

FROM THE KILLING FIELDS OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: InterFaith Essays on the Resumption of Executions

Edited and with an Introduction by Sharon J. Dailey



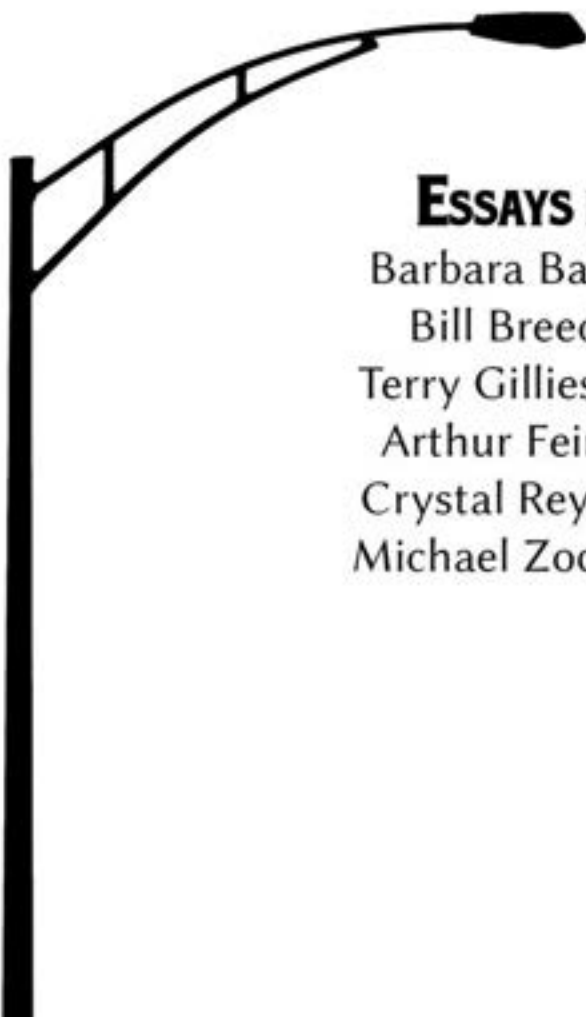
ESSAYS BY:

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Arthur Feinsod
Crystal Reynolds
Michael Zoosman

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for the InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley
by Sheron J. Dailey

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From the Killing Fields of the Federal Government: InterFaith Essays on the Resumption of Executions edited by Sheron J. Dailey

Ten essays and one poem about federal executions July 2020 - January 2021

ISBN #: 00000000000000000000000000000000

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of
Terry Gillies-Fear
(September 15, 1954 - December 14, 2020)
who believed in love and compassion
and who strove to
find elements
in the human spirit in ways that unite
— rather than divide —
all of us throughout the world.
She lived her life fully, as an ardent advocate
and a thoughtful and loving friend.



Terry Fear (far left) with three other Executive Committee members of the InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley on October 12, 2019 as they hold a vigil and protest against policies toward immigrants seeking refuge at the US southern border. They stand near the altar of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Home Church of the Sisters of Providence, on the campus of St. Mary-of-the-Woods College, West Terre Haute, Indiana.
From left to right: Terry Fear, Sister Barbara Battista, Riem Rostom and Sister Paula Damiano

“Do Justice. Love Mercy. March Proudly.”

TIMBER

William E. LeCroy Jr.

*From this barred window,
Browning at the edge of a grass field,
I behold those crooked pines,
Lines of sap oozing freely
Down the barkless spots on their trunks,
Perhaps weeping, remembering a time
In youth when they were green.
Orange bands bright like nooses
Strangle them, condemn them.
No longer part of the living eco-system,
Different somehow – infested, an eyesore,
Or carriers of fungus or death rot contagion –
They are marked for death, quarantined,
Anxiously awaiting their executioners.
Do they contemplate that fate?
Are they conscious, struggling to breathe,
Senses atwitter, ever vigilant,
Listening for the thwack! Of looming axes,
Whose vibrations tremble every dWritten uled off,
Do they scream sharply when heaped upon the pyre?
Finally consumed. Just ashes. Dead and gone.
Will there be something more for them
Than numbing oblivion, finality?
Is there someplace eternal, fertile,
Beside a tranquil river with lots of sunshine
Waiting to greet the roots of their spirit?
Or can they focus only upon the culling
Coming along today or tomorrow, or the next,
To all living things eventually,
Even the men here on death row,
Isolated, graying, dying like those pines?
Perhaps they are resigned in knowing
That much too soon, to even the mighty,
Something comes along to cut us all down.
And maybe they dread only the arbitrary waiting.*

Will wrote this poem in 2011. He was executed on September 22, 2020
at the US Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana

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INTRODUCTION

Terre Haute, Indiana is located at the intersection of two major national highways. US 41 winds from Miami through Chicago to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. US 40 links New Jersey to California and was called (before the days of interstates) "The Main Street of America." These roads meet at Seventh and Wabash in the heart of downtown Terre Haute: "The Crossroads of America."

Terre Haute is also the crossroads of two diametrically opposed ideas. Eugene V. Debs, a pacifist, lived a few blocks north of downtown. Debs' outspoken opposition to World War I led to his arrest for sedition. Upon his conviction (September 18, 1918) Debs addressed the court:

Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

A few miles south of Terre Haute is one of 122 United States Federal Penitentiaries. Since 1993 this "Federal Correctional Complex" has housed the nation's only death chamber for people who have committed federal crimes.

From 2003 until 2020 no federal executions took place. Then, on July 25, 2019, the Attorney General of the United States, William P. Barr, lifted the ban and ordered the executions of five death row inmates. He argued that each of the men had exhausted his "appellate and post-conviction remedies." Thus, after seventeen years, the door to the death chamber at the United States Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute opened.

Nearly a year later, on July 14, 2020, the US Supreme Court -- in a 5-4 unsigned decision -- vacated a District Court's decision which held that executions using pentobarbital "likely" constituted "cruel and unusual punishment." After seventeen years, the Supreme Court decided that executions should take place.

Currently, opinions* about the death penalty are almost evenly divided, as exemplified by the Supreme Court decision just cited. Perhaps the division is caused by the adversarial justice system. Thus, to hear arguments offered by a capable prosecutor and an equally capable defender is to understand how complex the legal process is, particularly the responsibilities of jurors. As tempting as it is to want "nothing but the truth" rarely is the truth "pure and simple." However, the criminal justice system demands a judgment.

Initially five men were listed in Attorney General Barr's ban. Now the number has grown to thirteen and includes one woman. Each was convicted of a heinous crime that inflicted enormous pain on the victims. They are listed here along with execution dates, brief information, and the name(s) of victim(s). The brief information was chosen only to provide a hint at the vast range of complex issues that surround the death penalty. Nothing mentioned should be interpreted either as an excuse for the crime or as a lack of sympathy for the victims as well as their friends and families who continue to mourn the tragic deaths of their loved ones.

The ten men who have been executed as of this writing are the following:

Daniel Lewis Lee (Executed July 14, 2020) committed his crimes with an accomplice, Chevie Kehoe, who was sentenced to life in prison. Lee was executed in spite of requests from the family of the victims for clemency. Lee was convicted of murdering William Frederick Mueller, Nancy Ann Mueller, and their daughter Sarah Elizabeth Powell.

Wesley Ira Purkey (Executed July 16, 2020) was described by his lawyers as so “damaged and delusional” that he did not understand that he was about to be executed. Purkey was convicted of murdering Jessica Long.

Dustin Lee Honken (Executed July 17, 2020) became a devout and repentant Catholic. His final words were, “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for me.” Honken was convicted of murdering Greg Nicholson, Lori Duncan, Kandi Duncan, Amber Duncan, and Terry DeGeus.

Lezmond Mitchell (Executed August 26, 2020) committed the crime on the Navajo Nation’s land. The Navajo opposed the execution. The father of one of the victims said he had waited 19 years to get justice for his daughter. Other family members opposed the execution. Mitchell was convicted of murdering Tiffany Lee and Alyce Slim.

Keith Dwayne Nelson (Executed August 28, 2020) was represented by lawyers in appellate court who argued that he had been inadequately represented previously and suffered from brain damage. Nelson offered no final words, and his remorse was limited. Nelson was convicted of murdering Pamela Butler.

William Emmett LeCroy, Jr. (Executed September 22, 2020) wrote the poem, “Timber,” in the prologue. His story is central to Barbara Battista’s essay in this book. LeCroy was convicted of murdering Joann Lee Tiesler.

Christopher Andre Vialva (Executed September 24, 2020) was a Messianic Jew. In his last statement, he asked God to comfort the families of the couple he killed. Vialva was convicted of murdering Stacie Bagley and Todd Bagley.

Orlando Cordia Hall (Executed November 19, 2020), a Black man, was convicted in Texas by an all-White jury. His story is a major part of the essay by Terry Fears that follows. Hall was convicted of murdering Lisa Rene.

Brandon Bernard (Executed December 10, 2020) was first found guilty by a jury. However, his execution was ultimately opposed by five of the nine surviving jurors who asked for his sentence to be commuted. Bernard was convicted of murdering Stacie Bagley and Todd Bagley.

Alfred Bourgeois (Executed December 11, 2020) offered the following final statement: "I ask God to forgive all those who plotted and schemed against me, and planted false evidence. I did not commit this crime." Bourgeois was convicted of murdering his daughter, "JG."

As of this writing, five months have passed since the first execution took place. Three more are scheduled:

Lisa Montgomery (January 12, 2021) was represented by lawyers in appellate court who argued that continual physical, mental, and emotional abuse throughout her life had left her mentally impaired. She was convicted of murdering Bobbie Jo Stinnett.

Cory Johnson (January 14, 2021) was involved in numerous drug-related crimes. His story is pivotal to the essay by Bill Breeden. He was convicted of murdering (along with accomplices) Louis Johnson, Bobby Long, Carter, Dorothy Armstrong, Curtis Thorne, Linwood Chiles, and Peyton Johnson;

Dustin John Higgs (January 15, 2021) did not murder anyone himself but was found guilty of kidnapping and ordering the killings. (The person who carried out the murders received a sentence of life plus 45 years.) The victims were Tamika Black, Tanji Jackson, and Mishann Chinn, 23.

Each individual has a compelling personal narrative as do the families of the victims who have suffered grievous losses.

