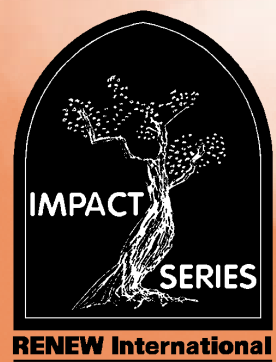


Reflections on "Dead Man Walking"

Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ
and Lucille Sarrat



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NIHIL OBSTAT:

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil.
Archdiocese of Newark Theological Commission
Censor Librorum

IMPRIMATUR:

Most Reverend Theodore E. McCarrick, D.D.
Archbishop of Newark

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IMPACT SERIES

No person in the history of the world has had a greater impact upon human behavior than Jesus. Through his Spirit, he continues to call us to discipleship and to become a people of witness and service in the world. He came that we “might have life and have it to the fullest.” This full life called for a whole new respect for the dignity of each person and for harmonious relationships between and among men, women, children, and all of creation. This “reign of God” proclaimed by Jesus was not relegated to the hereafter, but was to begin here and now in the temporal order. All life is sacred.

We are called to live this reign of God in our everyday lives. The practice of faith is not restricted to Sunday worship or special times of prayer. Our faith is to permeate our entire week and be reflected in all human activity. Because the full practice of our faith may conflict with the customs and mores of society, we have a tendency to avoid tension in our lives by compartmentalizing religion. As a result, religion can become insipid and lack real impact in our daily lives.

The Second Vatican Council projected a more holistic view when it stated: “The work of Christ’s redemption concerns essentially the salvation of people; it takes in also, however, the renewal of the whole temporal order. The mission of the Church, consequently, is not only to bring people the message and grace of Christ but to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal” (*Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, #5).

The *Impact Series* aims to do precisely that. In connecting faith to a wide range of human concerns and issues, it hopes that participants will not only be led to prayerful reflection and fruitful sharing, but also to concrete actions that positively influence human attitudes and behavior.

Growth through action is a basic principle in the *Impact Series*. Discussion and even good sharing are not enough. The intention of this series is to lead participants to concrete and specific actions that influence human attitudes and behaviors. Some of the *Impact Series* materials that deal with social issues will use the Observe, Judge, and Act methodology because of its proven ability to lead to thoughtful and effective action.

Ideally, a group will meet every two or three weeks. This will allow members of the community sufficient time to implement their outreach actions and time for observations to be made in preparation for the upcoming meeting.

For small Christian communities to be worthy of their name, carrying out the mission which Christ gave to his Church must always be kept central. Faith sharing that tends to turn in on the self-interest of the group will, in time, have the effect of atrophy on the group. God’s Holy Spirit should be a fire vigorously moving a healthy community to a ministry of loving service. Many issues are somewhat difficult to face and to grasp. Experience shows that they are seldom addressed without a certain amount of challenge, guidance, and assistance. The *Impact Series* is designed to meet this need and, in doing so, to help small Christian communities better realize their great potential for participation in God’s reign on our earth.

SESSION 5

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

Aim: To identify with feelings of revenge and, at the same time, to realize that reconciliation and forgiveness are the only ways to healing.

Opening Prayer

Song: “Peace Prayer”

Scripture: Luke 23:32-34a

Silent or Shared Prayer

Action Response

Review actions from your last meeting.

Observe (To be prepared before the meeting.)

Ask several people the following question:

- As of August 1999, eighty-two persons have been removed from death row because their innocence was proven. Why do they think so many innocent people end up on death row along with the guilty?

Sharing of the “Observes” (Each shares briefly.)

Judge

Reflection 1

At a program held at Trinity University, Bud Welch, a Catholic whose daughter, Julie, was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing, moved the audience to tears with his tale of meeting with Timothy McVeigh’s family. “I can tell you, the rage and revenge I had after the bombing was incredible,” Welch said. “I changed my mind about

the death penalty. I know what temporary insanity is—I lived it.” But he remembered an occasion when Julie, his daughter, heard about a Texas execution on the radio and told him, “Dad, all they’re doing is teaching hate to their children in Texas.”

