

Lessons in loss

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

On April 19, 1995, Julie Marie Welch died in the Oklahoma City bombing at the age of 23. Her father, Bud Welch, remembers earlier discussions with Julie about the death penalty. Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, authors of *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing*, report that Julie Welch was “outraged about the prolific rate of executions in neighboring Texas; [to her] . . . the death penalty taught a lesson in hatred to the children of that state.”

After his daughter died, Welch put aside his memory of those talks. He wanted revenge, and told others that we should “hang them.” Eventually, however, his anger subsided, and gradually the memory of his daughter’s opposition to the death penalty led Welch to forgive his daughter’s killer. He began his own personal campaign against capital punishment. Who better to speak out against killing than a father whose daughter died in the worst domestic terrorist attack in U.S. history?

On one of his speaking trips, Welch went to visit Timothy McVeigh’s father at his home in western New York state. There, sitting around the same dining room table where the FBI had questioned Bill McVeigh about his son, Welch talked with Bill and Jennifer, Timothy’s younger sister. The three of them “shared their losses and helped one another through the process of healing.”

Earlier this year, Welch spoke to an ecumenical gathering at Sister Margaret Mary Parish in Terre Haute, Indiana, two miles from the federal prison where Timothy McVeigh was executed on June 11. Welch’s visit was sponsored by the Terre Haute Abolition Network, a group that campaigns against the death penalty.

I learned about Sister Margaret Mary Parish from Cate McCauley of Coventry, Rhode Island. McCauley called me after reading a column that I had written for *Newsday*. In the column, I reported McVeigh’s decision to use William Ernest Henley’s poem “Invictus” as his final statement to the public, and I suggested that McVeigh had misused the poem. He had chosen it several years before his execution when he resonated to the poem’s final defiant words: “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” But William Henley, who suffered from tubercular arthritis, did

not write “Invictus” as an act of defiance against society. He was expressing his acceptance of a lifetime of physical suffering.

In my column, I deplored McVeigh’s failure to express remorse over his crime. But it was not remorse that McCauley wanted to discuss. She wanted to correct my comment that McVeigh “sought no spiritual solace beyond himself in his final hours.”

As a researcher for McVeigh’s defense team, McCauley became his official archivist, collecting records and correspondence that she intends to give to officials in Oklahoma City. McCauley was also one of four witnesses whom McVeigh chose to be present for his execution. On the night before McVeigh died, she participated in a prayer vigil service at Sister Margaret Mary Parish, two miles from the prison.

During the hour-and-a-half-long service, at McVeigh’s request, she read Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8, which begins, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.” McCauley told me that McVeigh heard the service through a telephone hookup.

A small brass musical group played an original composition by Californian David Woodward, who wrote the piece in honor of Pope John Paul II, an ardent opponent of capital punishment who had asked President Bush for clemency for McVeigh. The service was led by Father Ron Ashmore, the parish priest. Pastoral associate Sister Mary Beth Kalingel told me that McVeigh, whose family is Catholic, received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (often called “the last rites”).

After talking with the quiet-spoken sister Mary Beth, I remembered a bit of history recorded in *American Terrorist*. The U.S. death penalty was declared unconstitutional in 1972, but was reinstated by Congress in 1988 “only for use against drug kingpins who murdered.” In 1994, several months before the Oklahoma City bombing, Congress expanded the death penalty “to include about 60 more crimes, including terrorist bombings, hiring a hit man, killing during a car jacking, and killing during a sex attack.”

Opponents of the death penalty in no way condone McVeigh’s crime of mass destruction. The case against capital punishment does not turn on the horror of McVeigh’s crime, but on the horror of an official response of killing the killer.

The U.S. government may have thought that it had a friendly, convenient middle-of-the-nation location when it built its Terre Haute death facility in 1995. But it was a

bad tactical choice, because no one checked out the anti-death penalty religious fervor in Terre Haute. There is strength in Sister Mary Beth's voice when she says, "We are going to continue our education program against the death penalty." With Sister Mary Beth and Julie Marie's father making the case against the death penalty, I'd put my money on their side.