At the Terre Haute intersection described earlier is a bronze sculpture of Terre Haute's native son, writer Max Ehrmann. Nearby is the text of his most famous work, "Desiderata" which begins with the line, "Go placidly amid the noise and haste and remember what peace there may be in silence." Much of the time those words are good advice. However, moments arise when to be placid and silent is to be complicit. The resumption of the executions was just such a moment for the essayists in this book. All were written by members of the InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley (IFC), which is composed of people from diverse religious faiths and humanitarian belief systems. All live near the site of the executions. All were written as the executions were taking place -- at a time when no one should be placid and silent.

The tone of the essays ranges widely from personal narratives, to impassioned analyses, to scholarly reflections, to objective reports. Furthermore, they employ an even wider range of styles beginning with the "legalistic" format of "Resolution Opposing the Death Penalty." Some were written to be spoken aloud directly to an audience. Often they feel as if they are "cries from the heart."

The first essay by Arthur Feinsod examines the opposition to the death penalty through the lenses of six people from a variety of religious faiths: Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Martin Buber, Abdul Ghaffar, the Dalai Lama, and Mother Teresa.

Bill Breeden, spiritual adviser to Cody Johnson in the weeks leading up to his scheduled execution, explores the cruelty of solitary confinement and their growing friendship. He will witness the execution if no stay is granted.

Sister Barbara Battista reflects on her experiences as a witness at the execution of Will LeCroy and the "essential truth" that his life and their friendship have given her. A line in her essay inspired the title of this book.

Terry Gillies-Fear examines the disparity between the way the justice system deals with people who have wealth and privilege and those who have neither. Her arguments prompt this fundamental question: When was the last time a rich person was executed?

Crystal Reynolds employs narratives and statistics to demonstrate the racism in the judicial system whereby the death penalty is disproportionately applied to people of color.

Michael Zoosman, in a letter published in *The Times of Israel*, explores the questions and concerns that surround this phrase in the Eighth Amendment: “nor [shall] cruel and unusual punishments [be] inflicted.”

The final essay, the second by Arthur Feinsod, builds on an issue that is fundamental to the IFC: how the friendship between Abraham and God can be a model of how we treat each other, particularly how we treat strangers, outsiders, and “the other.”

At the sculpture mentioned earlier, carefully balanced on Max Ehrmann’s knee, is a writing tablet with these words etched in the bronze: “Here is the world in miniature.” With the schism between the ideals of Eugene Debs and the realities of the death chamber, Terre Haute demonstrates, once again, the conflicts surrounding executions -- conflicts that exist not only within our nation but also throughout the world. However, over 140 nations have already abolished the death penalty, either by law or by practice, including Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and South Africa. It’s clearly time for the United States of America to join them.

Sheron J. Dailey
Terre Haute, Indiana
January 2, 2021

*A 2020 survey showed a gradually narrowing gap between abolitionists and advocates. In response to the question "Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?" a 1994 poll showed 80% favored and 16% opposed; in 2020, 55% favored and 43% opposed. Additional statistics in response to a related question are provided in the "Afterword."

RESOLUTION OPPOSING THE DEATH PENALTY

InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley

Whereas, the InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley (IFC) believes the death penalty is cruel and inhumane and violates the constitutional ban against cruel and unusual punishment as well as the guarantees of law and equal protection under the law. Moreover, it is an intolerable denial of civil liberties and is inconsistent with the fundamental values of our democratic system;

Whereas, the primary message conveyed by an execution is one of brutality and violence. The death penalty is not used fairly, has failed to make society safer, and undermines any possible alternative moral message;

Whereas, the death penalty is uncivilized in theory and often unfair and inequitable in practice and is disproportionately applied against the most vulnerable in society, including the poor, ethnic and religious minorities, as well as people with mental disorders;

Whereas, the American justice system has often been influenced by systemic racism and has a history of committing errors for other reasons, therefore making the risk of executing an innocent person ever present. When the death penalty is carried out, it is final; mistakes made cannot be undone. Innocent persons may be released from prison for a crime they did not commit, but an execution can never be reversed;

Whereas, even though there is “eye for an eye” justice referenced in all Abrahamic religions so is prohibiting murder; execution is murder even if it is state-sanctioned. In addition, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are fundamental parts -- and are at the very spirit -- of all major world religions;

Therefore, be it resolved that the IFC condemns the use of the death penalty, as it inherently violates the constitutional ban against cruel and unusual punishment and the guarantees of law and of equal protection under the law. Therefore, be it resolved that we of many faiths who belong to the Interfaith Council of the Wabash Valley call on the United States to join other Western countries to ban, once and for all, the death penalty.

Passed unanimously by the InterFaith Council Members, 11/18/20

Executive Committee:

Arthur Feinsod, President
Terry Fear, Vice President
Deborah Sitarski, Secretary
Sister Barbara Battista, SP, Secretary
Riem Rostom, Member-at-Large
Sister Paula Damiano, SP, Member-at-Large

WORDS FROM THE INTERFAITH WISE AGAINST STATE-SPONSORED HOMICIDE

Arthur Feinsod

On November 21, 2019, Indiana's InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley (IFC), passed a resolution calling for an end to the use of the death penalty in the United States. The next month our resolution was read at St. Benedict Church in Terre Haute after which I presented the following speech. My talk was heard by members of Death Penalty Action, who then invited me to repeat it in Washington DC during the summer of 2020 on the steps of the Supreme Court as part of their yearly event, "Starvin' for Justice." That event was cancelled due to Covid-19, so I delivered it instead virtually for Death Penalty Action on July 3, 2020.

*Arthur Feinsod, President
InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley*

I come today to speak in support of the InterFaith Council's resolution demanding an immediate end to the death penalty in the United States. I do so not so much with my own words but with those of six wise individuals of great faith and deep conscience: Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Martin Buber, Abdul Ghaffar, the Dalai Lama, and Mother Teresa. I bring together their voices to create a chorus of the wise, all of whom share the IFC's conviction that the death penalty must be abolished, once and for all, now and forever.

Mohandas Gandhi stated: "If a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of the others too." If the heart of all religions is the same, as Gandhi claims, I ask, where is that universal heart in relation to the death penalty? Is it revenge which comes of hate, or mercy and forgiveness which come from love and compassion?

Gandhi came at this subject from a Hindu perspective though, as a perpetual student of all religions, he constantly drew from the wisdom of other faiths as well as his own. When he found contradictions within and

between religious' precepts, he said he chose whatever brought him closer to God. His experiments with truth brought him to the concept of *ahimsa*, the Sanskrit word for "non-injury" or non-violence. Thus, he embraced the Hebrew Bible's command: "Thou shalt not kill." However, when the same Hebrew Bible states: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," Gandhi rejected that precept in favor of what brought him closer to God. His conclusion was, "An eye for an eye will only leave the whole world blind."

In a letter written in 1916, Gandhi answers the question, "Should the death penalty be allowed?"

By birth I am a follower of Vishnu and was taught ahimsa in my childhood. . . . In its negative form, ahimsa means not injuring any living being, whether by body or mind. I may not therefore hurt the person of any wrong-doer, or bear any ill will to him and so cause him mental suffering.

Later he writes: "There are many causes I would die for. There is not a single cause I would kill for." Gandhi could never accept the death penalty under any circumstance.

For a Protestant voice, I draw on the words from Gandhi's most famous American follower, **Martin Luther King, Jr.** Besides being the leading voice for the Civil Rights Movement, King studied Gandhi's writings carefully and seriously. Years after Gandhi's assassination, King traveled to India as a young man to study Gandhi's philosophy of *ahimsa*. When King was asked in 1957, "Do you think God approves the death penalty for crimes like rape and murder?" he responded,

I do not think that God approves the death penalty for any crime, rape and murder included. . . . Capital punishment is against the better judgment of modern criminology, and, above all, against the highest expression of love in the nature of God.

In his sermon "Loving Your Enemies," Dr. King preached a philosophy that came directly from the heart of the Sermon on the Mount -- from Jesus' challenge to all of us to love our enemies. His words still resonate today:

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.

In addition to Gandhi, King was deeply influenced by the writings of the greatest modern Jewish philosopher, **Martin Buber**. King referenced Buber's *I and Thou* in his most celebrated work, "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail." For Buber, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was an absolute; and his actions grew from this firm belief.

In 1961, Buber sought to halt the execution of one of the Jew's most notorious enemies, Adolf Eichmann, who was directly responsible for the deaths of thousands of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. After Eichmann had been transferred from Argentina to Israel to face the death penalty, and despite condemnation from many of his fellow Jews, Buber visited Israeli President David Ben-Gurion to try to gain a stay of execution. His argument struck at his most fundamental belief: "Thou shalt not kill" applies to the State as much it applies as to the individual.

Later Buber wrote: "What the Torah teaches us is this: none but God can command us to destroy a man." From a more practical standpoint, Buber concluded, "The death sentence has not diminished crime -- on the contrary -- killing awakens killing." Statistics confirm his conclusion: death penalties in States where it still exists are not a deterrence to murder but actually raise homicide rates. [Note: Although this information was not included in Dr. Feinsod's speech, a thorough analysis is available at <https://www.amnestyusa.org/a-clear-scientific-consensus-that-the-deathpenalty-does-not-deter/>]

From a Buddhist perspective, the current (and 14th) **Dalai Lama**, Tenzin Gyatso, opposes the death penalty on the grounds that it cuts short the opportunity for redemption. In the 1990's the Dalai Lama said:

The death penalty . . . is . . . very clearly a form of revenge. It is an especially severe form of punishment because it is so final. The human life is ended, and the executed person is deprived of the opportunity to change, to restore the harm done or compensate for it. Before advocating execution we should consider whether criminals are intrinsically negative and harmful people or whether they will remain perpetually in the same state of mind in which they committed their crime. . . . The answer, I believe, is definitely not. However horrible the act they . . . committed, I believe . . . everyone has the potential to improve and correct themselves.

Probably the most famous advocate of non-violence among modern day Muslims was **Abdul Ghaffar Khan**, a close friend of Gandhi's, who marched shoulder to shoulder with him many times, not only in support of his efforts to free India from Great Britain but also in their unsuccessful attempt to keep India and Pakistan as one country. Khan recognized the principle of non-violence as being at the very heart of Islam. Khan wrote:

The Holy Prophet Mohammed taught us that a Muslim is a man who never hurts anyone by word or deed, but who works for the benefit and happiness of God's creatures. Belief in God is to love one's fellow men.

