

**Texas After Violence Project**  
**Interview with David Atwood**

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Place: Houston, Texas

Equipment: Sony 1080i mini-HD DV camcorder; Sennheiser external microphone

Recorded on: Sony mini-DV cassettes

Interviewer: Virginia Raymond

Videographer: Gabriel Solis

Transcription: Susanne Mason

Reviewed & edited: Sabina Hinz-Foley (March 17, 2009)

**ABSTRACT**

[TAPE 1]

RAYMOND: We're here with David Atwood in the Olive Branch Room of the Maryknoll Farmers House in Houston, Texas—

DAVID ATWOOD: Right.

RAYMOND: —on Rice Boulevard, and we thank the Maryknoll for letting us be here. It is September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and the voice you hear is Virginia Raymond, conducting the interview or listening, mostly. And Gabriel Solis is behind the camera. And thank you very much.

ATWOOD: You're welcome.

RAYMOND: So, just - we had talked a little bit before about what we were doing at Texas After Violence Project, and that we are asking you to interview you today for both public education, non-commercial uses, perhaps soon, and also for the historical record.

ATWOOD: Correct.

RAYMOND: And do you consent to be interviewed today?

ATWOOD: Yes, I do consent. (laughs)

RAYMOND: Okay. Thank you, and then you'll have an opportunity— you can either have an opportunity to review the transcript before— before donating it to us or you could donate it to us now if you feel comfortable with what you are going to say.

ATWOOD: Yeah, I feel comfortable with donating it to you now.

RAYMOND: Okay, thank you, and we will use it for a variety of purposes, and maybe spliced in with other interviews to share your experiences with other people.

ATWOOD: Sure. Thank you. Good.

RAYMOND: So, you have been involved in the anti-death penalty movement very intensely. I wonder if you could tell us about yourself and how you got into that work.

ATWOOD: Well, I— I moved to Houston back in the early seventies. I came down to Texas with the Shell Oil Company. And it was in the late 1980s that I first started to hear about the death penalty. I was totally unfamiliar with the subject at all. I mean I just didn't have any interest in it. It wasn't any thing that affected my life, and I was serving on a committee called the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in the Catholic Diocese here in Houston, and we had a Catholic nun, her name is Sister Gina Moore, who actually came to our committee and asked if we would financially sponsor a small newspaper called *The Endeavor*, which was written by prisoners on Death Row. And they needed some financial help to actually put the paper together outside of the prison and make copies and distribute it. And we agreed to do that. And that was really my first contact with the death penalty at that time.

Like I say, I didn't have any experience whatsoever with it. I didn't know anything. And for some reason though it caught my attention more than maybe some other things. And I started to research it and thought this is interesting. And I found out first of all since we were, our committee was a Catholic committee, I tried to find out what the Catholic Church had said about the death penalty because I— I didn't have any idea whatsoever, and did find out that the Catholic Church had— the bishops in the United States had made a statement back in 1980. And—But I didn't know about it. Nobody knew about it. I don't think. It was pretty well hidden. And so I thought that was interesting, and— and— and

that got me started. And then I started doing more research on the subject matter, and that's what pulled me into the whole subject.

RAYMOND: You had obviously come from a background of social justice work before working on the death penalty—

ATWOOD: Right. Right. I— This Catholic Campaign for Human Development—what it is, is the Catholic— U.S. Catholic Bishops' Anti-Poverty Program. And I served on a committee that would go out into the community and talk to people about their needs and whether they could use some funding to get something started to help poor people, to empower the poor. And so I'd been doing that for several years before. I had been for maybe over 10 years leading up to this time in a period of personal development and transformation myself, both from an educational point of view and spiritual also, which caused me to become much more interested in what was happening to people around me.

I was still working at that time for Shell Oil Company, but even within Shell, my interest was in the area of safety and environmental protection, so I was more interested there in helping people and protecting the environment than— than trying to earn big bucks for Shell. I mean, my belief was that anything you did in those areas would be good not only for society in general, but also for the company too. So, it all fit together, but I was still working for Shell at that time. But I was developing more of a social conscience at that time and I'd gone away on a number of retreats. I went out to New Mexico for over a month for a—to a monastery, and so I was going through some pretty tremendous changes myself.

RAYMOND: And you also were telling me, you've written in your book about living in community.

ATWOOD: Right. Right. We had, back in the seventies, we had become very interested in the whole idea of a— an extended community, extended households. We had a situation with a, we had joined a— what we called at that time the

medical community. It was a small Christian interdenominational community, a number of families from different faith backgrounds. And we all came together to form this community of prayer and work really, where we had people live with us in our home. I think we had three children at a time, but we were moving on to more, but we had three at that time. And so we had several individuals that lived with us and they worked as volunteers in the clinic.

