

Interview with Bill Pelke, founder of the Journey of Hope

<http://www.journeyofhope.org/pages/index.htm>

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert

I'm a board member of lifespark, an organization that arranges penpalships to inmates on death row in the USA. All of our pen pals are convicted of murder and are supposed to have taken at least one person's life. I'm sure you know that oftentimes very strong and close friendships arise between our members and their pen pals. How do you, as a victim's relative, feel about that?

I feel it is a wonderful thing that your organization does. I, of course, am not the typical victim. I have developed a relationship with Paula and know that many people have written her and I think that is great. I want Paula to do well and know that there are people who support her even though she once did a terrible thing.

The lifespark board has set up a lot of information sheets and services so that our members can provide their pen pals more easily with money, writing supplies and other help. Many of us visit their pen pals. We also support our members when their pen pal gets an execution date. Are we doing the right thing?

Absolutely, life is very hard for these people and they need help. Just be careful with the sending of money. Although many need the help, some of the people may be playing a con game just trying to get money and take advantage of caring people.

I also believe that there is a spiritual way to go for us. Facing the whole guilt of a person who has become a friend of mine, is not a peanut for me. I'm interested in finding out how I can be that friend and still show respect to the victims. I believe that we can learn from you.

Forgiveness is a key to me. You can forgive the person who has done a bad thing. It does not mean you condone what they did. It means you do not hold that against them and want to see revenge.

Forgiveness is what victim family members need to learn, but often they do not want to learn that because they think if they forgive then they minimize what was done to their loved one.

For the victim's family, the best thing you can do is by your presence. Let them know that you are there for them, let them vent or do whatever, but let them know you are there for them.

The answer is love and compassion for all of humanity. It is easy to have compassion for the victim, not so easy to have it for the perpetrator.

What I fear is that "forgiveness" could be faked. Doesn't there have to be a struggle for it? Everybody who writes an inmate says, "Sure I feel sorry for the victims," but does everybody consider that thoroughly enough? Some of our members hope or believe that their pen pal is actually innocent. (And some are indeed, of course.) I feel that by hoping that they kind of refuse to face his guilt. But maybe I'm wrong? We, friends of the inmates, hardly ever get the chance to talk to the victims. I don't know about anybody who has done so. It appears like we are, together with the inmate, against them.

Forgiveness does not have to be a struggle. For many it might be.

I am sure that everyone who writes the inmates are sorry for the victims. I don't doubt that at all. The thing is that you can be on both sides. You don't have to pick one over the other.

I am on everybody's side, the victim's side and the perpetrator's side. There is only really one side anyway and that is the human side. It is natural to be on the side of victims. Anyone with any compassion is on the victim's side, but it takes a special compassion to be on the perpetrator's side. That is why I say that the answer is love and compassion for all of humanity. That goes for those who do good and bad.

Some of your members may well be corresponding with innocent. Many more may say they are innocent while guilty and some admit their guilt.

Obviously, all do not admit to their guilt for one reason or another. I believe that if I killed someone I would lie. I don't think I could ever admit to that sort of crime especially while my mother is alive. I don't think I could admit to something horrible like that because I would not want her to think she failed in raising her son. Others may feel they would lose family support if they admitted their guilt and others, esp. those on death row, would be afraid if they admitted anything, it would hasten their death.

Sometimes I think the friendships that can develop can help bring a person to admit the truth. You just let the people know that you care for them as human beings regardless of if they did it or not.

The thing about love and compassion for all of humanity is that love believes all things. If you want someone to be your friend, I think you must believe them, and if you ever find out they were lying, love them and continue to be their friend.

Many victims do not want anything to do with the perpetrator. That is understandable. This person has hurt not only their loved one, but they are feeling pain and don't want any association with the person who caused their pain and they don't want to hear from the perpetrator's friends either.

It is difficult to deal with the pain and some never heal. That is why many of the victim's families on the Journey promote forgiveness as a way of healing. It was how they healed. But forgiveness is so misunderstood. Many think that to forgive the bad guy is doing him a favor. The person who forgives is the one who gets the favor.

On many occasions, I have told people that forgiving Paula Cooper did more for me than it did for Paula Cooper. That's the way forgiveness is.

There were three sentences in what you said above that touched me very much. The first is when you said that if you had killed somebody, you'd lie about it, too. I've never thought about that before.

The second thing is when you said that forgiving Paula did more for you than it did for her. Are you saying that she needs to do the work - forgiving - herself, too, and that you can't do it for her?

The third is: "There is only really one side anyway and that is the human side." I totally agree with you. What hinders other crimes' victims from getting to that point, too?

First, for question one, the reason I said that I think I would lie about it if I killed someone would be because I could never admit to my mother that I had killed someone. I think I would lie to avoid her thinking she had raised a killer and blaming herself. So yes, I can understand I think why some people might lie and not admit to the wrong they have done.

