



Tenderness, kindness and compassion on death row

By José Moreno, 48 years old, 28 years in prison, 22 of which on death row in Texas

When a person commits murder, does that single evil act transform them into a completely different individual than what they used to be, one that has no remorse or pity and stops caring about others?

Do you think someone that has killed another human being loses their ability to express compassion?

What I believe, is that no single act, no matter how evil it is, can cause someone to lose their humanity. I am one of those that has been convicted of murdering another human being. For this inexcusable act I committed 30 years ago, I was sentenced to be executed. But more importantly, I had to be housed with others that were also condemned to death for their crimes. For 22 years of my life, I lived with these fellow murderers on Texas' death row.

I was housed in a cell that was next to another cell, and so on. All the cells were lined up like cubicles in a hen house. We could all call out to each other at any time of the day or night if we were feeling lonely or bored. Nearly everyone did and that's why it was usually a cacophony of voices throughout the day. These conversations were valuable to me and through them I made many friendships.

Prior to the year 2000 and getting transferred from the Ellis I unit to the Polunsky unit, I was able to recreate with a group of other death row inmates. So in addition to socializing from cell to cell, we had physical contact in the form of sports like basketball, handball and volleyball.

The first sign I saw that killers still have compassion for other human beings, happened when I arrived at the Ellis I unit in 1987. A long-held tradition amongst prisoners of all kinds is that when someone new arrives, several or many other inmates all pitch in to gather up basic necessities for the new arrival.

When inmates get transferred from their county jail to state prison, everything is confiscated from them except personal items like letters, photos and legal documents. Nowhere else except death row have I seen the level of caring inmates that provide the new arrival with necessities like soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, deodorant, shower shoes, paper, envelopes, postage stamps, writing pens, and sometimes some consumables as well. This is an important gift that gets the new arrival immediately on his feet because sometimes it takes several weeks before they are allowed to purchase from the commissary, if they are fortunate enough to have even brought money with them from the county jail.

Another custom, one that prison officials still allow to this day (I believe) is that when a condemned prisoner receives an execution date, they are allowed to choose up to 10 other death row prisoners to have a visit with for about an hour each. Of course, when you are choosing other people for a last visit, you pick your closest friends.

I went through this process both as someone about to be executed and also to say goodbye to friends that were executed. It's a tragically sad situation either way. On the one hand, you may realize that someone else may actually consider you their best friend – a humbling surprise. On the other hand, surviving the experience helps one understand just how much of a friendship you really have with these guys that have been executed or are still awaiting the outcome of their sentence.

Lastly, another unexpected act of tenderness, that occurs after someone has been executed is that the inmate friends of the executed will make a special hand-drawn card and they will pass that card around to everyone they can on death row so that it can get filled up with kind words for the family members of the executed. Then the card is sent to the family to let them know that their loved one was appreciated by the death row community. These are acts of kindness by compassionate human beings that are trying to remain caring individuals.