



## How to be happy and Free in the Face of death – what Anthony Graves taught me in the 16 years of our penfriendship

By Nick Bell, Switzerland, February 2016

A prisoner on death row is not the obvious teacher, but this is what Anthony Graves has been for me. It was an incredible bonus that he was freed after being cleared of the charges against him after 18 years in prison.

Not many of us will have the wonderful luck and happiness that I had to welcome their penfriend in their homes, even if they are, like Anthony, innocent. This was an impossible dream that finally came true on May 11, 2011.

Anthony loves to laugh. I remembered that from my visit to him in Huntsville Texas, and from the humour in his letters. But it was the same Anthony who was laughing and joking on our balcony in Switzerland with our friends on that summer evening, now nearly five years ago.

It had been a long journey from a death row cell to freedom and the opportunity to visit his penfriends in Switzerland, Sweden and Germany. Even in prison, though, Anthony was already free, because he had never allowed the authorities to take his mental and spiritual freedom from him. Of course this meant that, like Nelson Mandela, he would not allow himself to be trapped in resentment and hatred.

In his letters and in his talks that I attended in Switzerland, Anthony taught me how to concentrate on what is important to me and not to get distracted. As he stated in the event Amnesty International organised in Zurich University: he found out in prison that what he wanted was to be happy, and that everything we do is directed to that end.

Together with his focus on happiness, he never forgot his aim to be free. He kept his attention on that in all his letters, so that his penfriends and others who came into contact with him were inspired to campaign and work on his behalf. It was this focus, his humour, and the wisdom born of his experience of hardship that enabled Anthony to keep his audiences in Switzerland spellbound.

So what can we learn from him to share with our penfriends on Death Row? How to stay positive no matter how hopeless things seem – even when you see good friends go to their death and have a definite date for your own – and how to keep your focus on mental and spiritual freedom and happiness.

Anthony Graves was one of the lucky ones who got out alive, but many of our penfriends do find freedom and happiness in the face of the seemingly impossible odds of Death Row, even those who are, sadly, put to death.

For more information about his story and what he is up to now, Google “Anthony Graves”.