



Meeting a jury member who voted for my death

Talk with Donald Dillbeck, 30 years on death row in Florida

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, Switzerland, 2020

Don, you told me that one of the jury members wrote to you after the trial. Can you tell us how that unfolded?

The juror member's name was Betty. Right after the verdict, she approached my attorney and asked him if it would be okay if she wrote me, so he asked me and I said yes. I don't recall how long after I was sentenced to death that she wrote me, but she did at some point.

You said that jury members, too, wind up being silent victims. Can you elaborate on that?

What I meant by juror members also become silent victims of crimes.

They are going about living their lives and then they get notice they have to report to jury duty as their civic duty. Now, if it happens to be a death penalty case, it means the responsibility is thrust on them to decide whether or not a person should be able to live, or should they be killed. This here is a very heavy burden to be thrust on anyone's shoulders, and it's a decision they will have to live with. I'm sure that they must always be doubting if the decision they made, especially if it was for death, was the right choice and may even lead to deep regret. So, by just having this put on them makes them too a victim of sorts, especially if it really weighs on their conscious.

You show a lot of compassion to the jury members, the people who sentenced you to death. I would not have anticipated that.

I can't even begin to tell you of all the mistakes and bad decisions I've made along this journey. When we learn self-compassion and understanding, it sure makes it easier to not be as judgmental towards others. Even though the choice of life and death has the appearance of being so permanent, it really isn't. I have to believe that, in a misguided way, the jurors really thought it was the right choice. And once again, I and I alone have full ownership of both my life and death; now and in the end, I'm the only one who has this responsibility.

The jury member even came visit you sometime later. What did the talk revolve around?

When Betty came to see me, the conversation was mostly about her life, such as being married for decades, being a substitute teacher, her choir, being a blood donor and not having so much as a cold for years and some history on her family. We had a very good conversation, and she revealed that she was one of the jury members who voted for death. So, she was looking for some absolution, which I gave to her, because I strongly

felt that I put myself here and can't blame anyone else. She told me if there was anything she could do to help my lawyers in my appeals, she would do it. We shared a bag of popcorn, and also played a game of Scrabble if I'm not mistaken.

I must say, I'm surprised, to say the least, to imagine you sitting in the visit park of the death row wing, eating popcorn and you giving a jury member who helped to sentence you to death absolution for sentencing you to death. Let me think about that for a second.

I have always thought that strong bonds are created through bad actions, even murder. A victim and their offender – something will connect them forever. Betty wanting absolution from you proves she felt that connection, right? She could have asked a spiritual advisor or pastor for absolution.

Did Betty actually change her mind and regretted voting for the death penalty?

We are all much more connected to each other than what we imagine. Do I think because she wanted absolution, she felt this connection? That is a very strong possibility. For sure though, it speaks volumes about her character. For all I know, she did have conversations with her pastor, but still felt it was me from whom she needed absolution. Her telling me she would help with my appeals if she could indicates that she had a change of heart.

Do you know in which ways Betty's life changed after she was a jury member and/or after she met with you?

I really can't say how her life was affected after she was a jury member, but no doubt the whole situation must have weighed upon her or she wouldn't have wanted to reach out to me. Afterwards, I hope she had some peace of mind. We only wrote a couple of times after the visit, she found an elderly gentleman and started a relationship with him; he wasn't so keen on her writing me, so we stopped writing. I do believe she received closure, and that's all that matters.

You seem very selfless. What is it that you care about in your life the most?

You say I seem selfless. I'm not, rather I see myself as self-more or self-full. When we learn to expand our hearts to include other people through empathy and consideration, our sense of self expands. What used to seem a small disconnected self appears large and inclusive. What is it in my life I care about the most? For me this is a very simple question to answer: my heart and soul. Plus, love and the Source that is the wellspring from where they flow. These are the greatest treasures any of us can have, that is if we give them a chance to grow.

When you look back at the encounter with Betty, what importance do you give it in your life?

You know when my lawyer asked me if I would write her, I was under the assumption that she was one of the four who voted for life. Had I known she was one of the eight

who voted for death, I wouldn't have had the maturity to get past my hurt at that time, from being sentenced to death, and I would never have agreed to write her. Through our correspondence, I was able to see her as a person rather than a perceived enemy, as it would have been so easy to do for someone in my situation. This whole experience wound up being a blessing that I cherish.

Is there anything you would like to tell other inmates in a similar situation?

It really is so easy to get caught up in our own pain and feeling that it's so unfair what happened by being sentenced to death, and who doesn't agree with that? If we were the jury member rather than the one sentenced, would we do it differently? Now especially since this has been our experience, most would be quick to say 'I don't believe in the death penalty! So no, I wouldn't have voted for death or even have convicted the person!' Let's take a minute and look at this, the moment someone snitches, isn't it so easy to have thoughts or feelings of what should be done to them? What about child molesters, isn't it easy to think what big monsters they are, and think it's okay to hurt or do worse to them? Isn't this basically the same thing a juror did to us and it's terrible, yet when we judge a snitch or child molester, then it's okay? The bottom line is that we are not so different after all, because it's the exact same spirit or feelings of righteous indignation flowing through us, that the jurors experienced. I wouldn't tell anyone they should or should not do anything. This includes having understanding for a juror because for most, that's way too far of a stretch. But these words being planted, there is no telling what may grow at one time or another.

Thank you very much, Don, for sharing this interesting story with us. I wish you all the best!