

Compassion

Written by Death-Row Prisoners

HELPING PRISONERS ON DEATH ROW LIVE CONNECTED AND FRUITFUL LIVES

140 W. South Boundary Street | Perrysburg, OH 43551

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Publishing compassionate and introspective articles written by death-row prisoners.



ATTENTION DEATH ROW PRISONERS:

We need your art to make Compassion's 2021 Calendar.

Your gift helps us operate and gives scholarships to family members of murder victims.

Deadline is extended, postmark by October 31.

Thank you.

www.compassionondeathrow.net

Three Scholarships Awarded

Compassion is honored to present \$700.00 scholarships to three ladies who tragically lost family members to murder. Charli Elliott from Herrin, IL will be attending Southern Illinois University; Isabella Garcia from Mapleton, North Dakota will be attending North Dakota State University; and Christine Riley from San Diego, CA will be attending Mira Costa College. Their essays that accompanied their applications appear in this issue. Death Row prisoners donate their works of art to help fund these awards.

Demonstrating Compassion

by Charli M. Elliott

My Great Grandmother, Maxine McKenzie, devoted her life to taking care of Veterans at the Marion, Illinois Veterans Hospital for more than 30 years. She demonstrated compassion her entire life by taking care of Veterans with PTSD and HIV, as well as the people in her small town of Hurst, Illinois. My Grandmother, Nancy Elliott, followed in her mother's footsteps and devoted her life to students with special needs. My grandmother taught students with special needs for more than 30 years. My father and mother also followed in her footsteps and pursued a career in teaching special needs students. My family truly believes in giving back to their community and serving students with special needs and their families.

On June 25, 2000, my family's world came crashing down. Along with two cohorts, one of my

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A Family's Tragedy Repeated

by Christine M. Riley



October 5, 2014 was the day my entire family woke up to a nightmare and a tragedy which forever changed our lives. My mother was contacted by the

Fresno County Coroner's office that her only son, my only brother had been brutally murdered. As a friend drove me to my mother's job, I noticed we were behind an ambulance going the same direction. I knew in my heart the ambulance was on its way to see about my mother. For the next two months, we were tormented by not knowing who took my baby brother's life and why. One day we received a call from Fresno Homicide Detectives that an arrest had been made and the detectives needed to meet with the immediate family as soon as possible. My mother, my oldest sister and I sat

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He Won't Be Here Anymore

by Izabella Garcia



My name is Izabella Garcia. On June 20, 2019, my Grandpa Mario Garcia, Sr.'s body was located in the wooded ravine behind his trailer. My grandmother who has been married to my grandpa for almost 40 years was the one who murdered him. She confessed to authorities after she was taken in that she had murdered my grandpa by shooting him in the face, putting a bag over his head and pulling him to the ravine. There she continued pouring carpet cleaner on his body so it would decompose and mask the smell of the dead body. This tragedy divided our whole family. Everybody is taking sides. Some of the family says that her murdering him was an accident and that she didn't murder him; others saying that she murdered him since there is evidence she did, and because she confessed.

Continues on page 2

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor are welcomed from all prisoners (this includes non-death row prisoners) and the outside community.

In submitting letters, we ask that compassionate and introspective guidelines apply to your communications.

Limit size to 400 words or less. Letters may be edited for clarity and space considerations.

SEND ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO:

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PLEASE NOTE: Any opinions expressed in this publication are those of the individuals writing them and not of Compassion or other staff members. Anything death row prisoners write may jeopardize their future appeals. This may limit the scope of their expressions.

All stories are subject to editing for grammar, sentence structure, and clarity.

EDITORIAL:

Stepping Stones

I love an intense basketball game: the quick, sharp passes that'll crack your fingers or nose if you aren't paying attention; the tight swerves and spins around opponents, close enough to streak sweat across their chests; the grateful, floating fingerrolls... But even at my best, I'm mediocre. Many guys here on death row are a whole lot better than I am, but still none of use are NBA quality. The average age here is 50; I'm young, at 39. What's interesting is that when we play pick-up games, our teams include men who're less athletic than us – and everybody knows it – yet we expect them to perform NBA level feats! I've found myself getting frustrated when one on my 60-year-old teammates moved too slow. It's foolish, I know. And unrealistic to expect them to move their creaky knees like me. Nevertheless, I sometimes do the same thing spiritually. Some might consider me a "mature Christian," meaning I am knowledgeable in scripture and generally walk the walk. Intellectually I know it's taken more than 15 years of nonstop study and contemplation for me to reach this stage – rather, for the last 15 years God has developed me, using my daily devotions and tools to shape me. Yet, caught up in the intensity of everyday life, when I observe the Christians around me who are newer to The Way, I sometimes find myself getting frustrated with their shortcomings.

