

WITNESS TO THE

Trained to preserve lives, a physician grapples with the execution of a friend on death row

EXECUTION



PHOTOGRAPH BY KEN LIGHT

by ANDREW G. DEAN

THE MORNING OF RON SPIVEY'S EXECUTION, MY WIFE AND I drove past an empty guard shack, down a half-mile of road, and past some duck ponds to reach the Diagnostic and Classification Prison in Jackson, home of Georgia's death row. We passed through two metal detectors and four steel-barred doors before walking down a long corridor to visit Ron for the last time. ■ Five visitors had gathered with Ron in a wire-mesh-enclosed visitors' room. One hulking, black-clad tactical squad member

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was posted inside the room and another just outside the door. We joked and cried and swapped stories. Ron had blown his cash account on photo tickets, and we posed with him while another prisoner snapped away with a Polaroid. At three o'clock, the guards pronounced our visit over. Ron waved and smiled as he retreated down the hall, his six-foot-six, 340-pound frame flanked by a half dozen guards.

Ten months earlier, after more than two decades on death row, Ron had come within several hours of execution, but the Georgia Supreme Court had ordered a stay while deliberating whether death by electrocution constituted cruel and unusual punishment. After the court ruled in October 2001 that it did, lethal injection replaced the electric chair, and four chemical executions had quickly taken place in Georgia. Ron's was to be the fifth.

The State Board of Pardons and Paroles had listened, unmoved, to testimony about Ron's history of mental illness. One of my HMS classmates, Jay Jackman '64, had flown in from California to interview Ron and to file an expert declaration outlining Ron's mental problems. The Reverend Joseph Lowery, a legendary colleague of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., had delivered an emotional appeal, declaring that the time to stop this kind of killing had come. It didn't matter that Ron was white, Lowery had told the board members; he was a human being, and the principle of nonviolence applied to all races—and to the state.

The pardons board had brushed aside evidence that Ron had tried to make amends while in prison, even saving several lives by reporting plots he had overheard to kill people on the outside. The other death-row inmates, in fact, considered Ron a snitch; once a gang of four attacked him using homemade knives and he nearly died from a penetrating chest wound. During one six-year period, Ron had refused to emerge from his cell, preferring solitary confinement to the dangers he faced outside its doors. Even in his cell, he had to watch out for boiling water hurled his way and razorblades mounted on sticks pushed through the bars.

Tangled Legacies

A few hours after our final visit with Ron, as we were returning to witness his execution, we saw an

ambulance suddenly emerge from the prison compound and speed toward the freeway. We later heard that it had been transporting the widow of Billy Watson, the off-duty policeman Ron had shot to death in 1976. Mrs. Watson, who had conducted an impassioned, 25-year-long campaign to have Ron executed, was said to have collapsed an hour before the scheduled event. Officer Watson's son, himself a police officer, nurtured a different perspective. He had once told a reporter, "Hate is not in my vocabulary. I couldn't hate forever. I don't hate Spivey and I don't like the process."

Shortly before seven, the guards checked our identification and waved a metal detector over us before we climbed into a van reserved for Ron's friends and sympathizers. Following another security check at the prison entrance, we were led to the visiting area where we had said goodbye to Ron a few hours earlier. Posted on the wall were the familiar ground rules for visitors, detailing such instructions as how much skin female visitors could expose (not much) and the number of embraces allowed per session (one initial and one final). We could hear, but not see, invited members of the political and law enforcement communities and other witnesses for the state being escorted into a separate room.

During our vigil, I reflected on the stories that Ron had revealed to us during three years of monthly visits and frequent letters. His mother had barely attended school, he had told us, and she had taught herself to read food orders while working in a restaurant. When Ron turned 16, his parents had ordered him to quit school and go to work. His father made it clear that his birth had been an accident and that he remained unwanted. "He beat me like a dog," Ron recalled, "and he talked to me like one, too."

Ron ran away several times, and the authorities finally removed him from his home to rescue him from his father's abuse. While still a teenager, Ron took advantage of a deal to enter the Army rather than go to juvenile prison. After he was kicked out of the Army for bad behavior, he passed the high school equivalency test, but despite his high IQ, he never pursued additional schooling.

