

ARE YOU KIDDING?!

A Lifer's View of the Death Penalty

By: James Doyle

Some time ago, I sat alone in my prison cell reading a Christian magazine. One article in particular caught my eye. It was entitled, "Rethinking the Death Penalty." In it, the author laid out his polemic against the death penalty. Nothing new, he presented the same vague generalities and shallow understanding of the issue I have heard for years. However, he made one statement that really shocked me. Arguing that the death penalty is not necessary for public safety, he asserted, "with modern advancements in the corrections industry, developed nations are fully capable of keeping criminals locked away for life" (The Banner, February 2016. 21). I have only one question: ARE YOU KIDDING?!

Everyone seems to have their own opinion on the death penalty: politicians, professionals, the public. Some clamor for execution; others decry it as inhumane. Now, they all have the right to hold their opinions as well as the freedom to express them; however, they all have one thing in common: None of them has spent significant time inside a prison. Rather, their opinions are based on media sensationalism, industry propaganda, and personal agendas. Personal experience is conspicuously absent from the conversation. As a man with a life sentence, presently in the midst of my fourth decade behind the fences, I represent the voice of personal experience. And I say, keeping criminals locked away for life is inhumane. The death penalty is truly the humane option.

On April 25, 1985, I pled guilty to first degree murder in exchange for a life sentence. Like the rest of the misinformed, I felt it was more humane than the death penalty. Two days later, the Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) welcomed me to my new home. They traumatized me with the two month hazing they call the reception process. Then the DOC transferred me to Union Correctional Institution in Raiford. I was in shock but I was not abandoned. Whenever I was lonely and needed the comfort of a friendly voice, I could call my family. Someone was always there for me. Sadly, this would not last.

The first to fall away was Nanny. It may have been July 1985. Still new in prison, I lived in a constant state of anxiety, confusion and fear. Early one evening, I went to the little patch of grass in front of Dorm 57, where two blue phones hung on the slime green wall. I picked up one of the black receivers and pressed the little silver buttons, entering Nanny's number. "Hello." The operator informed Nanny she had a collect call from James Doyle. "Will you accept the

charges?" In a voice filled with desperation, Nanny replied, "Nooo," and hung up. I did not understand.

Others soon followed suit. I sent Amy a wedding gift: she did not acknowledge it. I sent everyone Christmas cards: only my parents and my sister Diane reciprocated. Trapped between the majority of the family and Dad and me, Diane made excuses for everyone. "Everyone's fine. Busy working." But that did not make sense. I still did not understand.

I finally learned the truth through "family leaks" and Dad. In building their case against me, the State Attorney had called my family in for depositions. But first...he gave all of them a copy of my confession. I finally understood: I had committed an unpardonable sin. With the exception of Mom, Dad, and Diane, my family had turned away from me.

Eventually, I lost Mom. Though Mom lived in Georgia, she and I maintained a healthy communication. We exchanged letters and holiday cards. We talked on the phone at least once a month. She even came to visit in 1987. Then things began to change. She divorced her third husband; Garlock, the company for which she worked, went out of business; she suffered a severe concussion in an auto accident. Finally, she moved back to Rochester, New York, to be with her family. Suddenly, her letters arrived more sporadically. And then, the "Phone Games."

The phone games began around 2005. One sunny afternoon at Zephyrhills Correctional Institution, I walked to the D-Dorm day room. Picking up the black receiver of the blue phone on the wall, I pressed the little silver buttons entering Mom's number. "Hello." By this time, the phone system was automated. The computer put me on hold while it gave Mom instructions on how to accept my call. About a minute later, the curt voice of the computer kicked in. "Your call was not accepted. Please try again later." A few weeks later, I called Mom again. She accepted my call this time. Beginning our conversation, she asserted, "I heard you called a few weeks ago, but I was not here." Knowing she lived alone, I guessed, "I must have heard your answering machine." Caught off guard she blurted, "I don't have an answering machine." My mind went blank. I did not understand, but I was afraid to press farther.

