, I had this name on an envelope and I brought it back to the sisters that night. As we sat at the table having supper, I said, "I think I am going to start writing this guy on death row." Everyone

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2. U.S. CONST. amend. XIII.

thought that I should. I sat down to write the letter. It was the first time I had ever written such a letter, but I was still writing to a human being and giving the core of the gospel of Jesus. I wrote, "I just want to be your friend. I care about your life, and I believe you have dignity and value. No matter what you have done, I would like to be your pen pal." I had been told that I could send some pictures, so I sent a picture of Christ on the cross, and a picture of myself. The only picture I had of myself was a picture of me on a little pony out in the woods. I made a little joke, telling him that I was the one with the two legs. I also sent him a pretty picture of the blue, swirling waters of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. A few days later, I got a package from Angola which said that I failed to abide by one of the prison rules and the prison was sending back two of the pictures because they were too big. So back came Jesus, and back came the picture of the waters of Bay St. Louis, but he got the picture of me on the pony. That was the beginning of my education on prison rules.

Shortly thereafter, Patrick's first letter came. I have committed his letter to memory. He wrote, "Dear Sister Helen, I couldn't believe it when the guard stopped by my cell and said, 'Hey, Sonnier, we have a letter for you,' because I knew I wasn't writing to anybody. You see, I figured that they were going to kill me and that it would be better to go it alone. After all, why be close to anybody if you know you are going to die?" His words echoed an ongoing dilemma for people on death row. Should the possibility of friendship with another inmate on death row emerge, you know that you may ultimately watch the inmate walk down to the end of the tier and through the green door to be killed. Anyway, Patrick said he was lonely and that he would like to be my pen pal. Patrick told me about life in a six-foot by eight-and-one-half-foot cell where the inmates are confined twenty-three out of twenty-four hours per day. They are let out for one hour to take a shower or visit with other people on the tier. Three hours per week they can go into a yard for solitary exercise, and they are never allowed in a group.

One time I asked him what the hardest thing was about being on death row. He replied, "I never touch anyone." He said that one time a guard let him hug his little girl. In one of his last requests before they took him out to be executed, he asked, in the voice of a little boy, "Warden, can I ask you one question? As we go, can Sister Helen touch my arm?" The warden nodded his head and

that was the only time I ever touched Patrick. I put my hand upon his shoulder and we walked together. I wanted to touch him. With the death penalty we have created the great untouchables. They are not humans like us. They do not learn the way we do. They are incorrigible. They are going to kill again. The rhetoric goes on and on. I guarantee that if you were to sit at a table with eight death-row inmates, you would not really know their identities unless they told you the stories of their lives. You would be amazed at how human these people are, how real they are, and what stories they have to tell.

One of the strange things about the O.J. Simpson trial, of the many things to comment on, is that the prosecution decided not to pursue the death penalty. Everyone knows O.J. Simpson; everyone has seen his picture in the airport. He is one of us. It is hard to kill someone you know, someone human like yourself. O.J. Simpson is the only African-American man I know of who has been on trial for killing two white people and who has had an almost all-black jury. Dobie, the man I am now visiting on death row in Louisiana, is a black man. Dobie was accused of stabbing a white woman to death in her bathroom. Dobie had an all-white jury and was sentenced to death with almost no physical evidence against him. These convictions are common and race plays a part in them. The key part that race plays, of course, is in who got killed. When you identify with the victim, you want to see the killer receive the ultimate punishment.

Consider the 3,000 people on death row in this country who have been caught in the net that we call the death penalty. Consider the people who are dragged into the net and ask yourself why eighty-five percent of them have victims who are white. Overwhelmingly, they are on death row because they killed white people. Yet, one-half of all of the homicide victims in this country are people of color. No pure criterion is applied in determining who goes to death row.