Mother Teresa believed that opposition to the death penalty was central to Catholicism and the Gospels. She reflected her beliefs in both word and deed. In 1990 Father John Dear, who was frantically trying to stop an execution in California, called on Mother Teresa to come to his aid. This is his story in his own words:

Nervous, I dialed the long number. Halfway around the world Mother Teresa picked up the phone in her office. "Hello," she said in her heavy,

unmistakable, Albanian-Indian accent. I introduced myself, told her the situation and asked if she'd be willing to help.

"What exactly did Robert Harris do?" she asked. I told her, then proposed that she speak with the Governor of California, George Deukmejian, by phone in the next few days before the execution and ask for clemency. "Yes I will," she said, "and I will ask all the Sisters at the Motherhouse here in Calcutta to pray for the Governor." She spoke of her visit a few years earlier to San Quentin's death row. On the way out that day, she told the guard, "What you do to them, you do to God."

On Monday evening, March 26, 1990, Mother Teresa spoke briefly with the Governor. I called her back immediately to find out what happened: "Did you speak with the Governor?" I asked. "Yes. He started talking about how he had to do this, that this was the law." "What did you say?" I asked. Mother Teresa's response? "I just said, 'Do what Jesus would do.'"

No arguments. No statistics. No invocation of sin or immorality or injustice. No lecture. No angry denunciation: Just: "Do what Jesus would do." She cut right to the heart of the matter. Mother Teresa continued: "That's all I said. He talked again about how it was in the state's hands, so I repeated what I said, "Do what Jesus would do if He were in your position." [http://misyonline.info-aid.net/misyonline.com/sep-oct2002/mother-teresa-says-no-death-penalty.html/]

The efforts of Mother Teresa and Father John Dear won a temporary stay of execution, but sadly, the victory did not hold: Robert Harris was later executed in the gas chamber. But later that same year Father Dear, again with Mother Teresa's help, won permanent clemency for another inmate, Billy Neal Moore in New Mexico. When Dear called and shared the happy news with Mother Teresa, she did a dance of joy, singing, "We saved a life, we saved a life." What a great image: that dance, that song sung by a modern-day saint! And I like to think that one day we of many faiths will all be dancing, when the death penalty is finally abolished.

Recently, a decree from Attorney General Barr reinstituted the Federal death penalty. As a result, four individuals will be murdered this summer in my city of Terre Haute, Indiana: three in July, one in August. All are slated to be killed virtually in my own backyard. I'd like to say to Attorney General Barr what Mother Teresa said to the guard that day in 1990: "What you do to them, you do to God." I'd also like to say: "By taking this action, you are going against the collected wisdom of a chorus of our deepest thinkers and believers from diverse faiths – Martin Luther King, Jr., Martin Buber, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Ghaffar Kahn, the Dalai Lama – people who discovered that what is underneath their own religion is what underlies the idea of religion itself: Not revenge and punishment, which come from anger and hate, but rather compassion, mercy, and forgiveness, which come from hope and love." And that is why, from any deeply considered religious and spiritual perspective, the death penalty is untenable and must be abolished here and everywhere, now and forever.

PREPARATION FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL*

Bill Breeden

After our most recent vigil for a federal execution on December 10th, I asked my lawyer friend, Margaret O'Donnell, to find out if the next three scheduled victims of Trump's killing spree had spiritual advisors. I said that if any of them did not have one, I would serve them if they so desired. Privately, I was hoping that I would not be needed.

For more than a decade, I have served as a spiritual advisor, officially known as the "Minister of Record" (MOR), to Chad Fulks. I have visited the anteroom to hell many times. The anteroom is the Special Containment Unit (SCU) where all persons await their date with death. Hell is the execution chamber where on January 14th, barring a stay, I will witness the murder of Cory Johnson, a man I have come to love.

Albert Camus wrote that no one could imagine a more cold-blooded, premeditated murder than to hold a man (or woman) in a solitary cell for years, and then on a certain date, at a certain time, take him (her) out of that cell and kill him (or her). On January 12th, Lisa Montgomery is scheduled to be the first woman executed in the United States for more than seven decades. Cory Johnson and Dustin Higgs, two black men, are scheduled to follow on the 14th and 15th, in a macabre celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday.

Cory Johnson did not have a spiritual advisor. His lawyer advised him that it might be a bit easier for him if he had a person in the chamber with him who was there just for him, a person not paid by the government that was killing him. (The only person, aside from the assassins, who can be in hell with him, is an MOR. Lawyers can only witness from the witness rooms.) The lawyer advised Cory that I was willing to be with him, and that all he had to do was to change his religious affiliation from "none" to "Unitarian" and request that I be his MOR.

I was so impressed with Cory's response to the lawyer's suggestion that I share it now only to illustrate the integrity of this man who was scheduled to be murdered. Cory said that he couldn't put "Unitarian" on the form, because he was not a Unitarian, didn't even know what a Unitarian was, and that he was unwilling to tell a lie. He added that he was also concerned that a minister would come in and try to convert him to something he was not.

Cory needed to know that I was not going to try and convert him but would only be there as a friend, to comfort him. Once he understood that stating Unitarianism as his religious affiliation was merely a bureaucratic hoop that he had to jump through, he agreed to invite me to be his MOR.

Thus began my preparation for a descent into hell. To be very honest, I had no idea what kind of man I would find. Cory's lawyer, Don Salzman, and I talked at length by phone as I sat in my car beside the Ohio River. He told me some of what he knew of Cory. By chance, on the day the judge sentenced Cory to death, a middle-school class of mostly black children was observing the workings of the court. I suspect that, given the severity of the sentence the judge was about to pronounce, even he was surprised at their presence.

After condemning Cory to death, the judge asked him if he had anything to say. Unbeknownst to his lawyers, Cory did have something to say, but not to the judge, to the children. He turned and said to them, "I have done some terrible things in my life and this is the result of those things. Please do not follow my path."

A TV crew who was there for the sentencing interviewed some of the students when they emerged from the courtroom. They spoke of "that man who was sentenced" and mentioned that he was black -- like them. They said that they listened to what he said.

That was more than twenty-nine years ago. Cory has spent those twenty-nine years in solitary confinement. I would be his first visitor by anyone, except a lawyer, for nearly three decades.

Leo Tolstoy, in his classic work, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, wrote of a visit to an exposition on the methods of human torture in St. Petersburg, Russia in the year 1893. He determined that the number one means of human torture was solitary confinement. (As I write these words, I am aware that an estimated 70,000 Americans are in solitary confinement every day.)

I have been in solitary three times in my life, thankfully for very short periods. Those experiences were the catalysts for my becoming a volunteer prison minister for nearly three decades and visiting inmates who were in solitary. Cory has spent more years in solitary than anyone else I have ever visited. As a result, I was concerned that perhaps he would be like Renfield in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, insane and catching flies.

I could not have been more surprised to find a man who, though as his appellate lawyers argued had mental challenges, is far from insane. He is a mild-mannered human being who cares for others more than himself and is genuinely loving. Cory takes full responsibility for his past actions and does not try to excuse them or explain them away. Indeed, his most difficult task is forgiving himself. We discussed the fact that he was a warrior in a gang war and that killing is the nature of all wars. I told him that if he had killed in Baghdad, seventeen civilians, including children, we could probably get him a pardon.

Since becoming Cory's MOR, I have spent about twenty-four hours with him. I wish I could spend many more. I will have a few more hours on Thursday morning before he is murdered, unless we find a judge with a conscience, who will stop this killing spree by a treasonous president who seems to be enamored with killing. Even hundreds of thousands of Covid

deaths have not sated his morbid hunger. Cory, along with more than thirty-five inmates in the SCU, has Covid.

Thanks to the generosity of Cory's legal team and to folks from all over the country, we have raised the funds to make it possible for his family members to come to visit him. They have shared how joyful he has been to see them after twenty-nine years.

My greatest fear is that this Thursday will have no joy. But if Cory makes the descent into the hell that is the execution chamber, I will be with him, praying. And one of the prayers that I will offer is from Jesus of Nazareth who, when he was being executed, cried out, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Regardless of what happens this Thursday, I will carry Cory with me for the rest of my life. I plan to share more memories of him, and some of my other experiences on death row in my memoirs, because these condemned persons have added so much to my understanding of what it means to be a human being.

Thanks to all who fight to end the madness that abounds in our nation, of which murder by the State is among the greatest expressions.

*The title for this essay is a reference to and was inspired by Doris Lessing's book, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971).

WITNESS

Sister Barbara Battista, SP

Our faith calls us to recognize that no one is exempt from God's love.

-- Thomas Merton

I watched a man die. He wanted someone to be there for him. Someone not on the killing team. September 22, 2020 at 9:06 p.m. in the execution chamber of the United States Penitentiary (USP) in Terre Haute, Indiana, Mr. William Emmet LeCroy, Jr. took his last breath strapped down, flat on his back, on a slightly tilted cruciform table in a room full of windows. Five of us shared that room. Will, defenseless and completely at the mercy of his executioner, had asked me to pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet with him. I began, "Our Father. . . ." and continued through the rites to the final line, "Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us and on the whole world."

Will asked me to continue to pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet, out loud, as the executioner began his death-dealing infusion. And I did. I wonder if the warden, the U.S. Marshall, or the executioner were silently praying these words with me? I know Will was.

I met Will near the end of August. We were introduced through Keith Dwayne Nelson, a man whose life was taken on August 28th inside that very same chamber. The Bureau of Prisons conducts these executions in a highly orchestrated manner. Nothing is left to chance. The staff is kind, solicitous even. Many are in Personal Protective Equipment. A few wear a good-fitting mask for protection. My overriding impression is that of a stark environment, devoid of human emotion, calm, and eerily quiet while an act of extreme violence is being inflicted upon another human being . . . a person whom Jesus referred to when enjoining us to "love our neighbor as ourselves."

As of this writing, the federal government has inflicted revenge killing, or executions, on seven persons starting July 13, 2020. Three more are scheduled before Christmas: Orlando Hall, November 19; Lisa Montgomery, December 8; Brandon Bernard, December 10. Sadly, Terre Haute has become the killing fields for the Federal Government which issues its orders in the name of "We the People of the United States. . . ."

The Bishops of Indiana, along with numerous other Bishops, have spoken out against the death penalty. So have religious communities across the country, including my own, the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. My faith and the teachings of our Church compel me to say "No!" to the death penalty and to work to abolish it. In 2017, Pope Francis approved the following revision to paragraph 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: *"...the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide."* We are called to respect the human dignity of all persons. Those on death row are no exception.

