

Our own murky sides as a pen pal – interview with a former lifespark member

Talk between Ines Aubert and Ursula Timea Rossel

Ursi, only recently you lost Marcus, the second of your two pen pals through execution. You had a hard time dealing with both of the executions. Your rather negative score sheet on your two pen pal-ships made you think about sharing your thoughts before and we decided we would tackle it here now. You warned me “It will be counterproductive to your purpose and chase away people!” But I find it very interesting to listen to your thoughts anyway.

Let me begin with a very short summary of a rather weird story that you told me about your first pen pal, Thomas. Some years after his execution you stumbled over a website and found letters written by him on sale there.

To me, that’s shocking. What is the aspect you want to talk about first?

The very first thing is the last: the execution itself. When it happened back in 2010, I couldn’t handle it at all, and I never wanted to go through this again, although I did have to last June. It didn’t help that I knew from the very start that it would happen, and it didn’t help much either that I always kept an emotional distance to my pen pals. You mourn for a friend who has gone, you’re angry at the murderers, that’s hard enough already, but at least unambiguous. But there were nastier feelings, too. I hated myself for also feeling relief, like “finally it’s over, and at least it went smoothly”. While my pen pals were alive, I never felt that I offended the victims’ families by my activity. But after the executions, it struck me as weird: how would I feel towards a stranger overseas who is upset because of the death of my loved one’s murderer? Not a friend of old, from before things went awry, that would be only natural – but a stranger, who deliberately sought him out *because* he was a murderer? I felt an unusual sort of shame, which again made me very angry, because the reason for the penpalships wasn’t that Thomas and Marcus were murderers (...or was it?), but that they were human beings sentenced to death for murder. It was a tangled mess, a nightmare. I was able to handle it far better the second time though. Which is murky in itself, because it suggests that maybe after 30 times or so we would get used to executions.

While following the news before Marcus’ execution, I stumbled upon Thomas’ letters, which were being sold on an online platform. What kind of a person sells letters without the knowledge of the sender? That automatically raises the question, whether letters *received* by an inmate could also be sold as “murder memorabilia”. What happens to our letters after our pen pal is gone? Especially if he has no contact to his family, as in Thomas’ case? Or what do pen pals do with our letters while they’re alive anyway? How can we be so sure that they’re just treasured and treated with due respect? For a moment I got a bit paranoid. How could I tell personal stories of my life – and unavoidably of the lives of my loved ones to a certain extent – to a complete stranger, who might not be who he claims to be, and who has no privacy himself? That’s mad somehow, isn’t it? Where it concerns our family and friends, we could even ask if we have a right to tell about them in our letters...

I had understood in the four years of our correspondence that I was the only regular contact person for Thomas. His being completely isolated had been the reason to look for a pen pal in the first place. Moreover, the scanned letter in the Internet sounded and looked exactly the same as all the letters that I have in my drawer. Well, it doesn’t change that much for me: it was always a possibility that Thomas and I didn’t live in the same story. I could live with that. He had been on death row for more than 30 years. It’s quite probable that he had had other contacts earlier on which faded away. It’s also

normal that letters get somewhat monotonous, describing a monotonous life. No letter without "it's been a typical day". While I was writing and receiving letters, I wanted them to be true, of course.

You used the expression "We didn't live in the same story". Actually, in the course of many years, I've come across similar thoughts. Do my pen pals and I really see our correspondence the same way? What do we really know about the life in prison and about what ideas the circumstances generate in the inmates?

But also, what ideas does the photo of a young or good looking inmate generate in us?

As for the photos, I cannot really answer. My pen pals were both about 30 years my senior (okay, I wonder when I will be finally old enough to feel attracted to younger men, haha!), and I am completely immune to photos. I cannot tell by a photo if I find somebody attractive or not. In this respect, I had no murky motivation at all. But I am aware of this. My first encounter with inmates was very indirect, long before I had pen pals myself: I heard two middle-aged women exchange very cute stories in a café. I thought they were talking about their pets in cages, fluffy guinea pigs perhaps. After a while, I realized that the objects of such tender and possessive feelings must be kids, but I found it strange that modern kids would write letters. Only when they talked about prison rules it dawned on me that they were discussing – death row pen pals!

