

Capital Punishment: A View from Within

MY PRIMARY concern here is not compassion for the murderer. My concern is for the society which adopts vengeance as an acceptable motive for its collective behavior. If we make that choice, we will snuff out some of that boundless hope and confidence in ourselves and other people which has marked our maturing as a free people.”

These words, spoken by former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, 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 all murderers and their actions. Our objection is that the death penalty is a complete renunciation of all that is embodied in our concept of humanity. Or, more simply put, executions degrade us all.

In today's society, the execution process is far removed from most individual citizens. We may, or more likely may not, be aware of the criminal acts that put an individual on death row—and if we are, it is usually only through sensationalized press accounts. But very few of us know of the human being whom society has condemned to death. And even fewer of us have witnessed, or will ever witness, an actual execution. They are carried out in the middle of the night, in the dark, away from us

all, to hide what they really are—a barbaric punishment symbolic of our less civilized past. 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.

This deliberate dehumanization of the entire process makes it easier for us to distance ourselves from capital punishment and to accept it as “something government does,” which in turn allows us to avoid individual responsibility for the consequences of such actions. That is the only way that any state or government can continue with executions without the public demanding their eradication.

There are acceptable alternatives to capital punishment that are more in line with the values of our supposedly enlightened and humanistic society. The state is supposed to be the pillar of our ideals, and its institutions should emulate the society. Are not the greatest of these values our compassion, our concern for human rights, and our capacity for mercy? By continuing to conduct executions, aren't we undermining the very foundations of our greatness?

As Zimbabwe poet Chenjerai Hove wrote: “The death penalty is abominable, as abominable as the crime itself. Our state must be based on love, not hatred and victimization. Our penal code must be based on rehabilitation rather than annihilation.”

For so long as the spirit of vengeance has the slightest vestige of respectability, so long as it pervades the public mind and infuses its evil upon the statute books of law, we will make no headway

This communication is reprinted without embellishment or comment. The author's note, appended to his letter, explains, “I am a condemned man on Connecticut's death row. I have been on death row since June of 1987. I am currently under a stay of execution pending the resolution of the appeals process.”

towards the control of violence in our society. There are suitable alternatives. Individuals who are a danger to society must be removed from society. Society has the right to protect itself—there is no disputing that. If rehabilitation is not possible or is not a consideration, then that removal must be made permanent. But that permanent removal need not take the form of the death penalty.

Those who favor the abolition of capital punishment do not advocate releasing convicted murderers into society. The choice is not between the death penalty and unconditional release, but between the death penalty and meaningful long-term sentences. Life without the possibility of parole, or natural life sentences, meet the necessary requirements of society without being excessively brutal or barbaric.

Feelings of retribution, vengeance, blood atonement, and the like are feelings difficult to suppress. Perhaps there are some individuals who, in some sense, “deserve” to be executed. But the real question that should be asked is do we really need the death penalty? In light of such suitable alternatives as natural life sentences, is society in general paying too high a price when it executes its own citizens?

The late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall once wrote: ‘I can not agree that the American people have been so hardened, so embittered that they want to take the life of one who performs even the basest criminal act, knowing that the execution is nothing more than bloodlust.’

It is time for us to acknowledge the death penalty for what it really is—barbaric savagery, pure and simple—and abolish it nationwide. By rejecting the seemingly “simple” solutions that compromise our values and undermine the fundamental principles of our society, we maintain the greatness of our country. For it is certainly true that by giving in to our basest emotions we lower ourselves to the level of the very persons whom we wish to execute, and in the process weaken the moral fibers that bind and protect our society.

And while it is admittedly difficult at times to restrain our regressive vindictiveness, when we recognize the humanity of the person who com-



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“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”—Matthew 20:25.

mits the vilest act, when we acknowledge that person as fellow human being rather than as an object to be discarded, we honor the dignity and sanctity of life and we celebrate our own humanity.

What can you do? You can get involved, for no justice is done if everyone leaves the work of justice to everyone else. There are several organizations working hard to rid our country of capital punishment. They need your help and support. You may contact one or more of the following groups:

National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, 918 “F” St. NW, Suite 601, Washington, DC 20004. Phone (202) 347-2411

Amnesty International—Program to Abolish the Death Penalty, 322 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10001. Phone (212) 807-8400

American Civil Liberties Union—Capital Punishment Project, 122 Maryland Ave, NE, Washington, DC 20002. Phone (202) 675-2321

Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation, P.O. Box #208, Atlantic, VA 23303. Phone (804) 824-0948 □