We have about forty women who belong to a support group for the family and friends of murder victims in New Orleans. The group is called "Survive." The district attorney's office in New Orleans has failed to seek the death penalty in any of the cases of concern to the members of Survive, and has not even prosecuted many of the alleged killers. Do they even care enough to investigate? Who cares about the kids from the St. Thomas Project who

were killed? They certainly care if a white housewife is killed, or a tourist, or a professor. You see, one of the things that you deal with from square one in this process is the status of the victim. When you consider the history of the death penalty in this country, it is obvious that the race of the victim has always played a part.

Shirley Carr is one of the members of our support group, Survive. When her two sons were killed within six months of each other, the district attorney never came knocking on her door to say, "Oh Ms. Carr, we are really sorry about this, and we are going to investigate this." One of the things that this woman has to deal with is waking up in the morning and seeing the boy who killed her son. The killer is free and she knows that the district attorney will not prosecute, because the life of her son just never mattered much.

Do not believe the rhetoric that you hear about the death penalty being reserved for only the most heinous crimes, because it really all depends on the profile of the victim and the identity of those who will feel outrage over the crime. When a person of stature is killed, there is pressure on the district attorney's office to convict someone. In order to get the Ted Bundys and the John Wayne Gacys of this world, people are pulled into the death-penalty dragnet—the guilty as well as the innocent. I gave a speech in Tucson not long ago. Sitting in that room was Mitch Blazak, who was on death row in Arizona for eighteen years until a devoted attorney finally proved that one of the investigators had planted evidence against him. For those of you who are law students, one of the first things that I learned about the law is that the law is almost always on the side of people with wealth and power.

When you know all of the stories, the people, the suffering, and the injustice that I know, you understand that equal justice is a great idea that we need to make real. Equal justice, however, is not yet real. Equal justice is no more real than the belief that all people are created equal with inalienable rights, like the right to life—the right not to be killed—or, as the Eighth Amendment says, the right not to be tortured or the object of cruelty.<sup>3</sup> The death penalty is torture. Do not be fooled by the physical method of execution. Do not accept obscuring analogies, such as the one

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3. See U.S. CONST. amend. VIII (stating that "[e]xcessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted").



offered by Ronald Reagan which compared execution by lethal injection to his past experiences with putting ailing horses to sleep.<sup>4</sup>

The torture begins when conscious human beings are condemned to die, because on death row you die a thousand times before you are actually executed. I have been with three people who were executed. By the time the death-row inmates get to the end of the process, they are tired. It is not just about preparing to die. You could be within six or eight hours of the execution, have been brought to the death house, and have said good-bye to your family when the phone rings and you get a stay of execution. You pack up your belongings, go back to death row, and begin the process again.

Your family goes through it with you. Some change their names and some leave the state because they are guilty by association—"You're the sister of the death-row inmate in Louisiana!" The kids are teased and may have to change to different schools. Mothers in grocery stores the week before their sons are executed hear people say things like, "I can't wait to see that Robert Willie fry!" Who tells the family's story? The members of the family have not killed anyone. The state is going to kill their son or their brother, and the killings are just as real as one individual taking the life of another, but in the most premeditated way.

At the prison, there is a strap-down team that is responsible for retrieving the prisoner from his cell, walking him over to the death house, and killing him. The team finds someone of the inmate's size and build, and practices. The team practices with the prisoner resisting and with the prisoner going calmly. All that the team members want is to get it right. They do not want to have a scene like the one that occurred in California at the execution of Leandress Riley. Leandress Riley was a young black guy who was very small. He slipped his hand out of the strap in the gas chamber and banged against the door, hollering, "I don't want to die! I don't want to die!" None of the guards who worked at Riley's execution could ever perform another execution. The head of the Louisiana Department of Corrections explained the procedure to me by say-

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4. See David C. Anderson, *Lethal Injection Makes Execution Less Brutal but Questions Linger*, ORANGE COUNTY REG., Feb. 26, 1995, at A3 (noting Ronald Reagan's advocacy of execution by lethal injection and quoting Reagan as saying, "You call the veterinarian and the vet gives it a shot and the horse goes to sleep—that's it.").

ing, “Well, Sister, we don’t want any emotion. We want this to be done with dignity.” With dignity. The word dignity is used. The phrases “doing justice” and “justice for victims” are used to say that we can kill people and that somehow it is okay.

