

Witness and remember: McVeigh's execution should be televised

by [Thomas Lynch](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

After 30 years of directing funerals, I've come to believe in open caskets. A service to which everybody but the deceased is invited, like a wedding without the bride or a baptism without the baby, denies the essential reality of the occasion, misses the focal point. It is why we comb wreckage, drag rivers and bring our war dead home. Knowing is better than not knowing, no matter how difficult the facts; and seeing, it turns out, is believing. That's what hurts, the heart-sore widow says of the body in the blue suit in the box. Births, deaths, marriages—the fashions of these passages change, but the fundamental obligations of witness and remembrance remain. And whether we bear witness to the joy or sadness, the love or grief, the life or death, the sharing of it makes the bearing of it better.

Which is why we searched the devastation in Oklahoma City—to return the bodies of the dead to the families they belonged to. To deal with loss, we must confront our losses. Witness and remembrance are akin.

The same is so for executions. Knowing is better than not knowing. Seeing is believing. Such an extreme exercise of the public will and the state's power demands a public witness.

For people of faith, witness and remembrance are essential stations in their pilgrimage. Passover and Crucifixion, Crusade and Holocaust—these are flesh-and-blood events that call upon the flesh-and-blood faithful to “see and believe,” to “watch and not forget.” They are not pleasant, but they are compelling. And while Christ chided Thomas for his famous doubt, two millennia later we are glad to have his unambiguous testimony: “My Lord!” he said, changed utterly by the moment, “My God!” We might reasonably wonder if those first Jewish Christians would have embraced the meaning of Christ's execution if Pilate had decided to do it behind closed doors, or if Thomas and his co-religionists had never seen the dead man raised to life.

Scripture and liturgy are the record and replay of what was seen and heard. Nowadays we watch for signs and wonders on TV.

When Timothy McVeigh is put to death by lethal injection on May 16, it will be the first federal execution in nearly 40 years. For most Americans alive today, it will be the first time in our adult lives that one of our own kind—human kind—will be capitally punished by the government to which we pledge our allegiance and pay our taxes. And yet, except for a select few, none of us will be allowed to watch. The suggestion that this execution be televised is dismissed out of hand by the powers that be for reasons never clearly articulated, and in doing so they substantially undermine the rights and duties of citizens in a democracy to scrutinize the exercise of a government's lethal powers.

When we bomb Iraqis or Serbians, when we send troops into harm's way with weapons that kill, we send along the cameras too, because it is our right—some would say our duty—to witness the killing that is done in our names. If that is so in Kosova, why oughtn't it be so in Indianapolis when a legal, justifiable and state-sanctioned dose of homicide is visited upon the Oklahoma City Bomber on behalf of We the People?

For most of history the public square has been where these things were done—it's the place for politicians and preachers, the sideshows and snake oil, the floggings and the hangings, the public spectacles and entertainments and civic business. The public square is now the TV screen where candidates and con artists, circus and sales pitch, pundits and the evening news all get aired, for all to see. We may choose not to watch, but should we be denied access?

So why not public executions?

"Bad taste," it is argued, as if *Temptation Island* or Jerry Springer were benchmarks of culture. To be sure, if we only televised what edified, the screen would be blank most hours of most days. That "it might make him a martyr" seems unlikely. A vicious dog put down does not become a much-missed pet. And seeing an evil man put to death will neither add to nor subtract from the terrible math: 19 children, 149 adults—168 innocents murdered by his horrific evil. Those mistaken enough to regard McVeigh as a martyr will not be disabused of their ignorance by his death, seen or unseen. Those who know evil when they see it will not confuse McVeigh with Martin Luther King Jr. or St. Catherine of Sienna. "It might be turned into a

spectacle” is another caution, as if the medium cannot distinguish between witness and entertainment, as if the terrorism McVeigh visited upon Oklahoma City and the society at large was not “spectacular.” Television does Senate hearings and superbows, the World Wrestling Federation and *Book TV*. It does not entirely confuse the death of princes or the burial of princesses with *Bowling for Dollars* or *The Dating Game*. It could, quite conceivably, get an execution “right.” But getting it wrong is still better than not getting it at all.

Of course, the real concern is that a country that claims to be “for” the death penalty mightn’t have the stomach to see exactly what it is that it is “for.” Is it possible that the idea of the thing is less disturbing than the thing itself, the abstract more palatable than the actual fact in the way that “a woman’s right to choose” is a tidier concept than jars of dead fetuses that look like us? Is it likely that our bravery and braggadocio might wither a little by watching someone put down, more or less like a cocker spaniel or Cheshire cat—not because of what is done to McVeigh, but because of what is done to us?

For years my fellow citizens of Michigan, a state that does not have the death penalty, debated the relative merits of “assisted suicide” while Jack Kevorkian dispatched 120-odd of our fellow citizens, in the name of mercy and kindness and, oh yes, dignity. This was accomplished in the back of an old van with lethal gases and then potassium chloride, and with remarkable impunity. And we acquitted him, every chance we got, persuaded by the rhetorical of Jeffrey Feiger, his erstwhile advocate, to wit: “If it’s good enough for our pets, why not for our parents?” We liked the sound of that and went about our business until one Sunday night in prime time CBS broadcast the snuff film starring Dr. Jack and Thomas Youk. Once we saw it there on the TV in living color, mercy and dignity looked suspiciously like serial killing. Witness—seeing the thing itself being done—provided a clarity that was missing from the disembodied discussion. Kevorkian got ten to 25 years.

Smug and resolute and unrepentant, Timothy McVeigh is our most evil evildoer. Because he victimized the nation, it is the nation that judges and punishes him. Because his crime was broadcast in real time and in color, the images of the dead and damaged remain vivid in our memories. A child dying in a fireman’s arms, the broken and bandaged, the frightened, heartbroken, wounded and lost, the bodies and parts of bodies, the terrible shell of the bombed building—we witnessed these things and we remember. It ought to be easy to watch him die. Still, something in us argues, maybe not. Maybe even a little remedial dose of court-ordered, court-

sanctioned homicide, in response to massive evil, kills a little something in ourselves. Maybe we cannot kill others of our kind without risking something of our own humanity.

But the die in McVeigh's case is already cast. And while he has no rights in the matter, we the people certainly do. Surely the value of the death penalty must be measured not only by the difference it makes to the criminal but by the difference it makes to a community of victims in whose name the killer is killed. But whether it soothes or saddens, comforts or vexes, whether it moves us to march against it or to pray, whether we are silenced or sickened by it, is it not our duty to have a look? Would it not tell us something important about ourselves? Whether we are for or against capital punishment, oughtn't citizens of a participatory democracy participate when the will of the people is so profoundly, so irreversibly wrought?

For a generation, we've debated the justice and humanity of existential issues—war, abortion, euthanasia, cloning—the things that have to do with being and ceasing to be. The national dialogue on the death penalty has been carried on by a nation of pundits, commentators, politicians and preachers, policymakers and coffee-clutch advocates on either side. It is time a nation of opinionizers became a nation of witnesses. It would up the ante on this difficult conversation and bring us that much nearer to a clear view. We cannot declare closure or proclaim justice done. We can only hope to achieve them by confronting our most difficult realities. If we cannot watch, then we should reconsider. We did not look away from the crime. We ought not look away from its punishment.

If what we intend to do to Timothy McVeigh is justice, why wouldn't we watch it? To be a deterrent, shouldn't it be seen? If it is good riddance, sweet revenge, righteousness or humanity—if it is any of these things, why shouldn't we look? If it is none of these things, why do we do it at all?