



Interview with José after he survived his execution date

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, Switzerland, 2009

About two years ago you came very close to your execution. You received a stay within three hours of your execution. How did that experience affect your life?

At that moment I felt so alone and empty. My sense of belonging to the human race was slowly being stripped away. I was about to make an exit from this world and there was nobody that would be there with me. Not only was I going to leave everyone I loved behind but my destination was a mystery. Comfort and assurance is something I desperately needed. After the terror subsided from that moment and I was able to reflect on the situation, I determined to find a source of comfort and assurance should I ever find myself in that situation again.

Have you been able to find that source of comfort and assurance?

Yes, I have found tremendous comfort in Christian faith. My life has changed so drastically. I'm happier than I have been in many years. Where before I lacked direction, now my feet are firmly planted on the road and my pace is a leisure stroll so that I can enjoy my new journey. The longer I travel this road, the more my assurance grows.

You had family and friends visiting you those last days. Can you tell us what it meant to have them close by?

It made a world of difference! I have a large family with many relatives but nearly all of them abandoned me at the time of my arrest. However, over the years I have discovered new friendships and these friends have become my new family. The relationship I have with them is that of a loving relative. To hear from them in a letter is a very special gesture of caring. When I see them in person at a visit, that is an act of loving kindness. To have your loved ones present at the most critical point in your life is the ultimate gift of love. Not only does it help in soothing and comforting during a stressful time but the presence of someone that cares about you reminds you that you are not alone.

All your focus must have been on your situation and on what you were going to go through. What did you perceive as helpful from the side of your loved ones?

My loved ones provided a lot of emotional and spiritual support. Many of my family and friends encouraged me spiritually and while I was not interested at the time, their efforts forever remained with me. To this day I appreciate everything they did.

Can you elaborate on that a little? What exactly did you perceive as supportive? What about people with another religion? Was their support helpful as well?

Like any grand voyage we embark on, preparations will make the departure smoother. If I were making a trip to the moon, then the best support someone could give me would be aeronautical training. If I were to go on an expedition through the jungle, then it would be survival training. Death is a spiritual journey. While there are many spiritual philosophies, Christianity is the most prevalent belief system in America. It is the only religious spiritual advice I have ever been offered.

What support do you suggest an Atheist person could give an inmate with an execution date?

The beliefs of the person should not be an issue. Everyone has an idea of where we are going, when we die. Even an Atheist has spiritual advice to give and share. There is so many issues to talk about concerning the afterlife. Most of the friends I have on death row don't take this subject seriously, in normal everyday life. But when you have a pending execution date and all your appeals are exhausted, you will have to face it. Some will face it privately in their own minds and others will want to talk about it with someone. This is where it won't matter what religious belief the friend shares with the inmate.

Some family members or friends decided to witness your execution. In your situation, did you consider this a support?

Having family and friends attend my execution is a delicate matter. Some of my family and friends feel that they must be there at any cost. While other family and friends are not mentally capable of watching me get murdered. It is very difficult to ask anyone to be present for my execution. On the other hand, if someone insists on being present for my execution, secretly I am overjoyed that they want to be there.

Now you have me a little confused. Myself, I am ready to witness an execution in case one of my pen pals wants that. I'd wish to be as close as possible. I think that he's the main person though and he should say who he wishes to be there. So, no way would I dare to "insist" to witness his execution!

The one person dearest to me, the one that loves me more than anyone else, did not want to watch me being murdered. But if I asked them to be present for my execution they would because they love me so much they would honor my request. But how could I make such a selfish request knowing full well that they don't want to be there? Knowing that there is people who feel like this, it is very difficult to ask anyone to be present for my execution. That is why I prefer that someone ask to be present and not the other way around.

Do I understand you correctly; you would be shy of accepting the gift of somebody being there only because you wish to?

Now you have me a little confused. It has nothing to do with being shy or because I wish things to be so. It's about being considerate for other people's wishes. If a person does not want to be present for my execution and I know that, then I'm not going to ask them if asking them is going to make them do something they didn't want to do in the first place. I write to friends that have witnessed executions and they all tell me the same thing: that it was a horrifying and traumatic experience that they would not wish to repeat. Now, imagine how much worse it is for an elderly parent to watch their only child being executed? This is not something I wish to put anyone through, friend or family. That is why, if someone will witness my execution, it will be because they were capable to do so and they requested to be there.

I totally agree with you that people shouldn't be pushed to witness an execution if they don't feel capable. However, above you said "If I asked them to be present for my execution they would because they love me so much..." I consider their willingness to be there a gift to you. Am I wrong with my perception?

