



Dialogue with Lilia Allemann, who was the spiritual counselor of her pen pal on death row in Texas

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, 2014

Lilia, at the end of September your pen pal, Arturo Diaz, with whom you had become close, was executed in Texas. You went there to have the last few visits with him and to be present at his execution. After your return, you told me some incredible things on the telephone and by e-mail, including the following sentence: “All of this impacted me on the deepest level, and I am no longer the same woman that I once was.” Can you tell me in a few sentences what happened?

When I began to write to him seven years ago, I didn't know what a goldmine I'd found. Seven wonderful years passed by so quickly, and then so unexpectedly “Day X” suddenly arrived. Arturo wanted me to be present at his execution as his spiritual counselor.

Wow! That is a lot at one time! Let's start at the beginning. Could you tell a little bit about your pen pal friendship?

Arturo and I had no idea that such a beautiful friendship with so much trust, heartfelt closeness and warmth could have developed. We clung to dreams that “Day X” would never arrive, that executions would be stopped, and that many prisoners would be rehabilitated. No matter what was to come, we wanted to make the best out of it. In our fantasies we experienced so much in our letters: we walked our dogs, strolled through woods and fields, collected mushrooms, shared picnics and a water fight at a fountain in the woods. We gave parties, went motorcycling, cooked, baked, ate together, sang songs, prayed, did spring cleaning together and much more.

I'm so happy that you obviously had such a wonderful and lively friendship. And now, have I understood correctly that Arturo wanted you to be his spiritual counselor? I've never heard that this is possible.

Arturo often wrote that my letters gave him great peace. He said that he was happy, and this joy was with him until the very end. Arturo radiated a special kind of beauty from his heart which left an impression on all of us. We were both surrounded by an inexplicable peace, and Arturo said that these had been the best and loveliest days of his life. Only God alone can bring that about. When Arturo learned of his execution date, he expressed his wish that I should be his spiritual counselor. From that moment on, my life became more difficult. As things progressed, there were many problems and breakdowns. My inner voice warned me: “See what you see and hear what you hear. Do not move away from the peace of God.” That was the key to being able to deal with everything, no matter what would come. In order to become a spiritual counselor, I had to first be put on the Minister List. I was educated in end-of-life care/spiritual

counseling social work, and with the support of my church, I dared to attempt it for Arturo's sake. It came to the most absurd situations: the documents disappeared, I was not able to contact the other chaplains, and then the fax machine with which I wanted to send a copy wouldn't function. During the entire process, Arturo gave me small messages which always arrived exactly in those moments in which I needed them the most. After a long odyssey and a lot of headaches, I managed to send the necessary documents 10 minutes prior to the deadline (!), and I was added to the list. Arturo celebrated in prison, and many inmates who had followed what was happening with keen interest shared in our joy.

Then you travelled to Texas for his execution on September 26, 2013?

Yes, I spent 15 days there prior to the execution date. It is almost impossible to explain how it was when we first saw each other; we felt such joy, such thankfulness. During my first visit to Polunsky Unit, a delegation of chaplains came to meet me. I was already in the visiting booth when they arrived. I painfully discovered that it is one that to accompany terminally ill, dying people, but something altogether different to see a young, perfectly healthy man die. From my training in end-of-life care, I know that a certain emotional distance must be kept, but in this situation it was next to impossible to do so. We were all perfectly prepared, but we were unable to come to terms with the thought that such a healthy person should die in such a manner. Arturo was a gentle person. How much he would have liked to reverse all that had happened!

You told me about such peculiar things, for example the thing with the money...

I had already booked the return flight a week later, but then ran out of money. Three times money came to me in inexplicable ways. I was flabbergasted and so deeply grateful. There were so many new experiences for me; everything changed so often that I didn't know anymore how to take each day, just one step at a time.

What is your duty as a spiritual counselor and how were you able to care for and support Arturo?

