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## DEAR YOUNG PERSON

### A LETTER FROM SISTER HELEN PREJEAN<sup>1</sup>

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Dear Young Person,

As you choose your life's work - or it chooses you - to engage in the struggle for human rights, here's what I hope happens to you:

You're lolling along in your little boat in your everyday life, just floating along, when all of a sudden this really huge wave rises right in front of you. I mean, huge. It's so high it looks like a towering wall of water, and you can't see over it, but there it is, welling up and coming toward you. There you are in your little boat and you just know you're absolutely going to be swamped and you're scared. What to do? Duck and run? Hold your breath and let it pass over you? But somewhere deep down you feel this turn of your heart toward the Wave and this deep desire rises inside. You realize you've been waiting for something like this your whole life, ever since you were a little kid, and you'd dream and say to yourself: "Some day I'm going to do something significant, something great." So, you aim your little boat right into the huge Wave. And immediately you can feel this immense power under you, churning like a giant engine and

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<sup>1</sup> Sister Helen Prejean was born on April 21, 1939, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille in 1957 (now known as the Congregation of St. Joseph) and received a B.A. in English and Education from St. Mary's Dominican College, New Orleans in 1962. In 1973, she earned an M.A. in Religious Education from St. Paul's University in Ottawa, Canada. She has been the Religious Education Director at St. Frances Cabrini Parish in New Orleans, the Formation Director for her religious community, and has taught junior and senior high school students.

Sister Helen Prejean is known around the world for her tireless work against the death penalty and her bestselling book *Dead Man Walking*.

hurling you forward. You know you've connected to something really big, really powerful, and you know you're not causing the power. You're just riding it.

Welcome to passion. Welcome to fierce engagement in the cause of human rights. Welcome to soul-sized struggles that will cause you to "laugh all your laughter and cry all your tears."<sup>2</sup>

But be ready. Be poised. You've got to have depth in you. You've got to be spiritually grounded or you won't last long in this endeavor. This is no adventuresome joy ride. You're going to be engaged with people who are suffering terribly, and the forces arrayed against them will feel unassailable. Often enough, even despite a whole lot of effort, the outcome is going to break your heart and not just once. You're going to be thrust out of your predictable "life-as-you-have-always-known-it" into human suffering and pain, in which, like those you are accompanying, renders you powerless. And the suffering and defeat gets inside you and gnaws at you as if it were your own.

This is what compassion is made of.

It is this experience of compassion stirring in you that will jolt you out of your small ego-absorbed self and stir your heart, not to give up but to try again and again. We don't have to look far to find an arena for human rights. As I've experienced it, our own nation is engaging in some really huge human rights violations, which, as of now, our United States Supreme Court and Congress refuse to acknowledge. For example, our Supreme Court claims that our Constitution sanctions government's right to kill our citizens for certain crimes, something clearly forbidden by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the vast majority of nations follow. In my life, it's the cause of human rights that drew me into the big Wave and hasn't let go of me since.

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<sup>2</sup> Kahlil Gibran

Here's what happened to me. I offer you my life experience in hopes that it might help illuminate your path.

For me, the awakening to justice was a spiritual experience. I'm a Catholic nun, trying to follow the way of Jesus as closely as I can. But for a long time, I thought being a Catholic nun meant being kind and charitable to those around me. I was in my forties before I understood that following Jesus means a whole lot more than just being a nice person to the people around you. I didn't understand that real Christian faith means a lot more than simply sharing food baskets with poor people on Thanksgiving or gifts for poor kids at Christmas. My prayer life was pretty narrow, too. I thought that for the big problems of the world, such as starving children and war and terrorism, my job was to pray for God to solve the problems. Even as a little kid saying my night prayers I'd ask, "*Please God, take care of all the homeless people who don't have a nice bed to sleep in. Amen.*"

It took me a while to wake up - quite a while. I didn't get faith-that-does-justice until I was in my forties. It wasn't that I was a bad, selfish person. I was just ignorant. I had grown up privileged, and was always in the company of other people like me: educated, nice house, good health care. . . . you know, the whole Middle Class America scenario. I didn't know a single person who was poor. I felt sorry for poor people, the poor things. It was sad that some people had such hard lives. I was aware, of course, that there was racial prejudice and racism. I knew that black people always seemed to have it harder than white people, especially in the South where I had always lived, like New Orleans, which is about as South as you can get. There were ten major housing projects in inner city New Orleans, where mostly poor African Americans lived, and I didn't feel any special inclination to go there, even to visit. I was no fool. That's where all the shootings and stabbings and drugs and crime happened. Those were the people you always saw on the evening news be-

ing handcuffed by police and put into police cars. Those were the people in jails and prison.