My wife did part time work in this clinic. It was a clinic in the 4<sup>th</sup> Ward of Houston for the poor there. It was a free clinic and— on West Grey, the building is still there. And everybody that worked in that clinic worked pretty much as volunteers. And, and we were drawn into that in the seventies—in the early seventies and did that for several years. And also we had got involved in some other spiritual activities that were focused on the poor. And pretty much that changed our lives dramatically. And it certainly opened me up to—I became much more sensitive to the needs of people, particularly poor people, and people with need. And so we did this through the seventies and into the eighties, actually. And all this time I was going through a spiritual development myself. And then in the— like I say, in the late 1980s I was working on this Catholic Campaign for Human Development and this whole thing started with the Death Penalty, which is totally new and totally different from anything else I'd worked on before.

RAYMOND: Started— everything started with the death penalty in terms of your life?

ATWOOD: Yes. Right. I mean I really had not— I didn't have anything in my family or my wife's family or anybody I even knew that had anything to do with the criminal justice system. My— I didn't know anybody in prison. I didn't know anybody in jail. I hadn't had any relatives that had gone to prison. I mean, I didn't— nothing pulled me in from personal experience, which is sort of interesting because you would think that— that there would be something. And many times there is something that will pull people into a particular subject. But in this case, there was nothing like that that I could identify. (bird screeching)

But what happened is that when I got more interested in the subject and I met some people, someone asked me to visit a prisoner on death row. And—which I did. And that was—that was the hook that really brought me because I knew that I was visiting a person that was destined to be executed. And after you meet people like this personally and you meet their families, and you see them as human beings, no matter what they've done, you still see them as a human being. And it's very hard to just say that's all right to do that. And—and so often people become rehabilitated, which unfortunately in our state and our society, rehabilitation counts for nothing. And so to say that we're going to go ahead and execute these people no matter what changes have taken place in their life, no matter if they repent, no matter what, I thought was just totally wrong. And I saw their humanity, and I just felt like I had to fight against the death penalty.

RAYMOND: Can you tell us a little bit more about this first visit, who you visited and what it was like for you to go there, what you saw?

ATWOOD: Yeah, the first person that I visited on death row was a guy named Richard Jones. Richard was from Fort Worth and he was there because of a woman that had been murdered during a robbery up in Fort Worth. And 'course I went up assuming—the reason I visited him was that there was some friends, some people from Italy who had visited him and asked me if I would go visit him when they went back to Italy. And so, Richard—well you know you have stereotypes of what somebody's gonna be like, a hardened criminal, and—just the stereotypes that everybody has. And Richard didn't fit in any of those categories at all. I mean, he had a—he was just a nice guy to visit with. He had a great sense of humor, and it was just a very pleasant experience.

These visits last about two hours long, which to some people might think that's an awful long time for a visit, but with Richard it would just go by like that, very quickly, cause it was a good experience. And I assumed though that he was guilty. And the reality is that most people on death row are guilty. But, over time, visiting with him and getting more interested in his case, and I visited with his attorney that was working on his appeals and,





Against the Death Penalty, your visit to Washington D.C. for a national conference. Were these things happening at the same time?

ATWOOD:   Yeah, they— Through the— when I first started learning about the death penalty in the late 1980s and it— there were a number of years— I was still working pretty intensely in my regular job. Although at that time, I had left Shell in 1991, and I was doing consulting work. But it was still intensive work. It included a lot of travel. And it was all within working with corporations doing reviews and audits and things like that. And so there was a period from the late eighties up ‘til like ’93, ’94, where I’m still learning about everything. I hadn’t really taken a positive step to say I’m gonna devote really my life to this at that point. We had the national coalition people could see that there were some people interested in doing something in this area, and they came down and they encouraged us to do it. And then they went away, basically. They went back to Washington and we didn’t hear from them for a while. And I can remember sitting around saying, “Well, looks like, if something’s gonna be done in terms of forming an organization to really work on this, we’re gonna have to do it ourselves.” And that was around, I think that was around ’94, ’95, in that time frame. (church bells ringing) And so I called up some of the other people in Houston who were, had come to some of those earlier meetings, and we— I said, “Let’s get together and let’s make this happen.” I said, “We really should.” Because we— everything that had been done up to that point had been sort of spotty I guess is the best way to word— there was no organization in place to work on this. Like I have in my book, I have, like Rick Halpern had done some stuff up in Dallas, and through Amnesty International primarily. And he did that, put together that march in 1992.

