

### ***Straight from the Heart, continued...***

Our mission and purpose were to provide spiritual support for a man who was on Death Row. Sister Christine had been in communication with this person for the previous five years via letters, occasional phone calls, and visits. Upon our arrival, we met Mose Young, a 44-year-old African-American who had been convicted and incarcerated since February, 1983, for the killing of three men in a pawn shop in St. Louis, Missouri.

My being able to come face to face with the accused introduced a whole new dimension of reality of a person on Death Row. I saw before me a man who was very appropriate in his words and in his behavior. Mose was a strong extrovert with an outgoing personality and an unusual sense of humor. He was neatly dressed and well groomed in his simple prison apparel. From the very beginning, I sensed a genuineness in his being and a comfortableness in his relating to us in spite of our just having met. Mose had a story that needed to be told, a story that needed to be heard: his story of conversion and grace after so many long and difficult years on Death Row. "In spite of all the adversities I have had in my life, I harbor no grudge or resentment towards anyone. I was not always of this thinking, but Allah has been good to me and has worked through me. I praise him every day for this rebirth."

Mose had been given an execution date for July 12, 2000. Several days after our first visit we were on the road again to Potosi. Throughout the long trip, "When I was in prison, you visited me." kept running through my head. How many times had I read or heard this corporal work of mercy? How many times had I committed myself to being present to someone who is confined behind prison walls, unable to express his or her freedom in ways which I so much take for granted? Without a doubt in my mind, this experience presented a whole new meaning to reaching out to those who have no voice and in many ways are looked at as being disposable.

As we got closer to foreign territory, I found myself a bit anxious, apprehensive, and rather emotional. Deep within I knew that this was just the beginning of the many hurdles that we would have to face. My focus was not intended to pamper my own fears but an attempt to meet any needs that Mose might be having during this crucial and devastating time.

After being so coldly processed and educated in the do's and don'ts of the execution protocol, I did not allow myself to become disempowered by what I perceived as insensitive and uncaring attitudes of some of the staff. For some it seemed to be "just a job". For others their nonverbal behavior spoke of compassion.

Like many caught up in the system, Mose openly admitted that his past history did not deem the "prize". "I have done some awful things in my life that I am not very proud of, but I can honestly say today, as was said eighteen years ago, I am innocent of this crime. I am not a murderer. I am not the insensitive and selfish person I was years ago." A number of the staff confirmed this when they said that Mose had been a model prisoner throughout his time of being incarcerated.

Mose, without hesitation, maintained his innocence to the last. So was this man innocent or not? It is not my nature to minimize or condone any heinous and violent act that destroys life. At the same time, I feel a grave responsibility from within that compels me to contend that life, all life is to be revered and protected from harm.

Our first deathwatch began on July 10th, 2000. Having passed all the tightly secured checkpoints, we were then escorted down a deserted hallway, passing through several large automated steel

doors that snapped with a harsh bang, resonating throughout the corridor. This pathway eventually lead to a long flight of winding stairs, leading down to subterranean depths of the prison. The holding cell and execution chamber are within several feet of each other, both being a part of the prison infirmary. I found this to be most disturbing and misleading.

The holding cell symbolized extreme confinement and "untouchable" for the individual that occupies this minute space. This designated area was camouflaged by a corrugated door, giving one a feeling of dark secrecy. In a more descriptive sense, the holding cell is best to be described as a "cage" or a "dog kennel". The exterior of the holding cell is made up of a heavy iron crisscrossed fence, which obscures one's view when visiting with the inmate. This area is backed by a solid concrete wall. The limited space consists of one plastic patio chair, a metal bed frame that extends out from the wall with a foam mattress approximately three inches or less in depth; a small TV, telephone, and a stainless steel toilet and washbowl. A guard sits at a small desk, closely watching, listening, and documenting all activity that goes on in the holding cell. Right outside of the "cage" are two more plastic chairs nailed to the floor. One could not miss the bold and intimidating red line that strongly indicated to visitors to stay within their boundary. The long hours spent in such uncomfortable confinement was indeed evident of God's grace for my own personal endurance.

Six hours prior to the scheduled execution, Mose was granted a temporary stay. Not knowing just how long the stay would last, we rejoiced in the moment and expressed our sighs of relief and prayers of thanksgiving. After leaving the prison around 11:00 PM, we waited anxiously back at the motel until 1:00 AM, when we received word that the U.S. Supreme Court had upheld the stay for further investigation. With this news, we had hoped that Mose would possibly be given a second chance at a new trial.

In earlier years, Mose's legal representatives failed to adequately prepare for his defense. Sometime later, two of the trial lawyers were disbarred for numerous misrepresentations and personal discrepancies. One of the lawyers, with much humility, was courageous enough to admit his negligence in the case: "This knowledge has haunted me for the past 18 years and will continue to haunt me for the rest of my life."

