

Confessions of a Penitentiary Death Dealer

Kyle Hedquist

The crumpled penitentiary newsletter lay in my makeshift garbage can. Like most weeks the “news” meant little to me. I was 21 years old and the last thing I was interested in was offer contained in the last article I read before tossing the news in my trash. The article read something to the effect of a “Help Wanted” sign for an “exciting and new” opportunity being offered, a hospice program – a program I had never heard of within the prison infirmary, which was a place I had never been. They were asking for volunteers to take care of a bunch of old men dying in the infirmary, most of them probably convicted of the most discreditable acts. The piece was just like I thought, another worthless article.

I was in prison for murder, why would I want to care for strangers dying in a prison infirmary? At the same time, however, my own grandfather was suffering and slowly dying from Parkinson’s disease. I did not know anything about that disease and I felt helpless behind these 25-foot concrete walls. I reconsidered my initial disregard and decided to apply to volunteer for the hospice program.

Two weeks passed when I received a notice that I had an interview. The room was coated in multiple layers of dingy whitish paint, a colour only seen in prison. The floors were cold in color well-worn from decades of scrubbing and machine wheel wear. Three official looking staff members sat behind a table questioning my interest and motivation for entering this new program. Now 22 years old, I was the youngest applicant. I had very little interest and I did not fully grasp what had motivated me to apply. Nevertheless, I found myself attending a 12-week community-led training course. We soon had three “clients”. Dying prisoners had to sign up to participate in the hospice program.

I quickly found myself sitting with a terminally ill man, much like myself. We were both confused and I was afraid of what I did not know. However, I had never met Death, despite being in prison for murder. I was uncomfortable with the idea of being with someone as they died. Sometimes all I could do was sit and listen. I did not like that and wanted to “do” something. But I sat and listened to laboured breathing one shallow breath after another, cold clammy hands lying atop sheets that I had already changed three times. I had never changed a diaper on a grown man before, but early on in my training I had made up my mind that no client of mine would ever sit in his own feces and urine.

I learned a lot about how the body prepares to leave this earth from this client. Death, I would learn, comes on its own terms and in its own time. Death is like a fog that enters the room – the air is heavy and damp, the room unusually cold. The smell of dying human flesh would permeate my clothing, my hands would smell of rot and decay, I could taste Death on my lips, my eyes would burn when I left the room to enter the bright sunlight and fill my lungs with fresh air. Some clients left quietly almost with a sense of peace, while others left this world violently, full of pain and fear. Death came for all of them, he took them and he is waiting for each of us.

The Hispanic population had a nickname for us, “Death Dealers”. They revered death and saw us as warriors in the battle between Death and Life. I did not feel like I was winning any battles. I sat for years with dozens of tears of dying men. I sacrificed my free time, spent hours listening to their stories, their regrets and, yes, even their confessions of brutal crimes – murder, rape, child molestation. They were all liars and thieves. The more I heard, the dirtier I felt. I became angry and thought that maybe this way some cruel cosmic justice. Was this Death’s final punishment for criminals? Would this be my punishment for my crime?

I could not have known all those years ago that death would bring my humanity back. So I sat, I listened, their teary-eyed regurgitation of their crimes burned my ears, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth as I consumed the confessions. Their pain would burrow itself into my flesh, my heart weighed heavy. At times I was emotionally drained and physically exhausted as I carried their pain. Was this my punishment as a murderer? I strove to feel their regrets. I wrapped their sorrows around my shivering body like a worn-out hospital blanket. I could not understand, but somehow just being with them and listening lightened their burden before Death stepped in to take them. There were times that I witnessed Death come, it was always near, when counting the breaths as I did hour by hour. Sometimes I did not want him to come and I cried in my cell not wanting a relationship to end, “not yet” I would whisper.

My grandfather died and I did not get to hold his hand, I did not change his bedding, I did not have the privilege of listening to his story, to find out if he had regrets. Did he have confessions to make? I was not there when Death came for him. I did not plead with Death to wait.

I have questioned my motives, my purpose and my role in prison. Murder brought me to this place, but it was dealing with Death that brought me back

to life. I will spend the rest of my life in prison for the crimes I committed, but you will find me sitting, listening and waiting to meet Death in the cold infirmary of the State Penitentiary.

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