

“The Forgotten Ones”

©the Rev. Lucy M. Ijams, all rights reserved. Permission only to use excerpts with attribution to author. May be reprinted by “Amnesty International” for events related to Abolition of the Death Penalty.

Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, April 15, 2007

Last Sunday was Easter, a festive holiday. Lots of children, whose caregivers perpetuate the myth of the Easter bunny, got chocolates and jelly beans and maybe some little presents in their Easter baskets. In keeping with the festivity, I witnessed a good joke on the day before Easter. My friend Ron had some minor surgery about three weeks ago, and last weekend we were visiting his son and family for his youngest grandchild's first birthday party. Ron and I were sitting on the living room sofa when his son came around the corner from the front hall asking about the operation. “Hey, Dad, I know you had an operation. Did your anesthetist look anything like this?” And he pulls out this [picture of the Ether Bunny—pass copies around]

What I want to talk about today is NO joke. I'm going to talk about the Easter of the Christian Bible. I'll speak about what followed the execution of Jesus of Nazareth by the ruling authorities. I'm going to talk about the survivors, the families and friends of Jesus, and what they are said to have experienced. And then, because today is the day our income taxes are due, we'll examine what follows in the wake of executions in most other cases, in these times, in our country, in our names, with our tax dollars.

Many Christians believe that Jesus was raised from the dead after his death on the cross. Some believe it is literally true, others take a more mythological stance, but it is the central story of Christianity.

All four accounts in the gospels are about the same. On that Friday, with the three crucified men dying, it was about noon, and the sky grew dark. After Jesus cried out and took his last breath, there was an earthquake, which convinced the Roman centurions that Jesus had been innocent, or in some versions, they said he truly was God's son after all. The women who were closest followers of Jesus were witnessing all this from some distance.

Joseph of Arimathea asked the governor, Pilate, if he could have the body to give it a proper burial in his own tomb. Pilate granted his request, and the body was taken and wrapped in linen and left in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rocks. A large stone was rolled in front of the opening to seal the tomb. In one account, guards were sent to the tomb to make sure that the body would not be taken by Jesus' disciples. It being just before the Sabbath, Friday evening, the body was not prepared with the customary funeral spices.

Then at the dawn on Sunday, ending the Sabbath, the women disciples of Jesus, went to the tomb to finish the cleaning and spicing of Jesus' body. To their astonishment and fear, the stone had been rolled away and the body was gone. There were angelic messengers there, with bright, shining white garments, who told them not to be afraid, that Jesus had been raised, as he had foretold, and that they should gather the disciples and meet the risen Jesus in Galilee.

The gospels vary in telling what happened next. In John there is a reference to some of the disciples staying locked inside a house because they did not want to be attacked by the Jews who were not followers of Jesus. But all the gospels say that the resurrected and glorified Jesus came to the disciples, although they did not at first recognize him. After a period of time, Jesus ascended to heaven to be with God the Father in eternity.

The gospels paint a fairly rosy picture of what the survivors of Jesus went through after his execution. We see a little grief and anguish, and perhaps some shame and isolation from the general society, but these are minimal. The really important part to tell about the most famous execution in human history is the triumph over death celebrated by Christians, and the good news of salvation through Jesus to be spread among the nations.

This gospel stands in sharp contrast to the real experiences of the survivors of the men and women who have been executed by government authorities. ----- Whereas the Christian bible raises up the stories of those who worshipped Jesus and who went on to create a religion about him after his death, today I want to lift up the stories of more ordinary people, who are the forgotten ones when it comes to capital punishment.

An editorial writer for a Texas newspaper wrote, "executions are creating a class of victims who are being traumatized by state killing machines." [Editorial Board of the *Austin American-Statesman*, Friday, October 28, 2005
<http://www.murdervictimsfamilies.org/>]

That is strong language. I'd like to humanize it for you by reading you the statements of some of the hidden victims of our system of justice.

But first, let me make it clear. Adults who commit murder and other acts of violence should be removed from society. The most heinous criminals must be removed from society permanently. Many people approve of the death penalty for this purpose. Although it may be reasonable that people who take the lives of others receive the ultimate punishment, why must the murderer's families and loved ones also be punished? Supporters of the death penalty may call this "collateral damage."

