

Remembering An Executed Man

BY HOLLY METZ

October 29, 1997. Daylight Savings Time had ended a few days before, and I was trying to offset the creeping afternoon dark by rising early. I took in the mail: bills, a letter, two magazines, and the latest issue of the *Catholic Worker*. As I waited at my kitchen table for my coffee to brew, I paged through the *Catholic Worker* and saw a name I recognized at the top of the obituary page. Bobby West, it said, had been executed by lethal injection on July 29, 1997.

I first wrote to Bobby West in 1990, at the beginning of the new year. He had helped to found *Endeavor: Live Voices From Death Row*, a journal conceived, written, and published by Texas death-row prisoners and their families. I was curious about this unusually independent "in-house" publication, and requested an interview by mail. (See "The News From Death Row," June 1990 issue.)

The single-spaced, marginless reply I received from Bobby had the signature look of correspondence written in confinement. Alongside the date, the then twenty-eight-year-old prisoner had written "Day 2,711," the number of days he'd spent in Huntsville's Ellis I Unit. He was twenty years old when he arrived there; his entire adult life would be spent on death row.

Bobby spent all of his teenage years in "reform school, Florida state prison, countless county and city jails, and other rehabilitation centers," he wrote. But he was one of the few prisoners I'd ever interviewed who didn't claim innocence, didn't blame his upbringing or someone else.

There was no death-row conversion. He didn't say Jesus had forgiven him and swept away his sins. He said he'd killed a woman in a drunken, vengeful rage. What got him on death row, what made it capital murder, was the charge that he'd also stolen that woman's necklace.

"Whatever I can tell you about this system will not be assumptions made by some blind reporter," he wrote. He meant to tell all he could about death row, through essays in *Endeavor* and the *Catholic Worker*, in news briefs on executions and capital-

punishment legislation, and, as I was to learn through six months of correspondence, in densely typed rushes of narrative, protest, and sly humor. He wrote prodigiously, in the hope that people outside would come to see capital punishment as part of a cycle of violence, and so bring about its end.

As he explained in his essay "A View of Civilization from Death Row in Texas," published in the *Catholic Worker*: "The death penalty. Every man, woman, and idiot has been pronouncing and spelling this thing wrong. I'm not the son of Webster, but I think I can help. It's spelled r-e-v-e-n-g-e. The revenge penalty."

Revenge was something he knew about, he said. It had motivated the murder he committed, and he recognized its consuming wrath in the forces behind capital punishment.

He refused an official work assignment, considering the *Endeavor* his work. "Other than that, I live in this cell for twenty-four hours a day, because I refuse to work for free and make money for the state. I will not help pay for my execution or somebody else's execution."

Rereading his letters, I marvel at this ability to stay sane. "If you were to come in here," he wrote, "you would hear a whole cellblock of confused people screaming incoherent babble at each other. You would see the police running from cell to cell telling people that other people have said something about them in order to start trouble and keep us separated. You would find yourself caught up in something that can make you feel so small and unimportant that you think there is nothing you can do to keep it from

eating your ass alive. You would realize that some of the people you once thought insane because of their incessant rambling were really in possession of all their faculties. . . ."

And yet it was in that jarring, upside-down world that he found clarity of mind. Some of it he attributed to "being taken off of drugs and alcohol," once constants in his life. "I've been able to look around and inside of myself, and as a result of that I've grown and changed," he wrote. "I feel the pain of my actions every day."

I couldn't say whether Bobby West was a good person, but he was honest with himself, and I learned from his honest prose.

He wrote without self-pity. He clutched at words, threw them down. When I sent him poems by Muriel Rukeyser and Dennis Brutus, he responded: "The words tore out pieces of me." He wrote about weariness but did not stop writing. People outside had to see death-row prisoners: the teenagers, the ones "who knew nothing but the streets, the people of color, poor people, retarded people, and the people driven by the system to the point of not caring. . . ." The indifferent ones sounded like the people I knew, people with good politics, who backed away when I showed them anti-death-penalty literature. I turned to Bobby's letters instead, quoting portions. Some grew thoughtful, less dogmatic. They asked questions about this one death-row prisoner, Bobby West.

As I sat at my kitchen table the morning I read about Bobby's execution, I remembered the answer he gave to the first question I'd asked him: "Why did you start the *Endeavor*?" He wanted it to be an antidote to mainstream media, he said. When a person was killed by the state, papers published only the horrible crime that had brought the person to death row, as if that man or woman had done nothing before or after that we might find useful or meaningful as a society, as if the wrongful act was the sum of their time on earth. "The public needs to be shown," he wrote, "that the folks they are murdering are not merely numbers and small newspaper clippings." ■

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