In September 1998, he was able to arrange a meeting with McVeigh’s

father and sister, Jennifer, through the family’s Catholic parish. Before he left, he and Jennifer cried together. “I was able to hold her face in my hands and tell her, ‘Honey, the three of us are in this the rest of our lives. We can make the most of this if we choose. I don’t want your brother to die, and I will do everything in my power to prevent it.’” He added, “I have never in my life felt closer to God than I did at that time.”

Marietta Jaeger, a founding member of Murder Victim Families for Reconciliation, has said, “Forgiveness is hard work. Anyone who thinks forgiveness is for wimps has never tried it.” Jaeger, who made herself pray each day for one good thing to happen to the man who had killed her daughter, said, “There’s no one who can say to me, ‘Well, Marietta, you wouldn’t be opposed to the death penalty if it happened to your little girl.’ No amount of retaliatory death will compensate for the loss of our loved ones or restore them to our arms. And, in fact, to say that the execution death of any one malfunctioning person will bring justice is an insult to the immeasurable value of our loved ones’ lives.”

In June 1997, the U.S. Bishops’ Conference forcibly presented its own case on behalf of faith, justice, and mercy regarding the action of Timothy McVeigh. In two statements (June 5 and 13), the bishops reminded us that “this terrible act still burns in our hearts” and the “magnitude of the agony” is still “felt by the families of the victims and the survivors.” And, while it is understandable that many would demand the same fate for

McVeigh as that experienced by his victims, the bishops maintain that in acting this out we would “perpetuate a terrible cycle of violence and further diminish respect for life.” We must rather seek ways to “break the culture of violence that grips our society.” Further, “our God calls for justice and mercy, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We are called to seek justice without vengeance.”

Opposing the death sentence for Mr. McVeigh, the bishops recall:

Jesus Christ taught us to seek justice *with* mercy, to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. We add our voice to the public debate on this issue, therefore, in

hopes that we will not harden our hearts in the face of unspeakable violence, but will eventually decide that the best response to violence and death is the biblical call to “choose life.”

“U.S. Bishops React to Sentencing of Timothy McVeigh,”
Statement by: Bernard Cardinal Law,
Archbishop of Boston, Chairman,
Committee for Pro-Life Activities and
Most Reverend William S. Skylstad,
Bishop of Spokane, Chairman,
Committee for Domestic Policy,
July 13, 1997.
Office of Communications,
National Conference of Catholic
Bishops/United States
Catholic Conference.

Sharing Questions

- What feelings well up in me in response to the opening paragraph of Chapter 10 in *Dead Man Walking*?
- What points of the bishops’ statements of 1997 particularly strike me? How difficult is it to live out these Christian values?

Reflection 2

Debbie Morris is the woman from Madisonville, Louisiana who was kidnapped and raped by Robert Willie. She has written a book, called *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*, in which she recounts the nightmarish ordeal she underwent. In this book, she writes very vividly of her long road to recovery, which only came about through her final forgiveness of the criminal. This did not take place overnight. Rather, it took many years of mental anguish. Her dealing with the justice system and her appearance at the trial of Willie was traumatizing. Later, she suffered panic attacks and deep depression. She became a school dropout, had a bout of heavy drinking,

and had feelings of low self-esteem. She tells of her slow return to school, then to college. In college she began to wrestle with her feelings regarding capital punishment, especially when persons jumped to conclusions either for or against the issue. “Does Robert Willie deserve to die for what he did to me?” she asked herself.

Then she had to deal with her feelings about me, when she heard that I was the spiritual advisor to Robert Willie. “He needs a spiritual advisor,” she thought, “but no one is offering me a spiritual advisor. What does some nun know about the real world?”

On the night of Willie’s execution, she writes:

I went to bed early that night and tried to sleep. Of course I couldn’t. So I lay in the dark, staring up at the ceiling, and tried not to think of Robert Willie. I couldn’t manage that either. I thought back over all the days and months and years that I’d hated Robert Willie and everything about him. For who he was. For what he did to me, to Mark, to Faith Hathaway (p. 17).