Over the next nine months, we continued to travel to Potosi to visit Mose. A revised legal team was working very diligently and conscientiously in trying to bring justice to the forefront. All kinds of legal tactics were exercised, but to no avail, the darkness was upon us once again.

March 27, 2001, there was a mandatory lock-down in the prison. Mose shared with us that a strange feeling came over him. Once he was in his cell, he was able to look through what is called a bubble, a large mirror, anchored on the wall. He saw six guards and a prison official ascending the stairs to the second landing. At that point he was certain they were coming to retrieve him. Mose was informed that the Missouri Supreme Court had issued another warrant and date for his execution. The execution was scheduled for April 25th. Without further information, Mose was immediately removed from the prison's general population and placed in protective custody for the next 30 days.

Upon hearing this news, I was intent not to be overcome by the brain-etched nightmares of last July, for I had committed myself unconditionally for the duration of this journey, no matter what the outcome.

Sunday, April 22nd, 12:00 o'clock midnight, when quiet dominates the prison environment, Mose was transferred to the holding cell. This transition always occurs 48 hours prior to the execution. Mose felt that he had an advantage in knowing what to expect this time around.

Monday, April 23rd, we began our second deathwatch with Mose. With much regret, due to prior international meetings, Sister Kathleen was unable to make this last stretch of Mose's journey. She was able to speak with him over the phone reassuring him of her prayers, blessings and heartfelt wishes.

Shortly before we were escorted down to the holding cell, we met with Mose's attorneys. They were just coming from meeting with him. The lawyers were quite emotional in their informing us that the outcome was not looking very favorable. Their last attempt for clemency was presented to both the governor and the 8th Circuit Court. If either would refuse to give consideration to the requests, then legally there was nothing else to be done, for they had exhausted all avenues.

These legal advocates were quite moved by Mose's concern for them. He reassured and thanked them for all they had done on his behalf. "Can you believe that he was consoling us and thanking us? We have never represented anyone like Mose before... ever! Mose's concern for others when his own life is less than 36 hours away from being over is so amazing." The lawyers graciously expressed their thanks and appreciation for our presence and commitment to Mose. "He will need you more than ever at this time," said one of the lawyers. Mose would often say "You don't begin to know how much it means to have my 'special angels' here." We knew, yet his gift of self and example to us outweighed anything we could have possibly given to him. Truly we were the recipients.

When entering the holding cell area, we found Mose in good spirits despite the circumstances. We were graced with shared moments of spiritual peace, prayer and laughter, recalling some of our previous visits and how we all looked forward to getting together and sharing the vending machine meals. Never forgetting the seriousness of the situation, there was mutual determination not to be robbed of our quality time together. In one sense Mose made it easier for us, we just simply took our cues from him. He had a way about him that seemed to overshadow the sadness with peace.

Tuesday morning, April 24th, 15 hours away from the scheduled execution, Mose's lawyers called to inform him that the courts had denied his request for an appeal. Even at this news, Mose remained composed and undisturbed, not giving into the forces that had dictated his life for the past eighteen years. This unusual stamina was not one that seemed to come from wrestling with his foes, but one that comes from the God force within. "I understand and I appreciate all that you and the rest of my supporters have done for me. No matter what, there will be a blessing, there will be a resurrection, for this thing is much bigger than Mose. If it is Allah's will, then so be it. I may have to die for this cause, but it will not have been in vain."

Taking only a brief break during the day, we continued to wait with him, hoping and praying that the governor's decision would be honest and non-political, that it would be a decision of compassion, not one of vengeance and cruelty. Around 6:10 PM, being very much aware that visiting hours would be ending at 7:00 PM, we expressed our words of gratitude and blessings for one another. For one of our final prayers we sang "I Will Walk in the Presence of God". This song speaks of the freedom which comes when one enters into God's presence. We later sang the blessing of St. Francis: "May the Lord bless and keep you. May he turn his face to you have mercy. May he turn his countenance to you and give you peace." Tears welled up in Mose's eyes. We knew he could feel the touch of God and that peace and comfort were his companions.

I said to Mose, "If the state carries out this execution tonight, embrace death, for death is a gift. Death is never the hard part; it's the getting there. There is this old spiritual I sing once in a while, 'I don't feel no ways tired, I've come too far from where I started from. Nobody told me that the road would be easy, I don't believe he's brought me this far to leave me'." Mose's response: "Amen, Amen!" He said with much conviction. "This is a very unjust thing that has happened to me. For eighteen years I have had to live with this heavy burden strapped to my back, but tonight it is going to end. Straight from the heart, I am all right, for I am at peace. I refuse to harbor hate, for hate is deadly in the worst kind of way. They may be able to destroy Mose's body, but they will never be able to claim Mose's spirit or soul."

