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Waging Peace On The Death Penalty

By David Howard

21 February 2006
Selves And Others

At 12:01 a.m. Tuesday morning Michael Morales is scheduled to die for the 1982 murder of Terri Winchell, a 17-year old Lodi, California high school student.

The trial took place in Ventura County, where I live.

This evening, as Michael is strapped to the executioner's table, Amnesty International and Citizens for Peaceful Resolutions will hold a candlelight vigil in front of the Ventura County Government Center, where Morales was condemned to death. We will call for the abolition of the capital punishment.

Michael Morales has lost his struggle to survive, but eventually we death penalty abolitionists will prevail in the United States as we have prevailed in 120 other countries, from Angola to Nepal to Venezuela. Eventually, we as a nation will learn to respect the universal human right to life. We will reject execution as a form of torture.

There are signs that the tide is turning against capital punishment. In 2002 the US Supreme Court declared the execution of the mentally disabled unconstitutional; the execution of juveniles was abolished in 2005. Twelve states have no capital punishment statute, and Illinois and New Jersey have moratoria in effect. Recent polls suggest that voters prefer life without parole as an alternative to the death penalty.

The rational arguments in favor of capital punishment are weak. It is excruciatingly obvious that executions do not deter capital offenses, are frequently meted out to factually innocent individuals, are racially biased, and function as a macabre lottery stacked against the most destitute defendants.

But the best argument against the death penalty may simply be to see Michael Morales as a fellow human being worthy of our care and compassion. Although these humanistic arguments were ignored by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger when he rejected Morales' clemency petition, Michael is remorseful and rehabilitated. He is a talented and sensitive artist. He has a mother, a father, two brothers, a sister, three children and young grandchildren who will be no less devastated by his murder at the hands of the state than Terri Winchell's wonderful and loving family has been by her murder at the hands of Michael and his accomplice.

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I will hold two candles tonight-one for Terri and one for Michael. I believe it is only through honoring both these lives, loving both these souls, that we can finally come to grips with our residual national resistance to abolition.

It easy to love a young woman like Terri Winchell; I know because I have two equally lovable teenage daughters. It's a lot harder - but just as important-to love Michael Morales. When instead we hate Michael and men like him, we neglect to provide early intervention alternatives to guns, drugs, unemployment, gangs and prison.

Father Gregory Boyle, who has devoted his life to working with youth at risk for violent crime, particularly minority males like Michael Morales, says that Jesus always represented "the poor and excluded, the easily despised, the demonized, and those whose burdens were more than they could bear."

Michael Morales-so easily despised and demonized for the horrific murder he committed at age 21 while stoned on marijuana, PCP and embalming fluid-fits the profile perfectly.

Father Boyle says such youth don't need a second chance; they need the first chance that no one ever gave them.

Our "war on crime" has made us the world's number 1 per capita incarceration country with over 2.1 million prisoners. We are a leading purveyor of capital punishment, rivaled only by the likes of China, Vietnam and Iran. We have implemented astonishingly draconian measures like California's heinous Three Strikes Law which provides a life sentence for offenses as minor as stealing a couple of DVDs or lying on a driver's license application.

As we mourn Terri and Michael's death, and as we approach March 1, International Death Penalty Abolition Day, let us contemplate what it would look like to wage peace, instead of war, on crime. What if our guiding principles were compassion and rehabilitation instead of vengeance and punishment?

Our first step would be to abolish the death penalty and to give Michael Morales his first chance.

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