

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

An eye for an eye ...

By: Andrea Laidman

Posted: 3/18/08

There are certain videos posted on YouTube that have become Internet cult classics. An interview of a kid at a carnival, "Zombie kid like turtles" has four million views. The adorable British brothers in "Charlie bit my finger - again!" have been watched twelve million times on YouTube. A clip of a toddler boy with an endearing and comical laugh, simply titled "Hahaha," boasts 48 million views.

These videos offer thirty seconds or a minute of humor, but give viewers little else. And while sites like YouTube have begun to play a role in the political process - evident with the abundance of videos and channels dedicated to covering the 2008 presidential primaries - videos that offer wisdom alone are largely ignored by the internet community.

"Victim to Panel: No to Death Penalty, No to Revenge," is one such clip. With only 1,700 views, it doesn't even begin to compete on YouTube's "most viewed" page, but the testimony offered in the video is perhaps the most insightful and comprehensive statement about the death penalty that I've encountered over several years on working on the issue.

Aundre Herron is a former prosecutor in California whose eldest brother was murdered in 1994. In this YouTube clip, filmed during hearings on the death penalty currently occurring in California and posted by the group California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, Herron describes her initial reaction to her brother's death as one of vengeful vigilantism. She says she wanted to pick up a gun and roam the streets in pursuit of her brother's killer.

But given time to reflect and heal, Herron explained to the panel, she reached an insightful position on the death penalty that does not forget the real rage and desperation felt by victims.

"I understand that this sense of revenge is a very legitimate emotion, but it is not a legitimate basis for public policy. I think we denigrate our own noble ideals when we use revenge and we use the public fist for the purpose of killing our fellow human beings."

Bud Welch, who spoke at Notre Dame in early November 2007, lost his daughter in the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995. Like Herron, Welch initially reacted with anger, only later to arrive at his stance against the death penalty. Speaking in the Montgomery Theatre of LaFortune on Nov. 7, Welch said to a group of Notre Dame students:

"The very idea that this revenge of killing another person is going to somehow help you to heal ... it's impossible. I was trying to go through the healing process while I was living with this revenge, and you can't do it."

Another speaker who visited Notre Dame this fall, Dr. Michael Radelet of the University of Colorado-Boulder, argues against the death penalty and for the families of murder victims in another way. He is involved in fighting for a reallocation of funds from maintaining Colorado's capital punishment system to paying for re-investigations of cold cases.

Rather than seek the so-called highest form of revenge for only a few families, this movement asks that resources be used to work toward answers for all families impacted by the tragedy of murder.

Herron, too, points to the financial irresponsibility of the death penalty in California, where 114 million dollars are spent each year to uphold the death penalty system:

"It is a stunning irony, I think, that even as the governor [of California] is about to announce a deficit of fourteen billion dollars, we can still find funds to kill those who kill-all the while proclaiming that killing is wrong. We can pay prison guards more than teachers, and exalt state-sanctioned killing to a place of greater importance than healthcare and housing, than paying workers a living wage, than protecting our children, our seniors, the disabled and the disadvantaged."

According to Aundre Herron, a woman who has worked both as a prosecutor and a defender, who has "comforted surviving family members and counseled convicted murderers alike," and who has suffered through the murder of her own brother, "The death penalty is not about justice, it is about revenge."

As a Catholic community, we at Notre Dame must act in the interest of the victims of violent crime, and join in a growing national discussion on shifting public funds from capital punishment to straightforward initiatives that care for the victims of violent crime and their survivors (including helping them to pay for funeral expenses or obtaining grief counseling). We must work toward developing possibilities of giving justice to communities impacted by murder without allowing emotion to become an accepted basis for the law.

During this season of Lent, and especially during Holy Week, we can consider the death penalty in another light, as we recall the execution of Jesus. As members of the Christian faith we follow a man who forgave his killers even as he neared his last breath; we have a responsibility to examine the modern death penalty and challenge the conventional wisdom regarding justice and revenge that are often used to support it.

Andrea Laidman is a senior political science and peace studies major, and the Director of Notre Dame Against State Killing (ND ASK), a campaign for a moratorium in Indiana. Her column's title recalls advice given to John Adams by his wife, Abigail: "We have too many high sounding words, and too few actions that correspond with them." She can be contacted at alaidman@nd.edu

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