Five minutes to seven, the escorts had come down to tell me that I must leave. Sister Christine, Mose's spiritual advisor, would be staying until 10:30. As I was leaving the holding cell, the very last words that I heard were, "I love you, keep it real."

"I love you too my brother, be at peace." I thought how sad and inhuman that the one who is to die is denied that last human touch with their loved ones. I remained strong, but the core of my soul grieved for all of us. It is customary that on the eve of an execution there is a lock-down of the entire prison. All inmates are accounted for in their cells. The guards are manning their posts. The press conference area is intact. The telephones are checked for clear connections, and the clocks are all synchronized. The atmosphere is very quiet, but far from being peaceful.

I was to return to the prison at 10:30 PM. The next three and half hours would seem like an eternity. As I was being escorted to my car, I was told that the purpose of the escort was for my protection from the media. Personally, I did not perceive it as a problem. Greater measures were taken to avoid any possible contact with the victim's family. It was even suggested that when I return to the motel, I park my car at least 2-3 doors down from where I was actually staying to avoid the "forbidden"!

It was later reported that a few minutes before 10:00 PM one of Mose's lawyers called to inform him that the governor would be announcing his decision on television that the execution would be carried out as planned. Mose was able to hear the announcement simultaneously as he was speaking to his lawyers. Mose said, "I am relieved. The wait is almost over. I will finally get to see my mother and father tonight. It has been an awful long time since I have seen them." Sadly, both parents and numerous other loved ones had passed away during the time of Mose's incarceration.

At 10:20 I started my short trip back to the prison. I felt as if I were in slow motion. About one half mile before reaching the entrance of the prison, I was trailed by several security vehicles which followed me to the front gate. The gate, being closed, was blocked by another eight or nine security cars. The prison's S.W.A.T. team was heavily strapped with fire arms and communication gear. One would have thought that some dignitary was expected to arrive, not that a man was about to be murdered in our name. I felt a deep hollowness inside.

A couple of the guards approached my vehicle. After showing some ID and stating that I was a witness for Mose Young, I was flagged on, led by a security car to the back entrance of the prison, only to park my vehicle and be transported in the prison van to the farthest and most remote section of the prison. Inside the van there were the driver and a companion guard in the front seat. Directly behind them, was a steel grate dividing the seats. I was instructed to sit behind the grate. No effort made for conversation. Only after a short distance this overwhelming distaste of feeling violated and being treated like a criminal came over me. I insisted that I be let out, so that I could walk the rest of the way. With much reluctance they complied. Ahead I could see the chaplain and a

"high security" staff person waiting. Sad to say, I really do not think that either one had a clue as to how vulnerable a person might be feeling at this time.

I was then taken to a waiting room, ironically the same waiting room where we would often visit Mose. There I was to meet Sister Christine. Once she arrived, we were detained for little over an hour before being taken to the execution chamber. We as witnesses of the accused were the last to enter the execution area and the first to leave immediately once the execution was completed.

The execution chamber is a core of a larger room. It is enclosed by a steel door on one side and three viewing rooms. At each window of the viewing rooms are Venetian blinds that are kept closed until the procedure is ready to begin. In the viewing area to the left of the offender were the state witnesses and media, the second viewing area, at the foot of the offender was the victim's family, and the third viewing area to the right of the offender were the witnesses for the accused. Only one victim's family participated. They felt that the death of this man was justified in order that they might have some kind of closure. The father in this particular case refused to participate in the witnessing. The second victim's family are all deceased, and the third victim's family stated that they also, did not want to advocate the taking of another person's life.

At 11:55 PM the call came for us to go to the execution chamber, the dreaded dark hour had come. I remember praying over and over, "Lord, God, let your mercy be upon us. Jesus remember Mose when you come into your kingdom."

Once we were in the chamber, we sat in our designated seats, which consisted of plastic chairs nailed to a three-tiered platform. There was a stillness, a shameful silence. A gamut of emotions filled the room. Some waiting for the first signal to be given, others praying that the first signal would never come... but it did.

"Operation will begin," the monotone voice announced. The blinds are aggressively snapped open. The front line executioners are not revealed. Alone in the chamber, Mose was lying on a gurney. A bright white sheet covered all but his face and head, leaving the imprints of the restraints underneath quite visible. In spite of his mild lethargic state, Mose immediately made contact with us. He turned his head and smiled. With some effort, he was able to raise his right hand to give the peace sign. He mouthed the words, "I am all right. I will be with you. I am going to touch you." Our message to him, "Mose go towards the light. Finally be at peace, embrace your God, for Allah is with you forever."