When I was with Patrick Sonnier at his execution, I felt as if I was in a hospital in which the tiles were all polished and everyone was merely following a protocol. I kept feeling as though they were trying to save his life. It was so hard for my mind to accept the fact that they were going to kill him. I knew, though, that they *were* going to kill him—the secretary was typing up the forms for the witnesses, you could hear the coffee pot percolating, and people were coming in and out. An event was going to happen. The event was Patrick’s death.

Around eleven o’clock at night, the warden and the chaplain came in with their three-piece suits, ready to bless it all and make it official. I have come to understand the struggle of chaplains who get their paychecks from a prison that executes people. I have heard that there is a chaplain here in Texas who actually counsels people to give up their appeals so that they can go to meet God.

The way in which people use religion in the context of the death penalty is similar to the selective quoting of the Bible that I call “biblical quarterbacking.” People pass their favorite little biblical quotes back and forth. I have repeatedly witnessed people’s desire to have God in their corner. Everyone wants to quote the ultimate authority to justify what he or she is doing. For example, death penalty advocates quote the passage which reads, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.”<sup>5</sup> Others point to the life of Jesus Christ. However, for 300 years after Jesus died, Christians could not even be in the military because they were so against violence. Peter put away his sword when Jesus said, “[A]ll who draw the sword will die by the sword.”<sup>6</sup> I once heard a district attorney say, “Aha, you heard what he said about the sword. Those who live by the sword die by the sword, so if you commit murder you can be killed too.”

I have been on radio talk shows across the United States and I can recognize these people on the radio in the first few syllables. I know what parts of the Bible they are going to quote. I almost

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5. *Genesis* 9:6.

6. *Matthew* 26:52.

have them down pat. I reply, "Well, hold on one second. Are you saying that the Bible says blood for blood, life for life?" I say, "If you look closely, it also says that the penalty for adultery is death, but we do not want that, do we? It would decimate our population." You hear, "Oh, well no, we are more civilized than that." They only want to plug that one little quote. These people forget that the community was nomadic in biblical times—the members of that community did not have alternatives, and they did not have prisons as we do today. Selective quoting of religion is tricky. As Christians, we should practice compassion. Instead, we practice disassociation by saying, "They are not like us." This disassociation paves the way for the cruelty and the killing. To me, the heart of religion—the heart of what Jesus was about and what we should be about—is compassion and humanity.

Death-row inmates welcome compassion and humanity. Most of them are lonely and have very few visitors. I noticed after I began to write to Patrick that he had no one to come visit him. When I filled out the visitor application, he said, "Well, you can be my spiritual advisor because you are a nun and I am a Catholic." I did not realize that everyone leaves the death house at a quarter to six in the evening, except for the spiritual advisor, when there is an execution. The spiritual advisor may stay until the end and witness the execution. I never dreamed that it would come to that, or that I would be the one. Patrick said that his last spiritual advisor talked only about the Bible, so I told him that we could talk normally, about how to trust in our humanity and how we could be the face of God to each other. That way there is love and compassion, and where there is compassion, there is God. Where there is freedom and liberty, there is God. But where hatred and cruelty cause pain, God is not there, and we have to help God to be present. To me, this is essential. So I came to be with Patrick as a human being.

After writing to Patrick for several months, I went to visit him. When you first visit the prison, you are met in the visiting room with an intimidating, green sign that reads, Stepping Onto Prison Property, You Subject Yourself To Body Searches. The authorities have dogs sniffing for drugs. When I saw the sign, I thought maybe they would cut me some slack because they knew I was a nun and I would not bring in drugs. By coming to the prison, you are stepping into a place where you are not in control of your environment. It was a scary experience for me. You have to undergo a little pat

search. I thought, God, what is a pat search? Then you go through the gates with the guard crying, "Woman on the tier!" You hear this debate about the prisons and how cushy they are, but there are no soft sounds in prison. Prison is all cement and bars and the sound of ringing metal. Finally, you round a corner with a green door bearing red, block letters that reads, Death Row.

