

Interview with Gabi Uhl, anti-death penalty activist

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert

Gabi, you witnessed the execution of your friend on death row. Can you tell us a little bit about your friend and your friendship?

I witnessed the execution of Clifford Boggess in 1998. He had been on Death Row in Texas. My friendship with Cliff was a rather short one, it lasted not even six months. I got to know him when I accompanied a friend of mine to Texas - she had been his pen pal already for three years and wanted to visit him for the first time. After the visits I started to write Cliff myself, and we became very close in a very short time. Not a romantic relationship, but we recognized that we had had some similar experiences in our childhood, or better: we felt about things in a similar way. Soon I noticed that Cliff understood me better than anyone else did at that time.

Can you still remember when it became clear to you that you would be there in the witness chamber?

When the friend and I visited him, he had asked her if she would be willing to witness his execution. Her first reaction was to say no. A few weeks later she told me she had considered changing her mind. And my first thought was that I wanted to be there too, just to support her. But as my own friendship with Cliff developed, I began to think that I would do it to support him - if he wanted me to. So, when the date was set and he asked me to be a witness, I had already made my mind – and so had my friend: Yes, we would do it. On the one hand, because it was his wish, on the other hand, because for us it seemed more difficult just to sit somewhere watching the clock and knowing what was going to happen. Being in the death chamber was like at least being able to do something - although just being there didn't seem like much.

How is it for you to think about that moment today?

I cope with the experience. I am able to talk about it without any problems. I'm not suffering anymore, and I don't think I'm only repressing my experiences or the feelings. But it took some time until I was able to cope with it, of course. And sometimes emotions come back - especially when I don't expect them. I remember that some years ago I was in the theater watching "Jesus Christ Superstar". Of course, Jesus was executed, but I didn't expect to deal with the Death Penalty that night. I like the music, and the death of Jesus is a theological matter. Capital Punishment was not on my mind. But - when the scene of crucifixion came, they brought a Death Gurney on stage and executed Jesus by lethal injection! For me this came unexpectedly, and I felt like being in the witness-room of the death chamber in Texas again...

In fact you witnessed even another execution of a pen pal some years after Cliff's execution. That makes it obvious that you managed to cope well with the experience. Can you tell us what helped you in particular to prepare yourself for the witnessing of Cliff's execution and what you consider the most helpful strategy to cope with such an experience?

In Cliff's case it was especially he himself who helped me a lot to cope with his execution. He became very religious in prison and it was his strong belief that death was a doorway into another, into a better life. He was very confident until the very end, his only concern was how we would feel, and that helped a lot. It would have been much more difficult for me, if he had been in despair or if he had been in a

struggle with his fate. Besides that, we were prepared because we had been told in detail what was going to happen. But unless you experience it, you can't know what it will do to you to see a man being killed right in front of you. So I was feeling rather strained and insecure before Cliff's execution.

After his execution it was helpful to talk – I talked about my experience with many people. And I started to do things, for example to create a website, to sing songs about Capital Punishment etc. But people are different. In my childhood I learned a strategy to control my emotions. On the one hand, this strategy created psychological problems I had to solve later in my life. On the other hand, it still helps me to cope with such an extreme situation. I think anyone in a similar situation has to find his or her own way in the end. And it even starts with the decision to witness or not to witness the execution of a friend or loved one. There is no right or wrong, except for your own decision. One close friend of Cliff – not the one I accompanied to Texas, but another – decided not to witness the execution, and she said later that she had made the right decision, and I also felt I had made the right decision. In any case – the decision is right, if you feel it's the best way for you.

So, did I understand you correctly: In order to assimilate the experience you transformed it and created something positive; a website, songs?

Yes, you're right. I think, this was my way to deal with what I had experienced. See, in my case things sometimes have been the other way round from the usual or what you would expect. Usually you start writing someone, later you visit. I visited Cliff first, and later I started to write him. I think, not for all, but for some or even many people writing someone on Death Row, the execution of their pen friend is the end of their dealing with the Death Penalty as a topic in their lives. (And in my opinion that is absolutely okay, if one for example says: "It hurts too much, I can't engage myself in the fight against Capital Punishment anymore...") But with me it was the other way round: My friendship with Cliff and his execution hardly six months later was the start of my involvement in the fight against Death Penalty.

How did Cliff describe the help you'd be giving him by witnessing his execution? Was he specific about this?

As our friendship was so short, we didn't have much time to talk a lot about that. But it was obvious that his intention was, that he didn't want to be surrounded only by people who wanted to see him killed and dead. In his last minutes he wanted to see the familiar faces of some of the people who accepted him and loved him. But as he cared more for us than for himself, he was willing to accept our decision, whatever it was. When my friend first said no, she did not want to see him die, he didn't seem to be disappointed or sad and he didn't try to talk her into changing her mind. I think, he understood that everyone has to find the right decision him- or herself.