In a way, waking up was everything. After I woke up, my whole life changed. The flashpoint happened for me one day at a lecture. I heard a fellow nun tell us that a big part of the good news Jesus preached to poor people of his day was that they would be poor no longer, that poverty wasn't God's will. Her words jolted my little lifeboat right out of my just-be-nice-to-everybody lagoon and changed the trajectory of my life. I realized I could no longer simply pray for poor people, I had to meet them. I had to be physically in their company. It led me to move out of the suburbs and into the St. Thomas Housing Project in inner city New Orleans. I was stunned at how different it felt to live there. It felt like I was in another country and all the rules were different. But my African American neighbors were kind and patient with me and taught me about this Other America. I lived with them for four formative years. I had everything to learn about police, public education, jail, the courts, welfare and work, sickness with no health care benefits and having to wait three or four hours at Charity Hospital for some young intern to attend to you or your feverish child. One of the main things I learned about myself at St. Thomas was that my *veneer* of virtue, "*Look what a good person I am, look how I've left the comforts of life to come here to live in this slum to help these poor, miserable people*" got stripped away. . . . quickly. I was compelled to look squarely at all I had been given: strong family love, advanced education, a supportive community of nuns, travel, health care – the works. Virtue? With all I'd been given, I'd better get off my duff and roll up my sleeves to serve people, whom I had only known as my family's servants when I was growing up. I was just so very happy that I had awakened. I'm still glad, still humbly grateful that I woke up to work for justice, my true vocation. When you think of it, we can't simply will ourselves into being awake. Or, to use the language of spiritual traditions – "enlightened." When we really get it about our deep purpose, it's always

a gift, always grace. What's important, I think, is that when we do wake up— however and whenever it happens – we immediately act. We take a step of concrete action on our new path right away, no matter how small the step. If we hesitate, we'll hover and be anxious and think and overthink ourselves right out of it. Not to respond right away is to risk paralyzing ourselves. I noticed that when I took the very first step of action out of my new consciousness, it was deliciously freeing. It's not as if I had to have an entire blueprint of action all laid out before I began to act. When I arrived at St. Thomas, Sister Lory Schaff, the Director of Hope House, told me, knowing my tendency to plan projects that often ended in thin air, "Helen, just be a neighbor, the people will teach you, and you'll know what to do." That's just what happened. When I did begin to act for justice, the action just sort of flowed out of me. Maybe it's what the Tao means by "non-action." Maybe it's what Father Daniel Berrigan (imprisoned for civil disobedience against U.S. war efforts) means when he talks about his actions for peace: "I must do what I do, it's a moral imperative, knowing what I know, I can not *Not Do It.*"

This awakening to work for justice that led me to live in St. Thomas is how I begin my story in *Dead Man Walking*. Once in the current with poor and struggling people, it was a straight shot to a man on Louisiana's death row. Straight shot? From the suburbs to the projects to death row? Yeah, because once you're in the matrix of poverty and oppression, you soon see the direct, intricate network between poverty and prison. Every family I met in St. Thomas had someone in jail or prison, and it doesn't take a super-laser IQ to figure out why. And for starters, let me just say that it's not because some people are simply bad and prone to evil and some people (you know, like us, who stay in school and work hard, etc, etc) are good and do good things in the world.

I've written two books about my experiences with people on death row, but here is my best effort to summarize the key points of my journey. I invite you to descend into the teeming ins and outs of my journey, which is still happening, still unfurling. I've learned a lot. I'm still learning. I'm going to be learning until I die.

One day I get an invitation to write to a man, Patrick Sonnier, on Louisiana's death row, and I say, "Sure." Now get this: I thought I was only going to be writing letters to this man. Me, an English major, thinking, "*Well, I could send him a few poems, you know, nice, literary, uplifting letters.*" I never dreamed that two years later the man on the other end of my letters was actually going to be electrocuted to death by the state of Louisiana. Much less that I'd be there with him and as he's dying he's going to look at my face. Surprise. . .just ride the Wave.

I start visiting Pat and right away I can see, can feel his deep humanness. I begin to realize that everyone is worth more than his or her worst act. Amnesty International becomes my first teacher of human rights, that these rights are inalienable to human beings simply because we're human. At a very basic level, this means governments don't have power to *bestow* these rights on citizens for good behavior nor *take them away* for bad behavior. Two of these rock-bottom rights, as expressed in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are the right to life (Article 3) and the right to not be subjected to degrading punishment and torture (Article 5). I get it. I embrace the stance of firm, principled opposition to government executions, no matter what the crime. (Much later down the road when I have the opportunity to dialogue with Pope John Paul II, that will be one of my main points: that no government should be given the absolute power to decide which citizens ought to live and which ought to die.)

I find out about Pat's crime. It is more horrible than I could have ever imagined. He and his brother, Eddie, killed two innocent teenage kids, a boy and a girl, at point-blank range – shooting them in the back of the head, execution-style. I can't put it together: Pat and Eddie's human faces, the good I see in them – and yet this unspeakable, depraved act. I feel for the kids' parents, plunged forever in grief and loss, all their peace and security gone, their promising young kids buried, dead –forever.