A year ago, we formed the Terre Haute Death Penalty Resistance to collaborate in working to abolish the death penalty and bear witness to federal executions. We have members from Catholic Mobilizing Network; Indiana Catholic Conference; Indiana Abolition Coalition; Sisters of Providence; Oldenburg Franciscans; InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley; Amnesty International; students from across Indiana; and various other individuals from around the nation who are dedicated to abolishing the death penalty. The day of each execution we gather in protest and vigil at the main entrance to the United States Penitentiary in Terre Haute.

Will mailed his last words to me which, as Providence would have it, came the day after he was executed. At a press conference the morning of September 24th, when Christopher Vialva would be executed later that day, I spoke William's last words. He quoted from his spiritual guides - Thomas Merton, Pema Chodron and others. From Kahil Gibran's book,

The Prophet, Will identified an essential truth: "But I say that even as the Holy and the righteous cannot rise beyond the highest which is in each of you, so the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower than the lowest which is in you also."

I believe Will LeCroy can teach us an essential truth: Who among us deserves to be labeled, judged, discarded even, according to the worst thing we ever did? Rather are we not called to honor human dignity and extend God's loving design to all creation, to all persons? Surely just as we know that God loves us always and is never far from us, so are we called to love one another always, no matter what. October is Respect Life month; I urge you to join me in working to abolish the death penalty. Let us move towards Advent with a renewed commitment to truly be brother or sister to all members of the human community.

WE ARE BETTER THAN VENGEANCE

Terry Gillies-Fear

Thirteen minutes. The time it takes me to drive to Starbucks. For Orlando Hall, sitting on death row, thirteen minutes sealed his execution. Had these minutes passed, and midnight been reached, the stay of execution for Orlando Hall would have been extended 90 days. But a last-minute Supreme Court decision (6-3) vacated the stay. At 11:47 PM EST, Thursday, November 19, 2020, Orlando Hall was pronounced dead at the United States Federal Penitentiary, Terre Haute. The cause of death on his death certificate? Legal homicide. Justice is not blind, but it is capricious.

To be honest and transparent, Orlando Hall killed a sixteen year-old girl in a grisly, brutal manner. Another African American man, OJ Simpson, was accused of a similarly horrific crime. However, unlike OJ, there was no "Dream Team" defense for Orlando. No Johnnie-Cochran-like, high-profile attorney arguing to the jury, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit." No, the American justice system is not blind to celebrity. Nor is it deaf to money.

OJ Simpson's popularity and wealth provided him with a unique advantage that few African American males have. He was found "not guilty" by a criminal justice system that, according to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), "is persistent in its racial discrimination in the US death penalty." They continue, "Racial disparities are present at every stage of a capital case and get magnified as a case moves through the legal process."

OJ won against the odds. Traditionally, simply accusing a Black man of the grisly murder of a White woman and a White man carried with it a presumption of guilt. However, OJ was found not guilty because he was OJ. He received the justice reserved for the rich and famous.

Orlando Hall, twenty-six years ago, brutally murdered his victim. The details are so horrific that I cannot bring myself to type them out. What he did was evil. As a result, he put himself into a criminal justice system that would ultimately kill him. Orlando spent 26 years on death row, repenting and mourning the death of that young girl. But he had neither fame nor fortune which would have been enough for him to receive a life sentence. Instead, he was condemned in Texas by an all-White jury. Racial discrimination most certainly played a part in driving his death sentence. Robert Dunham, DCIP's Executive Director, stated, "[T]he modern death penalty is the direct descendant of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow segregation. . . ." He added that the death penalty plays, "an out-sized role as an agent and validator of racial discrimination. What is broken or intentionally discriminatory in the criminal legal system is visibly worse in death penalty cases." Orlando got the poor Black man's justice system.

The Interfaith Council of the Wabash Valley has written a "Resolution Opposing the Death Penalty"* with rationales that include, in part:

- The primary message conveyed by an execution is one of brutality and violence. The death penalty is not used fairly, has failed to make society safer, and undermines any possible alternative moral message;
- The death penalty is uncivilized in theory and inequitable in practice, and is disproportionately applied against the most vulnerable in society. . . ;
- Even though there is an "eye for an eye" justice referenced in all Abrahamic religions, so is prohibiting murder; execution is murder even if it is state-sanctioned. In addition, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are fundamental parts -- and are at the very spirit -- of all major religions.

Across the road from the prison along US Highway 41, I have joined execution-protest vigils, both in person and virtually, with the Sisters of

Providence, the Interfaith Council of the Wabash Valley, NAACP, Unitarian Universalists, Death Penalty Action, Terre Haute Death Penalty Resistance, Jewish Abolitionist Society** (virtually), as well as with other individuals and sometimes the families of the prisoners. Always quiet and somber, we pray and wait. We mourn not only for the prisoners and their families but also for the victims and their families. We are a small group of heartsick people -- hopeless and helpless -- keeping vigil over a condemned man or woman who will be executed *in our name*: "We the People of the United States." We keep coming back -- eight times now in eleven weeks. The next execution is scheduled for the first night of Hanukkah, with two more to follow. Donald Trump, William Barr, and the Supreme Court of the United States have made quite an efficient team.

My personal wish is always for a death sentence to be commuted to life in prison. I long for the United States to join other Western countries in their ban of the death penalty.

Today, November 21, 2000, OJ Simpson, now in his seventies, spends his time golfing. Today, Orlando Hall's children and grandchildren prepare for his burial.

Once OJ was found "not guilty", he pledged to find the real killer. Neither he -- nor anyone else -- has. In fact, in spite of evidence that many people think clearly and unequivocally links him to the murders, many other people still ask, "How could 'The Juice,' that lovable hero of the hapless Buffalo Bills and *Naked Gun* movies, butcher his ex and her boyfriend?

Orlando Hall, or Shakib Wali (his Muslim name), was not apparently lovable. He looked guilty. Unless you listen closely to the man he became in prison. His words came from a transformed man. A man who thought about his victim everyday, and mourned over the horrible senseless loss of life that he caused. Sitting on death row, he repented and became a man of deep faith.

Orlando Hall's last email was sent on November 19th to friends, including Cantor Michael Zoosman*** of the Jewish Abolitionist Society. I am including Orlando's words here, exactly as he wrote them, three days before his execution.

Hello, First and far most, I want to thank ALL of you for your humanity, although our government has said I don't deserve your compassion and that your reverence for my life and others in my position is misplaced, your presence and efforts have proven them wrong once again. Love will always defeat hate! I have truly been humbled by your altruism and consistent commitment to abolishing the death penalty, to you spreading love, mercy, and the power of redemption. . . . It's true that the death penalty murders people that have turned their lives around and developed attributes that if allowed, can thrive in any community and be assets. . . . If you're a Christian, you must believe that Christ is the THE REDEEMER of all. As a practicing Muslim I know the power of redemption, and Allah's Mercy is for ALL. I know it's real and can be achieved by all that are willing to surrender to Higher Power. I'm living proof. I want to thank the faith-based community for all your prayers and efforts. Please know that even when the government carries out its injustice that we're standing on the side of victory and humanity and that is our victory. The spirit of Love can never be killed when we choose to express it. My prayer is that on this we continue to grow stronger in faith and love. Allah is Mercy! Please be at peace. In love, Orlando Hall

I am astounded by his faith in God. I am truly astonished by the transformation that occurred while he was incarcerated.

In another life, before he put himself under the control of the Department of Justice, this new Orlando could have been my friend and fellow member of the InterFaith Council. He could have been an honorary member of the Daughters of Abraham and joined Riem, Sister Paula, Sister Barbara, and me in lively conversation. He surely would be joining his large family around the Thanksgiving table. Maybe even playing golf. . . .

*The text is included in its entirety earlier in this book.

**The name of the Jewish Abolitionist Society has been changed to "L'chaim!
Jews Against the Death Penalty"

***An essay by Cantor Zoosman is included later in this book.

MODERN DAY LYNCHING?

Crystal Mikell Reynolds*

Capital punishment is the formal and euphemistic terminology for what is commonly, and more appropriately, called the “death penalty.” The term refers to the legal killing of a person, as legislated by either the federal or a state government. The term “lynch law” is a colloquial term for the practice of murdering alleged offenders by mob action without proper trial and without due process of law. Usually, the mob’s preferred form of execution was hanging. While lethal injection is currently the preferred method for federal executions, hanging, electrocution, gas chambers, and firing squads have also been used in the past. Capital punishment is legal and is rooted in federal law, and interestingly, lynching on the federal level is not illegal. Both of these methods (capital punishment and lynching) have been used to punish African Americans disproportionately.

At the recent Indiana State Convention of the NAACP, its leaders reaffirmed the organization’s historical stance in opposition to capital punishment. The leadership’s current position can be traced back to the numerous White mobs that historically used lynching as an extrajudicial form of the death penalty. However, the reaffirmation noted a most significant point: on both the state and federal levels, a great disparity exists between White and Black offenders in arresting, charging, plea bargaining, sentencing, and executing. The NAACP’s opposition can also be credited to the historical fact that most African Americans were sentenced to death at the hands of all-White or predominately White juries in speedy trials with no legal safeguards. Due process was denied or overlooked. And interestingly, the poorer and darker-skinned the African American, the more likely the death penalty would be used. In addition, the majority of Black Americans on death row were convicted of killing or sexually assaulting White persons.

In the hearts and minds of many Black people, just the word “lynching” is particularly disturbing because it conjures up horrific images of mutilated and burned bodies hanging from trees (which gave rise to the chilling phrase, “Strange Fruit”), surrounded by leering, cheering, triumphant White crowds. Today, however, many citizens of the United States see the death penalty as a government-sanctioned form of lynching, even though the executions are conducted within the law. Like lynchings, however, they are carried out by all or mostly White juries and disproportionately applied to people of color.

Although the death penalty in the United States can be traced back to the earliest years of the Republic, the 1790s, lynching dates back to the 1830s when it was first used against Whites. Rarely were Blacks lynched during the Antebellum period because Enslaved Africans were considered property and too valuable. However, after emancipation, from 1886-1968, lynching served as a way to terrorize and control the Black population. The NAACP reports that there were 4,743 lynchings in America and 3,446 were Black Americans. [www.naACP.org] In other words, at a time when the African American population never exceeded 12% of the total population, almost three-quarters of the people lynched were Black.