From the beginning was the motivation to act and "to visit the sick and those in prison" according to Matthew 25:31-36. As a pen pal, I saw myself as a caretaker. The trip to Texas is long and expensive, and I could not afford it. I tried to compensate for the impossibility of my physical presence with the content of my letters. Walter Nitsche (a well-known German relationship advisor) said: "To love is to explore the true needs of my partner and to try to satisfy these needs". In this sense, I tried to discover Arturo's true needs in order to better minister to these needs. The teaching of Jesus Christ is my lifestyle, my resource for life, where I can personally tap into strength. This flowed into our relationship and influenced it. We wanted to allow words to lead to action. Much has been forgiven me. I shared with Arturo how I went through my own struggles, temptations and mistakes, and how I had learned from them. For example, from

Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath" (in moments of provocation) helped Arturo very much in his everyday life. To forgive and to ask for forgiveness is freeing. This is important in life, as well as in dying. When Arturo asked me to be his spiritual counselor, we were already on the way in this direction. The only thing which changed is that he had an execution date. I enjoyed his full trust. As soon as he knew that he was unconditionally accepted and loved, he opened his heart. Arturo asked me to look after his family and to prepare them for all that would come, and so I took care of them, too. We bought the clothes that he wore after his execution, and I spent the last night in the Hospitality House with his family. Arturo was baptized on September 18, 2013, but I was not allowed to be present.

As an official spiritual counselor, do you have privileges that ordinary pen pals don't have?

Yes, I was allowed to be with Arturo until shortly before his execution. In the Walls Unit, I had to identify myself as a spiritual counselor and was meticulously searched. I was allowed to take my Bible with me, as well as some song sheets which I'd brought along. The chaplains again came and carefully observed everything. On the execution day, I spent an hour with Arturo in front of his cell right next to the execution chamber. Without the miraculous "cocktail" of love, peace, and joy, I would have hardly been able to fulfill my role as a spiritual counselor without falling apart. During our last meeting in front of his cell, we prayed and sang. Even singing was possible for us in this extreme situation. We read the Bible, had communion and then went into silence. This was from 16:00 to 17:00. When this time of spiritual counseling was over, we left each other. This moment was indescribable.

We thanked God for the privilege to have been allowed to know Him, for His assistance and His presence exactly when we most needed it, and that He brought us together in this special and wonderful relationship. At 18:00, Arturo was led to his execution.

Would you like to explain to us how you experienced his execution?

I was brought to a waiting room in which five other witnesses were waiting. All of us had to be searched before being brought into the witness chamber. While Arturo lay bound to the stretcher and spoke his last words (in Spanish), he departed from us. His lips trembled as in conclusion he said something to the father of the victim: "I hope this can bring some relief to you and your family". He continued: "I hope that this serves as an example for the youngsters. Think about it before you make bad decisions". Then he said: "Let's go, Warden, I'm ready", and closed his eyes. It was suspenseful, and time stood still. In this moment, I was spiritually connected with Arturo in intensive prayer, and did not perceive much of what was around me. As he was declared dead, the horrible mourning cries of his mother and grandmother resounded. This was more burdensome than anything else I had experienced during the entire odyssey. Later we drove to a chapel. There lay Arturo's body, pale and bluish; it was already cold. I was allowed to touch him for the first time. I put my hand in his; there was no pulse. I didn't cry. It was

as if I were frozen. The next day, everyone went home early. For the first time, I felt miserable, alone, and dead tired.

Dear Lilia, your experiences have made a great impression upon me, and I am pleased that you have shared them with us. At the beginning you wrote, “I am no longer the same woman that I once was”. Who are you today?

I am a woman who has been changed by all kinds of hindsight. When I first got in touch with you seven years ago and you sent me information to look over, it was accompanied by fear. I thought, “That’s nothing for me”. I have nothing to do with violence in any form, and these were real killers, not from the cinema, television, or a criminal novel. Cowardly, I came up with the excuse that I don’t know any English, but you asked me what my native language is. I answered: Spanish. You were pleased because there were prisoners on the waiting list who speak Spanish. I now knew that I was in the right place. I found wonderful people with warm hearts, no nameless dark figures behind bars; people who hunger and thirst for love and acceptance, and who want to be perceived as people. Yesterday was Arturo’s birthday. I phoned his grandmother who was just leaving for the cemetery. I “accompanied” her by mobile phone. She cried, but was happy that I was “there”. It is beautiful how everything has unfolded. Just as before, I don’t know where the road leads, but I know who leads my way.

Dear Lilia, thank you for your openness and that you have allowed us to share in your experiences. I am sure that many readers will be deeply moved, just as I have been. I wish you all of the best on your unknown way through life.