Recently when it happened God convicted me: He showed me that not only was I being prideful and sanctimonious, but I was being unrealistically critical and impatient where I should've been moved to compassion. Further, I know better! The small slip I'd witnessed my brother commit was nothing compared to my negative attitude. "Man judges the outward appearance, but God judges the heart."

It reminded me that I hadn't "arrived". In fact, none of us has. Spiritual maturity is a growing process that won't be completed until we receive our resurrected bodies; which means, until then, we will remain works-in-progress. God humbled me. It is wrong to hold less developed believers to the same standard of accountability as the so-called "mature" disciples.

Whether playing basketball or practicing our faith, I pray that we would be more patient and compassionate in our attitudes toward others. In this way we will help lift others to higher levels rather than knock their feet out from under them. Let us be stepping stones not stumbling blocks. Amen.



George Wilkerson
Editor
North Carolina Death Row
Raleigh, NC

Continued from page 1

He Won't Be Here Anymore

My grandpa's murder has affected me drastically. Knowing that he won't be here with me for all my milestones makes my heart heavy. He wasn't here to sing me Happy Birthday in his broken English like he did every year. He won't be there to watch me graduate high school, select a college, graduate college, and become a doctor. He won't be there to watch me get married, or to watch me grow a family. He won't be there for anything anymore.

He should be here. He should still be laughing and singing and dancing. He should still be alive. It's hardest when something really exciting happens in my life and he is the first person that I want to tell but I can't and I won't ever be able to. We played a song called "You Should Be Here" by Cole Swindell at his funeral and it is now referred to as "Grandpa's Song." Whenever it plays we all sit there, some of us quietly, singing along, some of us crying, and some of us just listening to the words of the song. My heart will forever hurt over the loss of my grandpa, but I know that one day I will see him again.

A Family's Tragedy Repeated

in my mother's living room and listened in horror as the detectives told us the man who killed my brother was a complete stranger, and after stabbing my brother nine times, he had bragged to other people that he "killed a nigger because too many was in his mother's neighborhood." To add to the horror of learning this, we were also told my brother had four broken fingers from fighting for his life; my brother was unarmed.

Two weeks before jury selection was scheduled to begin for my brother's murderer, Fresno Homicide Detectives was once again at our door to tell me my oldest son, 22-years old, died from a stab wound to his heart. I sank to my knees; it absolutely could not be true that once again another loved one in my family had been murdered. I felt tortured when I found out my son, just like my brother, was unarmed when he was murdered. After laying my oldest son to rest, jury selection began for my brother's murderer. I felt so much anger. I wanted both of the men who had destroyed my family's life to be punished and I felt no compassion for either man. I felt the only way I would ever sleep, eat, and have a life again was to see both offenders brought to justice and suffer as I did each day.

My beloved mother taught our family the meaning of compassion on December 16, 2016. In the courtroom, my mother stood in front of the man who took her only son's life and told him she forgave him for what he had done. My mother told him that God had forgiven her for her own sins and as a Christian she must do the same. As our family sat and listened with tears rolling down our cheeks, for the first time I thought of the two men who had changed my family's lives forever with a level of compassion and sorrow. Compassion is forgiveness.

Demonstrating Compassion

father's students murdered and raped my great grandmother. It devastated my grandmother, father, and mother and family. My Great Grandmother, Maxine McKenzie, was raped repeatedly and shot eight times. The three young men defiled her body and left her naked body outside exposed to the elements. The men killed her dog and stole her vehicle. My father almost gave up teaching due to this horrific act of violence but he was determined to continue serving his community.

Through prayer and fortitude, my father began to forgive the three murderers. He forgave them for several reasons. He forgave them because he began to hate rather than love. As a Catholic man, he believed that Christ forgives all. He also forgave the three men because he wanted to lead by example for his family and students. My family did not pursue the death penalty. Two of the men were sentenced to 75 years without parole and one was sentenced to 60 years without parole.

