

Observations from Inside on Execution Day

T.A. Mahon-Haft

Have you ever been deep in a forest before a thunder storm, when the air is green, electrified and smelling of ozone? That is akin to the environment in prison on the day of an execution, at least here at Greenville Correctional Center – the actual location where death is delivered on schedule, justified by the state as a proportionate reprimand for causing death.

There is a sense of tension and danger in the air. It is not the typical prison tension and danger, though. It is enormous potential energy embedded in stillness. No one moves much, but everyone feels the need to run, even though running cannot save anyone. There is nowhere to hide or such is the feeling. Rather than a sense of impending conflict between specific residents, it is everywhere, respecting no factions. Everyone feels an unquantifiable danger from an unknown, non-human entity. Just like preceding lightning strikes, this produces strange bedfellows, foxes bedding down with deer beneath boughs, Bloods sitting beside skin heads on communal benches docilely tuned out, staring at the pod TV. There is an interesting actual peace within the tension. In fact, contrary to the normal petty squabbles and ever-present fist-fights, no one gets to that point this day. Everyone is on their calmest behaviour, even while on pins and needles. It is almost as if, in the presence of the ultimate violence, everyone instinctively seeks to avoid more out of fear or sudden humility. It is almost as if the danger could zap any of us if we draw too much attention to ourselves today. Things that would normally be uttered to assert dominance are left unsaid. If we start heading down that road, it is without gusto and those words are often left to wither. The tension in the air saps much of the anger – usually present in our interactions.

The quiet is almost oppressive. The usual din of many competing lives in a small space, like a forest, is subdued. The typical cacophony of echoes, clangs and shouts (Elger, 2009) is halfway muted physically and auditorily all day leading up to the evening execution. It is almost as if even the physical structure of the institution itself senses the tension.

The tense calm is oddly compartmentalized, though. It does not begin weeks or even multiple days before the event. Guarded mentions do begin to filter in the week before, once the date is set and the man set to be executed is moved to this facility, but they are only brief verbal, glancing mentions, not part of the aura. Just like the pre-storm forest, the local residents only sense it in the air when it is near enough to pose a threat. The aura does not last, either, but that day sure does show clear differences in the tenor of the realm.

All day long, no one admits it, but everyone sneaks peeks at the distant fence line to try and see any potential protesters. There are also countless furtive glances towards the segregation building (“the hole”). This is where the death chamber resides, a mere 400 to 500 feet from where I sleep.

Like the overall atmospheric tension, the specific topic remains mostly in the ether. It is on everyone’s mind, but the actual execution is mostly unspoken about. Often, it passes lips only when it cannot be ignored, like when its occurrence is covered on the news and screened on the pod TV. There is an entirely surreal feeling that occurs when this prison – where we are isolated and forgotten, never spoken of as human beings – suddenly shows up on the news that all the state’s ‘normal’ people watch for their infotainment (Postman, 1985).

On killing day, there is always a touch of, literally, gallows humor. Death nearby is unusual and unsettling for most folks anywhere, whether inside or outside prison walls. Death on schedule right next door is particularly so. Thus, some of the men here, most of whom have not been taught tremendous emotional skills, cope by trying to laugh. Besides, wit is generally a highly respected skill here, where joy is so hard to come by and no one can make more than 45 cents an hour. In relation to this topic, those jokers tend to be rather tortured. For instance, I have heard numerous references likening the executee to the upcoming week’s charred “meat rock”, the indeterminate meat substitute mush we eat so regularly here, despite the fact that the electric chair is no longer the method. Once, I also heard a couple of guys ironically singing Europe’s “Final Countdown”.

Perhaps my most surprising observation has been the minority – but surprisingly large number, all things considered – of people behind bars who want to harshly, publicly condemn the man being executed. Often this involves exaggerated discussion of the alleged crime’s details, and even the person’s character and personality. This is sold as believable knowledge here, slightly better than most, because a few here *have* been on death row and then brought back to “just” life sentences. How do you celebrate that? I have always wondered.

Nearly everyone here has been at a jail or prison with someone who ended up on death row. Still, most of it is hogwash, a way for guys to differentiate themselves, to be better than at least someone. That is the most shocking thing about prison, in general. It is, ironically, the most judgemental environment I have ever encountered. It is true that, for some people lacking hope, support

and confidence – and it is exactly those who judge the loudest here – putting others down becomes an act of public substitution. There is even a very small contingent of folks who use these executions to outright declare, “I may have [insert conviction here], but at least I never [insert the executee’s conviction here]. Everyone who does that deserves to die. It even says so in the Bible”. Although not the norm, I have heard that exact sentence a few times.