There had been some individual cases that had been focused on where people thought they were innocent, and people came together and worked on that and put a lot of effort into those, but then when that was done, everybody would basically go home and that was the end of it. And so there was no consistent effort to abolish the death penalty in Texas. So that’s what we started in— around ’94, ’95, in that time frame. And we just started meeting here just like in a room like this. We just started coming together on a monthly basis. And

we just picked out a name—Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. And we just met in Houston for quite a few years.

But my— my vision had always been to make it, that it would be a statewide organization. It would become a non-profit corporation. And also that it would be an organization with a lot of credibility because this was a difficult subject to work on in this state in particular. And so I wanted the people that were involved in the Texas Coalition to be people that would, say if they got up before say a group of businessmen, or folks that were sort of conservative in their outlook on life, that they could make a good presentation to those people and be convincing. They may not always come with you the first time around, but they would hear a good argument, they would see somebody talking on the subject matter that was credible and that brought forth good arguments why we shouldn't have the death penalty. I looked at the Texas Coalition as an educational organization. I always have. Primarily education. We work on— we do some other specific things, but primarily education of the citizens. With the belief that the average Texas citizen with good information, good arguments, would be convinced that the death penalty was not good for the state or for anybody. And that's sort of been our philosophy all along.

And so there are some other groups around Texas that are more I guess you'd say radical in a way, and that's what they do and that's fine. That's more their approach. We've done a few radical things. Not too much, but a few things we've done. But generally, we're sort of mainstream. And so we've got people in our organization now— I'm jumping ahead a little bit I realize— that are, you know, we've got people who have been in the military. One Air Force Commander. One Army Colonel. We've got a couple of Republicans even. So we're not all Democrats. And it's great to have people like that because if you get somebody who you don't think would be against the death penalty just by looking at them, sort of— and what that person usually looks like is usually a white male, older male person, who looks conservative. You look at him and say, "This is a conservative guy." But then he comes forward and he talks against the death penalty. That really is effective with a lot of people. And we've got a number of people that can do that. We've got a number of

university professors who speak out very well and a lot of just average good Texas citizens who are part of our organization.

RAYMOND: I wonder— this is—this is all helpful and all useful so— I want— you said you're going out of order. Any order that you want to talk in is the right order.

ATWOOD: Yeah. Okay.

RAYMOND: But I wonder if you could talk about— you visited Richard Jones. Were there other people that you were also getting to know?

ATWOOD: Yeah.

RAYMOND: Can you tell us about that?

ATWOOD: Yeah, there were— The— Richard was the first person. But another guy I started to visit very early in the— when I started to do that was a guy named Dominique Green from Houston. And another one was James Allridge from Fort Worth. Both African American guys. I'll talk about Dominique a little bit. Dominique was a rather unique person, that's the only thing I can say about him. And there's a lot that's being written on him particularly right now. There's a video that's about to come out called "Thou Shalt Not Kill." It's being put together by an Italian group. There's a fellow named Tom Cahill who's a well-known author out in New York who is writing a book on Dominique Green. He's gonna call it, "A Saint on Death Row." And— but I was one, again, I got— I started visiting Dominique because of a woman from Italy named Barbara Bocci, who had visited Dominique. And when she went back to Italy again, she asked me if I would continue to go up and see him.

And so I went up and I visited Dominique. And when I first met him— and this was probably around '96 or so—around that time, still mid-90s basically, I met a guy, a young,

I guess you'd say a young angry black fellow who was only about twenty, twenty-one at that time. And Dominique was—he was angry. He was. And he was angry at the criminal justice system, he was angry at what happened to him in his life, he was angry at his mother 'cause he felt like she contributed to him going to death row. And—and he—and so—and lots of times, there's some people when you visit them on death row, you visit many times you do visit wounded people. And you have to sort of be resolved that if they say something or do something that might turn you off or discourage you from visiting even, that if you're really interested in helping somebody that you don't allow that to happen. And that didn't happen with me, but it did happen, I remember, with Barbara. Dominique wrote her a letter and basically said, "Goodbye, you're not doing enough for me and you're not helping me out." And that was an indication of where he was back then. Now—then I wrote him a letter and I said, "Dominique, Barbara Bocci from Italy is your best friend. Don't drive her away." And I think he wrote her a letter after that and apologized.

But well, I had one prisoner one time write me a letter. I won't mention his name. But he wrote a two-page letter and used every swear word in the book that you can imagine. He said, "Dear Dave, blankety blank, blankety blank, blank blank blank. Sincerely," at the end, "your friend Paul." (laughs) It was two pages of swear words at me. And—and I wrote him back. And I says, "Paul, seems like you're a little angry with me at this moment." And he says—he wrote me back and he said, "I thought you'd never write me back after I wrote that letter." He thought I'd done something, which hadn't happened. But the thing happens, the people on death row, they're living in a little 6x10 box, basically, for twenty-three hours a day with no contact. They're basically in solitary confinement. They don't have any work program anymore. They don't have any church services. They don't have any group recreation. They took away a lot of their arts and crafts programs. They're in isolation and things can—their minds can play tricks on them very easily. And they can misinterpret things and, you know. And the ones that maintain their sanity, quite frankly, under those conditions, I think it's amazing they can maintain their sanity. And some don't. Some don't maintain their sanity. Some go crazy under those conditions and some commit suicide. It's very inhumane conditions. I think it's cruel and unusual

punishment myself. But, so when they— when something weird like that happens, rather than writing off the person you gotta sort of dig into it a little bit.