When it comes to killing, there is never an excuse for it, but again, when you look at the lives some of the people have lived, it almost makes you realize how they got involved in the sort of situation where they did kill. There is never an excuse, but there is, I believe, the understanding of the reasons of why they did what they did.

The second question is about my statement that forgiving Paula did more for me than it did for Paula. I did the right thing for me when I forgave Paula. If Paula rejected my forgiveness, I still did the right thing. Forgiving Paula brought me healing. It brought me peace. It brought me a better way to live. It brought meaning and purpose to my life. Forgiving Paula did much more for me than it did for her.

Paula did tell me early on that she had asked God to forgive her and she believed that God had. That is, I believe, an important step towards self-forgiveness. Yes, that is something that only she can do. I can not do it for her.

The third question is about sides. I guess it is easy for the victim to not want to picture the perpetrator as being on their side. It is easier to see it as us and them. But we are all brothers and sisters in this great creation, but for some it is hard to see.

To your remark that anyone with any compassion is on the victims' side I need to add that our members most of the time have another approach. Usually in the public there is first a crime and after awhile or immediately after, the offender who belongs to it is found and gets known, too. There's always the focus on the victim first, though. Our members come to their pen pals differently, though. They get an address of an inmate and no information about the crime or the victims. Some members never learn about the crime of their pen pal. So, the inmate himself appears as a victim; the victim of an unfair justice system, of bad circumstances, inhumane prison conditions, and so on. The "real" victim can easily be forgotten. I think it's very important to care about the inmates' conditions and show them humanity, but I wonder if the victims of the crime also need to get more attention in our commitment. They paid with their lives!

Compassion should be had for all: the victim, the perpetrator.

Sometimes writing a perpetrator it is easier not to know the terrible thing the person has done. It is easier to like them if you don't know. In Sister Helen's book, "Dead Man Walking," she had to deal with finding out what the man's crime was. It was not pretty, but people who write can not fool themselves. Many of the people have done terrible things. In a way, we are all victims, but those of us who commit terrible crimes need to be taken out of society for a period of time. There has to be consequences for our actions. We can be sorry for the people who are locked away under terrible conditions and those under the sentence of death. If executed, they and their families also become murder victim family members also.

One of our members is a juvenile lawyer here in my area. He's also the media contact person for juvenile cases. I sent him what I found about Paula Cooper and asked him what would have happened with Paula in Switzerland. Paula would have gotten many chances here in Switzerland! She would have been taken care of and maybe not even been put in prison. We have a totally different justice system here. I wish it was the same in the USA!!!!

(See next page after the interview)

To what extent, do you think, did it help you that Paula got such a harsh punishment? Would it have been harder to forgive her if she had not gotten the death penalty resp. 60 years?

There were many reasons that hit me that night when I forgave Paula.

One of the reasons that weighed very heavy was the fact that she was on death row and everyone seemed to want her to die for what she did. If she had had a lesser sentence, I may have never come to the point of praying for compassion that night. It was also because I pictured her alone because her mom and dad did not even come to the trial when she was sentenced to death. Her age, her sex, my grandmother's faith, my faith had a lot to do with the decision, but being on death row was a key. If she had been sentenced to five or ten years, I doubt I would have come to my conclusion.

But nonetheless, because of how it happened, I learned that valuable lesson of love and compassion in a way I could never forget. It was the most important lesson I ever learned because it brought forgiveness, peace, joy, and much more.

It is interesting to see how Paula would have been treated in Switzerland. Obviously, Paula had some mental problems or she never would have committed such a crime. They just put her on death row in solitary confinement waiting for the date to come to kill her and offered no help for her mental problems.

So actually, what was a horrible outcome for Paula - that she got the death penalty at first - turned out to be a blessing for you because it helped you to "learn the most important lesson" in your life.

Bill, in the meantime I've read your book "JOURNEY OF HOPE - From Violence to Healing," which you sent me. Thank you very much! It was very encouraging to read it! I'm impressed about the change in your life and about the great and adventurous projects you set up to make people understand that forgiveness is the key to healing and that the death penalty is always wrong. Sr. Prejean called your work in her foreword a "soul adventure." Is that adventure still going on for you?

Yes, it is still an adventure of the soul.

And my soul found such peace this past month while in Rome. I had the opportunity to hear and meet Desmond Tutu. He spoke of forgiveness and the death penalty. His spirit bore witness to my spirit and it was a wonderful peace that occurred.

And one last question: I have several pen pals on death row and with some of them I have a close friendship. 12 people between the ages of an unborn baby to a 66 year old woman were killed by my pen pals. How can I go on with my commitment for my friends on death row and against the death penalty and, at the same time, actively show respect to these 12 victims and their family?

This is a very tough struggle for you I am sure. First of all I would continue your relationship with your pen pals. You can show respect to the victims by showing your personal respect for life. You can show respect by leaving the victims family alone if that is what they wish. Continue to show your love for all of humanity. That is the only answer that I can see.

Thank you so much, Bill, for answering my questions. For all your further adventures I wish you all the best!