At the head of the gurney, there was a hole in the wall that accommodated three intravenous lines, piggybacked into a main line that was inserted in Mose's right arm. As a medical professional, I cannot count the times I have started IV lines administering medications to fight infections and inflammations of all sorts, the goal and result being restorative, yet I felt powerless and much sadness that I was unable to intervene on behalf of a human being who was intentionally being put to death.

"Phase One!" Startled by the unemotional announcer, I was aware that the first lethal injection, Sodium Pentathal, causing deep unconsciousness, was being administered. Mose's immediate response was a mild shudder. His pupils became fixed. He was still, very still. There was a brief pause, approximately 60 seconds. Then on cue "Phase Two" the next lethal injection, Pancuronium Bromide was introduced in the lines causing paralysis of the lungs and other muscles. At this time I began to notice some cyanosis (a bluish tint) around Mose's lips. Very little time had passed when we heard the final instruction, "Phase Three", a lethal injection of Potassium Chloride administered

causing cardiac arrest. After the last drug was given, there was a 7-8 minute wait, before the announcer signaled, "Operation complete. Mose Young deceased."

Soon after midnight, Mose had succumbed. Flooded with an overwhelming sense of God's peace, I was certain that death had come prior to it's being officially pronounced. I felt the moment Mose's freedom came, for his physical remains presented a different look. His body no longer housed his soul. I am confident that God embraced this man with a tenderness which, hopefully, you and I shall come to know. All I could pray was "Thanks be to God for setting this man free. No longer enslaved. No longer caught up in a system that denies his right to life. No more prison bars and locked doors to keep him confined. No more raping of his humanity and vulnerability. No more looking over his shoulder, wondering if this is the day someone makes the decision whether he lives or dies. No more walking in the shadow of death... No more walking in the shadow of death."

Just seconds after the official death pronouncement, the blinds were lowered. We were hurried out of the chamber area. No allowances or considerations intended. Sadly, no acknowledgment of the loss.

As we proceeded to leave the premises, the front entrance that was once swarming with guards, and security cars was now deserted. The air was fresh, the sky was clear and the stars were plenty. After all there was a real celebration going in heaven, a real welcoming home. Mose had reached the finish line. He had crossed the barren desert, and he did not die of thirst, for it was his faith and trust in God that sustained him through the fire.

With heartfelt regret, I am truly sorry that there was never the occasion to speak with the victim's family, not to judge them or challenge their feelings, but to simply acknowledge their pain and their loss. As Sister Helen Prejean expresses so well, we need to stand on both sides of the cross, giving empathy, compassion and understanding for both the victims and the perpetrators.

I have often wondered why we are afraid to speak of what heals rather than what destroys. In the past eighteen years, what had been done to help families such as these find authentic closure which would bring healing and peace? I believe that within each person there are inner resources which can offer comfort and reconciliation. With appropriate guidance and direction, one can come to recognize these gifts and channel his or her life in a more holistic way.

For me the following excerpt speaks volumes, "Vengeance and violence dehumanizes, gives false satisfaction. Surrendering to vengeance and violence can only lead to death, spiritual death. If we truly understand our pain and suffering from serious violation, then why would we want to inflict this pain on anyone else, especially when it can only lead to false hope and temporary satisfaction? Violence and vengeance crucifies us all, but every time someone responds with love and forgiveness, that person and all humankind are raised up to a new vision and quality of life. This is salvation. This is mirroring the God who makes good come out of evil. This is the beginning of the end of violence." (Hidden Friends, Carmelites of Indianapolis)

Personally having experienced violence in my own family, the murders of a grandfather and three cousins, I feel compelled as a human being to be a part of what seeks, advocates, and promotes peace and justice. In the struggle to find that unity of reverencing life, all life, we must become reconciled. It is imperative that we give value and worth to all people, even those who have made poor choices in their lives, especially those whom we perceive as radically different from ourselves.

In reality they reflect a dimension of who we are and what we are capable of "but for the grace of God".

Though our "Green Mile" has been long and emotionally draining, my life has been touched in a very sacred way, a way that not even I will be able to fully grasp until that day when I too shall be in total presence of God. I give thanks to him for this rich experience, and the grace to endure it. As I look back and process this tragic ordeal, I feel a much deeper appreciation for the protection that accompanied us. God's shock absorbers were indeed a blessing!

As people of God, we must all continue to rise and move against the grain for justice, remembering and praying for those who have fallen at the hands of violence. Through faith we are committed to divine law rather than the law of the state, knowing that this is the only way we can come to God's true peace and forgiveness of one another.

---*Sister Audrey Locke, O.S.F.*