Well anyway, getting back to Dominique, he was— he was angry and the reason he was angry was that first of all he said he was with a gang of boys. And they had robbed a man in Houston. And the man was shot. The man resisted the robbery. He was shot and killed. The gang who was made up of three African American boys, Dominique was one of them, and one white boy. Dominique got the death penalty, the two other African American boys got prison sentences, and the white boy didn't spend a day in jail. And Dominique said, "I wasn't even the one that actually shot the guy." He was the youngest of the group.

That often happens. If there's a group, or even two people, they— the district attorney will try to get somebody to rat on the other one. And they all ratted against Dominique. They all came together and did that. And whether he was the one that— I never was sure who actually did the shooting in that case, but Dominique was the one that got the death penalty. And I never understood why the one young white boy didn't spend one day in jail, and Dominique got the death penalty. That disparity just bothered me. But anyway, so Dominique was mad over that. He was mad over the fact that his family had, his mother in particular had some mental problems. She had really abused him horribly, put his hand over an open flame when he was a little kid. Shot a gun at him. Finally kicked him out of the house when he was a young teenager. He ended up living out on the streets in Houston in abandoned houses and storage sheds and things like that. And did what probably would happen to most young people under those circumstances, he ended up getting into a life of crime, selling drugs, getting into a life of crime. And he was with this gang of boys and that happened. And this was in the early 90s.

So— and so his mother, basically, at the trial told the judge and the jury, "Do whatever you need to do with Dominique. I don't care." She was just really, she just turned him out and just said, you know. I think she even said something like, "Give him the worst you can give him." So she really— now she had mental problems. I got to know the family real well. And I got to know her pretty well. I spent probably— I probably spent twelve to

fifteen hours in a car with his mother, taking her, for one thing I took her, when I found out that Dominique and she were not speaking because of what had happened. I ended up—I was able to work a time when I took her up to visit him, with the hope that there would be some reconciliation, which did happen, which was nice.

So I took her up to prison to visit him two or three different times, maybe three times. I took—Dominique had two younger brothers, so I took one of his younger brothers up to visit him. And then I took, Stephanie, the mom, up to Austin for a program one time. So I spent a lot of time in the car with her, and got to know her pretty well and found out what happened to her as a child. And this is— this is when you get into the families it really opens your eyes. Dominique's mom Stephanie was horribly abused as a child herself. Tried to commit suicide several times. Ran away from home. So the abuse that she was handing out to Dominique was the abuse that she had received as a child. It was that cycle. And we've got to do something about these cycles.

And I'm not an expert on how to do that, but I know that that's part of what we need to learn how to do as the human race.

So, Dominique was angry, angry at his Mom, angry at the world, angry at what happened to him, angry at the criminal justice system, angry at these other members in the gang. And— but over time he changed, which was the most amazing thing. He really— he grew up, he had people like myself who were visitors many times. You find out that people in prison on death row, the first time they really had somebody they would call a real friend is when they are in prison, somebody who cares about them and they're not trying to get anything from them. So myself and Barbara and a number of some other people that visited him, while in prison he wrote a letter to, I think, a newspaper in Italy and got a whole bunch of people from Italy to become his supporters and friends. And Barbara was one of these people, but it was also a group over there called the Sant'Egidio Community in Rome. And there were some people in Sant'Egidio who started writing, and that community, which is a large world-wide community, basically adopted Dominique as one of their— the people that they wanted to help. So, over time, through all these influences, his reading, growing up, he— he developed.

Dominique developed mentally and spiritually and became a different person. I could see this happening right before my eyes, and he became a mentor for other prisoners on death row even. And one of the really interesting parts of it is that he read one of the books that Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote called *No Future Without Forgiveness* about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And so that whole idea of forgiveness, not really having a future, individually, or a nation or anybody, unless somehow they can forgive people who have hurt them, became a really important part of his life. And he really took it in and that helped also with his transformation. And later, through one of his attorneys, a woman named Sheila Murphy from Chicago, and again Tom Cahill the author from New York, they were able to get Archbishop Desmond Tutu to come visit Dominique on death row.