I was nervous when I went to visit Patrick because we had two hours to talk. I thought, What am I going to talk to him about for two hours? I paced up and down after they locked me in the room. When they brought him in, he had a leather belt around his waist to which his hands and legs were handcuffed. I had never seen a human being in chains before. I had seen animals being transported from the zoo, but that was different. I heard those chains as Patrick moved across the floor. Ironically, the sound of those chains would be one of the last sounds I would remember after they led him to the electric chair—those chains dragging across that polished tile floor. Those would be the first and last sounds from Patrick Sonnier that I would ever hear.

When they brought Patrick in to see me, he was really glad to see a human being who cared enough to make the three-hour drive from New Orleans just to see him. When you wake up in the morning on death row, you receive no indication that your life has any value, but you receive a thousand signals that your life is disposable human waste. You hear the guards placing bets on who will fry next. If you need medical care, or a wisdom tooth pulled, or eyeglasses, none of those things matters. Dobie, the man I am currently visiting on death row, has rheumatoid arthritis, and it is a royal battle to get him medication. They just give him the medication when they feel like it. So he suffers in pain. Once they feel justified that they can kill people, all of these things are considered mere amenities.

Patrick and I visited for two hours. Patrick was a white man and he was Cajun. He was clean-shaven and he wore a clean, blue, denim shirt. He talked nonstop for two hours because he was so glad to see someone. He was like a firehose; I never had to worry at all about what I was going to say. All I had to say was, "Yeah, oh, yeah." He was just so glad to have that human presence. You know, one of the things I have learned is that the best thing we ever give each other is merely the gift of our total, undivided presence. That is what I gave Patrick.

After the first visit, I drove back home to New Orleans with a splitting headache. Later, a psychiatrist friend of mine explained that when you get into new situations and you are exposed to a lot of new sensory information, you cannot process it all. All that stimulation must have caused my headache. On my way home I thought, You know, I don't want to be naïve about this, but I don't believe the State of Louisiana should be executing Patrick Sonnier. However, I also did not want to be naïve about what he had done. I did not feel that I had the right to ask him to confess to me. I do not believe that any human being has a right to say to someone, "Confess to me now the worst thing you ever did in your life." I felt that he would confide in me if he ever trusted me enough. I also knew, though, that I had never been involved in anything like this before and I did not want to be naïve.

Later, I went to the Prison Coalition office to see Patrick's case file. The staff found the manila folders for his case and laid them out on the table for me. As the staff left the office, someone said, "Sister, just pull the door behind you." I was alone. I opened up the folders. Now, I had just gone to visit Patrick and I had begun to visit his brother, Eddie, who got life in prison. Patrick Sonnier got death and his brother got life. I did not yet understand how the law worked. I looked down at the front page of the *Daily Iberian*, the newspaper from a little town right in the heart of Acadiana. I saw the faces of two young teenagers in their prom outfits, Loretta Bourque and David LeBlanc. Looking at the paper, you might think that these teenagers won an award or something, but then you read the terrible headlines in big, black, dark letters: "Teenage Couple Found Murdered."<sup>7</sup> The scowling faces of Patrick and Eddie Sonnier are farther down on the same page. Patrick's picture did not look like the clean-shaven, smiling man I had visited who was so happy to see me. Rather, the picture was of someone who had committed a despicable deed by killing two teenagers.

I learned that the two teenagers had gone to an abandoned little place known as the local "lovers' lane" after a high-school football game. The story explained that the two Sonnier brothers found the couple and told them that they were trespassing. The brothers told the girl that if she would have sex with them, they would not report

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7. *Teenage Couple Found Murdered*, DAILY IBERIAN, Nov. 7, 1977, at 1.

the couple. Other couples came forward after the murders and said that the same thing had happened to them. Though the brothers' scheme had never led to murder before, the brothers had raped and abducted kids, and exercised a potent kind of macho power over people, which immediately indicates that they were not balanced. People who are balanced know about love, caring, and sensitivity. These brothers did not know of love or caring or sensitivity. That night, the brothers' power play ended in murder. The two teenagers were found lying face down, both shot in the back of the head.