The nadir of lynching was between the 1880s and 1930s. This practice was not limited to the south although Mississippi had the greatest number with 581. Also, not all victims were Black and male. Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, and Caucasians as well as men and women were also murdered. [www.naACP.org]

Sadly, February 2021 will mark the 120th anniversary of the lynching of George Ward in a midwestern “northern” state -- in my adopted hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana, often called the Crossroads of America. In 1901, Mr. Ward was accused of killing a White Jewish school teacher. He was forcibly taken out of his jail cell by a White mob, beaten, dragged through the streets, and hanged from the Wabash River Bridge. Then, his mutilated body was burned on a pyre. Nothing could ever justify these

atrocities, but they were magnified by the fact that Mr. Ward never received that most important and fundamental right of all Americans: a trial by a jury of his peers.

This spectacle of horror continued when buttons from Mr. Ward's unburned boots and his toes were taken as keepsakes. His toes reportedly sold for one dollar each. The Vigo County Historical Society (Terre Haute) has gruesome pictures of the lynching, taken by a local photographer, that were sold as souvenirs. Although several of the persons responsible for the hanging were photographed, no one was ever held responsible. In fact, some public police officials and other members of the White mob were celebrated for their involvement.

In 1909, eight years after Ward's lynching, the NAACP was founded, partly as a result of the great number of lynchings occurring in the United States, as well as because of the crusading activism of journalists, such as Ida B. Wells, who waged a dynamic anti-lynching campaign in the 1890s and early 1900s. A central tenet of the organization was to seek national legislation that would put an end to this evil practice.

However, initial efforts to pass anti-lynching legislation actually predate the formation of the NAACP. In 1900, the year before George Ward's murder, the first anti-lynching law was proposed to the United States Congress. The bill called for the prosecution of lynchings at the federal level and was brought to the House by an African American Republican Congressman, George W. White from North Carolina, which was formerly a state with Enslaved Africans. It died in committee. Undaunted, brave members of Congress have tried to pass anti-lynching laws approximately 200 times since 1900. Each time they have failed.

Although numerous laws on both the state and federal levels prohibit murder, currently there is not, nor has there ever been, an anti-lynching bill passed by the United States Congress. The current bill (introduced by senators Cory Booker, Kamala Harris, and Tim Scott) is now officially

called the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act, named after the young Chicago teen who was tortured and murdered at the hands of a White mob in Mississippi in 1955. This bill was passed by the House of Representatives by a 410-4 margin and is currently before the Senate. But as of December 2020, no anti-lynching bill has ever been passed by both the House and Senate.

Some argue that lynching should be treated as an historic anomaly and that we should forget about it: "Let bygones be bygones." However, many other people believe that the execution of predominately Black men is a modern form of lynching. This is a strong statement, but one advocated by many among all races. It is also a sentiment that is deeply rooted in the psyche of virtually all Black Americans.

The modern day death penalty was reenacted in 1977; however, no federal executions took place until 2001, when Timothy McVeigh (who blew up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995) became the first person executed in the federal system since 1963. Although numerous offenders were sentenced to death after 2001, not one was executed; instead, all were left to languish indefinitely in a grim limbo. However, this all changed in July of 2019 when United States Attorney General William Barr advocated for the resumption of federal executions. As of this writing (December 15, 2020), seventeen years after lifting the hiatus on the federal death penalty, ten men have been put to death in the federal system in just six months. Four were Black. Three more people are slated to lose their lives in January 2021, the twilight of Donald Trump's presidency. Two are Black. That's almost 50% of recent executions, whereas, only 13.4% of the population is Black.

This unprecedented rush to execute raises many questions. Why is the seventeen-year hiatus on federal executions being lifted? Why are these deaths suddenly being pursued with such zeal in the waning days of a lame-duck presidency? Why are so many of those on death row people of color?

Proponents of the death penalty argue that the race or gender of those on death row does not matter and that it is the crime itself and the victims that matter. Yes, victims matter. Yes, victims' families matter. Yes, Black lives matter. Yes, human beings matter. The fact that a disproportionate number of those who are on death row are Black matters, as current statistics demonstrate. A total of 2,557 people are on death row; 1,063 are Black: 41% at a time when the black population is, again, 13.4% of the population. [<https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/death-row/overview/demographics>] Every life matters. We are all connected on this planet. Every living thing on this planet is connected.

In her study of trees, (ironically, as indicated earlier, the preferred vehicle of 19th Century White lynch mobs), ecologist Suzanne Simard observes that trees are so interconnected that when one tree in a forest is cut down, the other trees -- the bigger, sturdier, older species -- use their roots to provide nutrients to the smaller remaining trees who are no longer the beneficiary of assistance from the removed tree. Remarkably, the trees who are alive reach out and help the other trees to stay alive, regardless of whether they are oak, sycamore, or other. They preserve the life of their fellow trees. I wonder how great it would be if we humans, in this interconnected world, could reach out to help and protect the lives of our fellow brethren, regardless of the color of the person's skin, or place in life, or redemptive status. These trees help because other trees are in need of help.

Those who sit on death row need help. I, as an African American Catholic woman from the Deep South, am expressing my opinions here in support of life and am willing to work toward ending this state-sanctioned taking of life. However, people of color should not be the only ones who talk about racial inequalities in the federal and state capital punishment systems. The fact that there is a disproportionate number of Black men on death row, and the fact that there appears to be an unseemly race to execute all the Black men who currently sit on the federal death row is not just a

Black thing,” but is an overtly political thing. Black, Brown, and White brethren should all be speaking out against this travesty in our country. In fact, we all should be speaking out and up for all people facing such state-sanctioned murders carried out in the name of “We the People. . . .” And yes, we all should be speaking up for the victims of crimes as well. Like trees in the forest, we are all interconnected, and when one of us or one group is in crisis, then we all should reach out to help that group to preserve life. Groups like the NAACP and the InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley have heard the cry and understand the crisis. They understand that this is a universal issue that calls all of us to protect the sanctity of human life.

Finally, this essay is a call to action. Capital punishment must end because it has no place in our interconnected world. Of course, the mention of “interconnectedness” steers us into a discussion of mutual support and interdependence that is of ultimate significance but, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this essay. However, drawing from the analogy of the trees cited earlier, I only ask this question: In the final analysis, doesn’t all life matter?

*I wish to thank Theresa Bynum, Phoenix Bynum, and Graeme Reid for their editorial assistance in revising this essay.!

THE DEATH PENALTY IS AN ABOMINATION*

Michael Zoosman

As a Jewish, former prison chaplain and as a third-generation descendent of Holocaust survivors, I know this: State-sponsored killings of prisoners is the epitome of evil. In response to the recent executions, I wrote this letter to President Donald Trump and Acting Attorney General, Kenneth Rosen and sent it to The Israel Times.

December 27, 2020, 3:57 p.m.

I am a Jewish, multi-faith federal chaplain and former prison chaplain with a message – a plea – to President Trump and Attorney General Rosen.

I represent the group “L’chaim! [To Life!] Jews Against the Death Penalty,” founded last month, that now has over 500 members as of this writing. We are joined by countless other rabbis, cantors and Jewish community leaders who oppose the death penalty and who, along with us, are aligned with the organization Death Penalty Action.

In my loudest possible cantorial voice, I chant “Never Again!” to state-sponsored killings of prisoners, whether by use of the lethal injection protocols created by the Nazis or otherwise! The death penalty is an abomination before any name for Divinity. It is the epitome of evil, worse than any capital crime. It is collectively premeditated by society and leads to a singularly sadistic form of prolonged, cruel and unusual punishment: namely, the psychological torture of forcing human beings to approach a scheduled date with death against their will. It is sadistically racist as it is practiced in this country. Also, the often-argued notion that it is a deterrence** has been shown time and again to be wrong. It is the most egregious horror of a profoundly broken criminal “justice” system that begs for immediate transformation from the hell that it has become into an

entirely new system designed from restorative justice principles and practices. This is the only moral and ethical way forward for humanity.

I know these facts well. Formerly, I served as a prison chaplain, and I have been in regular mail and email correspondence with those on federal death row -- and on various state death rows -- who have been waiting to die. I have borne witness to their torture. Ten men have been executed in the past five months including two during the 10 Days of Repentance and two on the first two nights of Hanukkah, when we snuffed out their lights even as we kindled the redemptive lights of Hanukkah. Another individual I am in touch with is slated to be killed in the federal death chamber on January 15th -- on what would have been the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ninety-second birthday. You may recall MLK's views on the death penalty: "Capital punishment is against the better judgment of modern criminology, and, above all, against the highest expression of love in the nature of God."

At execution protest vigils at the US Capitol Steps and the Department of Justice during the 10 Days of Repentance and just prior to the execution of Christopher Vialva, who corresponded with me and who identifies with Jewish practices, I wore a shirt that says, "I am Troy Davis." Troy Davis -- who, with his last breath, maintained his innocence and who was, in all probability, unjustly convicted -- was executed by the state of Georgia in 2011.

Future generations of Americans will look back at us and ask what in God's name we thought we were doing. In the only version of "an eye for an eye" that makes any sense at all in "20/20" we will have to look our grandchildren in the eye and try to explain why we remained silent bystanders as this horror was perpetrated in our names. . . . And we will surely fail, lowering our eyes in shame as we avert our eyes from their gaze.

Any government killing of defenseless prisoners is wrong -- from those who took the lives of my family members in the Holocaust to that

which is taking place in the death chamber at what-is-euphemistically called the "Federal Correctional Complex" in Terre Haute, Indiana.

In a cruel irony, the death chamber is located in the same zip code as the CANDLES*** Holocaust Museum of Terre Haute, Indiana, which commemorates victims of medical experiments developed by the Nazis, including the protocol for lethal injection created by Dr. Karl Brandt, a personal physician to Adolph Hitler. The Nazis used these lethal injections in their infamous AKTION T4 program to legally murder disabled children and adults, along with Jews and others the state deemed undesirable or "unworthy of life." It may be that this is the first time you are learning about these facts. Now that you know, it is incumbent upon you to rise up and act. There is no viable way -- by definition -- for a government to kill its prisoners.

