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Point of view

Death Row inmates have a humanity worth recognizing

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For several months I have been volunteering at Central Prison in Raleigh, teaching a writing class to men on Death Row. I thought that no one would benefit more from memoir-writing and self-reflection than those whose lives hold a known expiration date.

Throughout a career in drug policy and social work, I've spent a lot of time with society's most vilified groups: drug dealers, sex workers, prisoners, undocumented immigrants. Anyone can seem inhuman if all you know about him is the worst thing he has ever done. Yet I have not once met a person I would consider evil. I've met people I might not like and some who have done shameful things, but under every tough or cruel exterior there was always something good, something redeemable, something worth saving.

I volunteered to work with Death Row inmates partly to see whether my belief that no one is truly evil would still hold.

I have been meeting twice a month with about 15 men on Death Row, and the experience has been both edifying and moving. I don't see heartless killers, though they might have killed in a moment of heartlessness. I see anger problems, stubbornness, lack of self-control, immaturity and miseducation. I see those qualities in people outside prison, too. I see them in myself sometimes. But in these men I also see pain, regret, a capacity for kindness and self-reflection – and a desire to be seen for what they are: flawed and very human.

Were the death penalty a deterrent to murder, it might be defensible. But overwhelming evidence shows that state-sanctioned execution does not prevent violent crime, and states that impose capital punishment do not have fewer murders than those that have abolished the death penalty. Given that, it is important to ask ourselves why we would support a measure that is both ineffective and ironic. For closure? For Old Testament justice? Just as beating a child does not teach him that violence is wrong, killing a convict does not teach others that killing is wrong. Murder is still murder, senseless and unnecessary whether committed by an individual or by a state.

After spending time with these men and listening to their stories, I don't claim to know them thoroughly or to fully comprehend why they did what they did. Nor do I defend the crimes of any man on Death Row, certainly not the crimes of Jonathan Richardson, most recently sentenced to death for the murder and sexual assault of a 4-year-old girl. But I will defend their humanity because I experience it every time I walk through those prison doors.

I would challenge those who support the death penalty to spend time getting to know a Death Row inmate on a personal level. In each of these men there are many things worth understanding, worth supporting and worth saving. I hope you would come to realize that the death penalty has no place in a just society and that revenge is no way to honor the dead.