What would you recommend people to do who don't know whether or not they should witness the execution of their pen friend?

I'd recommend considering it very carefully. Look and listen within yourself and try to find out how you feel with the thought of being a witness and with the thought of refusing to be a witness. Talk with people who already had such an experience. Try to find out what is best for yourself. And don't have a bad conscience, if you come to the decision you don't feel able to witness! If your friend is a true friend, he will understand and accept it. Because it is YOU who has to live with it the rest of your life.

I also would recommend honesty – the one to be executed and the friend should be open about their own wishes and feelings. See, the second friend I saw in the death chamber – initially he didn't ask his

family or his friends if they would be witnesses. He thought no one would want to see a loved one die. And so he was not able to imagine, that someone could be willing to be with him until the end or that it could be more difficult for someone not to be allowed to be there until the end. We discussed it a lot, and I tried to convince him that he should make his own mind by finding out what he wants for himself, instead of him trying to decide for me. Because I wanted to be there in case he wanted me to. I would have accepted, if he for himself had wanted to die alone. But I found it hard to accept that he might not want me there, just because he thought it was better for me, while I saw it differently for myself.

What gave you the strength to endure the different phases prior to the execution – the hours between noon and 6pm and the waiting inside the Walls Unit – and then to witness the execution?

Sometimes in life – especially in such extreme situations – you do not know beforehand how you will manage and you do not know afterwards how you did manage the situation. What gave me the strength? Maybe just the thought that I had to go through it, because I had decided to. Several times in my life I have experienced, that I had more strength to cope with a situation than I was able to imagine beforehand. I honestly believe that most of us will surpass ourselves the moment it's needed. If it's God who gives us strength or if it's the psychological resources we have, that's up to the individual interpretation of the individual. But I also believe that we do not get the strength in advance – we can't "buy" it ahead. It is given to us just in the moment we need it.

Your last sentence, does it refer to a feeling of trust? Is it your life experience that made you trust that the necessary strength would be given to you?

Well, there are no guarantees, of course. And as I don't get the strength for difficult situations in life in advance, I'm always nervous before something important is going to happen, and I ask myself fearfully, if I will be strong enough. There are always doubts, but I try to remember that in the past I did get the strength so often, whenever I needed it. Maybe it's not so much the actual feeling of trust, but the memory of the past and the resulting hope for the future that counts and helps.

Do you have any rituals or other proved means that help you in difficult situations in life that you'd like to share with us?

I think, what helped me a lot, was not to be alone. To be together with friends, who were just there. I could talk with them, if I wanted to. They just listened, when I needed someone to listen. Or they just were there to give me a hug, when I needed a hug. When Cliff was executed, all the people there were really personally involved. We helped each other, of course, or at least tried. When I experienced the second execution, I had a friend at my side, who was not involved that way, she wasn't a close friend of the inmate herself. Maybe that made it easier: For me she was like a solid rock I could lean on.

I assume that the friend who was so helpful for you had never witnessed an execution. So, it was not her own experience with the situation that made her be the "solid rock" as you called it?

You're right, she had never seen an execution. But as a nurse for the elderly she is not afraid of death. In her life she has seen several people die she had been caring for. That makes her someone you can talk with about such serious subjects as death and dying. And she helped in a practical way as well when after the execution in the funeral home we, all together, changed the clothes of our just executed friend.

You asked what was helpful for me to cope with the experience after the execution – here is one more thing: When Cliff was executed, I didn't think of going to the funeral home afterwards. It occurred to me

only when I was back in Germany, that it would have been the only opportunity to touch him – because during the visits there was always glass and wire mesh between us. But after the second execution I witnessed, we visited the funeral home half an hour later. If the last thing I had seen of him would have been the barbaric picture of the death chamber, it would have been more difficult for me. I remember how I was shaking when I came out of the witness-room and finally fell into the arms of my “solid-rock”-friend. And I remember well how helpful it was for me to be in the funeral home and to see my pen friend there at peace and to touch his still warm body.

The way I sensed it, the atmosphere in the funeral home was rather special. Of course, we were sad. But in some way, there was peace, because we knew it was over now. And – although that might sound strange – we even laughed at times, for example, as we were changing his clothes we remarked how he would have liked being touched by so many beautiful women.

If you had a friend who would be willing to witness the execution of their pen pal and in case you'd help them to prepare for it; what support would you suggest and offer them?

I would offer him or her to talk about it. He or she could ask me any question, and I'd try to answer it the best I can. Because I think it's helpful to be well informed about the facts and all the details. Unfortunately my job as a teacher doesn't give me the opportunity to take my holidays when I want to, but if it would be possible for me from my timetable, I would offer to accompany him or her and to be there to listen, to talk, for a hug. Just as someone who understands...

Thank you very much for your most interesting answers, Gabi! I wish you all the best for the work you're doing.

June 2009