The perpetuation of this state-sponsored killing system is the worst kind of slap in the face to those who aspire to learn from the past. It allows the legacy of the hatred and killing of Hitler and the Nazis to live on in this country. Government-sponsored killings of prisoners -- conducted in the name of "We the People" -- constitute the diametric opposite of the values of restorative justice and forgiveness that the late founder of CANDLES, Holocaust survivor Eva Mozes Kor, practiced and preached when she corresponded with former Nazis and discovered the transformative power of healing through forgiveness. In my humble opinion, she rolls over in her grave to see what is taking place in the backyard of her museum. I imagine she would agree with another Jewish woman of Herculean spiritual strength and wisdom, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, who famously said: "If I were queen, there would be no death penalty."

It goes without saying that the mass murder of innocents during the Shoah and the execution of those who committed horrible crimes must not be conflated. My family members who were killed, like millions of others, committed no crimes whatsoever. Neither did my grandmother, who was one of the survivors and who just turned 100 years old on Dec. 24th of this year. Her stories of her horrific experiences have taught me to speak out

against government killing of the defenseless when I see it. Even worse, when it comes to the reality of possibly executing people who may be innocent of the charges for which they were convicted, the prospect of an American Holocaust indeed becomes much more real. We saw this happen with Troy Davis nine years ago, along with countless others, like Walter "Arkie" Barton, the first person to be executed in in the United States (Missouri) in the COVID era.

President Trump, this is the killing spree you should have ended when you promised to end "American carnage" in your inaugural address. Instead, you have accelerated it with an unprecedented rush to execute that will constitute one of the greatest stains on your legacy.

As a hospital chaplain, I have walked with the dead and their loved ones in hospitals, morgues and cemeteries. I have learned the hard way and first-hand that inflicting more unnecessary pain, suffering and undesired death never brings true healing. It only brings more pain for all parties. We are simply lying to ourselves if we think anything else. I also have learned that legislating death for prisoners against their will crosses a spiritual line that we should not cross in this world.

This life is meant for something greater -- what I personally experience in my Jewish tradition as HaShekhinah -- the loving and just Divine Feminine Presence. I profoundly honor and respect the right of all people to describe this idea however they wish, through any values-driven, ethical, humanist, moral and/or spiritual lens that speaks to them. As a multi-faith chaplain, it is my sacred calling to honor this personal path toward that which gives us life, and I remain humbled by the many faces and names for the great mystery of life and death.

What I do know with absolute certainty is this: We cannot allow the legacy of the Nazis to continue, not next to the CANDLES Holocaust museum, nor anywhere in this country, or for that matter in our world. Not on our watch as human beings!

As a federal chaplain, I carry the responsibility of honoring and serving Divine ideals and the highest values of our nation, which includes balancing justice and mercy. For me, this also includes what National Institutes of Health Director, Dr. Francis Collins, has reminded my colleagues and me: “[A]t the most fundamental level, our mission at NIH is about the respect for human life, which should permeate all aspects of our lives and our work.”

Dr. Fauci and other doctors and scientists at the NIH remind us regularly to respect human life as we strive to end COVID-19. I would not be doing my job as a chaplain before the Divine, nor as a federal employee who honors the values of our government, if I did not speak out in the loudest possible voice against this blatant violation of our prime directive. Consider this, then, the greatest act of a “federal whistleblower!”

So, hear this cantor, President Trump: Please, in the name of God and humanity, grant clemency to Lisa Montgomery, Corey Johnson and Dustin John Higgs! It’s too late for the others who have been executed since July 2020, but not for these three human beings.

Acting Attorney General Rosen, I invite you to please read this petition from Jewish leaders across the country who join me in calling upon you to rescind these three death warrants. At the very least, for the sake of your Jewish people, Mr. Rosen, do not allow the legacy of the Nazis to continue in your name. Your cantor reminds you: “Never Again!”

As we all prepare to put the global horror that was 2020 behind us on the eve of a new year and decade, allow me to propose a toast: To the banishment of Malakh Hamavet -- the Angel of Death - from this land and this planet forever. Instead: L’chaim! To Life!

Respectfully,
Cantor Michael Zoosman, BCC
Federal Chaplain
3rd Generation Holocaust Survivor

*A slightly different version of this letter was originally printed in The Times of Israel (December 28, 2020) and is reprinted with permission.

** A thorough analysis of deterrence is available at <https://www.amnestyusa.org/aclear-scientific-consensus-that-the-death-penalty-does-not-deter/>

*** CANDLES (an acronym for "Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiments Survivors") is a museum and education center in Terre Haute that was founded in 1984 by Eva Kor, a survivor of Auschwitz who, as a small child, was subjected to Mengele's experiments on twins.

ON ABRAHAMIC FRIENDSHIP

Arthur Feinsod

Opposition to the death penalty can be viewed within the larger context of interfaith principles that are traceable to Abraham, the shared ancestor of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as to the ethical imperatives that are common to all three religions. Furthermore, those imperatives can be traced not only to Abraham himself, and his importance to all three religions, but also to his friendship with God and all that such a relationship implies. Most importantly, this friendship between Abraham and God can be a model of how we treat outsiders, particularly how we treat strangers and “the other.”

The monotheism of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as their commitment to faith, all spring from the prophet Abraham. He is a foundational prophet for all three religions because it is his progeny who carry his legacy forward to Islam through his first-born son Ishmael (whose mother was his Egyptian slave, Hagar) and to Judaism and Christianity through Isaac (whose mother was his wife, Sarah). All three religions today recognize lineage from Abraham, their common ancestor.

The most sacred texts of all three religions describe Abraham as God’s “friend.” The Hebrew Bible provides that description twice. First, Isaiah (41:8) states, “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend....” Then, in II Chronicles (20:7) Jehoshaphat asks, “Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham?” In the New Testament the Epistle of James (2:23) declares, “Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God.’” The Qur’an, the holiest of holy texts for Muslims asks (*surah* 4:125), “Who could be better in religion than those who direct

themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith? God took Abraham as a friend" (*surah* 4:125).

Describing their relationship as a friendship has a solid basis in both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an. In both texts, Abraham is seen as trusting in the one and only God in the same way that one would trust a good friend. God reciprocates, being as He tells him in a vision, his "shield" to protect him (Genesis 15:1). In the Qur'an, the young Abraham wins God's trust by rebelling against his biological father's polytheism and idolatry by preaching monotheism. He also undercuts the sale of his father's idols by announcing -- even as he attempts to sell them -- that they will do no good for those who buy them. When Abraham is condemned to the fire, God miraculously douses the flames, and he emerges unscathed. In both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an, Abraham proves his absolute faith by preparing to sacrifice his son when commanded by God to do so. However, the son (who is Isaac, as stated in the Hebrew Bible, or Ishmael, as implied in the Qur'an) is saved by divine intervention. These acts of friendship manifest a profound love between an all-powerful God and his human friend.

An important part of friendship is acceptance, which is at the heart of the relationship between Abraham and God. Abraham accepts God's bidding to go forth and leave Ur -- to leave everything that he is familiar with. [And God supports Abraham's effort to help Ishmael build the Kaaba, believed by Muslims to be the first house of worship on earth.] Abraham also accepts God's call for a sacrifice, even the sacrifice of his own son. Acceptance between God and Abraham, then, is certainly a factor in their relationship.

When a friend needs help, the other friend often assumes a position of superiority and acts as a protector, as does God when he tells Abraham not to be afraid since He is his shield. But ultimately friendships tend toward equality. Friendship begets a closeness between individuals who

conceive of themselves as equal partners. Thus, when God refers to a human as a friend, He implies that they can meet as equals.

Furthermore, having the sacred texts explicitly call them friends implies a kind of closeness rarely seen between a deity and a human in any religion. It implies an intimacy beyond what might be assumed by thinking of God as a father, which suggests authority and superiority rather than equality.

Because Jews, Christians and Muslims all love and honor Abraham, who loves and honors God, one would think that they would naturally treat each other as friends, through their shared belief in God, their shared belief in Abraham as a prophet, and their shared belief in Abraham's important place in the establishment of the three religions through his progeny. Unfortunately, the history between the three religions demonstrates the opposite: centuries of hatred, violence, and warfare, with periods of domination and subjugation as well as omnipresent, unrelenting prejudice and intolerance. Abraham has not been the glue one would have hoped for and expected.

Among the many reasons for this constant conflict is the pernicious influence of the attitude of "chosenness." This concept, as defined by Reuven Firestone in his book *Who are the Real Chosen People?: The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, is the claim, shared by all three religions, that theirs was selected as special by God over all other religions. The followers of each argue, "If God has selected my religion, my religion is therefore superior to all the others. Therefore, I am superior to all others." That feeling runs counter to the very nature of friendship, the great equalizer. Feelings of superiority disrupt and even negate the possibility of coming together on the equal ground of friendship.

Another reason for the constant conflict is exclusivity. If one religion is the one and only way to God, then all other forms of worship are invalid, wrong, sinful, or even evil. This entails thinking of religion as a zero-sum

game. Thus, if there is only one way to God and, therefore, every other way leads *away from* God, the validity of one religion means the invalidity of all others. Exclusionary thinking is one of the biggest obstacles to interfaith love and respect among devotees of the three Abrahamic religions.

Three obvious examples of obstacles to friendship in each religion's representative texts are especially striking. Deuteronomy (7:6) from the Hebrew Bible proclaims to the Jewish people, "You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." In the New Testament John (14:6) quotes Jesus as saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me." A final example from the Qur'an (*surah* 3:110) announces:

You are the best community that has been brought forth for humanity, commanding the reputable and forbidding the disreputable, and believing in God. If the People of the Book had believed it would have been better for them. Some of them are believers but most are degenerate.

Examining each of these passages in terms of its historical context reveals that all three were written when survival demanded that each religion assert its superiority and/or exclusivity or vanish. However, only rarely do people today understand these passages in terms of their historical contexts. Instead, the passages are often taken out of context altogether and read by adherents as a justification for why their religion is superior to others in how God is to be worshipped -- or why theirs is right while all others are wrong.

And yet many passages in the sacred texts of all three religions express tolerance, even acceptance, of the beliefs of others, especially those who trace their beliefs to Abraham. The Muslims, for example, call Jews and Christians (and themselves) "people of the book," as a shared honorific, exerting superiority over those who are not faithful monotheists. Although few passages in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament can be

interpreted as directly expressing acceptance and tolerance toward people of other faiths, many passages in both sacred texts open the door to friendship in a different way, by espousing universal principles of love, brotherhood, charity for the needy, hospitality, forgiveness, mercy and the acceptance of all human beings regardless of their faith affiliations.