Back to your first question: for the pen pals, I was prepared of course, and not only for them, but for the fact that all letters are opened and possibly read by prison staff as well. There might be murky people among officers, I fear... I didn't expect too much and was rather surprised how well it developed and how much we could share. It felt true back then, and on the whole it still does. But also, I was quite sure that neither of the two would be interested in exchanging letters with me if they had a "normal", busy life, a family, a job and an Internet connection, would they? So all the stuff about "how much you mean to me" isn't probably true, or only due to a desperate situation. We like it anyway, and that's okay. A benign lie.

But we wanted to look at ourselves rather than at the pen pals. How honest was I? What was my real motivation? Of course I wanted to add the famous drop in the ocean to make the world a better place, even maybe on a political level too. How very pathetic. And I wanted to be a friend and have a friend, in the best case.

But what else? I was curious. Curiosity is a virtue; but could it have bordered on being nosy? I wanted to know what it takes to become a murderer, and what happens after the boring part is over, at the point where all crime novels break off, namely when the offender is arrested and sentenced, that is when it gets really interesting. Everybody would be able to commit murder under certain circumstances, I'm convinced of this. So, where's the murderer in me? I wanted a look into a mirror. I wanted all the Crime & Punishment stuff behind the scenes.

I hadn't yet published as a writer, and didn't know if I'd ever get there. So the idea that at least one person would be glad to read a few lines of mine was comforting. Or did I even think that what I wrote could make a difference? Maybe it actually did, you never know. But it's very selfish.

And there's the thrill. How would people react if I told them about my very heroic hobby? Wouldn't it feel great when somebody admired me for it, wouldn't I secretly rejoice if someone else found it absurd and disgusting? Oh, yeah. We want to fight injustice and ignorant people and evil. If peace and justice were ever achieved, I bet there would be millions of suicides – all those fighters for the light who would find themselves without resistance and a goal!

When I was 13, I was sort of an environmental activist inspired by Greenpeace. In a secret place I hoped that the bad people would never stop killing whales and blow up nuclear plants, because it would be too sad if those beautiful, heroic “rainbow warriors” ran out of a job ...

That’s where we come full circle to our desire to do something good. It’s always only 10% altruistic, that’s another thing I’m convinced of. 90% is the desperate wish to be seen, admired and loved by others, or to be different. To fight our complex and often vaguely perceived guilt. Or even to act like martyrs. We’re all vain and selfish, that’s okay too, but why do we pretend otherwise? Why not just relax ... Like the woman who told me: “I have been a vegan for 10 years, but I have to eat meat again, although I don’t particularly like it; I was just so tired of feeling superior all the time!”

Of course I’m exaggerating to make a point. Once I came to terms with all my strange guilt issues, I no longer felt the slightest need to do good – I am already good, just because I exist, with all my flaws and the murderer within (which doesn’t mean that I don’t help others of course, but I don’t seek opportunities).

Also, nobody likes being on the other end of the chain, receiving help, if we are honest. I interviewed a beggar once, his story for a meal (purely selfish: I wanted to learn how to beg myself). He told me how many years it took him to overcome his pride, and how much he still hates his job. I admire beggars enormously (because I failed epically at begging, it’s maybe the hardest career out there). They are very important in our society, and I never “help” them because they’d hate it – and I would too!

Although I may sound cynical: I firmly believe that humans are basically good at heart. I feel much tenderness for ourselves. On a universal or divine level though, I don’t believe that good and evil exist – these are only human categories. Humans are not very important. And quite boring too, compared to bacteria or elephants or trees or black holes.

I personally consider the penpalships a win-win situation and wouldn’t call them “altruistic”. Like you, I feel that if we only want to give, we actually offend the person who – in our eyes – takes.

Also, like you pointed out, I believe too that we profit from the poverty the inmates are forced to live in and of the lack of choice that they have. Many of them will write to us and love us without ever having chosen us because they aren’t in a situation where they have a big choice. And yes, like you, I believe that they wouldn’t write to us if they were free or had the means to communicate with whoever they choose.