"In all my years in prison and out in society associating with other losers," he wrote us, "I found one thing that applied to 100 percent of us: none of us

had gotten a good education. I feel uncomfortable in a room full of well-educated people. So I sought out what I considered my own level of society. A lack of education forces you to live on the low end of all things."

In the winter of 1976, Ron's wife left him, taking their one-year-old daughter with her. "My world was in ruins," Ron told us. "I started drinking to numb the pain, and this led to losing a fine franchise business. I took tranquilizers, desperately trying to fight off the soul-numbing depression. Three days after the loneliest and most miserable Christmas of my life, I was taking tranquilizers and drinking all day. I had a confrontation with three men in a pool hall next to a bar in Macon, Georgia. I just snapped, and ended up killing one of the men." Ron then drove to Columbus, Georgia, where he tried to hold up a bar. He ended up shooting several people and killing one of them, Billy Watson.

"Because I had a gun when I went berserk that horrible night, a true American hero lost his life," Ron wrote us. "Officer Billy Watson, a 14-year police veteran, was moonlighting as a security guard at a nearby shopping center to earn extra money for his wife and children. During that night of madness

I shot five total strangers, and two died. I caused great suffering that night. Since then, my guilt and horror have haunted me constantly. Nothing on earth—this prison, no one—can punish me like my own conscience has done."

Valley of the Shadows

Ron's expressions of remorse had not swayed his executioners, who were finally ready to deliver the ultimate punishment. Minutes before the ritual was to begin, we were ushered down a hallway lined with motivational posters, including one that featured a slightly cross-eyed, annoyed-looking eagle and the admonition to "Focus." Several vans were waiting outside, and we climbed into one that had heavy wire grillwork behind the driver. Guards locked the door from the outside as soon as we entered.

With us sat Ruth Enero, whom we had met several years earlier at a life-issues conference, where my wife, Consuelo, had been a speaker. Ruth had been flying from California to Georgia to visit Ron about once a year and keeping up a correspondence in between, but, as she had said, we could visit him more often without having to travel so far.

PHOTO: STEVEN PUETZER/PHOTONICA





Throughout much of my life, I had maintained a vague interest in understanding what happens on death row, believing that outside authorities should monitor conditions there. But I had no direct experience with death-row inmates, and I had assumed capital punishment to be a routine part of the criminal justice system.

Later on, Amnesty International materials convinced me that execution is more expensive than life imprisonment, that there is no evidence that it lowers rates of violence, and that its application is enormously affected by the condemned person's race and his access—or lack of it—to competent legal representation. It had come as a surprise to me that the United States alone among Western industrialized nations still permits the death penalty.

My wife, by contrast, had a strong history of working in life issues and knew exactly where she stood; she had once belonged to a group that called itself People Against Everything—the death penalty, abortion, war, poverty, euthanasia, racism, and meat consumption. We're both physicians, though, which sets our baseline way over on the side of preserving life.

But it was our monthly visits with Ron that brought home the futility and waste of ending the life of a man who had sat on death row for more than two decades. Ron and I had nearly the same pre-World War II birthdate, and both of us were grandfathers. Although those who had never met him may have hated him, Consuelo and I found his conversation,

sharpened by years of meditation (death-row inmates receive no occupational therapy because they are considered temporary), to be compelling and wise. We often found it difficult to reconcile the reality of the Ron we knew with the knowledge of those five hours of madness during which he had destroyed his life while ending the lives of two others.

As we sat waiting for the final leg of our grim procession to the death chamber to begin, we watched through the window grates as guards ushered people into the other vans. Seven o'clock, the time Ron was scheduled to die, came and went, but the vehicles remained motionless. We briefly hoped that the delay might mean that the authorities had issued a stay, but our hopes were extinguished when the vans began to crawl around the perimeter of the high prison wall, which was topped with coils of razor-sharp barbed wire. When we entered through a side gate, uniformed officers exchanged passenger lists, opened the hood of the van, scanned underneath with mirrors, and finally opened a second gate. Everyone involved in the ritual had a defined and compartmentalized role, which I realized helps to contain the emotion attached to executing a fellow human being.