Like virtually every religion on earth, all three religions ascribe to the Golden Rule. Variations on this theme are found throughout each of the sacred texts; however, a few passages illustrate the basic idea. In Judaism the Tobit (4:14) reads: "And what you hate, do to no man." In Christianity the words Matthew ascribes to Jesus (7:12) are often thought to summarize His entire Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore all things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. . . ." In Islam, "Anas narrated that the Prophet said, 'None of you will have faith till he wishes for his brother what he likes for himself'" (Al-Bukhari, Volume 1, Hadith #12). Not one of the three specifies that "the other," has to be of the same religion; in this way ,the Golden Rule encourages bonds with people both within and between faiths.

In addition, the three religions emphasize social duty and responsibility which require that the faithful give aid to those in need, regardless of whether or not they belong to the same religious faith. Charity is one of the five pillars of Islam, and it can be applied not only to fellow Muslims but to any people in need. In the New Testament, Christians are called to treat others as if they were Jesus himself (Matthew 25:41-46); and in the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 58:10) Jews are called to "feed the hungry and help those in trouble."

The most sacred texts of these religions also contain passages promoting compassion, mercy and forgiveness towards one's fellow human beings, all of which open the door to interfaith understanding, a prerequisite for friendship. Each religion opposes killing as demanded precisely and explicitly in the Sixth Commandment of the Hebrew Bible: Thou shalt not kill. In the New Testament, Matthew (5:44) quotes Jesus's

admonition to his disciples: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you." The Qur'an states, "If anyone kills a person – unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land – it is as if he kills all mankind" (*surah* 5:32). These passages encourage friendship in ways that transcend one's own religion.

But can these foundational principles override the concept of revenge? Can the argument in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 21:22-25) that commands "an eye for an eye" be countered, especially as it is used to justify the death penalty in the United States?

When people are found guilty of a crime, most particularly a crime that has caused them to receive the death penalty, they often become outsiders. But are they outside the boundaries of universal brotherhood? Are they no longer a "neighbor" who deserves "love"? Are they beyond the principle, "Thou shalt not kill"?

Many people slated to be executed in the United States are already outsiders even before they end up on death row. In a society and judicial system dominated by financially comfortable White Christians, all too many people slated to be executed are either people of color or White people from poor backgrounds. Crimes only brand them further as outsiders, as strangers. But Abraham, too, was a stranger in Egypt and later in Canaan. When he ventured forth from his hometown of polytheists, who were like his father, he was making himself a stranger and yet was still a friend of God. If all fellow humans are our neighbors, does committing a so-called "capital crime" remove them from being a neighbor and thus allow us to kill them?

All three religions, of course, defend killing in self-defense, whether it be in its individual or state-sponsored form. But two of the passages quoted above, the "eye for an eye" injunction in the Hebrew Bible and the passage from the Qur'an, seem to justify killing in retribution or for

vengeance. While these passages are open to an interpretation that legitimates capital punishment, earlier arguments in this essay demonstrate that this idea is already contradicted and annulled by other statements in each of the three religions.

The great 20th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber held an absolutist's view on the subject of killing that drove him to argue against capital punishment in Israel even for Adolph Eichmann who proposed "the final solution," the massacre of all Jews, and who was accused, tried and convicted of sending thousands of Hungarian Jews to their deaths. Buber argued that the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" supersedes and nullifies "an eye for an eye." Furthermore, in one of the "antitheses" expressed in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus responds to the "eye for an eye" principle with a higher principle. Jesus states that loving thy neighbor is not enough: one must love thy enemy too, and that if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek for it, too, to be slapped (Matthew 5:39). This wisdom was carried into action by all those advocating civil disobedience, including Antigone, Thoreau, Gandhi, and King.

The most sacred texts of all three Abrahamic religions include numerous references to mercy and forgiveness, in fact, many more references to both than to retribution and revenge. In the Hebrew Bible, both echo throughout Psalms (25:6-7 and 51:1-2); Isaiah (30:18 and 55:7; Proverbs (28:13); and Micah in which God "delights to show mercy" Micah (7:18). The Qur'an directly favors mercy over retribution with these words: "But if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself" (*surah* 5:45). This citation is not an anomaly, as world religions scholar, Huston Smith, has demonstrated: Allah's compassion and mercy are mentioned 192 times in the Qur'an, with only 17 references to His wrath and vengeance. Furthermore, the bell of mercy and forgiveness rings clearly and loudly throughout the New Testament. Mercy resounds most powerfully in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus

The apparent contradictions within the most sacred texts can be bewildering. At such times, the advice of Mohandas Gandhi, a lover of many faiths, may be helpful. When faced with these contradictions, Gandhi's answer for himself was to follow the statement that made him feel closer to God. He found that passages of mercy, forgiveness, and compassion made him feel closer to God than passages about revenge. For, after all, God is love, and that concept transcends all religious divisions.

Instead of positing superiority and exclusive thinking, it is incumbent upon us to consider religions in terms of variable-sum rather than zero-sum entities whereby a number of "winners" is possible. Thus, we can conclude that there are many equally valid paths to God and that no one religious faith has a monopoly on Truth or the True Way to God.

Accepting this idea should not, in any way, detract from appreciation of the truth and preciousness of any individual's personal religion. Indeed, this view is shared by two great and wise men who lived centuries apart and who belonged to two different religions: Rumi, a 13th century poet and a Sufi Muslim, and Mohandas Gandhi, a 20th century spiritual and political leader and a Hindu.

Rumi conceived religion in a way that goes even further than the Qur'anic creed of tolerance for other religions. For Rumi, each religion was merely a different path to the same God. In Rumi's poem "Moses and the Shepherd," Moses criticizes a shepherd for how he worships. God overhears him and asks:

*... Did you come as a Prophet to unite, or to sever?
I have given each being a separate and unique way
of seeing and knowing and saying that knowledge.*

*What seems wrong to you is right for him.
What is poison to one is honey to someone else.*

*Purity and impurity, sloth and diligence in worship,
These mean nothing to me.*

*I am apart from all that.
Ways of worship are not to be ranked as better
Or worse than one another.*

Rumi's syncretic vision of respect for other forms of worship that are based on love did not lessen the bond he had with his own religion, just as Gandhi's attachment to the sacred works of other religions, like the Bible and the Qur'an, never detracted from his love and commitment to Hinduism. Similarly, our love and respect for other religions need not diminish our love and commitment to our own religion. We can all strive to achieve a variable-sum mindset, but it asks us to ignore, de-emphasize, or reevaluate exclusionary and hegemonic passages as anachronistic or, at the very least, inapplicable in today's world. Instead, we are called to emphasize passages that promote loving our neighbors by respecting any form of worship that is based on love and acceptance.

The friendship between Abraham and God described at the beginning of this essay is demonstrated in one of the most striking passages in the Hebrew Bible's first chapter, Genesis. At the beginning of Chapter 18, Ishmael is thirteen, and Abraham is ninety-nine. The great patriarch is sitting at the entrance of his tent on a hot day when the Lord appears before him. Abraham looks up; and rather than seeing God, he sees three strangers, as if they were God Himself. Abraham realizes that he needs to do for these strangers exactly what he would do for God. So he becomes the perfect host. He bows to the ground before them, the way Muslims pray to Allah; then, he offers them water, food and rest. Though Abraham does not seek a reward, he receives one of enormous consequence. One of the strangers foretells that he will have a son by Sarah, even though Abraham and his wife are both far beyond child-bearing age -- a miraculous birth that will happen a year from that visit.

The great biblical scholar Karen Armstrong describes the alacrity with which Abraham brings these visitors into his family home and performs acts of friendship as “the first human being to enjoy an intimacy with the divine since the expulsion from Eden.” Generosity toward fellow human beings not only nets him a miraculous second son, but also proves his intimate friendship with God. Because Abraham shows the same reverence to these strangers as he would show to God, writes Armstrong, God knows he could, “sit and eat with Abraham as a friend.”

Clearly there is a spiritual connection between honoring God and honoring one’s fellow human beings. In the New Testament (Matthew 22:36-40) a follower asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment. Jesus replies: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” When Jesus says the second commandment is “like unto it,” He makes explicit that both are inextricably linked -- that one restates the other. Thus, loving God and loving thy neighbor as thyself are virtually the same thing.

But what if they were outsiders, like the strangers who approached Abraham’s tent on that hot day? Yes, they are neighbors when we view “neighbors” in the broadest possible sense of the word, just as all human beings sharing our earth are neighbors. But what if they are viewed more narrowly, as outside the “neighborhood” and, thus, needing protection? Abraham’s answer is to accommodate the strangers not only as if they were friends, but as if they were God himself.

Any stranger can be an angel from God, and we must act accordingly. As God declares himself Abraham’s shield, we, too, are to protect the stranger and remember the prisoner (Matthew 25:43) -- as if each were Jesus himself. Once again in Matthew (25:46) Jesus offers this admonition, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

No one -- no stranger or prisoner -- is more clearly "the least" than those souls who sit on death row, waiting the ultimate judgment from their fellow man. They are powerless, so we must step in and say, "Stop the killing." It is then that we must act as their voice and shield, as God is for Abraham. We must act as a friend acts and speak out. And by being that voice, we shore them up, raising them up to the more equal status of friend. In the face of the death penalty, whoever is outside, whether Muslim, Jew or Christian, must speak out for the "other" who will be subjected to the killing. We must speak out if, for no other reason, in homage to the friendship between God and Abraham, the shared founding prophet of every Jew, Christian, and Muslim.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Barbara Battista, SP

Sister Barbara is an Indianapolis native and a member of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods Indiana. She serves as Justice Promoter for her congregation. In that role, she is asked to focus the energy of the Providence Community in effecting justice on all levels.

Environmental justice, abolishing the death penalty, immigrant rights, racial justice, church reform, and criminal justice reform are among the Community's critical areas of concern. Barbara is active in numerous justice-seeking organizations, a sampling of which includes the following: Treasurer of the InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley; local lead organizer for Terre Haute Death Penalty Resistance which works closely with Death Penalty Action and other abolitionist groups across the nation; and working groups for the Terre Haute Community Remembrance project, "Facing Injustice: The Lynching of George Ward." Sister Barbara companioned two men on federal death row including into the execution chamber. Praying with them and staying in contact with their friends and family members has been deeply challenging and transformative. In her own words, "My work as abolitionist, as spiritual companion, as organizer and facilitator for broader criminal justice reform is the path of love. Not a path I could have created or even planned for. Truly seeking justice is the public expression of love. And love takes me, perhaps us, to places we never imagined we could ever go."