I was robbed of any memory of my Great Grandmother, Maxine McKenzie, by three young men. As I grew up, my father told me stories of my Great Grandmother and her devotion to Veterans and her community. My father also taught me the love of forgiveness and commitment. I have also learned to forgive those three men, and other people who have wronged me throughout my young life.

I am pursuing a degree in Special Education so that I may give back to my community. I am proud of my family's commitment to serving others. I am also proud of my family's compassion for others. By demonstrating compassion in our lives, we make our world a better place and lead by example of Christ. I will serve my community and demonstrate compassion by teaching students with special needs and coaching Cross County Track and Field as well as the Special Olympics Team.

Letter to the Editor:

We Have All Lost Hope

Above Psalms 88 in my Bible is the heading "Prayer in the Face of Death." That got me to thinking... In ancient days many innocent men were tossed in the lions den, the furnaces, etc., some even were flogged for the faith. Today, we are a different breed, generally. Most of us wouldn't be martyrs. In fact, some of us actually took a life and that's the only reason somebody's trying to take ours.

Here in Texas a lady named Karla Faye Tucker was sentenced to death. I read a book she wrote since then, and although it's been

several years since I read it I remember that her FAITH stood out to me – it was so pure. God had transformed her: she was no longer the person arrested years before.

I imagine that those who stood for Jesus knew their fate, yet they persisted in being witnesses anyway, as a legacy we benefit from today, to help us become the people God created us to be. When we take the focus off ourselves, our self-interest, and instead take in the needs of those around us – then we're being Christ-like. By opening our ears to others we also heal the child within us who

was hurt so long ago. Caring for others opens a channel for God's love to shine through.

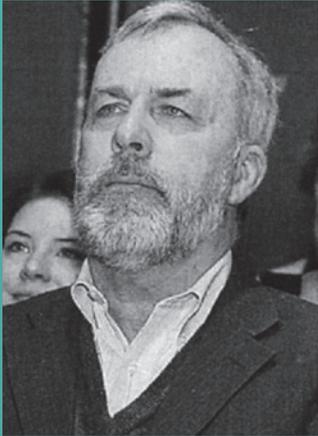
We may not be martyrs, but it takes self-sacrifice to truly care for the needs of others. To put others' needs before our own – that's where it begins, that's when we begin to change...from the inside out.



Shari Eggum
Gatesville Unit
Texas

VICTIMS VOICE

Opposition to the Death Penalty and a Life of Service



Renny Cushing

At 10:00 in the evening of June 1, 1988 Renny Cushing's mother was lying on the couch watching a Celtics game while his father was at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. There was a knock at the door and as his father answered it a couple of shotgun blasts rang out and his father died in front of his mother.

Renny writes "Prior to his father's murder, I was opposed to the death penalty." Although he was from the Irish-Catholic tradition, whose teachings include, "Thou shalt not kill", he was more akin to a set of principles upon which he consciously decided "I wanted to lead my life with a vision I have of a world in which I want to live."

His father's murder shaped Renny's work as an advocate for crime victims; and as an opponent of capital punishment. As a victim-abolitionist, he has been a pioneer in the effort to bridge death penalty abolition groups and the the victims' rights movement. He is the founder and Executive Director of Murder Victims Families for Human Rights and he travels throughout the U.S. and the world speaking with and on behalf of victims who oppose capital punishment.

Renny served two terms in the New Hampshire House of Representatives, where he was involved in victims' issues and sponsored a measure that would have abolished the death penalty in that state. He has counseled victims' families and supported them during trials, hearings and executions. He also helps the families of the condemned learn to survive their particular traumas.

Phones in Church

A man in Topeka, Kansas decided to write a book about churches around the country. He started by flying to California and planned on working his way east from there.

Going to a very large church, he began taking photographs and making notes. He spotted a golden telephone on the vestibule wall and was intrigued with a sign which read "Calls: \$100.00 a minute."

Seeking out the pastor he asked about the phone and sign. The pastor answered that the golden phone is, in fact, a direct line to heaven and if you pay the price you can talk directly to God.

The man thanked the pastor and continued on his way. As he continued to visit churches in Seattle, Dallas, St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, Milwaukee and all around the United States, he found phones with the same sign – and the same answer from the pastor.

