



## We all – on both sides of the prison wall – are made up of the same “raw material”

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Can such a good-looking man be a murderer? How is it that a person on death row has such nice handwriting? Can this prisoner who writes such wonderful poetry really have inflicted harm upon someone? Is my pen pal, who writes so affectionately and sensitively, really guilty?

These and similar questions have surfaced within me and within others, as well.

Apparently, there seems to be a perception within us about what kind of character and which attributes a person should have who has committed murder. We would like to have it so that his offense is seen in his appearance as well as reflected in his handwriting. How much easier that would be! We would then have distinct signs of discrimination, clear guidelines.

I recall dealing with questions myself when I visited one of my pen pals for the first time. This particular prisoner had earlier frequented bars with his guitar, singing songs there. He did this to earn money for a few bottles of beer, as well as for his own great enjoyment. This man actually has a very nice voice; he sang for me when I visited him. I couldn't stop wondering how a person who sings so beautifully could, at the same time, stab several people with a knife. In precisely this moment, my total incomprehension about the existence of such disparate facets of a person presented itself in an exceptionally intense way with regard to this man.

Since that time, I have learned that I cannot intellectually comprehend how and for what reason it is possible that a person who has great talent and a highly likeable side could at the same time have committed a terrible crime. The nicest handwriting and the most wonderful singing can accompany a deadly fit of rage. It still astounds me, but I have in the meantime accepted that it is for me incomprehensible.

I don't believe in the often-used term “monster” and I would not use this word to describe a person. It would be too simple to divide up people into categories like monster, good, or normal. I believe that we all – on both sides of the prison wall – are made up of the same “raw material”, and that we have more in common with others than what separates us from them.

For this reason, I have a keen sense of solidarity with the prisoners to whom we write. I do not feel any hatred toward people who have committed a heinous crime, only deep sadness and consternation about the immense guilt that these people have heaped upon themselves and with which they must live every day.