At the same time, when the topic is breached on the big day, it also sometimes involves responses of measured clarity and reason that follows the jokes and judgements, almost invariably ending the discussion. While these negative references tend to have a somewhat nervous energy and tone, these exhortations come in calmer, firmer tones. They typically come from the quieter guys, but men whose word carries greater cachet. Often times, they are the men who have educated themselves and had careers. They do not bring the topic up, but are eventually compelled to speak. One such prisoner explained that it was tacky to do so, but that he could not ignore the ignorance he heard. When these men speak out, the discussion is usually put to rest. There are a handful of people here whose words are rarely directly challenged and they are often those who speak sparingly. On this topic, such prison sages almost invariably, regardless of demographics of politics, speak of the ills of the state’s system. This is the one thing that the most leaders here agree on: that the death penalty enacted in our home is unfair, an unjust travesty that never gets applied to anyone but the poor (also see Soss *et al.*, 2003). Other arguments are sometimes made, but that is the common crux. This is not the majority making such reasoned points, but those widely considered the “best”. It actually takes much courage and confidence to refuse to judge while in prison.

On execution day, things are subtly different in a way that affects every level of this setting. Even guards and staff treat us differently, with a modicum of deference and decency. The officers who usually come here on power trips, spouting invective at every chance (Philliber, 1987), stand around quietly. Those who generally offer some kindness wear an aura approaching sympathy. Whereas most days there is widespread employee pride in refusing to let any residents know anything about what is going on, that standard is relaxed slightly. Any upcoming lockdown is typically denied vociferously until the moment it begins and then never explained. In contrast, this last execution, a humane lieutenant came into the pod beforehand and reminded everyone that lockdown was coming for the evening. She then gave guys extra time in the

last minutes beforehand to finish using the microwave, phone and shower. Overall, during the course of these days, before the overnight shut in begins at 6:00pm, the general treatment is markedly better. There are almost no shrill whistles blown and we even get everything we are supposed to in the dining hall without argument. Everyone who works here is on their best behaviour.

However, it does inevitably involve being caged in our cell all evening, starting hours before the event. This began many decades ago because executions sometimes produced reactionary rioting, especially in highly charged cases. Thus, for us, it now comes with a degree of punishment without cause. We have less change for curfew freedoms, like bathing, socializing and calling our families. This interruption then also essentially forces us to explain and discuss the macabre topic with our families.

They, the “odd heads”, claim that the lights at previous execution site prisons all flickered when the Reaper came knocking. After having been in prison during four executions, I have concluded that that is no longer the case, although some still try to say it happens. Not sure why that would make sense, since the method of execution here now comes via “lethal injection”. Likely some folks here wish to maintain some supernatural elements to this thing none of us fully grasp – death on cue next door.

Just a little before the appointed hour, it becomes utterly quiet. Beginning around 8:00pm it is stiller and quieter than any other time here. In the last few minutes, you can literally hear a pin drop. Rather than the usual rounds the guards make through the pod, we are for those couple hours left entirely to ourselves. At execution hour, there is an eerie emptiness. There is hardly even any talking within the cells, near as I can tell. Focused on their backs and TV, everyone attempts to remove themselves from this reality. Under normal lockdown circumstances, the slightest stimulus elicits regular banging on the steel doors and shouting out the skinny vertical strips of “window” carved out of these doors, a natural enough response to being caged like an animal (Johnson and Chernoff, 2002). This is usually heightened when anything tense occurs, like a fight or unwanted announcement. Not on these nights, though. Occasionally there has been a single man who banged the door once after the execution occurred. Normally this expression would spread, but these nights the stillness swallows it and no one responds. Immediately, the silence returns, and so it stays the rest of the night.

It stays quiet even in the cells, for the most part. The attitude is, I do not wish to focus on this because it is, literally, too close to home. In some

cases, when the news pops up with a report about the execution at 11:00pm, the silence may temporarily break. I had one cell partner who at that time proceeded with some brief philosophy of the injustice of the system. The risk feels too personal to conclude much else. If and when the topic comes up in the cell, it typically dies quickly. There is not much to be said about death on cue right down the boulevard, although guards at this point are occasionally inspired to engage in oddly nostalgic waxing about past executions and the different routines.

The next day, it is like it never happened. Literally overnight, the threat from the storm has passed and the forest has returned to normal roles and operations. It is not spoken of again, period. It is like it never happened, even though every man here holds distinct memories every time he has been here when it did.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.A. Mahon-Haft is an ardent, devoted humanist, a father, a partner, a teacher, an environmentalist, and an unapologetic progressive. He seeks to provide a voice for the voiceless and illuminate the humanity lost to mass incarceration and social stigma. He holds a doctorate in sociology, with an emphasis in criminology. His outspoken advocacy and teaching towards criminal justice reform afforded him the legal attention that landed him his current participant observer position in the largest state penitentiary on the East Coast. His commitment continues now, aided by this unique intersection of roles and a heightened understanding of the deprivation and dehumanization designed into the system.