The teenage boy's father was Lloyd LeBlanc. Lloyd LeBlanc was a true hero who dealt with the death of his son in the most Christian way. He knelt down by his son and said the Our Father that he had learned as a boy. He said, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." He knew that he could never have another son because he and his wife were older. He said, "Whoever did this, I forgive them," though he could not say it just once and be done with it. He would have to say it every day of his life. His story is incredible. He ultimately witnessed the execution of Patrick Sonnier, even though he really did not want to be there. I learned a lot about the pressure that the death penalty puts on the families of murder victims.

Lloyd LeBlanc periodically took me with him to pray in a little chapel. He took me to the place where his son had died and it was like making the Way of the Cross. He took me to the place where the teenagers had attended the football game and to the place where they had gone afterwards and their bodies were found. Lloyd is a Cajun man who talks with wonderful simplicity in a Cajun accent. When he met me at the pardon board hearing, he said, "Now, Sister, all of this time you have been going to visit Patrick and his brother you never came to see me. We had no one to talk to."

Lloyd asked his brother to witness the execution, but his brother had a heart attack six weeks before the execution. I only wish I had gotten to Lloyd sooner. I felt powerless, though, and I was unsure of how to handle things. When I found out about the murders, I thought that I should go see those poor parents. All parents' worst nightmare is the death of their child. How can these parents ever put their heads on their pillows in peace again at night? Later, when I visited the LeBlanc family at their home, I

saw a picture of the Good Shepherd. This picture was an example of their Catholic faith—that God protects us if we love Him and obey His law. As Shirley Carr, the woman in *Survive* who lost two sons, said, “I took my kids to church, I did all the right things for my kids, and I thought God would protect me and my boys.” But then your life is shattered when your children are ripped from you. What does that do to your faith in God? Who can continue to believe in a loving God? Lloyd LeBlanc did. Lloyd made his way.

When I first met Lloyd, he confronted me and asked me where I had been. He wanted to know where I had been when he needed someone to talk with. I apologized and told him that I had never thought he would want to see me. I also told him that I did not believe in the death penalty. He said he did not believe in the death penalty either, but he said he did not know what to do. The death penalty presents a terrible dilemma for someone who is already dealing with the death of a child.

David LeBlanc's mother, Eula, cried for three years after David's death. She and Lloyd moved to a new house about five years ago, and the move has really been good for her. Because it was a new house, she stopped seeing David standing by the kitchen sink with his new, blue, velour shirt she had given him to wear to the football game, saying, “Oh Mama, this shirt is going to keep me warm tonight.” So they moved, and it was for the best. They moved David's body to a little cemetery not far from their new house. From her kitchen window, Eula can look out and see the little, red, vigil light that she keeps on his grave. Every morning she kneels by David's grave to pray for him. It helps her get through the day. That is how Eula makes it. The grandchildren also help her. They have brought life to her again. They burst into the house, grab Eula by the leg, and say, “Mama, what do you have to eat?” They have brought her back to life.

I now realize that I made two bad mistakes. The first mistake was waiting too long to meet with the murder victims' families. This mistake has taught me to always visit the victims' families and let them know I am there for them if they want me. Sometimes they shut the door in my face, but not always. The second mistake has to do with lawyers, and I will tell you about that shortly.

After my experience with the LeBlancs, I went to visit another murder victim's family—the Harvey family. The Harveys' daughter had been brutally murdered. The response I received from the

Harveys was quite different from Lloyd LeBlanc's. Vernon Harvey had his own press conference before the execution of his daughter's killer, and he said, "I can't wait to see this SOB fry! I want to see the smoke fly off of his body!" The man who killed Vernon Harvey's stepdaughter was Robert Willie.