And I worked on that program, trying to get some things set up. And then we had a program at the little Episcopal Church up in Livingston, Texas, with Archbishop Desmond Tutu after— after the visit. Well anyway, Tutu came out of the prison after the visit and said to the press ‘cause there was press there, “Dominique is a remarkable advertisement for God.” That was his statement. “A remarkable advertisement for God.”

And so we worked, as time was going on— after about ten years, usually all these appeals get worked through and there were a lot of people working on this case, a lot of attorneys. But nothing seemed to be really happening in the way of a legal change that would help him. And so his attorney, again Sheila Murphy, asked if I could find the family of the victim. The victim’s name was Andrew Lastrapes. And I couldn’t find him. I went through every Lastrapes in the Houston phone directory, called them, none of them were the right people, and what had happened is that the family, the mother had gone back to— there were two sons involved— had gone back to her maiden name which was Luckett, L-u-c-k-e-t-t, and that’s why we couldn’t find him. And finally, Sheila had a young man working for her who ended up with a telephone number that he passed on to me. I called the number and I got, I connected with the family. And I went over, still, you don’t know how you’re gonna— what the reaction’s gonna be ‘cause many times they’re angry still. But I went over and visited this family over in the southeast side of Houston, and Bernatte Luckett and her two boys, Andrew and Andre, excuse me, and they all wanted, none of them wanted

to see Dominique executed. It was just an incredible experience to me. I have to say that I have found some of the most wonderful— they're African American. The victim, Andrew Lastrapes Senior was African American. I found some of the— an ability sometimes to forgive and to move on in the African American community that I have not seen in other communities. Probably I would say (chuckles)— this is very dangerous doing this, but I'd say African Americans, Latinos, have an ability to forgive and move on more than white people. Now there are white people that do it too, I know. But I think in general, I've seen that a number of times.

Anyway, getting back to that particular case. They did not want to see— they did not want to see Dominique executed. And that was— so she wrote a letter, the mother, the widow, actually, the widow of the victim, wrote a letter to the Governor of the Board of Pardons & Paroles, appealed for his life. Andre and Andrew both went up to visit Dominique on death row. I felt I was living in a different world altogether. I mean I thought this was just— this can hardly— this was so unusual. And these two— and so here's two young boys who are both in their mid-twenties. The two sons of the victim, visiting with Dominique who's on death row for the murder of their father, although we had questions whether Dominique was really the guy that did the shooting. But still, he was the guy that was on death row, visiting across from each other. It was just— to me it was like a vision of heaven, what heaven should be, that people could do something like that. And I maintained that friendship with the Lastrapes or Lockett family ever since because—

In fact, well— let me finish with that other— with the story on Dominique and I'll go back to that— the other family. They, on the day that Dominique was executed, both Andre and Andrew went up and visited him. And Dominique gave them, he had prayer beads that he gave them and he gave them a little book of African prayers by Desmond Tutu. And gave that to them. And then they went over to the prison where the executions take place in Huntsville and stood vigil as a protest against Dominique's execution. Just unbelievable.

And then— but then later I maintained— and I had to— I was— Dominique asked me to witness the execution. And it was horrible. It was not the first time I had witnessed an



execution. It was the second time. But to see Dominique strapped down on that gurney with these needles in his arm ready to be killed by the state just— just horrible. I mean if you really want to see something that's evil, that's probably the most evil thing I've ever seen in my whole life is an execution. Just really evil. I can't—I can't come up with any other word for it that's really adequate. So that was really tough, obviously.

And— but I did maintain also the relationship with the Lastrapes-Luckett family after that. And the community in Italy, Sant'Egidio actually provided some money and we got to further the education of both sons. And they're willing to, if he wanted it, to provide some money to help with the education of Dominique's younger brother, Hollingsworth, who lives here in Houston. If he wants to say go on to a computer school or something like that that he was interested in. So that community in Italy, the Sant'Egidio Community was very involved in everything that happened. And we wanted to everything we could do for the Lastrapes family and also for Dominique's younger brother, in particular. His other brother, Dominique had two brothers.

The older brother Marlin is up in— is in the military and has got a whole life of his own. He doesn't really need any help. But the younger brother does. So we've carried on with that as sort of wanting to— we knew that's what Dominique would want for both families. So, well I went on a lot about that one case, I know, but that was one of the other ones that I was very involved in.

