

Compassion

Written by Death-Row Prisoners

HELPING PRISONERS ON DEATH ROW LIVE CONNECTED AND FRUITFUL LIVES

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



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www.compassionondeathrow.net

CHOICES AND VOICES

One Sunday afternoon sitting at the back of the mall, waiting for our victim to appear, my co-defendant said, "Don't puss out on me." Minutes before David walked out, I heard a voice, "walk away." In the woods I heard another voice, "What are you doing? You're married, you have a wife; no need to do this, no need to take this young man's life by using this knife! You already have the money... walk away."

My first 10 years in here, it was all the same. I took anti-depressants, saw guys in 3-piece suits, lab coats with the letters Ph.D. after their names. The last doc I saw, we came to an agreement that I was cured, I no longer needed psychological treatment.

Some 12 years later I was in a class; "restorative justice" it was called. An assignment was handed out. I heard a voice, "Just write a poem." I asked myself, "But do you really want to show 'em? The last time you opened up honestly, it was met with eerie silence and hostility. Maybe it was too much, too soon...now you look and feel like a real buffoon."

I thought this was a judgement-free zone? Then why did I feel so naked, so exposed, stranded on an island and all alone?

As I sat in this cell contemplating what I should do, chow was served, no more voices to be heard. Before I began to eat, I asked God for one more favor, that He allowed me into His kingdom since I now have Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. The food was bland, it had no flavor, wishing I had a cigarette. These reminded me that the choices I made that day, I still regret.

I know this is sort of long-winded; don't worry I'm about to end it. We all have a story to tell and I'd like to hear them one day, but as for me, I just wanted to get mine out of the way. So, thank you for your patience and have a nice day.



Cliff Miller
North Carolina Death Row
Raleigh, NC

FROM WITHIN

From within a cell I live
with nothing but knowledge to give.
From within a cell I soar
crying out as a lion's roar.
From within a cell I suffer
the horror that makes me shudder.
From within a cell I write
expressing myself with all my might.
From within a cage I'm tamed,
treated like an animal well-trained.
From within a cage I rage,
anger builds in volcanic flames.

From within a cage I age,
gray hair takes center stage.
From within a cage I pray
asking God to save the day.
From within a cage I cry,
sentenced to die until I fry.



Christopher Henriquez
California Death Row
San Quentin, CA

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

EDITORIAL:

BUCKET BRIGADE

When I thought of being a servant of God, I envisioned sand-blasted prophets, fiery preachers, mighty TV evangelists. It discouraged me because I was a nobody: I was not a prominent figure. But one day God brought to mind a bucket brigade: a long line of people stretching between a water source and a fire. The person nearest the water filled the bucket and handed it to the next person, who handed it to the next person, who handed it to the next person and so on until the last person in line dumped it on the fire.

Spreading the love of God is like that. I heard an evangelist for the first time when I was 12 but over the next 13 years countless Christians would minister to me, each bringing me closer to God. Some were simply kind to me, some fed me when I had no money for food. Another forgave me when

I wrecked her car. Altogether, these gestures of Godliness led me to accept Christ. It may've been the last one in line who helped me pray and reach out to God, but every person along the way played a vital role in the spiritual bucket brigade.

It reminds me that although I may not be a Tony Evans or Billy Graham, I don't have to be a great man to love my neighbor – and it's the love God shines through little guys like me that help prepare the way for God to enter people's hearts. I don't need to be the last one in line, I just need to be part of the team. Amen.



George Wilkerson
Editor
North Carolina Death Row
Raleigh, NC

LWOP EDITORIAL:

HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

Welcome. My name is Philip Smith. This is my first issue acting as Assistant Editor, handling the new Compassion section dedicated to people serving life. I consider this position a great honor. Like many of you, I too am serving life without parole. After reading your submissions, I realized that we all share similar experiences, fears and concerns.

One submission detailed the struggles of systemic injustice. The writer expressed deep feelings about hopelessness, despair and pain. They wrote that the editor would not publish the piece because it described gloomy experiences. I hear you, but I understand that we cannot succumb to misery and I will not perpetuate it. If someone wise had not told me that I had promise, I would not be the writer I am today.

As a young prisoner, I taught myself to write creatively. In the years since, I have been published as a novelist, a poet, a journalist and as an essayist. Currently, I work as Editor in Chief of The Nash News, the only prison newspaper in

North Carolina. In 2022, I co-authored a legislative proposal, The Prison Resources Repurposing Act, that will extend parole to lifers in North Carolina if passed. The North Carolina Law Review published our proposal in April of 2022 and eighteen N.C. House Representatives sponsored it as NC HB 697. All this from a youth who could barely write a sentence when he came in. I feel your pain. I walk in your shoes; however, I choose to create hope no matter what I do. My work for Compassion will make hope bloom like a new rose in Spring.