I came to know Robert Willie when he was a death-row inmate. He was a tough guy who belonged to a supremacy group. He had tattoos all over his body and he was a racist. I had only two months with him. When Robert was executed, I was there along with Vernon Harvey. Louisiana allows the victim's family to sit in the front row to watch the person die. I will always remember coming out into the parking lot where the press was waiting after the execution. The execution received national press attention. It was on *ABC World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings. All of the members of the press approached Vernon Harvey and said, "Mr. Harvey, you got your wish tonight. You watched Robert Willie die. How do you feel now?" Vernon said, "The SOB died too quickly. I hope he burns in hell!"

Since the execution, Vernon and Elizabeth Harvey have become my friends. I have talked to Vernon many times about Robert Willie. I realize that after Robert Willie was killed Vernon had no enemies at whom he could direct his rage. All Vernon could do was hope and pray that God agreed with him and that somehow Robert Willie would not be included in the bounds of God's mercy. Whenever Vernon talked about Robert Willie, he would say, "You know where he is right now? He is down there burning in hell." He hoped that was, in fact, what had happened to Robert Willie. Vernon Harvey could have watched Robert Willie die a thousand times, but he could not save his stepdaughter. His stepdaughter could never be replaced. When I heard Vernon respond to the press that night, I thought that he resembled a thirsty man who had just taken a long drink of salt water.

I also knew Robert Willie's family, and I was with them when they buried their son. I watched as Robert Willie's mother fainted when she saw him in the coffin. Todd, Robert's little ten-year-old brother, was lying on the floor saying, "Mama, wake up. Mama, Mama, wake up." The heartache that the Willie family went through was immense. We merely compound our tragedy by thinking that having the state kill someone will heal anything, or solve anything.



None of us can solve all of the world's problems or heal all of the hurts in the world. God puts us here and each of us is connected with other people. Those of you who are law students are going to be deciding what to do with your knowledge and power as lawyers. You are going to be making decisions, and I would like to tell you a lawyer story before we move on. This story is about a young man who did not know what he wanted to do. A rich uncle persuaded the family to send the boy to law school because the boy was obviously floundering. The boy came out of law school still floundering, but he got his first case. The case was for only a small amount of money. When the young lawyer stood up in court to defend his client, he could not move his lips. He was speechless. There was a deafening silence. The lawyer was laughed out of the courtroom and was thereafter referred to as the lawyer who got no cases. Then one day a poor man came to him. The poor man had been wronged, and the lawyer said, "Why are you coming to me? I am a terrible lawyer." The man answered, "I've got no one else to turn to." The young lawyer knew that the man had been wronged. The lawyer researched, brought the case to trial, and won. Do you know who I am describing? The young lawyer I am describing was Mohandas Ghandi. That was Ghandi's beginning.

Part of being a good lawyer, teacher, or writer is doing what you love, knowing that you are making a difference in people's lives. I just wanted to say this as a little commercial to the future lawyers here. Go for what you really believe in. Get up early in the morning and work hard burning the midnight oil if you have to, because you know you are making a difference. The poor have no one to defend them. Even if you become involved in some other kind of law, one way to put a niche in your life is by taking the cases of poor people. In some way, help to make those words that are etched into the United States Supreme Court building—Equal Justice Under the Law—a reality and not just a myth.

I tell you this lawyer story and give you this pep talk because, as I said, the second bad mistake I made has to do with lawyers. This brings me back to Patrick Sonnier. I made two mistakes. One was not visiting with the murder victims' families, and the other was letting the lawyers do what they were doing with Patrick's case. I figured that the lawyers were good if they volunteered to take Patrick's case on appeal. I knew that people did not always get a perfect defense, but I thought that they at least got an adequate

defense. What really happened was truly shocking to me. I found out that Patrick's lawyer met with him only twice—just two half-hour periods—to prepare his defense. One of these meetings was on the morning of Patrick's trial. The jury was selected in one day and the trial lasted three days. By Friday, they had sentenced him to death. The trial lawyer never objected to anything, even during the jury selection.

