

Beauty and the Beast

By Ivo Knill, Männerzeitung, Dezember 2015

Translated from German into English by Heidi Uetz

As a member of the organization “lifespark”, Ines Aubert maintains and helps to organize correspondences with people on death row in the USA. She has learned about the causes and chasms which can result from the written word.

“I wouldn’t have wanted him to be set free,” she said, “at least not without a whole packet of additional measures.” Ines Aubert surprises once again with her lack of prejudice. Aubert is a member of the organization “lifespark”, which has existed in Switzerland since 1993 and organizes penpalships with inmates on death row in the USA. Aubert organizes these special correspondences - and participates in some of her own.

“Her” penpal, Casper, committed a series of brutal rapes at the end of his 20’s: He locked his victims up, tortured them and forced them into sexual acts. He forced them into a disturbed system of violence and sex, just as he had been mistreated as a child when growing up. He killed one of his victims, a 12-year old girl. The other victims may be traumatized for the rest of their lives. Aubert knew about these crimes, but still kept up the correspondence with him. Why?

Evil Excites

Excitement, thrills, suspense, getting the creeps and chills, outrage. Evil feeds our emotional state with glittering bits. During the day we suppress evil, this dangerous element, from our horizon. At night we open the door to evil, at least for as long as it is banished to books, crime novels, films and newspapers. Because that’s what evil needs, a ban, which keeps us from crossing the line.

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But what happens if we do cross the line? If we turn to things which destroy, shock, cause fear and irritate? What happens if we write letters to the evil one, who is sitting in a cell and becomes a reading consciousness, who knows more about our own life than our best friend?

A documentary shown by the BBC in 2014 dealt with another one of Aubert’s pen pals, Robert Pruett. Pruett grew up in a family where everything went wrong.

His family was narrow-minded and limited in all aspects - he was intelligent, even brilliant. He managed however to get himself into serious trouble and wound up on death row in Texas. There are clues however, which speak for his innocence.

He is the perfect protagonist for a documentary questioning the death penalty. He is young, charismatic and probably innocent. However, he does not represent the majority of execution candidates. “They are probably old, most of them are guilty, and are not of the material which makes heroes,” says Aubert. “If one is against the death penalty, then not only because the innocent may be executed, but also that even the guilty should be allowed to live.” As already stated, Aubert surprises, because she doesn’t glorify. Even if the possible innocence of an accused person is an argument

against the death penalty, whoever wants to abolish it, also advocates that multiple murderers should continue to live.

Aubert did not appear in the BBC film. But viewers who wanted to know more after having seen it and googled Pruett, came to a homepage which she had set up for him and a mailbox, which she also takes care of, since prisoners have no access to the Internet. After the BBC documentary, many messages came in for "Robert". Many of them came from women. "Some emails were 2 or 3 pages long. The women wrote to Robert that they felt close to him. They opened their hearts and lives to him." Pruett has had several marriage possibilities. This is not an exception. Also in the correspondences organized by "lifespark" there are cases of love, romantic relationships and marriage. Marriages which take place behind a glass wall, because body contact is not permitted for death row convicts, especially not in the "family room". They take the role of Snow White in the glass coffin. These are the two poles - revulsion and fascination. Both can be glorified.

Evil Fascinates

Where does this fascination with evil come from? What is the attraction, particularly for women? On death row in the USA, there are 3200 men - and 60 women. In the correspondences, it is the opposite, the women who write are in the majority. Actually, it could be ironically said that these convicts are the ideal men. If they want contact with the outside world, they are condemned to a relationship. They can't run away, they have to be grateful, they always have time. They await the women's letters because these letters are the only break in the daily routine in their 2 by 3 meter cells. These execution candidates are not looked after, have no therapy or distraction, or anyone to cheer them up. They are at the end of the U.S. system of justice, they are locked up in order to die. They sit in death's waiting room. They all have a lawyer, most of them a terrible one, who can do nothing to change the situation. Most of the men on death row are alone. Each letter is a drop of caring in a sea of loneliness. And every letter is a salve for the longing of the writers. One can look at it this way: Beauty and the Beast, which must be tamed.

Aubert also recognizes the power play. "Yes. It is very clear, these men try to be good pen pals. They are grateful for the attention they get." There are women who scold them as if they were little boys, others imagine a shared future in an imaginary "afterward", where the pen pal sits at home with them and enjoys the evening. And Aubert asks, "Is that bad?" Thereby asking an important question: when is evil permitted and when is it forbidden? Is it wrong to act as a helper for a person who sits in a cell and has no alternative?

The prisoners ask "lifespark" for pen pals. They are put on a waiting list. It usually takes a year before they receive a contact. If the men become bawdy in their letters or refuse to stop talking about sex, despite being asked to, the contact can be broken off and they are taken off the list. They have to behave. But they want to do that, since each day is long when you are locked up for an indefinite period of time, waiting for death.

