



The death penalty in my birth place, Virginia –its barbarity has now hit me on a deeply personal level

By Janet Brot, Switzerland, February 2016

The Commonwealth of Virginia, United States of America, birthplace of the nation and of presidents, takes pride in its status as a special place with its well-known slogan: “To be a Virginian either by Birth, Marriage, Adoption, even on one’s Mother’s side, is an introduction to any State in the Union, a Passport to any Foreign Country, and a Benediction from above”. This is emblazoned on T-shirts, banners, tea towels, etc. which are sold in tourist shops everywhere.

As an elementary school student, I enjoyed class trips to various places in Virginia: Jamestown, the site of the first permanent English settlement (1607); Colonial Williamsburg; Yorktown Battlefield; numerous Civil War sites; impressive plantations along the James River, amongst many others. We were taught the “glorious” part of history, while the “dark side” was pushed away, covered up, or glossed over. The blood of slaves cries out from the soil of those well-groomed green lawns of beautiful plantations perched on the banks of the James River, and those first presidents born in Virginia were large landowners and slaveholders. Slavery, a “peculiar institution” as Kenneth Stampp refers to it in his book entitled *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956) is a dark chapter in Virginia’s history.

Another of Virginia’s dark sides, another “peculiar institution”, as it is called in the title of David Garland’s book *Peculiar Institution: America’s Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition* (2010), is capital punishment. Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976, 111 individuals have been executed by the Commonwealth of Virginia. This statistic is NOT emblazoned on T-shirts, banners, tea towels, etc. and sold in tourist shops.

I grew up in the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia and attended Catholic school from Kindergarten through high school graduation. The Catholic Church places great emphasis on social justice in its teachings, and the Diocese of Richmond was always active in social justice education, projects, and activities. After graduation from high school, I studied Economics at Virginia Commonwealth University and worked for a few years in this field. Because of my keen awareness of and interest in social justice, I decided to study law. During the 16 years I worked in law firms, I became acutely aware of the injustice inherent in the so-called justice system. I watched court-appointed attorneys bury their clients’ files at the bottom of piles, laugh and make jokes about them, toss papers from these files across the room, amongst other more atrocious things. I removed myself from general practice and criminal law and focused upon estate and real estate law, often referred to as “quiet law”, in which at least some form of equity appeared to exist. Later, I became a Minister of Religious Education in a Catholic parish in Richmond, Virginia, in which position I supervised religious education in the parish for children, youth, and adults. In this capacity, I strove to emphasize social justice as the core of all church teaching, as it was certainly the core of Jesus’ teaching, i.e. of God’s heart. Yes, social

justice lies at the top of God's agenda, and Virginia's justice system and its politically- and wealth-oriented legal mill is failing miserably at keeping this.

After saying farewell to Virginia and the United States and relocating to Switzerland in September of 2001, I was no longer able to work in the legal field. For many years, I have taught English as an adult education project in various churches, and have thus integrated history and social justice in as many groups as possible. Several years after arriving in Switzerland, I became aware of lifespark and began writing to death row inmates, and over the years I came to know three quite well. The first, who had some very serious mental health issues, stopped writing after several years of correspondence. The second was moved to life imprisonment and didn't have time to write any longer, and my third and present pen pal, with whom I have had correspondence for more than five years, was scheduled to be executed on March 17, 2016, but has recently received an indefinite stay of execution. The death penalty in its barbarity has now hit me on a deeply personal level. The candle vigils prior to executions which I attended at the Cathedral of the Diocese of Richmond certainly had an impact upon me, but I never knew the human being personally whom Virginia was executing. I have gotten to know Marc as a warm and caring person who has shared so much of himself with me. I recently had the gift of hearing his voice, which matches the warmth of his heart. Marc's unwavering and sincere faith – despite all of the horrid circumstances of his entire life – has been and continues to be an inspiration to me. He is walking with God, and God is clearly walking with him.