The lawyer who handled the appeal did not know what he was doing either. He had a good heart, but he did not understand the process and he did not ask anyone for help. That is another thing about the law. Lawyers are held up on a big pedestal. It gets really difficult to say that you do not know it all—that you need help or need to consult with someone. As a lawyer, you are supposed to know it all. In part, Patrick Sonnier was killed because the lawyer who handled his appeal would not admit that he needed help.

All of these things unfolded before me as we moved toward Patrick's execution. I began to learn the law because you begin to learn the law when it makes a difference in your life. Most people learn the law when it affects them or someone they know.

In the end, Patrick was to die and I was to be with him. Patrick said, "No, Sister, it could really scar you," and I just thought of the crucifixion of Jesus and the women who stood at the foot of the cross. I knew deep in my soul that there was no way this man was going to die alone, looking only at faces of people who were there wanting to see him die. I said, "Pat, don't you worry about me. God is going to help me." I said, "You look at my face; just look at my face," because I wanted him to see a loving face when he died. In fact, that is the way it all happened when I was there in the death house.

While I was waiting for Patrick's execution, I went to visit Patrick's brother, Eddie, and I learned the incredible story of these two brothers. In fact, it was Eddie, not Patrick, who had killed the teenagers. Eddie now knows that he is responsible for the deaths of three people—the two teenagers and his brother, Patrick.

It was too late for Eddie to tell the courts that Patrick was not the killer. The gates of the judicial process had already been shut. It was a story that I came to know gradually. At one point we had a lawyer, Millard Farmer, and I told him that we needed to have a press conference. I said, "You talk and I'll talk, and I'll just say, 'Look, let me tell you this story. This man is not guilty of first-

degree murder. Eddie really did it.'” Millard replied, “Sister, there is no way we can have a press conference and there is no way that they are going to believe you. You have been a spiritual advisor and there is no way we can get out the truth about this.” Millard took every step he could, including contacting the governor and the bishop and motivating people of the church to stand up for life and intercede with the governor. He also talked to the Louisiana Pardon Board.

Later, I talked about the sham at the Pardon Board in an interview with a former Pardon Board member. Howard Marsellus, the former head of the Pardon Board, wept on the phone when I asked him to reflect back on what had happened. The Board heard the appeals of all inmates sentenced to death because those were the orders from the governor's office. “It was all a sham,” Howard said, “because they were dead men when they walked into their cells.” Incidentally, the title of my book, *Dead Man Walking*,<sup>8</sup> comes from the guards' comments about men who get out of their cells and walk out to death row. The guards say, “Dead man walking.” Well, they were dead men walking when they appeared before the Louisiana Pardon Board.

Howard Marsellus followed the governor's orders. Howard is going to weep every day of his life when he thinks about what he did. He said that he did not have the courage to oppose Patrick's execution because he held a high political post. He admitted that as soon as he found out what was going on, he should have had the courage to say, “This is wrong. I will have no part of it.”

All of that happened with Patrick's case. Patrick was in a crucible. He experienced a purification through reading, reflection, sorrow, and deep remorse for what had happened. He never claimed innocence because he knew that he had been a part of those scenes with the teenagers. He also realized that he was the older brother who should have kept his cool, and that Eddie was the volatile one. Patrick was there with Eddie when Eddie lost control and shot the teenagers. I think he felt as responsible for what had happened as he would have if he had pulled the trigger himself. In a sense, he was responsible for what happened because he was part of the fabric that led to the violence. But he was a man, a human being

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8. SISTER HELEN PREJEAN, *DEAN MAN WALKING* (1993).

with whom I sat through those long hours of waiting with the sun shining on one day and rain falling on the next. Writing in his Bible as his journey came to an end—on the pages upon which the births, deaths, and weddings were recorded—he wrote the date of his death with his own hand. I thought of the words that Jesus uttered, “As for the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.”<sup>9</sup> But when you die at the hands of the State of Louisiana, you know the day and the hour.