As a dutiful son, I continued to go to that blue phone and enter her number every month. I never expected an answer, though. She almost never accepted my calls now. She was just smarter about it, waiting to hear a computer voice warn her of a call from her son before she said, "Hello." This continued until she died, May 3, 2007.

Then I lost my Dad. Though we had a tumultuous relationship in my youth because of his verbal abuse, Dad became my best friend. He was there for me from the very beginning. Not a religious man himself, he sent me religious books he thought would be helpful and he

visited me twice a week while I was in county jail. And even though he was 71 when I was arrested, he continued to visit me faithfully regardless of where DOC sent me. Whether I was 300 miles away at Raiford or 45 miles away at Bowling Green, I survived knowing that Dad would visit every other week. Only two things could stop him: I was involved in a weekend chapel activity or he was incapacitated in the hospital.

Time is merciless. It has neither empathy for the elderly nor sympathy for the suffering. Over the years, I watched as the arthritis in his back and neck stooped his shoulders. The cartilage in his knees wore away: he digressed from walking independently to hobbling on a cane to supporting himself with a walker. He lived alone in this condition. With a daughter busy with her own family and a son in prison, his only help came from a dope addict who had worked with him in a print shop years before.

On June 30, 2007, Dad visited me for the last time. He seemed to have a little cold, but he left with his customary parting: "I love you and miss you, and I'll see you in two weeks." The following week, his cold made it hard for him to breathe. The dope addict got him to the hospital, where they discovered he really had pneumonia. They admitted him and put him on heavy antibiotics. His pneumonia cleared up, but he had become so weak, they sent him to a convalescent center to rebuild his strength. He finally returned home on August 18; however, things were still not right. I called him on August 19. Diane was with him. She let me know that Dad had had a "bad night" and that she was going to call hospice the next day. She let me talk to him for just a moment. He ended with his customary parting: "I love you and miss you, and I'll see you in Heaven." Hospice admitted Dad on August 20. Then, on August 29, 2007, Chaplain Fortner called me into his Hardee C.I. office. Dad was gone. He was 93.

Finally, I lost Diane. The last member of my family to maintain contact with me, she grew more distant after Dad's death. She had promised Dad that she would visit me faithfully when he was gone. I held on to the hope of seeing her for five years before I was finally able to accept the truth. She would never come. She and her husband moved twice, but they never gave me their new phone number. She stopped sending me a little money for birthdays and Christmas. She sent no notes or family news, just holiday cards that simply said, "Love, Diane."

Over the years, I tried to woo her into a deeper correspondence. To her credit, she did write me two real letters. She actually vented some of her feelings as well as dismissed any possibility that I will ever be paroled. I count them as special treasures; she finally told me how she felt. Years went by until I was again called into the chaplain's office. My sister died on May 4, 2019 after a long struggle with an unspecified illness. She was 81. The last thread connecting

me to my family has been severed.

Centuries ago, there was a king of a small, declining nation. It had been a great nation at one time, but now it was a vassal state to a powerful empire. Perhaps he had hopes of restoring his little nation to its former glory. Whatever the reason, he rebelled against his sovereign. Incensed, the sovereign sent his army to destroy this rebel nation. The little king fled, but he could not escape. He, along with his whole family, was dragged before his sovereign to stand judgement. The sovereign forced him to watch as soldiers murdered his seven sons. It was the last thing he ever saw. His captors gouged out his eyes and carried him away as a prisoner to their own country. There he died, the memories of failure and loss echoing through his empty heart.

A life sentence is a lot like that, but with one exception. The little king lost everything immediately; I have lost everything progressively. I have dealt with the confusion of being rejected by family, the desperation of relationships growing cold, and the self-condemnation of being helpless when my parents and sister needed me. Today, the memories of failure and loss echo through my empty heart. Yes, I have a life sentence. Yet, if nothing changes, my end will be no different than it would have been if I had a death sentence: I will die in prison. But I will be forced to hear these echoes for another thirty years before I reach the place where I will hear them no longer. The death penalty is truly the humane option.