Bill Breeden

The Reverend Bill Breeden retired as a Unitarian-Universalist minister in Bloomington, Indiana in 2014 after which he served as co-minister with the Reverend Florence Caplow in Urbana, Illinois until May 2020. In 2016 he was a candidate for Indiana State Representative. Although he wasn't elected, he points out that he enjoyed meeting a host of good people as he campaigned. A long-time peace activist, Bill was briefly imprisoned for peace in Indiana, Kentucky, Washington, DC, and Honduras. On two

occasions, he drove truckloads of aid to Nicaragua. Howard Zinn included Bill in his *Peoples History of the United States* as the only person to serve jail time, as a result of the Iran/Contra scandal, for his non-violent protest of Reagan's illegal war. In 2004 he travelled to Israel and Palestine on a fact-finding trip. His extensive work in prison ministry includes service for many decades as a spiritual advisor to inmates who are on death row. He is a past recipient of the Bloomington, Indiana Human Rights Award. Bill and Glenda, his life partner of 50+ years, share a joy of living and a passion for peace and justice. They have two adult children and one teenage grandson. Bill is currently working on his memoirs, entitled *Billy Pilgrim and the Black Female Jesus*.

Terry Gillies-Fear

This book is dedicated to the memory of a tireless and determined advocate for social justice. On Saturday, December 14, 2020, Terry spent much of the afternoon editing, "We Are Better than Vengeance." That evening she died unexpectedly. The shock of her loss reverberated throughout the InterFaith Council (IFC) where she served as Vice President and on the Executive Committee. A few days after her death, the IFC held a memorial service that brought written and spoken tributes from dozens of members. IFC President Arthur Feinsod said, "She lit the light of the InterFaith Council, and now there is a candle in my soul that was lit by Terry Fear, and that flame will never go out."

Later that week Terry's friend, Nancy Sommers, wrote a thoughtful and eloquent tribute that included these words:

With boldness and a strong moral compass, Terry knew what she was called to do and planted herself firmly and deeply at the intersection of Judaism and social justice. She believed that one cannot love God without a passion for justice. . . . She believed the world could be more peaceful and habitable and that she had a responsibility to build interfaith communities to make it so.

[Please Note: Nancy Sommers' complete text is available on the United Hebrew Congregation in Terre Haute website: <https://www.unitedhebrewth.org/rememberterry-fear-by-these-words-do-justice-love-mercy-march-proudly/>]

Finally, this benediction from the traditional Jewish response to a grievous loss seems appropriate: "May her memory be a blessing." In Terry's case, memories of her are, indeed, a blessing and will be for a very long time.

Arthur Feinsod, Ph.D.

Dr. Feinsod, President of the InterFaith Council of the Wabash Valley, has given a number of talks on faith and interfaith topics. He is Professor of Theater and in the Honors College at Indiana State University. As playwright, he wrote plays produced professionally including: *Table 17*; *Coming to See Aunt Sophie* (performed in US, Poland, Germany and Australia and translated into Polish and Hungarian); *Between the Dams* (also translated into Hungarian); and *Sword Against the Sea* (an adaptation of William Butler Yeats' *Cuchulain* plays and poems published by Samuel French). Feinsod served as artistic director of Crossroads Repertory Theatre from 2001 to 2014. He is the recipient of numerous teaching, research and creativity awards, including the Arthur Hughes Award for Teaching Excellence from Trinity College (where he taught before coming to Indiana State) and, at ISU, the Caleb Mills Distinguished Teaching Award; the Honors College Teacher-of-the-Year Award; and the Theodore Dreiser Distinguished Research/Creativity Award. As a theater scholar, he wrote *The Simple Stage* published by Greenwood Press and a chapter on Broadway director Arthur Hopkins for a multi-volume work on North American 20th century directors published by Bloomsbury Press. He holds degrees from Harvard (BA), UC Berkeley (MA), and New York University (PhD).

Crystal Mikell Reynolds, Ph.D

Dr. Reynolds, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana who calls Terre Haute her second home, is a trained historian and alumna of Indiana State University and Tulane University. She has taught at several local colleges and universities and cites her many years spent as an instructor in the College Prison Program in Indiana as her most fulfilling role. She is the author of three books (self-published) and numerous essays that focus on minority groups and women in Terre Haute, Indiana. She is also a guest

writer for the *Terre Haute Tribune-Star* for the column "Wabash Valley Historical Center Historical Treasures." Reynolds also designs and leads historical tours centered on Terre Haute's diverse and interesting history. She is the mother of two children (Alvin and Yzabel), both of whom share her passion for a more just Earth. Her daughter, Yzabel sang "Amazing Grace" at the recent InterFaith Council's commemoration for IFC member, Ms. Terry Gillies-Fear. Reynolds is currently a case manager at Hamilton Center, Inc. in the area of Forensics (the legal system and corrections) where she works to ensure that her clients are treated justly and humanely.

Cantor Michael Zoosman

Cantor Zoosman (he/him/his) is first and foremost a husband and father. Born and raised in West Hartford CT, he now lives with his wife and two daughters in College Park, MD. He is a Board Certified Chaplain with Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC) and received his investiture as a Cantor from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 2008, where he studied as a Wexner Graduate Fellow. He received his undergraduate degrees from Brandeis University, with majors in history and music, and minors in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies. He sits as an advisory board member at Death Penalty Action and is the founder of the group "L'chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty." Michael served as a fulltime cantor at Congregation Beth Israel in Vancouver, BC and is a former Jewish prison chaplain and psychiatric hospital chaplain. Currently, he is a multi-faith hospital chaplain at a federal research hospital, the National Institutes of Health - Clinical Center in Bethesda, MD. He is inspired by the life and work of Bill Pelke who successfully petitioned for his grandmother's murderer to get off of death row before devoting his life to the cause. Bill said, "The answer is love and compassion for all humanity." Michael's comments here represent his own opinions and not those of the federal government . . . yet!

AFTERWORD

Only six minutes away from my home is the entrance to the “killing fields of the federal government.” Because, as a prison employee said, “no one is allowed on private federal property,” vigils and protests for each of the ten men executed between July 14th and December 10th, 2020 were held across the street. Memories of those deaths have led me to think about the future, specifically, the three people who are scheduled to die before Joe Biden is inaugurated on January 20, 2021.

Biden has made clear that he opposes the death penalty. His website states:

Over 160 individuals who've been sentenced to death in this country since 1973 have later been exonerated. Because we cannot ensure we get death penalty cases right every time, Biden will work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government's example. These individuals should instead serve life sentences without probation or parole. [<https://joebiden.com/justice/>]

The thought that Lisa Montgomery (execution date, January 12, 2021), Cory Johnson (execution date, January 13, 2021), and Dustin John Higgs (execution date, January 15, 2021) may be the tragic victims of cruel timing is horrifying.

Those fearful images bring to mind the faithful abolitionists who have gathered at vigils to protest each execution. For five months, with COVID-19 raging around them and in weather ranging from hot, muggy days in July to frigid, biting days in December, they endured. They were hopeful when it appeared as if a stay might be possible; they despaired when the official word came down that “We, the People” had executed another human being.

The intersection where the vigils were held is busy. As cars went by, some drivers honked their horns and waved in approval, while others jeered and shouted, "Kill them all!" Most drove on silently. Once again, the conflicts within our "world in miniature," as Max Ehrmann wrote, were apparent. Will the vigilant protesters be there again in January? All fear the answer.

One participant who attended many of the vigils was Bill Pelke who would fly down from his home in Anchorage, Alaska. He had made plans to protest the execution of Orlando Hall on November 15th; but unfortunately, Bill died on November 12th. During the vigil for Mr. Hall, the protesters shared memories of Bill, including his compelling story about the murder of his grandmother and his conversion from death penalty advocate to abolitionist. Thoughts of Bill's successful effort to get the death penalty sentence for his grandmother's murderer commuted provide hope. Indeed, his tireless devotion to the cause will never be forgotten.

Most of the of the essayists knew Bill. All have been a part of numerous vigils and protests whether in person, in spirit, or (during the past five months) virtually. I am grateful to them for all of their contributions, particularly their determination to "never give up." I am also grateful to the many thoughtful and helpful people behind the scenes whose contributions have enabled the publication of this book. To mention only a few, Theresa Bynum, Phoenix Bynum, and Graeme Reid offered comments and suggestions to Crystal Reynolds for her essay; Tom Tucker and Crystal Smith Hammon helped me with mine. Certainly I will always be grateful for -- and amazed by -- Arthur Feinsod's efforts that went far beyond his extraordinary contribution of two thoughtful essays. Arthur also initiated the plans that eventually led to publication and provided invaluable and tireless editorial assistance every day. Perhaps most importantly, Arthur found printer, Simon Peterson, who worked through every detail with creativity, determination, and goodwill.

Finally, I'm reminded that Muriel Rukeyer in *The Life of Poetry* asks, "My one reader, you reading this book, who are you?" Whoever you are who is reading *this* book -- and whenever and wherever you are reading it -- thank you. If you believe life imprisonment with no possibility of parole is a better punishment for murder than the death penalty you are finally among the 60* percent who share the same view. And you probably agree with Terry Gillies-Fear who said in her essay, "My personal wish is always for a death sentence to be commuted to life in prison." Yes, indeed.

In addition, my personal wish is for a future in which another book on recent executions is not only unnecessary but impossible. May that day come soon.

Sheron J. Dailey
Terre Haute, Indiana
January 7, 2021

*This information is so uplifting that you might like to read the entire summation at news.gallup.com/

"Standing next to my fellow human beings as we witnessed against the brutality of the state in the backyard of the Terre Haute community, I could never have fully understood their deep and personal thinking and motivations. With these writings, we get to explore scriptural interpretations, historic relevance, and the true essence of each of these leaders. Their passion for justice without violence manifested itself first with a repeated, somewhat ceremonial collective presence protesting the unprecedented federal execution spree of the Trump Administration. Now their passion lives on in these pages - a wake-up call to humanity."

—Abraham J. Bonowitz
Director, Death Penalty Action



Demonstrators are seen near the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Ind., to show their opposition to the death penalty July 13, 2020.
(CNS photo/Bryan Woolston, Reuters)