There are families of murder victims who actively oppose capital punishment. Some of them are members of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, Journey of Hope—From Violence to Healing, and Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights. They are people who have come to understand the power of forgiveness after the personal tragedy and trauma of losing loved ones by murder. They have worked through many emotions, but one of the feelings they have in common is compassion for the family members of the murderers.

What happens to those who are related to convicts condemned to death has all the hallmarks of PTSD. They are victims who experience significant trauma, yet, there are no victims' assistance programs for the survivors of the executed. The anti-death penalty community sometimes can provide support to family members if they have contact, but these relationships are informal.

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights launched a project called "No Silence, No Shame" in Texas in October, 2005. They gathered a group of parents, children, siblings, nieces, and grandchildren of people who were executed from 11 states and one from Canada for a private gathering and a public ceremony. It was the first time many of the

participants had ever talked to anyone had someone in their family executed. At the public ceremony, speakers told of their experiences, and asked that we consider the effect of executions on surviving children. They called for treatment rather than death sentences for the mentally ill, and they described how horrifying it was to witness a loved one's execution. Then they each placed two roses in a vase; saying the name of their relative who had been executed, and the name of the victim of the murder their relative committed.

With funding from the Unitarian Universalist Fund for a Just Society, among other contributing organizations, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights recently published a report, entitled "Creating More Victims: How Executions Hurt the Families Left Behind".

This report uses as a framework *The Handbook on Justice for Victims* published in 1999 by the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention and the Centre for International Crime Prevention. The handbook was created by a group of experts from more than 40 countries as a manual for putting into practice the principles set forth in the Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, which was adopted in 1985. All of the principles in the handbook could apply to the survivors of the executed, but they are not specifically included as a group to be considered. Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, in its report, "Creating More Victims" asserts that they should be.

Take the example of Misty McWee, whose father was executed in South Carolina in 1994. The report states,

At 14, Misty was shocked when she learned that her father had been charged with capital murder, but as angry, disbelieving and abandoned as she felt then, she says now she believes she could have dealt with her father's spending his life in prison. "But to have a parent executed—knowing that he died because someone pushed chemicals into him—to me that felt like murder as well. It's different from his dying of natural causes in prison."

Misty was 28 when her father was executed, and she suffered from severe depression in the year following. She tried to commit suicide near the first anniversary. "I didn't care what happened to me. I felt like I should go be with him." "Why couldn't we have had someone to help us through it?" she wonders. "When we walked in the courtroom, people gave us dirty looks, just because we belonged to our father. You wonder, what did we as kids do to deserve this? There's so much you're trying to understand and it doesn't help to have people judging you. People look at it like, the whole family must be bad." ["Creating More Victims", p.5-6]

Pam Crawford's brother, Ed Horsley, was executed in Alabama in 1996. She said,

Around the time of the execution, my kids talked openly about their Uncle Ed, but then other kids at school began saying,

“They should’ve killed him already!” and other mean things. My kids started to learn to keep it a secret because they were ashamed of the reaction they would get. They were ashamed to be connected to him, ashamed to be who they were. [Ibid. p.9 sidebar]

And the effects of Ed's execution are even apparent in Pam's granddaughter, who was 8 when he was executed. At 19, Callie is being treated for depression and her doctor asked Pam who in the family had been executed and how long it had been. The doctor asked Pam if she knew her granddaughter was still affected by it. [Ibid, p. 9]

Another effect for Pam was leaving a job she loved because of the condemnation she experienced at the time of her brother's execution. She was not treated as the survivor of a trauma, but as someone who was indistinguishable from her brother. She found a note on a closet door where she was a housekeeper that said, “You're a murderer.”

“It wasn't just the students, it was my co-workers too,” Pam recalls. “After three weeks, it was too much. I had to leave. There were times when I felt real guilty, like I had actually done something—but the only thing I was guilty of was loving my brother.” [Ibid, p. 17]

There is a particular anguish for children who are victims of domestic violence in which one parent has killed the other. When the parent who committed the murder is sentenced to death, some children plead with authorities not to kill their remaining parent.

Rose Syriani and her three siblings had been children at the time their father killed their mother. They testified against him at the trial, and were estranged from him for many years. By 2005, the children, now grown, had reconciled with their father and were opposing his execution. But Elias Syriani was executed.