Inside a long, low building, we were led to an audience space of perhaps 50 seats installed in graduated rows to afford a clear view of the proceedings. Through the three-part glass wall we could see Ron strapped to a surgical table. His arms were bound to armrests extending straight out to the sides, and the table was raised 60 degrees to a semi-vertical position. With a medical technician on the left and the warden standing motionless on the other side, the scene reminded me of the crosses at Calvary.

Ron could see us through the glass partition, and we tried to signal our support by raising our brows and widening our eyes, in violation of the strict printed instructions on execution decorum that we had signed. He met our eyes, letting us know that he appreciated our presence. Other spectators—mostly uniformed officers and prison guards—filed in to line the walls on either side of the viewing room.

The scrub-suited medical technician hovered near Ron, monitoring the intravenous stand, whose infusion line ran to Ron's right arm. A curtain hid

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the people who would be pushing the buttons to start the automatic injection of thiopental sodium, followed by pancuronium bromide, and finally potassium chloride.

The impeccably dressed warden stood ramrod straight as he asked Ron whether he had any last words. Ron pulled himself up on his surgical cross. "I've apologized to the warden and to the family of Mr. Watson," he said, "and I think they know, and I hope they believe, that if I had a million lifetimes, I could never say I'm sorry enough." After speaking of the failure of the death penalty to recognize the power of redemption, Ron ended with, "God has blessed me in a million ways with people who love me, people I love, wonderful people who do good things. I want all those that I love and that love me to leave this thing tonight without any ugliness, any hatred, any anger, any of that, and let Christ be first in their life."

"It's time," the warden said. "Would you like a prayer offered?" The prison chaplain uttered a few words, the warden signaled to the medical technician, and the chemicals began to flow. Ron started chanting something that sounded like, "Live and love!" from behind the glass, but the microphone had been turned off and we could hear only with difficulty. Then suddenly his eyes, still wide open, rolled back in his head, and he was silent. I watched with medical understanding, knowing that he was not in pain, but with that helpless feeling of having just lost a patient. For several minutes, Ron continued to breathe. His breaths then resolved into spasmodic gasps and his abdominal muscles began to twitch. Finally, his chest was completely still.

Two hapless disciples of Hippocrates, physicians from the Medical College of Georgia, appeared from the wings with stethoscopes. They listened to Ron's chest to ascertain the absence of the same heartbeat they had sought to sustain through his diabetes, obesity, and mental problems. Now they found it stopped, and the curtain was pulled.

An American Medical Association policy statement reads, "A physician, as a member of a profession dedicated to preserving life when there is hope of doing so, should not be a participant in a legally authorized execution." According to the newspapers, the dean of the Medical College of Georgia had sent

a letter to the Department of Corrections withdrawing the school's support for even this ritualistic participation in executions, but within a few days, he was persuaded to continue.

States of Grace

We climbed into the van, which crawled back to the front gate where our car was parked. As soon as the van door opened, television crews trained bright lights on us and asked for our reactions. I said I was glad for Ron's sake that the electric chair was gone, but that I feared for the rest of us that lethal injection makes the process too easy. I did not mention that the scene I had just witnessed had evoked unsettling memories of our visit, several years earlier, to the museum of a death camp in Germany where chemical execution had been altogether too efficient.

Two months later, we had a reunion at the home of Pat Seaborn, one of Ron's cousins. She showed us the shrine in her family room, with Ron's ashes, the size 14 sneakers we had ordered for him, his glasses, and the brown scapular Consuelo had placed around his neck during our final visit. Although Ron was not Catholic, he had accepted this token, which is associated with dying in a state of grace, with religious feeling. He had kissed it after Consuelo's example, and the guards had allowed it to remain during his execution. We played the tape of his last words, which his daughter, Ronnie, hadn't heard, and she cried. Ron's granddaughter, who had seen him only once, played outside with a friend.

Pat told us that she and Ronnie had stayed at the main gate with the death penalty vigil group until it was time to leave. As they drove home, they saw clouds in the shape of a group of angels. As they watched, they thought they saw a shape come and join the other clouds, and then the whole host rose in the night sky. I kept thinking that we would see Ron again, perhaps somewhere on the road to Emmaus or the road to Jackson. The memories of warm conversations endure. ■

Andrew G. Dean '64 retired from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2002 and now teaches and consults in public health epidemiology.