And yes, me too, I know people who witnessed an execution and they all say it's something they will never forget. I don't remember having heard anybody say they regret having been a witness though. I believe, it's always a gift of love as nobody really does it for their own pleasure.

I personally believe that we free pen pals can't avoid a crisis when a dear friend is executed, whether we witness the execution or not. I also hear members describing the loss of their pen pals as a crisis in their life without them being on the spot. The trauma, in my eyes, is not the witnessing, but that something that cruel happens at all!

What gives me hope is the fact that a crisis mustn't necessarily mean it has negative effects - it's a turning point.

You're definitely on to something and you have a valid point. Someone that loves you will make personal sacrifices and that includes making a decision that will cause emotional distress and potential lasting psychological damage (trauma). That is a tremendous gift. The reason I said earlier that it is a delicate matter is because the one person most special in my life specifically told me they did not want to be present for my execution. They expressed not being capable. But if I had asked them to be present they would have been. This doesn't make them willing and the gift would be one that I pushed them into giving me. Furthermore I would be responsible for injuring my loved one if the experience resulted in psychological trauma or worse, a physical heart attack. Their physical and mental health should be more important than our need to have them present.

What about the people who protest before the Walls Unit when an execution is carried out? Were they of any importance to you when the execution time drew closer?

On the day of execution, many chaotic thoughts were running through my mind. While the supporters outside the Walls Unit may have crossed my mind, there is too much going on to give them significant importance. Nonetheless I am grateful to everyone that was present.

I can understand that very well, of course. So, what you're saying is that protesting is helpful for the cause but not a comfort for the particular inmate that is supposed to be executed?

I lacked the focus I normally have. While the supporters outside the Walls Unit were helpful to the cause, I wasn't capable of using them, to draw strength from them. This may not be the case for other condemned prisoners, others who may find a significant source of comfort knowing people are protesting their execution.

To come back to witnessing the execution: Can you describe in what ways a person witnessing your execution could be supportive to you? Witnesses are reduced to watching what's going on in the death chamber without any possibility to intervene, aren't they?

Not only are witnesses not allowed to talk with me in the death chamber but because of the position I am strapped down to the gurney, it is also difficult to see my family and friends without forcing my head up. I do, however, get 10 minutes to address everyone through a microphone just before the execution starts. Furthermore, I am allowed to use the telephone for about 3 hours and during this time I can be talking to everyone that is there to witness the execution. This occurs all the way up to 1 hour before the execution at 6:00pm.

When I say "witnesses of the execution", I mean the people who are there, behind the glass inside the Walls Unit, who see you die.

You say that you have 10 minutes time to address them. It moves me very much that you describe what you can do for them instead of what they can do for you.

Let me ask you again; what can the people who are behind the glass when you are executed, do for you? In what ways do you think you would feel supported by them?

In a strict physical sense I can't think of any wise things they can do to show support at that particular moment. (I can think of several not-so-wise things. ☺) When the execution is at that final state there is no opportunity for witnesses to interact with the

condemned. Everything needs to be said and done before reaching this point of no return. In a spiritual sense, loved ones can do quite a lot. Just knowing that someone who loves you is right there only a few feet away is a comfort. Loved ones can also pray at the crucial moment to help guide our souls. Lastly, remaining calm will probably help if we are able to catch a glimpse of our loved ones. I would not want to see my loved ones in distress as my final image before I die.

Who really knows how they'll react when they witness something as horrible as an execution? As for myself, I'd ask my friend for allowance to react in any ways that may happen. The only thing I can promise is that I'd react as a human being and as the person I've always been. All the rest is... not predictable.

On this very same day that I am writing these words, my attorney came to visit me and he informed me that I will no longer have to face the possibility of execution. My death sentence is now a sentence of life in prison. This is a wonderful conclusion, not only to this interview but also to my personal journey. It is my wish that no one ever have to face execution thereby eliminating the need for anyone to have to witness execution. But as long as this cruel form of punishment exists, there will be someone that needs a friend to be there for them during those last few moments. If there is anything to remember from this interview, please consider to offer volunteering to be a witness for your pen-pal friend on death row, especially if you are willing and capable, because there are many on death row that need someone. I would like to thank everyone that was there for me.

Wow! One never knows what will happen during the production of an interview via letters, right?

José, I'm very happy for you! This is absolutely great news! Hooray!

I wish you all the best and thank you for answering my questions.