Finally, he arrived in Montana. Upon entering a church, behold – he saw

the usual golden telephone. This time the sign read, "Calls: \$1.00 a minute."

Fascinated, he asked to talk to the pastor. "Sir, I've been in cities and churches all across the country and in each church I have found this golden telephone. I've been told it's a direct line to Heaven and that I could talk to God; but in all the other churches the cost was \$100.00 a minute. Your sign reads it's only \$1.00 a minute. Why?"

The pastor, smiling kindly, replied, "Son, you're in Montana now... You're in God's Country. It's a local call here!"



John Robinson
Kansas Death Row
El Dorado, Kansas

What's the Point?

If you're anything like me I'm sure you've asked yourself plenty of times, "what's the use of going on?" Sadly, it's a common attitude of our existence on the row. It's not something most people have to deal with when they have kids, a career, and future dreams.

We are obsessed with two things: getting out of prison and enduring it 'til then. But there's a bigger picture we miss if that's all we make our life about. There's a proverb that says, "life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass but learning to dance in the rain". Of course, I'd like to add that we should look for an umbrella while we dance, but let's not forget the dance.

In a song, Garth Brooks put it like this (The Dance): "I could have missed the pain but then I'd have missed the dance." Like dancing, life

demands we learn lessons on how to do it well. I find these lessons in my religion, some in spirituality, others in philosophy. Whether it's God, Karma or spiritual evolution that motivates you, by all means dance. Nobody was ever sorry for enjoying the music with bodily expression. It's only when the song ends that we regret not having danced.

Live a life without regret, and when your time comes, the song of your life will inspire others to dance.



Kevin Marinelli
Pennsylvania Death Row
Collegeville, PA

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Texas Death Row
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Jesus Walked Upon the Water

Jesus walked upon the water
And monks, they'd immolate.
You and me are just plain folk.
Which do we imitate?

Me, I'll go for water
Though I know I'm gonna sink,
I've been parched and dry for years.
At least I'll get a drink.

You can set a fire
Make your altar on the street.
Passers-by will wonder why
With all those that they meet.

But until then let us set the stage
For life to live upon.
I'll bring the wine, you sing a song.
We'll have fun until the dawn.

Jesus walked on water
A miraculous event.
I've heard it said a million times
That He was heaven-sent.

Baptize me in water
If that will save my soul.
Then baptize me in fire
And I will really know.

There was a man named Cohen.
I think he really knew.
Said, "Jesus taken serious by many,
Taken joyous by a few"

Jesus walked upon the water
As was written in a story.
It was just another way
To publicize His glory.

Jesus walked upon the water
Others tried another way.
Who is right? Maybe all are –
Who am I to say?



Richard Hirschfield
California Death Row
San Quentin, CA

A Tribute to My Mother

You took five pearls from an oyster,
kept them from the swine and vultures
of the streets, taught them morals
and virtues
and to be real to who they are –
to stand
on their two feet.

With two fish and five loaves of bread,
you could stretch our needs to
last a week,
making sure your pearls were fed.
You never did turn water into wine
but your Kool-aid tasted so good
it quenched our thirst every time.

You walked on the water of racism
amid the storms of the powerful
while in your pearls instilling
how to treat all men equally –
you set us an example
of truth and equality.

On rainy days you found ways
to make our sun shine; you made
us feel
like kings and queens on holidays
and birthdays.
At the same time you disciplined us,
to prevent spoiling –
to keep us from getting out of line.

So I write this tribute to you,
my precious Queen.
I can't speak for others
but you are my heart
and I love you, Ma, the woman
of my dreams.



Kyre Allen
Texas Death Row
Livingston, TX

The Peace of God

Love is a state of being. It's not outside you, it is deep within. You can never lose it, and it cannot leave you. It is not dependent on some other person, some external form. We all sense this already, so all I can do is remind you of what you have forgotten.

Some of love's obstacles are: unnecessary judgement; resistance to what is; and denial of the now. If you have lived long enough, you will know that things "go wrong" quite often. It is precisely at those times that surrender needs to be practiced if you want to eliminate pain and sorrow from your life. No other life-form on the planet knows negativity, only humans, just as no other life-form violates and poisons the earth that sustains it.

