

Sydney Begerowski

Voicing Unalienable, Dignified Rights

While politics drives legislation, politics itself is often driven by money and ethical sentiment; therefore, both are the basis of legislation. Sister Helen Prejean illustrates the role of both in her memoir, *Dead Man Walking*, in which she recounts her personal experience with capital punishment and its surrounding legislation. Even though she augments the injustice that stems from economics being rather influential, it was her illustration of ethical sentiment that fostered my own inquisition of the current legal system of the United States. She depicted three entities - Victims, the Government, and Nonaligned Individuals - yet brought them together by demonstrating their similar societal responsibility of respecting the fundamental human rights. Through the use of a moralistically poignant tone, Prejean demonstrates the harsh reality of the death penalty and its consequences, thus permeating my own views into a revelation: Every individual has a sense of moral dignity that must be not only acknowledged but also respected within the legal system and throughout society.

To begin, Prejean addresses the victims of murder, including those of the death penalty. As Prejean recounts the brutal killings of “a lovers’ lane teenage couple, David LeBlanc and Loretta Bourque” (Prejean 4), my feelings of remorse are overwhelming for the two innocent young adults. Their alleged murderer, Patrick Sonnier, falls victim to the death penalty thus fostering the concept that those killed by the government should also be identified as victims of murder. Prejean expresses that despite his wretched crimes, he is still “a human being and deserves to be treated with dignity” (Prejean 122). Furthermore, she continues to bolster this concept when asserting “killing a man who can’t defend himself... is just as wrong as what he did” (Prejean 181). It was Prejean’s implementation of such heavily connoted words like dignity and defense to

develop a moralistically poignant tone in conjunction with her beliefs that Patrick should live that transformed my own personal views on the death penalty. My immediate sense of anger and frustration towards a cold-blooded murder became feelings of sympathy in the realization that he, too, is a human being and killing him would only create yet another victim of murder. Thus, in reading Prejean's portrayal of the victims, I found that each person, regardless of their history, has a moral dignity that should be respected and treated equally among others and implementing capital punishment merely defies this.

Similar to the victims of murder and capital punishment, the government also plays a large role in the implementation of the death penalty, which Prejean demonstrates through the irony of death as punishment for the crime of killing. She begins by openly stating "for me... killing by anyone... cannot be tolerated. And that includes the government" (Prejean 31). This exact belief becomes present again when she explicitly argues that "If we are to have a society which protects its citizens... no one... may be permitted to torture and kill - and that includes the government" (Prejean 124). The repetition of the concept of including the government through fragmented syntax emphasizes that the government should be held equally responsible for killing a man as though a murderer would. While this augments her argument against the death penalty, it was ultimately her transition from personal to inclusive pronouns that shifted my own thought. By transforming "me" to "we," the confidence and power behind her words grew immensely, furthering her moralistically poignant tone and therefore evoking the same attitude in myself. I believe that the American legal system must recognize and respect that each person is a human being and in the failure to do so, must be held equally responsible as any other who would fail to do so.

As previously demonstrated, the murderers, the victims, and the government are all involved in the issuing of capital punishment; however, Prejean presents a third, lesser known perpetrator who is justly responsible: Nonaligned Individuals. While many people of the general public are not directly involved in death penalty cases, a “claim to be apolitical or neutral... would be... to uphold the status quo - a very political position to take and on the side of the oppressors” (Prejean 6). In the midst of being a spiritual advisor, Prejean herself realizes that “If [she] does not speak out and resist, [she] is an accomplice [to murder]” (Prejean 115). This motif of nonaligned individuals and her personal revelation develops a sense of responsibility in myself. In a country with a legal system influenced by money and ethical sentiment, the refusal to acknowledge and express personal views prevents change from occurring, making every individual responsible for the government issued death of a man - including myself. It was ultimately this perspective that influenced my understanding of the legal system, revealing the social obligations that lie in each and every individual to express their beliefs in order for reform to successfully happen. To me, in conjunction with the other perspectives, this means that I - along with many others - must vocalize that every human being has a dignity and inalienable rights that must be respected throughout the legal systems.

In conclusion, *Dead Man Walking* by Sister Helen Prejean presents a moral and judicial conflict as men who kill are faced with being killed themselves. Her illustration of ethical sentiment from the perspectives of the victims, the government, and nonaligned individuals through a moralistically poignant tone demonstrates that every person, even murderers, are human beings who have a sense of dignity that deserves to be respected. While the actions of the murderers are never condoned, no human being deserves to be killed; killing is an unlawful act even when executed by the government. In personal regards, this memoir has illustrated to me that these

concepts expand far beyond capital punishment. If the American legal system is to be successfully reformed on any premise, not only must citizens recognize that every human has inalienable rights but they also must voice these rights so they are heard, or they are responsible for the unjust acts that presently remain in society today.

Works Cited

Prejean, Helen. *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.