James Allridge was another one that I spent a lot of time with. And I have visited probably, I don't know, twenty, twenty-five people over the years. Some more intensely than others. It's really interesting to see the change— it's really interesting to see how they change over time. I visited one guy up there for a number of years who I didn't think was becoming rehabilitated. I thought he was angry and mad and would always be so. But I got a letter from him the other day that sort of almost sounded like a different person. And— and then you get to meet their families, which is a whole different story. What a family goes through when they have a son in prison like that. I mean, death row is— we got about three hundred and seventy people I think on death row at this time. But the larger picture is what we have

in our prisons in general in Texas, which is over one hundred and sixty thousand people incarcerated. Every one of those people, every one of those— they have a family. And, the families, this is just shattering to them to have to go through this. But you meet the families and you start thinking about how did this ever happen?

Getting back specifically to death row. How did this ever happen? And I've always tried to understand what I call the root causes, because if we don't get at the root causes, this will never end. And you can, after awhile, you can see some common factors: bad family situations, abuse and neglect of children, poverty, lack of education, drug and alcohol problems, mental illness, mental retardation, brain damage. Every now and then you'll meet somebody who doesn't seem to fit into any of the— have any of those problems. They don't seem to have any mental problems. You'll find out about their families. It seemed like they had a fairly decent family, and they—so you have to ask yourself, "What— how did this person get here?" And so, many times I'll ask them, "Did you—," if they're a young person in particular, I say, "Did you run in a gang?" Sometimes you find they ran in gangs. They got into a gang activity, and did something in a gang that they'd probably never do as an individual. Never do— in a one time kind of event. But it was a bad event. A horrible event that caused somebody to die and they ended up on death row. So, whatever we do to stop gang activity is important too because, some— I talk to young groups every now—like young kids in churches and schools, and I say, "Look it, be really careful about who your friends are. I know your parents tell you that already, but if you go out riding in a car with say three or four guys in a car and one of the kids in that car has a gun, and you don't even know about it, if that gun gets used and somebody gets killed, you can end up on death row. And you didn't even know the gun was in the car. (bird calls) It'll happen so fast that you won't even—you can't believe that it's even happened to you. So you gotta be real careful about who you're running with, who you're going with. And— 'cause it could happen to— it could happen. And you're not a bad— it's not that you're a bad kid or anything like that, it's just that you are not with the right people at the time when something happened. A kid jumps out of the car and goes off and decides to do something and boom, you're part of it." So the gangs are something that— there are a number of kids who get on death row because of gangs too. Not a lot, but some.

But mental illness, abusive family situation, abuse and neglect as children. There are some people that end up there— they actually were in an accident as a child and had a brain damage, a physical brain damage that caused them problems. Couldn't go to school and just everything started to spiral down after that. And so until we address these root causes, we're just not gonna have a better society.

So part of the work that I do, I talk about stopping the death penalty, but I also talk about— I talk about two other things. I talk about preventing violent crime, which most people, no matter what their position is on the death penalty, can agree with that. Nobody wants violent crime. Nobody wants crime at all. And, but right now in Texas our priorities are wrong. We think we're going to solve these problems through incarcerating and executing people. And that's not going to make our society a better society. And so we have to get at root causes. And we really have to do more to help also the victims of crime. And I speak about that a lot too because people who are victims of crime, whether it's murder, the families of murder victims, they get overall they—they're just—they're going through hell with what's happened in their family. But then they do not get treated, I think, properly by the authorities. I don't think our churches do nearly enough to help out people in that category. And so we have to do more for the families of the victims and the victims themselves. And we have to do a much better job there. So when I talk on the death penalty I go both, I also talk about the victims, and I also talk about how to work on the root causes of crime. 'Cause I think that's more of a complete picture. And we've got a serious problem.

This is— this is— I don't—I really don't know what to do about it, but people come here, come to the United States from other countries where they have some form of gun control and they think we're crazy here with all the guns that we have. And that's— that's even a hotter subject to talk about than the death penalty is gun control. So, but with all the guns that are around, I think there's almost one gun per citizen in this country, which means there're millions and millions of guns just out there. And when people get upset or they're high on drugs and alcohol, if they got a gun, then well, it sometimes gets used. And I, yeah, you could kill somebody with a knife too and it does happen. But you don't have too many

drive-by knifings. (laughs) You have drive-by shootings every now and then, but not drive-by knifings. So we've got a lot of problems socially to deal with, I think. So I went all the way from Dominique Green to solving the problems of society. (laughs) But Dominique is a good example of what is wrong in our society, I think, and everything. If his mother, if Dominique's mother had got help with her problems adequately, there somehow could be intervention so a kid like Dominique didn't end up on the streets. So there's a lot to do, a lot of work to do.

