The Chaplain and Death Row

by Rev. Edwin Muller
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Rev. Edwin Muller was the chaplain for Death Row when Chuck and Gary along with Bubba, Neil and Fitz were among the more than 600 men and women whose lives were spared by the June 1972 U.S. Supreme Court decision on the Death Penalty. More than ten years ago, Muller made a solid commitment to work in New York's prisons. He remains at his job.

Death row is a highly symbolic presence in the prison. The rules which govern it are more symbolic than practical. The whole practice of capital punishment has more of a symbolic and unconscious meaning than a practical, visible one. When ever you talk about the issue, people get angry. Unconscious fears and anger and hostility begin to come out. I'm not talking about inmates or staff. I'm talking about the general public.

If you talk rationally, there's no logic to capital punishment. But whenever you get into a situation like a debate where you try and talk logically, that's not what's prevailing. What's prevailing are the unconscious feelings and anger. I debated chaplain of the city police department in New York City, who said finally, "As a clergyman, look, I know what you're saying and have to agree with you. But I'm still in favor of capital punishment, and I don't care what the reasons are, if somebody kills somebody, they've got to be killed."

I remember when they brought the chair to Green Haven. At least, I think I remember. Part of the problem, nobody knows when it came. It was sometime after '67… I had been at Green Haven a few years before it came from Sing Sing. But there were all kinds of rumors that it was coming. Then there were rumors that it was there; then nobody knew if it was there or not. Then there were even long stories as to how it came — "They brought it in the night" — this kind of thing. To this day I don't know what was the actual truth. But the significant thing was not the truth. It was the fact that it stimulated all this anxiety.

There were a number of inmates at Green Haven who had been at Sing Sing at the time they were executing people and they contended, for instance, that every time there was an execution all the lights would go dim; which I found out was literally impossible because there

was a separate electrical hook-up for the death house. It had no connection whatsoever with the institution, and yet, in a very real way, everyone experienced it happening. There were a number of lifers who had spent time in the death house who said that if that chair comes, they're going. They wouldn't stay in the same institution with it.

What it stimulated was a lot of anxiety over death, which is a constant issue just below the surface of consciousness in prison, the death experience.

The graveyard at the prison has just cement markers with numbers on it. There are no names. Symbolically I think that says a lot. Even in death we don't deal with a man as an individual; we just deal with him with the same kind of institutional routine sameness, that lack of identity. Back in those days a man knew his number almost better than his name. To hear his name called was an unusual experience.

Going to prison, especially in the old days, a man experienced dying. Many men feared that nobody would remember them. Nobody would write to them. Nobody would visit them. Somehow they would be erased. I think going through that painful death experience, while being alive, confronted them also with the reality of dying physically. They were facing an experience they'd already experienced in a way, and therefore they feared it twice as much. And that's a lot behind the fear of dying in prison: the fact that you might die and nobody knows it. And by nobody, that means nobody from the outside.

At Green Haven, although we were fearful the penalty might be used in the future, I never believed the men were going to be executed. I never experienced watching another man walk down the corridor and not come back. Still, death row had a special air. A boat sense of isolation. Rigid rules that were there more for the needs of society than anything else, like security reasons. Banishment of visitors except for immediate family. Chaplains were the only ones to go up there, other than guards. A person on death row was totally cut off. He lived in the midst of rules. They weren't allowed to be with each other. That was a battle, even to bring about a modest freedom within the row. They had to be locked 23 hours a day in their cells, allowed out for exercise once.

Initially, when the row was set up, that was rigidly adhered to. Over a couple of years it was modified. There's a row of cells, and an area in front of all of them, which is barred off from

the access corridor. Eventually, they let the men into that area. One at a time, but at least they could go from cell to cell, talk and play chess, games, that sort of thing.

There was always this consciousness that you weren't allowed to be close. Yet, intense relationships developed. Everything was intense. When a guy was down, he was down. When he was feeling good, that also was intense. The men probably never have related since, in the way they did up there. They depended on one another for survival and meaning. There was a sense of humanness you will find nowhere else, a sense of care, a sense of pain, a sense of feeling — a whole reality unique only to that setting.

Except for a few family visitors, I was basically their only visitor. I would go up and sit for hours, partly because I liked the guys, partly because I knew this was their one contact with an outside perspective.

Their relationship with the guards became very intense. It was almost as difficult for a guard to do time there as it was for the inmates. Because the law said they had to be under observation all the time. But how do you work eight hours straight with five men sitting in cells in front of you and your job is, simply, watch them? There's not much else to do. They can't be out of the cell except one hour for exercise, so what do you do? There you are, there they are. With the potential for human beings to interrelate, all kinds of things begin happening. Friendships develop; anger emerges. I contend a lot of the conflict that develops in that kind of setting is simply just a way of dealing with boredom. Living against the boundaries and trying to make some kind of sense out of it.

Chuck and Gary were expending an amazing amount of energy up there. The row was a pressure situation. The rules, the guards, the concrete and steel. The whole oppression of capital punishment as a reality in our culture was bearing down on them, so an amazing amount of energy and creativity was popping out all over. They started getting into everything, all kinds of ideas and ways of living beyond the situation as well as in it. We enrolled all of them in college courses. They go intensely involved, Chuck was the poet, Gary the artist — I hooked them up to correspond with professors, people in the field — They carried on a correspondence and had a way of extending beyond the situation that was incredible. They were under this intense pressure that was often taking creative avenues. Event the protests. They would fight and rebel against

everything that would stifle them. Sometimes it was extremely rational and sometimes extremely irrational.

Sometimes I would come up there and just try and figure out what was going on. You couldn't expect predictable behavior either from them or the guards. There were too many things impinging on the situation. The whole experience has to be seen as utterly memorable in every sense of the word. I'm sure their whole life will be affected by it. Anyone who has done the time they have in the death house has to be unique, whether they want to or not. It's stamped on them, probably the primary factor the rest of their lives. They gazed at the human condition from a perspective almost nobody's had the opportunity to experience.

When they came down, an new era had come in. Attica took place while they were up there. They came down to a different world. They couldn't believe what was happening. We've often commented since they came down that it was almost like a Rip Van Winkle experience.

I see Attica as the symbolic pivotal point, like Selma in the civil rights movement. After Selma there was a loss of innocence. America one what it was doing. You couldn't hide anymore. And I think that's true of the prison situation. After Attica, whether attitudes changed or not, there was a loss of innocence. What we knew in the system, everybody knew. It was out, so business could no longer go on as usual. I saw Attica as putting an end to the old restraint system. That's not to say that it's not still around, but it was uncovered, exposed. And once that happens, something has been finished.

In the old, pre-Attica system, I se the primary mood of the inmate as living in the absence of hope in his day-to-day existence. He faced long sentences. When I first went to Green Haven it was common of meet guys who had been there 30 to 40 years. One guy, when he got sentenced to 40 years, his family bought him a 25 years subscription to the newspaper. In the time he served, five newspapers went out of existence. He started with the N.Y.World, then the N.Y. Telegram, the Sun, Herald Tribune — he finally ended up with the N.Y. Times.