However, for various reasons we all live limited lives and so I think it’s normal that we all make choices based on our circumstances, like the inmates do too.

I guess I would have to ask myself in what ways my life is lacking something, so that a penpalship makes it more complete.

I’ve thought about the question of whether we really want to abolish the death penalty before. I know from inmates who had their sentences overturned that their friends faded away. It seems that many people indeed need the thrill of the looming execution to feel motivated to write to an inmate. How murky is that?

However, I recognize the concern about the duration of the penpalship. For example, I have a pen pal who is younger than I am and who got his death sentence overturned into life without parole. This actually means I will probably write to him until the end of my life. I admit that this thought sometimes worries me a little.

What do you consider the most “counterproductive” among your arguments?

There are two kinds of counterproductivity, a private one and a political one. I can't speak for others, but in my case, it was counterproductive in the private sense, that it took me way too much time and energy. In retrospect, I realize that I fooled myself. Penpalships gave me an escape to a place which was worse than my own. It was one more excuse for not putting more effort into making my own “prison” a worthwhile place. It's also funny in a way, and quite normal too, I think. I do not regret the whole experience though. But it's time to quit (or rather, not to start a new penpalship).

The possible political counterproductivity is far more worrying. It's the same with all voluntary, so-called charity work. Many of these activities help to hide things that are amiss, or even justify and institutionalize them. We don't see hunger, although it exists even around here, because there is always somebody cooking some free soup for the hungry people. Wouldn't things change only if all the neatly clothed, busy people got to work late because they'd stumble over starved bodies when hurrying out of their clean houses? It would impress them much more than being late because of being stopped on their way by disgustingly idealistic students wanting them to sign up for yet another capitalist NGO, cleverly designed to keep the poor where they are.

I even think that the world would be a far better place without all those NGOs. I saw examples for that when I worked in development – in the best case, it's not destructive, but for the most part it is. It certainly doesn't help. Humans just love to argue and fight. Resistance creates counter-resistance. Maybe the whales would be thriving now if Greenpeace didn't exist. Maybe the DP would be a rare and marginal phenomenon, without so many organizations lobbying against it. It's no fun without all the discussions and media attention and the outrage on both sides, is it?

In the case of the DP, it may be different, as it is a historical and nowadays exotic topic in Switzerland. But I'm still not sure if “raising awareness” is a productive thing. Isn't it only since our media cover the DP in the US and elsewhere regularly that our own laws get tougher, and that there are even voices who call for the DP to be reintroduced? Maybe that's a coincidence. But still, it gives me the creeps. I'm somewhat tired of the cacophony of awareness calls. Illnesses are the best example. Rare illnesses, or increasingly even brand new, invented illnesses, are promoted like products on sale, and all of a sudden, thousands or millions of people suffer from the illness they didn't even know they had, and call for even more awareness. So much suffering out of the blue! It's highly contagious.

I'm not sure yet if I'll get to that conclusion, but at least I allow myself the thought: could it be that the DP might quietly die out if nobody would comment on it? And do I really, really care? I honestly ask myself that, and am still waiting for an answer. Just because I think that the DP is ethically, morally or spiritually wrong, doesn't mean necessarily that I care. Is awareness really a good thing?

As pen pals, we contribute to making the inmate's situations a touch more humane. Which is priceless on an individual level. But doesn't it contribute to cover up the inhumane conditions in prison, on the other hand? Isn't it a distraction from the real issues? Can that be a bad place where you get nice letters from all over the world? Sounds more like a summer camp for kids! Could it be counterproductive on a general level? Not to mention the bad reputation penpalships have in the public. I'm pretty sure that all of us have been confronted with the assumption that we are either “romantically disturbed” (if we are women) or “religiously deluded” (if we are men), or both. And a few of us probably even are one of those things, otherwise these too-well-known stories wouldn't exist. I even know for sure, remembering the two ladies in the café... So how could penpalship and a serious political commitment go together in the public opinion, even if our intention is just that?

I'm being very mean! But remember, I wanted to point out our own dark sides. Questions must be allowed.