RAYMOND: You talked about Dominique as one of the people that you were closest to. And you talk about him in the book. Could you also talk about James Allridge a little bit? [inaudible]

ATWOOD: Sure. Yeah. James, again I think I visited James for eight or nine years. Again a very—not the kind of person you expect to find on death row. From the moment I met him—I never knew James when he was angry like I knew Dominique at a time when he was angry when he was younger. From the time I met James, the question I always had in my mind was how did this person ever end up on death row. Because you met him and you felt like this is a person who had so much to offer the world and to society, and could do so much good in the world if he was not in prison. And so you'd say, well this is—you'd meet him and you'd talk with him—you'd say, well this is a person you could be in a restaurant with having a meal with and having a wonderful conversation and what's he doing here? And I always had this question in my mind to—to James.

I said, finally I asked him, I says, "You know I wanna do something with you that I've never done with anybody before. I'd like to do an interview with you."

And I did that. And we published it in the Houston Peace News.

And one of my questions was, "James, how did you ever end up on death row?" And I was really interested to find out what his answer was. And basically his—

what he said was that I was— he said, “I’m not gonna use this as an excuse, but I was under the influence of my older brother who was into criminal, doing some criminal activity, who had some mental problems of his own. But he was into criminal activity. And I— I— I looked up and I adored my brother.”

And he— and one of the things he explained to me— he came from a family, his family, and I got to know that whole family too, and really a wonderful family, but the family had some religious beliefs that made it difficult for James to have other friends in school. It was like if, well it sort of forced him into a position that about the only person he could relate with much was his older brother, and so he became very close to his older brother. And, but James was— you met him and you say well this person just couldn’t be on death row. And he explained that his brother got into some criminal activity and drew James and James admired his brother and he got involved in it with his brother. And during one of these, during a robbery he shot somebody and killed him. And he admitted it. He said, “I did it. I did it. And I’m not saying I’m innocent at all. But I realize how wrong it is now, what I did, but again I was just in this sort of time in my life when I was pretty much doing what my brother wanted me to do and we were doing this.”

But then that wasn’t like his true nature. It was like an aberration, I would say, of who James Allridge really was.

And by the way there were— in this family, the Allridge family from Fort Worth, there were a Mom and Dad. The father was a military person. They moved around I think a fair amount. There were five children. There were James and his older brother Ronald—like they were the first two brothers. And I think there was a little bit of a gap in there and then there were three younger brothers. Both older brothers, Ronald and James ended up going to death row. Ronald was executed and James was ultimately also. The three younger brothers, when I knew them, when I got to know them, one was a investment banker, one was a retirement counselor for the Dallas School District and the third was an artist. And as far as I know none of them have ever had any problems whatsoever that I know of with the law. And— and really likable guys, ‘cause

I got to know especially the younger brother, Stanley Allridge real well. Tall, handsome guy— just top-notch person. He was the investment banker. And, so— so the family, the five boys, just they'd gone through this horrible time with these two older boys and, but James when he was in prison just became the most outstanding artist of anybody I've ever known on death row. And he does these flowers and he does animals, just fantastic quality. We've got some of these hung up in the Texas coalition office in Austin, by the way, if you ever want to stop by and see them. They're prints, but— and he— and he— and he became, very personable, a good writer.

And so he— sometimes the prisoners on death row will get attention brought to them because they're so outgoing. There are a number of them aren't in that category. They have mental problems and they're just— they can't do it. But a number of them can. James was probably one of the most outgoing, friendly, personable people you'd ever meet. And his art got to be known pretty well, not only in the United States but in other— Europe. It went to Europe. He developed this writing relationship with Susan Sarandon. If she, if Susan is writing anybody else in prison, I don't know about it, but far as I know he was the only one here on death row that she wrote. And— and so everybody was very attracted to James as a person, and nobody wanted to see him executed. I certainly didn't. I mean, I visited him a number of times. It was always a wonderful experience to talk with him.

And, so but then the time, again, you go out eight or ten, twelve years, and usually your appeals are done and we could tell it was getting close to his execution— the possibility of him being executed. And we had this fundraiser in Houston for him with Susan Sarandon and Sister Helen Prejean. And— and then she went up, Susan later went on up later to visit him in prison. And I'll never forget that visit. That was really something. She was doing like yoga exercises in the visiting room in the prison, Susan Sarandon was. And— but then she had her own visit with James. She had always written him. She had never met him. That was the first time she really actually visited him. And so we tried very hard. I mean, everybody wrote letters. Everybody pleaded. We bring up with the Board of Pardons & Paroles and the Governor, certain people— Karla Faye Tucker's a good example of



[TAPE 2]

RAYMOND: We were talking about something during the break. I don't know where you want to start—

ATWOOD: Well, let's talk about maybe just a little bit on the subject of mental illness and the death penalty because we do not— there's no exclusion now for people with serious mental illness with the death penalty, and I think there really should be. The Supreme Court stopped the execution of people who are mentally retarded because of saying that they're not as culpable as somebody who is not mentally retarded. But what about people who are seriously mentally ill? It seems like the same concept fits. And, so that should be— I mean of course I want to see the whole death penalty abolished and done away with. I think that's the real answer. But sometimes you do these things in steps. And we should not be executing the seriously mentally ill people.