Debbie Morris recalled the anger, the shame, the humiliation, the guilt, and the repulsion that had all been part of her hatred. When she realized she hadn’t felt the intensity of those old emotions for a long time, she

decided there was no point in harboring the word—“hate”—to describe something she no longer felt.

Once she realized that she no longer “hated” Robert Willie, she was freed from some of the hold he’d had over her. She began to think that, if she didn’t hate him, perhaps she could actually forgive him—not for his sake, but for hers. Then she could get on with her life. As much as she hated the thought of him dying hating her, she realized it might be just as bad for him to die with her hating him.

Could Debbie truly forgive Robert Willie? In a sense, she already had. She had heard people say, “Robert Willie could die five times in the electric chair and it wouldn’t be half the pain he deserved for what he’s done.” However, Debbie didn’t feel that way anymore. She could forgive Robert Willie. But she couldn’t tell him. She could tell only God.

Lying in bed in the dark, Debbie began to pray.

Lord, please help me deal with whatever happens tonight. I really do forgive Robert Willie. As best I can anyway. If the execution goes on, please make it fast and painless. I don’t want him to suffer anymore. If he dies tonight, help his death to heal the Harveys and their pain. Amen

As Debbie prayed, pronouncing her forgiveness of Robert Willie, she gained an emotional release, a sense of freedom that she couldn’t describe. Ultimately, it cut her loose from the

control Robert Willie had over her for all those years.

Those who strive to come to mercy and forgiveness need the support of others as they approach this courageous act. The Catholic Bishops of Texas clearly enunciate this need for support in their Statement on Capital Punishment (October 20, 1997), as they describe the responsibility of the state:

Capital punishment does nothing for the families of victims of violent crime other than prolonging their suffering through many wasted years of criminal proceedings. Rather than fueling their cry for vengeance, the state could better serve them by helping them come to terms with their grief. We applaud the work toward reconciliation and rehabilitation of the people who caused tragic loss in their families.

We can all relate to a delightful children’s story about forgiveness called *The Hurt*, by Teddi Doleski (Paulist Press). It tells about two little boys who were friends. One calls the other an ugly name. The second boy takes offense and goes home to nurse his grievance. The hurt is pictured as a rock which he carries around. Later in the same day, the father comes home and the boy goes to meet him. At once, the father remonstrates with the child about the mud he has brought into the house. When the boy returns to his room, the rock has grown. All night he broods over the hurt, and the stone becomes so large that he can hardly sleep. Finally, he decides to tell his father about the situation. The father helps him to understand, and even apologizes for fussing about the dirt in the house. Upon returning to his room, the hurt (rock) has gotten smaller. He proceeds to push the hurt out the window, thus freeing himself from the power of the hurt.

Sharing Questions

- In what ways can I relate to these experiences of forgiveness?
- Have I had a similar experience of the great freedom which comes with forgiveness? (Please share, if you are willing.)
- How have others assisted me in my acts of forgiveness?
- How might I, or we, deal with a very difficult situation that requires forgiveness?

Act

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. These should be your primary considerations. The following are secondary suggestions.

Some Suggestions

- Engage in a specific act of forgiveness.
- Avail yourself of the sacrament of reconciliation with special attention to any inappropriate and sinful attitudes and behaviors you may have nurtured.
- Hold an evening in your parish to talk about the issue of capital punishment. Invite a speaker. Also invite anyone in your group who has had a change of heart about capital punishment to witness to his or her conversion experience.

Look Ahead

Take time now to read the “Observe” for Session 6. Be prepared to share clearly and briefly your observations at the next meeting.

Closing Prayer

Pray together:

God, you have taught us the way of forgiveness. Help us in our feeble efforts to be like you. Once again, we plead with you to change our stony hearts to hearts of flesh. Help us to understand better your people and ourselves. We thank you for the insights we

have gained through prayer, reflection, and sharing about forgiveness. Help us to realize that the power of forgiveness will always prevail over the power of violence. Be with us as we try to change. Amen

Conclude with the Lord's Prayer.



Photo by Wilbert Rideau