Hm. Shall we try to abolish the death penalty by ignoring the men and women concerned by it? Is that what you mean?

Questions are cool!

Yes, they are! And no, what I mean is that maybe we should not try at all. I realize in retrospect that I messed with something that didn't concern me directly. Is it enough to just feel that the DP is wrong, in order to make it a cause of my own? Isn't that simply a form of demonstrating moral superiority? Do I have a say in this without having a personal experience with crime, violence, justice, punishment, or a professional expertise e.g. being a lawyer? It would be different if we had the DP in Switzerland. I wouldn't want my taxes spent on legalized murder. US tax payers have the power to abolish the DP in the US.

In a way, the penpalship created an intended, artificially established kind of experience. When Thomas and Marcus were executed, it did concern me personally, I did care. It's like having messed with something that was not my business, and having paid the price for it. I even wonder if I was entitled to take on unnecessary suffering. It's impossible to be a pen pal and not suffer during the weeks or months with a date set, during the execution night, and for a while after. It struck me to realize that I get lots of support from my loved ones and friends when I suffer because of something that happens in *my* life, but regarding the executions, I felt left alone (I have to admit though that I never talked a lot about the penpalships, and about the executions mostly afterwards). Some people implicitly took the stance that I don't deserve compassion for emotional trouble I got myself into, knowingly and willingly. That's not destiny, but something I chose. I see that they are right. I shouldn't bother those who choose to accompany me with extraneous misery, should I? If each of us is responsible for his or her own well-being in the first place, in order to be able to share it and add to other people's well-being, is it a wise thing to pick up the address of a complete stranger and offer to share his exceptionally heavy load (and put some of our load on his back sometimes too)? It seems to multiply the overall human load instead of shrink it. I can't figure out why I should have done this, except for all the murky reasons mentioned before, no matter how good my intentions were. I didn't know all this almost ten years ago. It would be no longer honest to continue now.

By no means do I say that we should ignore the people who are concerned. Not trying to abolish the DP is far from ignoring. I like the term Witness. I prefer to observe and witness. But I no longer take sides unless I am involved, and I certainly wouldn't involve myself deliberately again. Most of my political opinions have crumbled away in the past few years and they haven't been replaced by new ones. Which doesn't mean that I'm indifferent, quite on the contrary. Maybe it has to do with my job. A writer must be a neutral (though not objective!) observer, trying to approach the truth by knowing as few things as possible for sure, and casting doubt even on the most obvious "truths" (I know that many fellow writers or literary critics would object to this...).

Here comes one question from my side at the end of our murky talk: If it was strictly prohibited to talk or write about your penpalship with a death row prisoner and absolutely no-one was to find out about it, would it still be the same for you?

I wouldn't have started penpalships if that were the case. My intention was to contribute on the personal level by writing letters, and on a general level by talking about the DP.

Raising awareness, exactly that stuff I no longer believe in (we all know it from tiny problems in daily life, or pimples: as soon as we focus on them and point them out to others, they grow huge; what happens then with social issues that are already huge?). After just two or three articles for the newsletter, some typing for one of the pen pals and an exchange with one of his lawyers, I realized that I don't have the resources to do that (I had taken on a thousand other things at the time, while my own life went steeply downhill). It was unsatisfactory to the extreme, because the letters alone made no sense.

Today I prefer writing letters just-so, not because somebody might need them or with a good intention in mind (maybe with unconscious murky reasons though?). So a secret penpalship would make more sense now than one you should talk about. Except that I don't like secrets either.

I certainly don't want to talk anybody out of a penpalship! If you have a very good reason, or no reason at all, or even murky reasons, as long as you are honest with yourself, then it is a worthwhile thing to do. I for one am looking forward to turn my attention to more exciting topics than human affairs now, let's say bacteria or elephants or trees or black holes.

Please say hello for me to the bacteria and black holes when you talk to them next time!

**Thank you very much, Ursi, for your provoking and interesting statements.
I greatly miss you in lifespark.**

Ines Aubert, August 2014

Read more about Ursula Timea Rossel at: www.kryptogeographie.ch