

The Execution of Justice

Though vengeance allows us the last—even fatal—blow, it does not in itself bring peace.

by Jon Wilson

AS I WRITE, THE NATION'S attention is focusing on the execution of Timothy McVeigh for destroying so many lives and families and memories in Oklahoma City. Many victims and survivors intend to watch as he draws his last breath, and more of us would watch if we could. It's tempting to believe that this event will bring "closure" for the survivors of the immense tragedy, but it will bring no closure at all, except to Mr. McVeigh's life, and that is not enough. Closure seems both an inaccurate and inadequate term for what survivors of such loss need and want. I doubt we can ever "close" anything on a loved one's memory. What we want is to find some peace and to feel that our lives are safe and our memories sacred. That, I think, is where true healing lies: in our ability to step out of deep and searing pain into a place of peace and hope for our futures. I don't know how many will find that when Timothy McVeigh is gone altogether.

This is not about the death penalty—the complexities of which are far too delicate and intense for this brief commentary. What victims and survivors need to feel delivered from their nightmare is theirs alone, and I am an outsider. But for those of us watching from the sidelines, we might consider that, even though vengeance allows us the last—even fatal—blow, it does not in itself bring peace. True peace enters when we can give voice to our pain and know that the one who has hurt us comprehends exactly *how* s/he has hurt us and feels true remorse for having done so.

Unfortunately, when Timothy McVeigh is executed, victims and survivors will have forever lost all opportunity to

express their grief and agony directly to the man who needs most to receive it. They will also have lost all opportunity to hear and receive whatever remorse he might, in time, come to express for what he did. With no hope of ever conveying the depth of their pain to Mr. McVeigh and no hope of seeing any kind of remorse or accountability from him, can these families truly heal and move on? For while our system will have succeeded in delivering the ultimate punishment to the man, it will also have succeeded in removing all possibility of his ever truly comprehending the extent of the pain that he caused. Can this really feel like justice for the victims and survivors?

And then there are the extended family members of the players in this horrific event, who bear no responsibility and yet must surely feel immeasurable guilt and pain, and who will also go unredeemed and unhealed. The McVeigh family, for example, and the family of Michael Fortier, McVeigh's former Army friend, who evidently knew about McVeigh's plan to blow up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building but said nothing. How many of us can know what their pain is like? Yet these are also undeserved agonies whose resolution will be impossible when Timothy McVeigh has been executed.

There are, no doubt, plenty of people who believe McVeigh would never feel remorse and accountability, and it is indeed possible that we would never see it. But I believe that, though it can take decades, all our acts of violence or cruelty or brutality return to trouble our sleep in one way or another. Yet this faintly encouraging possibility will become an irredeemably hopeless certainty after his execution.

This might not matter so much to me if I had not, in my study and work in enabling conversations between victims and offenders in victim offender mediation, seen victims actually *released* from some of the weight of their burdens when their offenders became personally accountable. Or seen murderers and other violent offenders completely transformed by the very act of accountability. Though it was, by their own admission, the most difficult thing such offenders had ever had to do, these encounters allowed them to face the monster in themselves and glimpse the possibility of their own humanity in the harsh light of their victims' pain. That was the beginning of renewal for themselves and their victims. This is the power of accountability.

Ironically, neither incarceration nor execution now demand what we need most from offenders, and if we're to change the nature of our violent society, we must begin by making offenders more accountable to their victims. There is no substitute for facing a victim directly, and this notion holds great promise for the future of justice and corrections. It allows punishment *and* accountability, from which rehabilitation—the objective I hope we all ultimately want—to become, at last, a real possibility.

If we are fortunate, we will learn something of this lesson from the execution of Timothy McVeigh. If we don't, we will merely have enabled and witnessed a wretched transaction, in which 168 innocent lives were exchanged for that of one impassive man.

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