Be honest when you write, but be mindful that I too need you to uplift me in the same way that I will uplift you. Please send your deepest, most thought-provoking work. Let me amplify your voice. I cannot wait to read the next batch of submissions.



Phillip Vance Smith II
Assistant Editor
Nash Correctional Institution
Nashville, NC

Letter to the Editor:

FREE IN JESUS

Iron bars block my view of sunlight in the sky. I cannot get away from here, it's futile just to try. Freedom's coming someday, I pray for it each night. But even if it doesn't, I know I'll be alright.

Because I'm free in Jesus, his blood unlocked the door. No prison can contain my soul, it's Him I'm living for. I wear white like angels, I praise Him from my cell, He has a purpose for all this that only time will tell.

My God made the moon and stars, He causes them to shine. I do not fear my sentence, because my God accelerates time. My God's thunder splits the heavens, He parted the Red Sea. And what He did for others, He'll surely do for me.

Because I'm free in Jesus, His blood unlocked the door. No prison can contain my soul, it's Him I'm living for. I wear white like angels, I praise Him from my cell, He has a purpose for all this that only time will tell.

Like Apostle Paul before me, I've learned there is a way, to find joy in each circumstance, to praise God every day. When I walk out of that gate, I'll take with me the glee that through iron bars and sacrifice, I learned to be free.

Because I'm free in Jesus, His blood unlocked the door. No prison can contain my soul, it's Him I'm living for. I wear white like angels, I praise Him from my cell, He has a purpose for all this that only time will tell.



Shannon Creevey
Crain Unit
Gatesville, TX

LWOP:

LIFE WITH OTHER POSSIBILITIES

All my years in prison have been spent coming to terms with spending the rest of my life in here. Until recently, that's all I have thought about.

I'm here to tell you that "LWOP" doesn't stand for life without parole. It stands for 'Life With Other Possibilities'. No matter what we did to end up here and no matter our sentence, possibilities abound and good people out there love us.

When I forced myself to focus on the possibilities right in front of my own nose, I recognized the beauty in my life. When I did that, I was blessed to build a relationship with my one and only daughter, a beautiful child.

I was also blessed to find my fiancé. I have some great friends out there who are like family, and I am lucky to have family in my life as well.

When you have good to give, good will be returned to you. Do yourself a favor by not falling into the trap of misery behind these walls.

Life with other possibilities is a state of mind that we should be in, for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for all others. Look for the good. Look for the possibilities.



Dion Sanders
LWOP
Marion Correctional Institution
Marion, OH

AS INTEGRITY DIES

The hate in their heart
is seen in their eyes.
Some hide it well beneath
their disguise.

Venom lives in their souls,
for they are broken.
Actions laced with evil
and premeditated by ill will.

Evident by the poison in
every word spoken.
Meant to destroy reputations,
designed to kill.

Deception is infused into
everything they do.
Quick to project what's false,
never what's true.

They negate truth in order
to embrace lies.
Content with chaos and disharmony
as integrity dies.



Anthony Cain
California Death Row
San Quentin, CA

VICTIMS VOICE

Losing a Brother to Execution



Pam Crawford

For more information
visit www.mvfh.org

Pam Crawford's brother Ed Horsley, was executed in 1996 after being convicted of the murder of Naomi Rolon. Ed was 16 at the time of his arrest.

Pam and her husband Calvin have been involved with the Alabama organization Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty, through which they have spoken to church congregations about the death penalty's effect on families and communities.

"When my brother was sentenced to death, none of us in the family were familiar with capital punishment – we had no idea of the process or what to expect. Gradually we learned more about it, but I still kept hoping the law would change before my brother was executed.

We definitely took a blow from the community. There were times when I felt guilty, like I had actually done something wrong, when all I was guilty of was loving my brother. I remember my children coming home from school and asking 'Mama, what did we do?'

They ended up ashamed to be connected to their uncle. And my granddaughter, who was 8 years old at the time of the execution, is still struggling with it to this day. She would always ask, 'If it's wrong to kill somebody, which it is, then how is it right for the state to kill Uncle Ed?'"

OBSERVATION OF AN ANT

One early morning, a man was sitting on his front porch enjoying the warm sunshine and his cup of coffee when a little ant caught his eye as it was going from one side of the porch to the other, carrying a big leaf on his shoulders. The man watched for almost half an hour. He saw that ant faced many impediments during its journey. It would pause, take a detour and then continue towards its destination.



