



The person in between - neither an offender nor a victim

By Ines Aubert, Switzerland, December 2015

I've been writing to death row inmates for fourteen years, and in many ways it has broadened my horizon enormously. Not only was I confronted with life on death row, but also with many aspects of the two poles of being an offender or a victim.

My empathy with other human beings is not limited to prisoners; my general attitude in life is an interest in other people's experiences and in their ways of thinking and feeling.

Sometimes people like me who write to death row prisoners are asked when we would finally do something for the victims instead of further pampering the offenders who are already given much more than they deserve.

Such remarks leave me helpless. I would love to be in contact with crime victims, as well, if they wished that. But generally, we don't have the chance to meet them and hear how they are doing. While death row prisoners actively seek out contacts with strangers who are willing to exchange letters, I've never come across such a request from a victim. (Yet, on a side note, let me say that many of the offenders turn out to have been victims in their childhood, as well.)

My friendship with one of my pen pals taught me that it is indeed possible to also do something for the victims when we write a death row prisoner.

It's the story of my journey with Robert Power, nicknamed Casper. Casper had committed a long row of horrible crimes; he had raped several girls and women and killed a girl during his last rape. Contrary to most inmates, Casper wanted me to know his horrid past because he longed to be seen and loved as a whole person rather than the cruel man he used to be, and as the religious and compassionate man he had become in the 23 years he has spent on death row. With the help of two prison spiritual advisers who had become his friends, Casper has changed drastically and felt great remorse about what he had done. His wish was to tell his many surviving victims and the family of the dead girl how much he regretted his actions and to apologize to them.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to get his message out. Casper and I both loved to discuss everything intensely, and besides our letters we wrote dialogues with the idea to once share them with readers.

Casper was very intelligent and suffered a lot when, after some years in prison, he started realizing what damage he had caused for many people. We didn't know that then, but when I got to know him, Casper had less than three years left to live before he died of cancer. Our friendship was very intense; when looking back, it appears as if Casper wanted to squeeze as much as possible into his remaining time on earth.

Casper started writing his biography and shared it with me. It was horrible to read about the crimes he had committed. There was a moment when I felt it was beyond that which I was able to handle. When I told him that, Casper was shocked. Although our pen palship continued, he

spoke many times of the moment he thought he would lose our connection. Through that and through my very emotional and hefty reaction to the description of his crimes, Casper began to realize the emotional aspect of his deeds and what losing someone could mean. His great intellect had not been able to provide him with that insight, a dialogue partner was necessary for that.

There was never the hope or intention to help Casper get off of death row. I rather consider it a life lesson for everyone in order to understand their actions, to realize what is important in life, and how everything is interconnected. This lesson can be learned in prison, also.

Having been on the journey with Casper was one of the biggest challenges in my life. One lesson I have learned is that we can, in fact, do something: we can withstand stories that are so hard that we think they can't be listened to, to not run but just be there and listen. For Casper it was life-changing.

Casper's death was announced in the newspaper Orlando Sentinel. Many readers reacted to the online version of the article by writing comments. Among them was the forgiving message of one of his rape victims, Debbie; a woman he had kidnapped and raped when she was 16 years old. Through the comment section, I was able to lead her to Casper's apology that was posted on the Internet already. After many e-mails and a couple of phone calls, Debbie and I met in her home town in the summer of 2011.

Of course, before that meeting, I was very nervous because it seemed to me as if I were crossing a bridge. It felt as if I had changed from "the side of the prisoner" to "the side of the victim". How could I have been friends with Casper and now meet with one of his earlier victims? Crossing such a bridge was something I'd never seen anyone do.

It turned out to be the best thing I could have done. It wasn't so much the crossing of a bridge, but rather becoming one myself. For both Debbie and I, it was a great meeting. She was happy that Casper had had someone to talk to. She also felt great satisfaction that he had become religious and that he had wanted to apologize to his victims.

Not one moment did Debbie or her mother question my commitment for Casper and other death row prisoners or state that they felt betrayed. They both thought it a good thing to communicate with offenders and, in so doing, possibly help them to understand.

So while it didn't change the past, communicating with me as Casper's pen friend definitely changed something for Debbie.

Casper wasn't there to learn about that outcome anymore, but through this story hope and understanding can be spread up until today.