I make a bad mistake. I think of reaching out to the murdered kids' parents, but I don't. I'm afraid. I stay away from them. I figure I'm the last person in the world they want to see. After all, I'm a spiritual advisor, giving counsel and solace to their children's murderers. I meet the victims' families at the worst possible time. It's at the public hearing of the Louisiana Pardon Board. They are there to make sure the Pardon Board upholds Pat's execution. I'm there to ask the Board to spare his life. I bump right into the bereaved parents outside the building as the Board is inside deliberating. It's a bad scene. They are furious at me. I deserve their anger.

But the boy's father surprises me. He walks right up to me and asks why I haven't come to visit them, that he's feeling alone and under a lot of pressure. "Everybody's telling me if I'm not for the death penalty, it will look like I don't really love my boy. Sister, where have you been?" He takes me completely by surprise. This brave, good man is going to take me into his heart's journey out from under the heavy, crushing rock of wanting revenge onto the path of forgiveness. He put it to me simply, "They killed my boy, but I'm not going to let them kill me. If I let these terrible feelings take over me, I'll be dead, too." And he set his face to follow the Christ path. This father is the hero of *Dead Man Walking*, not me. I'm just the storyteller, and I made a bad mistake by not reaching out to the victims' families. When you read his story, you'll know why.



I begin attending victims' families' support meetings. I find out that I'm not the only person in the world who avoids them. They say that's what almost everyone does. "People don't know how to deal with our pain, so they stay away." I come away from the gathering and do just one thing: I start a support group for victims' families in New Orleans. Even doing one thing, one concrete action, does a lot to alleviate guilt for past mistakes better than anything. Taking even the smallest action is also immensely freeing. As you put your hands on the life rope and start to pull, you can feel the life-force surging through you. It feels integral and whole and cleansing. At last you feel delivered from the paralysis of inaction, where you're wallowing around in thinking and re-thinking of endless possible things you can do or might do or maybe ought to do and feeling anxious and weary and pretty cynical about almost everything.

When Patrick Sonnier is killed in the electric chair, the last face he sees is mine. What I see changes me forever. I come out of the killing chamber that night and throw up right outside the prison gates. I realize just how hidden from view the entire execution process is and I know – really know – that I've been brought close for a reason: so that I can bring the people close to the reality of state killing and, in time, help them abolish the death penalty. Twenty-five years later, I'm still traveling, telling the story to all who invite me to speak, and the story never gets old. Each time I tell it, the energy of it feels as fresh as when I started. I'm still riding the Wave, but I make sure that I stay close to the pulsing center of the current. I continue to accompany real flesh-and-blood people on death row and see them through. Thus far, I've accompanied six human beings to their deaths at the hands of the state, and presently I'm accompanying Manuel Ortiz, on Louisiana's death row, whom I am utterly convinced is absolutely innocent of the murder-for-hire for which a jury sentenced him to death. Even if he were guilty, I would work might and mane to resist his killing. But innocent he

is – just as Dobie Williams and Joseph O’Dell were innocent – but executed anyway.

But back to *Dead Man Walking*. The book is published in 1993, when support of the American people for the death penalty is at an all-time high: 80%. I figure if the book sells 5,000 copies, it’ll be a miracle. A friend of Susan Sarandon gives her my book to read. She comes to see me and says she knows that Tim Robbins just has to be the one to make a film of my book, and I trust her. It takes her nine months to get Tim to read the book. As soon as he does, he sits down and writes the screenplay, which, he says, practically wrote itself because I had written a book that laid out the suffering of victims and perpetrators alike – and also the suffering of the families of the perpetrators, as well as the most hidden victims of all: the guards and wardens whose job it is to strap down fellow human beings and kill them. “Just do your job,” they’re told. “It’s all legal, upheld by the Supreme Court, and the people want it.”

The film of *Dead Man Walking* gets four nominations at the 1996 Academy Awards, and Susan wins an Oscar for her portrayal of me. 1.3 billion people watch the Awards that night and book sales skyrocket, all of which make me very happy because I know by now that good films like *Dead Man*, which bring people squarely over to both sides of the moral dilemma of the death penalty, are the catalyst for reflection we so badly need in this country to finally one day abolish government-sanctioned killings.

And so, with God’s good grace under me, I continue to ride the Wave.<sup>3</sup> I hope my words here are helpful to you, as you sit poised in your little boat, scanning the horizon to spot your own big Wave.

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<sup>3</sup> Visit [www.sisterhelen.org](http://www.sisterhelen.org) for accounts of my on-going adventures.

For my last parting shot, I offer you a word straight from Jesus of Nazareth to his disciples (slightly paraphrased), who, like you, sat waiting for life to happen in their small fishing boats close to the familiar shore:

“Enough of lolling about in the shallows, Guys. Set out for the Deep.” (Luke 5:4)

- *Sister Helen Prejean*