Compassion is the awareness of a deep bond between yourself and other creatures. Joy is uncaused but rather arises from within us. The joy of being. It is an essential part of the inner state of peace, the state that has been called the "peace of god". It is your natural state, not something that you need to work hard at or struggle to attain. When you live in complete acceptance of what is, that is the end of all drama in your life.

Everybody you come in contact with will be touched by your presence, affected by the peace that you emanate, whether they are conscious of it or not. Your peace is so vast and deep that anything that is not peace disappears into it as if it had never existed.



Paul Sanchez
Nevada Death Row
Ely, NV

The Sorrow of Now

In this moment of time
there appears nothing sublime.

In the gloom of now
you can't see how
there's a road to a better tomorrow
when today is filled with sorrow.

But in the past you've seen
misery that has been –
and you made it through
to a better you.

Today's a day like any other
from which you will recover.

Look to that point of light
though you're surrounded by night.

Focus on what's real;
don't let darkness steal
the light left for you
that is meant to carry you through.

Kevin Marinelli
Pennsylvania Death Row
Collegeville, PA



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COMPASSION**

140 W. South Boundary St. | Perrysburg, OH 43551



If you want to share someone else's work, please be sure you include the name of the author or its origin.

**PRISONERS OF DEATH ROW
YOUR ASSISTANCE WILL BE APPRECIATED**

7 Suggestions and Guidelines

1. Write about an experience that impacted you.
2. It doesn't have to be religious. Here are some themes: anger, apathy, beauty, betrayal, boredom, change, complacency, courage, fear, friendship, growing older, jealousy, pride, purpose, vices, and wisdom.
3. Use sensory details — the smell, who said what, its color, how cold it felt. Sensory details connect your experience to your readers.
4. There's no need to use big words when a simpler one suffices: leave your ego at the door with your case: this isn't the place for either one.
5. Look for ways to unify; help; and solve problems.
6. Be authentic. Be yourself. No one's perfect.
7. Try to limit it to 400 words or less, and if possible enclose a photo of yourself.

As there are numerous submissions it may take up to eight months for selected articles to be published.

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Editor's note: Apologies to Al Hardin for accidentally attributing the following poem to the wrong person in our May 2020 issue.

...pray on...

When you're living in a concrete
see-through box,
Trying to be conclusive
It can sometimes prove to be very elusive.
It can leave you feeling trapped
and exposed.
If you're trying to stay curled inside
your own little world,
A good book might allow your
mind to travel,
But it can also cause your heart
to come unraveled.
It's most certainly a daily plight.
Trying to walk the narrow path
of...do-right.
Your insides sometime buck
and scream:
"Please let me out of this
Horrorific dream!"
You're no longer sure just how
much more you can take.
You plead, "Lord Jesus,...
Let me awaken!"
Only a solid prayer life will
make you stronger,
Because...
Obviously this Journey is
going to be a little longer.



Al Hardin
North Carolina Death Row
Raleigh, NC

Compassion

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Perrysburg, Ohio 43551

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I QUIT!

I remember when I was a kid. I went running after some older kids when they were racing, but because they were older and bigger I couldn't catch up. So I just quit running and sadly went home. I also remember how people would always call me a quitter... Well, today I live by those words. But don't take my words lightly... Because today I quit feeling ashamed of my past failures. Also, I quit letting others' words dictate my future. Today I'm gonna quit being hurtful to others; today I'm gonna quit withholding forgiveness from people who wronged me, and most of all, today I'll quit running.

Today I'll take that first step; (always the hardest) and take God at His word. And here's why: In Isaiah 55:11 God tells Isaiah, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I Please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." So I took that first step of faith to trust his

words in my life. But let me say this: In the Bible, God of Heaven and Earth is also called "Our Father". Well, I had a big problem with that one. I never knew my real father here so how could I trust "Our Father" in heaven? So I took 2nd Corinthians 5:7 to heart where it says, "That we walk by faith not by sight." Most of the time it can be extremely hard on us to let go and trust others; I have found that in my journey of believing Jesus Christ, I have seen His truth over and over again. Our God is famous. I know deep down His love is unfailing and it's okay to trust His will in our lives. But, before we receive these promises we gotta quit running.



Steven Long
Texas Death Row
Livingston, TX