At one point the tiny creature came to a crack in the floor. It paused for a while and analyzed the situation. It then laid the huge leaf over the crack, walked over the leaf, picked it up on the other side and continued its journey. The man was

captivated by the cleverness of the ant, one of nature's tiniest creatures.

The incident left the man in awe and forced him to think about the vastness of the universe. The diversity of nature was on display right in front of his eyes. Here was this tiny creature, lacking in size, yet equipped with a brain able to analyze, contemplate, reason, explore, discover and overcome.

In about half an hour the ant finally reached its destination, a tiny hole in the corner of the floor which was the entrance to its underground dwelling. It was at this point that the ant's shortcoming was revealed. How could the ant carry the large leaf, that it had managed to carefully bring to the destination, into the tiny hole? It simply couldn't! So, the tiny creature, after all the painstaking hard work and exercising great strength and skills overcoming all the difficulties along the way, left behind the large leaf and went home empty-handed.

The ant had not thought about the end before its challenging journey began and, in the end, the

large leaf was nothing more than a burden to it. The creature had no option but to leave it behind so it could reach its destination.

The man learned a great lesson that day too. We worry about our family, we worry about our job, we worry about how to earn more money. We worry about where we should live, how big a house to own, what kind of vehicle to drive, what kind of clothing to wear – all sorts of things – only to abandon all of them when we reach our destination – the grave.

We forget that in our life's journey these are all unnecessary burdens we are carrying with the utmost care for fear of losing them, only to find that at the end, they are useless and that we can't take them with us.



John Robinson
Kansas Death Row
El Dorado, Kansas

FAITH

We've got to have faith. I say again: we've got to have faith! Faith, faith, faith is the way into the mystery of God. But what is faith? According to Hebrews 11:1, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. We understand this readily enough in many aspects of our lives. Even though we can't see electricity, we are sure that our provider will supply us with this vital utility. When we visit an ATM, we are certain that our bank has our money and that when we key in our P.I.N number our money will be dispensed. We don't go around fretting about these things – we are certain of many things we hope for but do not see.

Faith is often understood as a kind of leap into the dark but this is nonsense: this isn't faith, it's fatalism. Faith is putting our trust in the promises of God. It is a supernatural gift imparted by

the Holy Spirit and it causes us to bow humbly before the truths of revelation. It is true that faith and reason work together but the gift of faith takes us beyond reason into the world of revealed truth.

If we are bothered, flummoxed and hassled – as many of us can be during this time of year – we don't tend to think, 'I must just take some time out to meditate on my faith'. But we should because in doing so, we will receive the gifts of the Spirit: joy, peace and a sense of God's love and providence.



Al Cunningham
California Death Row
San Quentin, CA

LWOP:

IF I DIDN'T LAUGH, I'D CRY

If I didn't laugh, I'd cry
The absurdity of this all
Women pretending to be men
Playing games and having a ball

If I didn't laugh, I'd cry
The food makes me sick
They sometimes add seasoning
I'm onto their trick

If I didn't laugh, I'd cry
The have us dressed in blue
"Tuck your shirt in" they say
Take your hat off too

If I didn't laugh, I'd cry
Stand in line for a shower
Hopefully there'll be hot water
The uncertainty gives them power

If I didn't laugh, I'd cry
We can't even get mail
They're trying to break us, I think
They must like to hear us yell

Pandora Zan
LWOP
Dayton Correctional Institution
Dayton, OH

Original Art Work for Scholarships



Untitled

By John Sexton
Florida Death Row
Raidford, FL

9" x 12"
Acrylic on H2O Color Paper
\$75.00

To purchase make your check to Compassion and send to the address on page 2.

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Call **419-874-1333** and ask for Compassion office to verify availability.

VOLUNTEER

This life's not been easy, I've never belonged.
No need to keep breathing, I'm way too far gone.
So please do not grieve me,
keep faith and be strong.
There's peace in releasing these wrongs
that I've done....

I slow my mind down some, look deep in my soul.
It eases the doubt from these lies I've been sold.
Some things you can't outrun and
can't be controlled.

When I accepted this outcome,
I accepted my role....

No pleading or seeking behind the scene plays.
No more prayer for relief or last-minute stays.
No more motions or briefs to find other ways,
to seek a reprieve and keep things delayed....

No testing or questions playing games in my brain.
No more pressure from tests,
guessing what they'll say.

No depression or stress locked away in some cage.
No oppression to press me or chains to restrain....