Lock up or glorify. It seems as if we have to distance ourselves from these individuals in one way or another. We scandalize evil, the bad man, and stop seeing him as a human

being. That is the reaction of those who believe in long sentences and strict prosecution. Others glorify what they fear. They see the offenders as victims of society, or they see human beings, who through their special experience have been purged. Individuals, who like the monks of yore in their monasteries, became wise and purified. There are correspondents who tell their pen pals everything, let them take part in their lives and thoughts, because they are far away and so isolated; a distant, pure consciousness, which participates in one's life. Aubert reports that Pruett, the charismatic, innocent death candidate, has probably received hundreds of letters telling hundreds of life stories. A collection of figures, shapes and stories from all over the world dance through his cell.

There is a secret which gives the men on death row power. They have been where many of us don't dare to go. Every one of us has the capacity to be evil. Otherwise, how could we explain all the horrors which exist in our world? "Evil," says Aubert, "is a part of life. Like an element which can't be erased or gotten rid of. Given certain conditions, any one of us could commit evil acts. These men have known and touched evil."

Seeing and Bearing Evil

It may be the fact that the contact with inmates on death row occurs via letters that makes it special. When writing, thoughts about oneself find a distant listener, who becomes real during the process. The distant listener is suddenly close, in an intensity brought about by feeling, longing and imagining. The exchange with the inmate becomes a ritual; where in the rest of the world everything moves at a superficial and rapid pace, prison bureaucracy forces a slower correspondence rhythm. And the person on the other side cannot escape. If he wants to see more of the world than his 2 by 3 meter cell, he has to read and write.

Aubert does not pass judgment on the different motivations which lead to a contact with someone on death row. In her view, such a decision results from a multi-layered background. Self-interest, the desire to help, political involvement-everything is possible.

For herself, it is not simply the idea of helping these men or even forgiving them. They have to come to terms with their deeds by themselves. There are other reasons. Her pen pal Casper told her about his deeds early on in their relationship. He spoke about rape and murder and encouraged his new correspondent to ask whatever questions she wanted to. But for a long time the focus was not Casper's crimes. It was only when it was time to write his biography that Aubert really comprehended what this man had actually done, how cruel, how perverse and destructive his crimes were. After she had read what he had written, she suddenly pictured herself amongst the collection of women who had been forced to succumb to his perversions. Just as he had abducted, imprisoned and tortured his victims, she now saw herself, as she read, bonded to these women. For a brief moment she found herself unable to continue the contact. Then she wrote again, she fought with herself, with Casper, he apologized. Not for his crimes, which he was already sorry for, but for having shared with her the knowledge of his deeds. In this battle, it became clear to Aubert, what her responsibility with Casper was; namely to bear the fact that he had committed these crimes. And Casper actually formulated the wish which was at the basis of their correspondence: to find someone who would be able to accept him and his story.

Evil is Human

When Aubert first read about Casper's crimes, she felt for a moment entangled in the evil that he had perpetrated. She experienced how difficult it was to free oneself of this entanglement. How must the victims have felt? Casper regretted what he had done and he wanted his victims to know that. After Casper's death from cancer, his case was written about in a local newspaper, the "Orlando Sentinel". In the on-line commentaries a woman identified herself as one of his victims. Aubert contacted her, met and spoke with her then in the U.S.A. Two things were important to this woman, that Casper had repented and that he had found God.

The story could also be told this way: a Swiss woman, Ines Aubert, has contact with a man in the USA who has done horrible things. They write to each other, he admits his guilt and his correspondent spreads the message of his repentance to his victims. The victim has found God, just like the man who committed the crimes and she is ready to accept his repentance. Through the path of repentance and forgiveness, both victim and perpetrator have found a way out of the quagmire of guilt and the web of entanglement. This story is possible and when it becomes reality, it is moving and has its own right. But although it seems so simple, there does remain a certain doubt. For that reason, it is good to hear that Aubert had her own doubts about having "her inmate" released from prison.

The Seductive Narrative of Punishment

In the reports about penpalships with death row inmates, there is a double-edged narrative, in which guilt, punishment, reformation and forgiveness unite in a bizarre way to create transfiguration. The machinery of transfiguration runs on the perverse dramatic element of the victim's death sentence, supplied by the U.S. justice system. Everything leads to this act and it is directed towards forgiveness in the black mass of execution.

The execution takes place before a special audience. The families of the inmate and the victim sit in two separate rooms, separated from the actual execution chamber by a glass wall. The condemned person is brought in. The minutes pass, time moves slowly, moving towards that single moment, the last minute before death. Towards the question, whether the condemned man, lying on the gurney, ready to receive the final injection, will admit his guilt and say, "I'm sorry". If he says it, the victim's family will breathe a sigh of relief. Their life has been saved and their pain, if not relieved, at least recognized. If he refuses to say the words, they are thrown back into the spiral of pain and helplessness.

The amazing thing for me in the talk with Aubert is that she avoids all the ritual around evil. She compares it to the movement of a pendulum. The lives of the men whom she has corresponded with, have touched the realm of evil, but have also swung back into a life which is separate from evil, a life these men were once a part of and could be a part of again. It becomes clear: the deeds are evil, the individuals are not. It must be accepted, these are human beings. We are all human beings. The evil deed, the crime, the horror, must be identified and we must confront it. But we must also bear it as something which is all too human.