

God, Life, and Everything "We, the Killers"

We all know the Boston Marathon bomber, 20-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was sentenced to death by lethal injection last week. One person's death is fairly inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but there's a good case to be made that the manner of death is important. I've certainly argued it before.

This death sentence gives us a chance to once again visit the efficacy of that form of punishment.

Our first question ought to be, "Why do we impose the death penalty?" What is its function? We need to start there because if we're just killing people willy nilly without reflection or purpose, what are we?

So, why do we kill people as punishment? And do those arguments hold water?

Here are the most common reasons:

- 1 It discourages others from committing a similar crime in the future
- 2 It brings "closure" to the victims or survivors
- 3 It allows us to be done with the criminal once and for all - he will never harm anyone again
- 4 It shows that we are better than the murderers because we give due process before killing.

Let's start off with reason number one. It discourages future criminals, in this case terrorists. We know how ridiculous that sounds on the face of it. Terrorists often volunteer for their attacks knowing full well they will be killed - or will kill themselves in the process. Death is nothing to them, so why would execution prevent their crimes?

But even regular, non-idealistically driven crime is not deterred by the death penalty. Crime rates have never been shown to decrease when the death penalty is imposed, nor decrease when it is abolished. In some cases, it may even encourage crime. In 18th Century England, they found that increasingly harsh punishments - death for even minor crimes - simply drove people into an attitude of no longer caring. They figured their lives were already doomed, so why not have some fun in the process?

What about reason number two: closure? Boston's Mayor Martin J. Walsh had said in an interview that, "I hope this verdict provides a small amount of closure to the survivors, families, and all impacted by the violent and tragic events surrounding the 2013 Boston Marathon."

Certainly, some of the victims want him dead. Others were less certain about what they wanted. It brought no joy, they said. So, which victim's sensibilities do we ignore?

Of course, nothing can bring back lost loved ones or severed limbs. The victims will forever be reminded of what was taken away from them, so in a sense, there will never be that coveted and mythical state called "closure." Killing or not killing Dzhokhar Tsarnaev will do nothing to heal those wounds.

Moreover, there will be no closure with a death sentence. There will be appeal after appeal that could last for years, dragging out the process for the victims and their families. In this particular case, a sentence of life without parole would most likely have Tsarnaev out of the press and out of their lives much more quickly.

There is another element to this. The Boston Bombing was an assault on the entire community, and the "closure" that we seek isn't just for those lost or injured - it's for

everyone. Yet the majority of Bostonians did not want the death penalty imposed. This according to several polls. So, whom exactly was this sentence supposed to heal?

What about reason number three? Does killing Tsarnaev finally allow us to be done with him forever? Will it keep him from harming anyone again? Well, once he's dead, he'll certainly not kill again - not by himself anyway. However, with his death comes the mantle of martyrdom. There's every reason to believe he'll inspire many others who also seek the glory of the martyr. Just because he's dead doesn't mean we're done with him, and it's rather naive to think we might be.

Would keeping him locked up for life do any better? Not sure. But think of history's criminals who were killed versus those who spent the rest of their lives in prison - I'll bet you can name more who went out in a blaze of glory or as martyrs to the cause. Let's face it, death inspires.

Killing him masks the causes of the terrorism in the first place. Some say, they just hate our freedom. But if that were the case, they'd have been attacking us many decades ago. If we killing him will solve something, we simply help perpetuate the ongoing violence.

That leaves us with reason number four. We show our moral superiority by giving due process. In this particular case, it's certainly true that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev got his day in court. And it's pretty undeniable that he was one of the two terrorists who killed and maimed innocent people that day in Boston.

But it's also true that, given time for information gathering and reflection, we chose to kill. It was not self-defense - he was already incapacitated. It was not in the heat of the moment - it was thoroughly discussed by the jury. There is no mental illness involved nor is there religious fervor nor even pressure by an older sibling. This was a calculated choice to kill, not unlike the terrorists themselves.

What's more, in many other cases, we *don't* give due process. The number of people on death row who are later proved to be innocent is staggering. The Innocence Project reports more than 329 innocent people set free after an average of fourteen years on death row. The state says, "Sorry for the inconvenience," gives them a few dollars, and sends them on their way. The number of innocents we as a society have chosen to put to death is undoubtedly higher. And what do we say to *their* families? Oops?

Arguments for a death penalty are flawed and hollow. Worse yet, it appeals to our lowest motives. We kill because we are angry, because we want revenge. We kill because we are frustrated and fool ourselves into thinking it's a quick fix. We kill, frankly, because it titillates us. Death is addicting. The state's reasons for killing, despite high-minded sounding words, are the same as the criminal's reasons.

I said earlier, the manner of death is important - dying quietly in bed is less tragic than at the hands of a killer.

The question for us though is, what does it do to the killer's soul? Because in this case - and in all death penalty cases - the killer is us.