

Executions Are Degrading to Society

Michael Ross

When we abolished the punishment for treason that you should be hanged and then cut down while still alive, then disemboweled while still alive, and then quartered, we did not abolish that punishment because we sympathized with traitors, but because we took the view that this was a punishment no longer consistent with our self-respect.

These words, spoken by Lord Chancellor Gardiner during the 1965 death penalty abolition debates in the British Parliament, illustrate the feeling of most individuals opposed to capital punishment. It's not sympathy towards the murderer that we feel, indeed most of us feel a great deal of anger and revulsion towards him and his actions. Our objection is that it is a complete renunciation of all that is embodied in our concept of humanity. Or simply put, executions degrade us all.

In today's society, the execution process is far removed from most individual citizens. We may be aware of the criminal acts that put an individual on death row – usually through sensationalized press accounts – but very few of us know of the human being who society has condemned to death. And even fewer of us have ever witnessed, or ever will witness, an actual execution. This dehumanization of the whole process makes it easy for us to distance ourselves from capital punishment and accept it 'as something government does,' allowing us to deny responsibility for the consequences of such actions.

We need to be aware of the human side of executions. Therefore, I'd like to share with you an extract from an affidavit by David Bruck, an attorney who stayed with a condemned man, Terry Roach, during the last hours before his execution.

"I assisted with Terry Roach's defense during the last month before his execution, and I spent the last four hours with Terry Roach in his cell when he was electrocuted on January 10, 1986.

Although I have known Terry slightly for several years, meeting him in the course of visits to see other inmates on South Carolina's death row, my first long conversation with Terry occurred less than a month before his death. An execution date had already been set, and he seemed frightened and very nervous. I was struck at that time by how obviously mentally retarded Terry was ... I had known from following

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his case through the courts that he had been diagnosed as mildly mentally retarded, but I was still surprised at his slack-jawed and slow way of speaking, and at the evident lack of understanding of much of what we were telling him about the efforts that were underway to persuade Governor Riley to grant clemency.

The next time that I would see Terry was on the night of his execution. The lawyers who had worked on his case for the past eight years were at the Supreme Court in Washington, so I had decided to look in on Terry that night after his family had to leave for the last time, to see if I could help him with anything or just keep him company. When I arrived, he had decided to ask me to stay with him through the night and to accompany him when he was taken to the chair. So along with Marie Deans, a paralegal and counselor who works with condemned prisoners in Virginia, I stayed.

Although Terry was twenty-five years old by the time of his death, he seemed very childlike. In general, his demeanor and his reactions to the people around him appeared to me to comport with the finding, made at his last psychological evaluation, that his IQ was 70 – a score which placed his intellectual functioning at about the level of a twelve-year-old child. When his family minister showed him some prayers from the Bible that they would read together, Terry asked him which ones he thought would be especially likely to help him into heaven: his questions about this seemed based on the childish assumption that one prayer was likely to ‘work’ better than another, and that he just needed some advice about which ones would work best. Later in the night, he asked me to read him a long letter about reincarnation that a man from California had sent to him just that day: he listened to the letter with wonder, like a small child at bedtime, trusting and uncritical. Both Marie and I were struck by how calmed Terry seemed by the sound of a voice reading to him in the resonant cell, and we spent much of the remaining time reading to him while he listened, gazing at the reader with rapt attention.

He had a final statement which his girlfriend had helped him write. When I arrived that night, the statement was on three small scraps of paper, in his girlfriend’s handwriting. I copied it out for him, and got him to read it out loud a few times. No matter how many times he tried, the word ‘enemies’ came out ‘emenies.’ He kept practicing it, but pronouncing the written word just seemed beyond his capabilities. Still, he seemed to like the rehearsal: like everything we did that night, it filled the time and acknowledged that he was doing something very difficult.

Terry was a very passive young man, and that showed all through the night. Although he was obviously frightened, he was as cooperative as possible with the guards, and he tried to pretend that all the ritual preparation – the shaving of his head and right leg, the prolonged rubbing in of electrical conducting gel – was all a normal sort of thing

to have happen. He wanted the approval of those around him, and he seemed well aware that this night he could gain everyone's approval by being brave and keeping his fear at bay.

Still, when the warden appeared in the cell door at 5:00 AM and read the death warrant, while Terry stood, each wrist immobilized in a manacle known as the 'claw,' his left leg began to shake in large, involuntary movements. After that everything happened quickly. I walked to the chair with him, and talked to him as much as I could. He wanted me to read his statement, but I told him that he ought to try and I'd read it if he couldn't. His voice was only a little shaky, and he managed quite well, except for 'emenies.' After he had repeated the name of a friend of mine who had recently died, and whom he had offered to look up for me when he got to heaven, I left him and walked to the witness area, where I gave him a 'thumbs-up' sign. He signalled back with his fingers, as much as the straps permitted. We signalled to each other once more just before the mask was pulled down over his face.

A few seconds later the current hit. Terry's body snapped back and held frozen for the whole time that the current ran through his body. After a few seconds, steam began to rise from his body, and the skin on his thigh just above the electrode began to distend and blister. His fists were clenched and very white. His body slumped when the power was turned off, and jerked erect again when it was resumed. When he was declared dead, several guards wrestled his body out of the chair and onto a stretcher, while taking care to conceal his face (no longer covered by the mask) from the view of the witnesses and me by covering it with a sheet. I left the death house at about this time in the company of the warden. As we stepped out of the building, I heard the whoops of a crowd of about 150 or 200 demonstrators who had apparently come to celebrate the execution, and who were yelling and cheering outside the prison gates."

Executions degrade us all. They are held in the middle of the night, in the dark, away from us all, to hide what they really are. The men who are condemned to death are dehumanized by the state and by the press, to make it easier to carry-out their executions. And the public is kept as far away as possible from the whole process to keep them from seeing that human beings, real flesh and blood, real people, are being put to death. That is the only way that any state or government can continue executions without the public demanding its eradication.

It's time for us to acknowledge capital punishment for what it really is, and to abolish it nationwide. There are suitable alternatives. In my state, for example, those convicted of capital crimes, who are not sentenced to death, are sentenced to life imprisonment *without possibility of release*. This is clearly a suitable alternative to executions, and satisfies society's need to be protected from dangerous individuals. It

is not necessary to kill criminals, not even the most reprehensible ones, and to continue to do so truly lowers us to the level of the very ones that we wish to punish. And undoubtedly degrades us all.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For more information on how you can help abolish the death penalty in America contact:

The National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty
1325 G Street, NW, Lower Level-B
Washington, DC 20005

For \$2.00 they will send you the latest edition of *The Abolitionist's Directory*, which lists all death penalty abolitionist groups nationwide, statewide and locally. Please write today, for we need your help and only with your help will we be able to rid America of capital punishment. Thank You.