Later, I got all of Patrick’s papers, including the death warrant. There is a guard that everybody on death row hates to see coming because he only comes for one reason. When they see him step onto the floor, they know it means only one thing. The guard goes to a particular person’s cell and hands that person a paper which declares the date of death and the method of the execution. He asks the condemned person to sign it so that, at the very least, the person will be aware of the date on which the State of Louisiana plans to kill him. I found all of these papers later when I looked through Patrick’s belongings.

Not long before Patrick died, they prepared his body for execution; they shaved his head, cut the left leg of his pants, and shaved around the calf of his leg where the electrodes were to go. They put a clean, white t-shirt on him because the State of Louisiana kills with dignity. The State of Louisiana never sends anyone to the electric chair wearing a dirty shirt. Now Louisiana gives the condemned person a lethal injection, and uses a padded gurney with a hospital curtain around it. The whole process is as if the state is just putting the person to sleep.

After being with Patrick through all of that preparation, I remember going into the women’s room in the death house. It was the only private place there. I remember putting my head against the tile, holding on to my crucifix, and saying, “Jesus, please do not let him fall apart.” I did not know what I would do if Patrick came unraveled, began to cry, or just fell apart. I was hanging on by an inch and Patrick’s strength was my strength. When I returned, Patrick asked me if I was okay. I said that I was and we prayed together.

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9. *Matthew 25:36.*

In the end, I walked with him and he said, "Don't choose the Lord Is My Shepherd passage, because everyone does that for funerals." So I chose Isaiah 43, which reads, "I have called you by name; you are mine."<sup>10</sup> He said, "I just pray God holds up my legs." He did not want to faint, and he did not want to have to be dragged—that last bit of dignity remained. Every man I have been with has prayed that God holds up his legs so that he does not show weakness before the people who are killing him. As we walked together, I read from Isaiah 43.

When we went into the room, they asked him if he had any last words. He said, "Yes sir, I do." He spoke to the murder victims' families and asked for their forgiveness. Then he said to me very simply as he walked to the chair, "I love you." He sat in the chair. They worked very quickly, strapping his legs, arms, and trunk. They put a big metal cap on his head, which was connected to electrical wires leading to a generator that had been turned on earlier in the evening so that the prison would not have to rely on other electricity. The prison wanted to make sure there were no hitches in the execution. An executioner stood behind a panel. He would be paid \$400 for the execution that night. Just prior to the execution, they strap the person's jaw back with something like a football helmet strap, and place a mask over the person's face to keep the witnesses from seeing 1,900 volts of electricity hit the body.

Patrick saw my face. He looked at me, and the last words of his life were to me. They were words of thanks, words of love. I found myself with the witnesses sitting behind a plexiglass screen which protects you from the stench when the body burns. I remember reaching out to him and speaking the last words that he heard on this earth. They were my words of love to him. The warden stood by two red telephones—one to the governor's office, the other to the court. When the warden nodded his head, the executioner did his work. I looked up and what had been Patrick Sonnier was now trash.

I walked out of that execution chamber and I have been talking to people ever since. That execution is what led me to write. It is what leads me to speak, and I must tell you of my hopes about the issue of capital punishment. When people are educated on this is-

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10. *Isaiah* 43:1.

sue, they find out all of the things that go along with the death penalty—how selective it is, that it is not a deterrent, and how it is six times more costly than putting a person in prison for life because the capital case is the “Cadillac” of the criminal justice system. Everything is more costly in capital cases. When folks learn that people who are imprisoned for first-degree murder do not get out after a few years (there is either life without parole or long-term imprisonment), they change their minds and reject the death penalty. Most people are good and decent. They are ambivalent or manipulable on this issue partly because they cannot get real information about it.

If people learn the truth and we are able to educate, we can generate the second Abolitionist movement in the United States. The first one abolished slavery. There was a day in this country when over seventy percent of the people of this country supported slavery. It was a dark time until people gathered together and realized that slavery had to be abolished.

The death penalty will also be abolished. People will see that they have merely been sold a bill of goods by politicians who tell them that the death penalty is a deterrent. They will see that it does nothing to solve the crime problem. I hope you will join the people in the United States who are part of the second Abolitionist movement.