Children who were minors at the time of intra-familial murder have to cope alone as adults when their parent's execution happens. Marcus Lawrie was 7 when his father killed his mother and sisters in a drug-induced rage by setting the house on fire. He was 14 when his father was executed. Now at 21 he says he doesn't think taking his father away by executing him is any compensation for his multiple losses. [Ibid, p. 10-11] The pain of one group of survivors is not redressed by causing pain to another group of survivors.

The sensibilities we have now, or could have now, in these many centuries after the execution of Jesus, are very different from how capital punishment is regarded in the Bible, both Hebrew and Christian Testaments. Our sensibilities are informed by the great religious teachers of many faiths. Atonement and forgiveness and mercy are particularly Jewish and Christian concepts. When Jesus was dying on the cross, he is reported to have said of his tormentors, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

And from Buddhism we learn the value of compassion. One must have compassion for oneself if one is to forgive those who have caused us harm. If we remain stuck in seeking revenge against those who have harmed us or caused us suffering, we are not being compassionate with ourselves, because bitterness and anger are harmful to our spirits.

Bitterness and anger become attitudes we wear toward ourselves and others. We do not have good relations with others if we do not have good relations with ourselves.

Forgiveness and compassion are in Maria Hines' story. Her "baby" brother, Jerry, was a Virginia State Trooper who was murdered by Dennis Eaton. Dennis was sentenced to death for the murder because he also killed three other people. She writes,

As a result of this death sentence, I began a great deal of soul-searching as regards what I believed about the death penalty. One thought that continually came to mind was the fact that, through Dennis Eaton's being put to death, another family would have to suffer as my family had. My search brought me only one answer, that killing another human being is wrong even when it is done in the name of justice-even when that human being was my brother's killer. . . .

I realized that, although I had forgiven Dennis Eaton in my heart, forgiveness is not in the abstract but rather, whenever possible, face to face. So I wrote to Dennis telling him of my forgiveness. This is part of what I said: "It is also difficult to forgive one who has hurt you so deeply but I believe that, for me, forgiveness is the only way. I grew up as a Catholic and, from my earliest years learned the teachings of Jesus-the main one being that our lives must be governed by love and forgiveness. Hell has been defined as the absence of love and, likewise, with hatred instead of love in my heart, my life would be a living hell. So forgiving you is not only for you but also for me-and what it would do to my own soul if I refused to forgive." ["This started in tragedy and is ending in tragedy"; *Peacework*, April, 1999 <http://www.peaceworkmagazine.org/pwork/0499/049919.htm>]

Maria eventually met her brother's killer at the prison and discovered that he had been transformed by a religious conversion and was not the same person who had killed four people. She petitioned the governor of Virginia for clemency but the sentence remained and he was executed. She was at a vigil outside the prison when he died. When she went to a memorial service for Dennis the next evening, she was able to speak to Dennis's nephew and express her sympathy to the Eaton family.

Jesus's friends and relatives were rewarded after his execution by his appearances to them and they were commissioned to spread the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, and then he ascended into heaven. The survivors of his execution were rewarded by his resurrection. They have not ever been forgotten and won't be as long as the Bible is one of the best selling books in the world.

Where is the resurrection experience for the survivors of murder victims? Does it come when the perpetrator is executed? Not according to anything I have read. Their lives can be resurrected and they can be healed of the trauma of having a loved one murdered by finding forgiveness for the murderers and having compassion for the murderer's families. It is only possible for them to have a true reconciliation with the murderers if the murderers are living. They need understanding and support from others, and our justice system does not always do the best with victims' assistance programs.

And what of the forgotten ones, the survivors of the executed? Their lives can be resurrected from the trauma they have experienced when the isolation, shame and silence in their lives are broken by speaking about their experiences and getting support from others. They committed no crime and they do not deserve to be punished. Our society does not have that in its consciousness yet.

This religious community and others have the capacity to reach out to the forgotten ones and offer support. This religious community and others can be sure to remember the "collateral damage" of the death penalty. We can support the "No Silence, No Shame project." No joke. Except that information about contacting the creators of the "No Silence, No Shame" project is on the paper with the Ether Bunny. Amen.