No cutting my hate away with razors and blades.
Stuck in my ways again, some pain never fades.
Ashamed within every day, no rain left to blame.
No staying sedated today to maintain...

I'm hopelessly broken in the depths of my chest.
Open doors have all closed,
nothing left but regrets.

When all words have been spoken,
they'll collect on their debt.

Time frozen in motion, nothing next
but my death....

With my life in their hands, will they thrive
in that power?

When I'm strapped and can't stand,
will they claim that I cowered?

Will my fam understand in those following hours?
It was actually them who were the cowards...

Last prayer and last meal, last steps that I'll make.
Will it all feel surreal, the last breath that I take?
Last words meant to heal, it ain't never too late.
I can feel that you're there,
feel my thanks for the strength...

Seat the witness and victims,
hit the switch let it drip.

Deliver your vengeance in a single prick.
In an instant I'm distant, lungs quit, that's it.
All the senses go senseless,
my sentence was quick....

When the curtain is closed and
they see how it feels,
Will they feel so exposed, will they thrill in the kill?
Only mirrors really know who's a killer for real.
It clearly shows as it glares back and stares.

The End.



Victoria Drain
(aka Joel Drain)
Ohio Death Row
Youngstown, OH

THE WARDEN WHO CARES

I'd never been in prison so being on death row is a first for me and I must say, a challenge on so many levels. But in all the 21 years on this unit, I have witnessed one warden after another come and strip death row of anything that gives us life.

The smallest thing they could think of, I've witnessed wardens and their administrations take. It has gotten to where we have nothing to do in terms of activities. We have lived with no TV for years.

But Warden Dickerson came and he has shown to be a Godly man. This warden has been able to get a radio station on the unit that airs Christian programming, comedy and educational material and he arranged for movies to be brought to the pods that don't have TVs.

Then Warden Dickerson even lobbied to get the faith-based program on the unit extended to death row. There were those who told Warden Dickerson it was a waste of time and it

wouldn't help us, but he believed it would and got it started.

Since its conception, men on the pods that had access to the program have begun daily worship on their own, outside of the program. They sing, pray and share the word of God together every day. We have been experiencing a life transformation and growing as men for God!

We are facing ourselves in the mirror. We pray for each other and for issues in the world.

Thanks to Warden Dickerson, we are being given a chance to change from the inside - out, all because this warden believes men on death row deserve another chance. I just wanted to tell him we on the faith-based section thank him for believing in us.



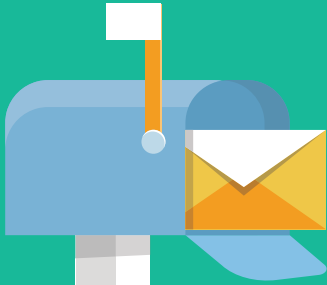
Kerry Allen
Texas Death Row
Livingston, TX



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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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NUMB

After all I've been through
and that's been done to me
After doing all I can do
my numbness is all that can be.
Calloused, it is true
caused by overuse.
But what else can I do
after suffering the abuse.
My heart is over-worked,
battered, bruised and bleeding.
My emotions have been corked
because right now I have no feeling.
It's weird to say, this is true,
worse to experience all I go through.
Knowing my numbness is real
so wounded I can't feel.
All my tears have dried out
leaving nothing but doubt.
Is it a monster I've become?
Why am I so numb?
Another hit I cannot take,
for my soul will surely break.
In this life I must live
having given all that I can give.
Now there's nothing left to be done,
save to feel oh so numb.



Kevin Marinelli,
Assistant Editor
Pennsylvania Death Row
Waynesburg, PA

Compassion

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WHO'S NEXT?

The question haunts me as metal doors open and iron gates close. The eyes of watchers burn as hearts are broken. Who's next?

Harsh language about homicidal events; no laughing matter when a life hangs in the balance. Who's next?

Well planned appeals over unfair trials are ruled 'harmless errors' in the paper trail to freedom. Who's next?

Overcoming poverty, racism and drug addiction - only to be overwhelmed by tragic incidents orchestrated by people incapable of respecting community. Who's next?

Pain and suffering translate into madness while violence becomes attractive to those who're overlooked. Who's next?

Pen-pals become the only voice of comfort and hope for the silenced - those guilty only of refusing a plea bargain. Who's next?

The pent-up animosity toward a rigged system destroys common sense and fades the conscience. Who's next?

Well-seasoned death is mixed and injected into the convicted, served cold by JUSTICE. Who's next?

That question echoes off these cell walls but the question that haunts me most is, "Daddy, when are you coming home?"

Lord, please don't let me be next...



Kristopher Love
Texas Death Row
Livingston, TX