Now we had— we had a really wonderful opportunity back in— a number of years ago. I can't— I don't know if I can remember what year it was, but, where we were contacted by this photographer from Switzerland, Fabian Biasio, about would you like to have my photographs of Tina Duroy shown in an art exhibit in Texas. And I had attended a press— maybe I even set it up, I can't recall— but a press conference on James Colburn's case earlier than that. But that I think had been a few years before. He was executed. And then when this photographer contacted us I said, "Well, we're looking for any opportunity to educate the public." And so it was quite a bit of work. We did it with the local Amnesty International group here in Houston and got some other groups to join in with us. And we had— and we brought over his photo exhibit and had it at a local museum. And that's when I first met Tina, of course.

We had a— we also set up a panel to discuss the whole subject of executing people who are seriously mentally ill. That was the beginning— the beginning of, I think, this current sort of movement that's happening now of really working toward excluding mentally ill people, seriously mentally ill people, from the death penalty. We've executed a number of



people who are paranoid schizophrenic and it's just not right. And so that exhibit and that discussion was a, I think, a wonderful start. Amnesty picked up on it, did some work, published some reports. And now, we also— Kristen Houle came down and has been working in our office in Austin on this subject matter. She got a Soros Foundation Fellowship for that. And so that pushed it along. And now the— and we worked with the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill. And now they're gonna have this program up in San Antonio with murder victims' families for human rights and the NAMI, National Alliance of the Mentally Ill, to talk about this more, about this subject more. And so I— it's been good to sort of— you see these things sort of develop over time. People pick up on it in different ways when they have an opportunity to do so, which is what we did here.

And I really hope— I really need to do something about this because somebody who is paranoid schizophrenic and we've got— and we've executed many of them. We've got more on death row and they should be excluded just automatically from the death penalty. And it can be done. There are professional diagnosis of people with these problems and they should be in a mental institution. That's what they should be in— a mental health hospital for treatment. We went through all this with Andrea Yates. That whole Andrea Yates case, which is a similar situation. She ultimately got, in a second trial— got committed to a hospital which should have happened during the first trial. But what we do in our work to abolish the death penalty, while ultimately abolition of the death penalty is our goal, total abolition, sometimes you do work in certain areas to try make some progress. And the execution of the seriously mentally ill is something that we should stop right now. I think the Supreme Court should intervene and just say, "Nah, we're not gonna do this anymore," and set up some guidelines and tell the state, "Stop it."

RAYMOND: Before we had to change this tape you were starting to say that you think there's a difference between Texas officials and what regular—

ATWOOD: --people. [laughs]

RAYMOND: And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that?

ATWOOD: I think that what I've seen is that over time most of the work that we've done has been educating citizens. We try to educate politicians too, but many times they're very set in their ways in what and they think is— they need to do. And they also have this political thing about being tough on crime and so they don't wanna— they wanna show they're strong on the death penalty. What we've seen, and we've had some polls here in Houston, in particular, that have demonstrated this is that support for the death penalty among the people is dropping. And I'd like to see a statewide poll, and some polls in other Texas cities that would show this. We've certainly seen it in Houston, that when you offer the alternatives, in terms of punishment, like a long prison sentence or life without parole, the citizens will often choose those alternatives. Because I don't think the citizens of Texas are bloodthirsty people. They— they're interested in having a safe society, as everybody is. And they would be concerned if somebody was given a prison sentence and then got out and did something bad again. Just like anybody would. So they want safety, but they're not necessarily bloodthirsty, calling for blood in terms of the death penalty. So I think the citizens are changing. And I think the citizens would accept, at this point, an alternative punishment in place of the death penalty.

Now we do have, back in 2005 life without parole was passed in the state as an alternative punishment. I'd like to see life without parole as the punishment for capital murder, or at least one of the options—not— and take the death penalty totally off the books. And I think a lot of people in the state would go along with that. The officials, on the other hand, the people who are in power right now, at least, the governors that we've had, a lot of legislators want this— and the district attorneys, and a lot of the judges who are also elected. All these people are elected. Everybody who runs this criminal justice system are elected officials. They— they seem to want to keep the death penalty—the ones that are in power right now—and so I think that the death penalty in Texas right now is perpetuated by these politicians more than the citizens of the state. I really do. And— well, what does that mean? That means that if we're going to have a big change in Texas, we're going to have to have a different set of politicians to make it happen, because the people that are in power right now, I don't think want to make that change and won't make that change.

RAYMOND: And yet you talk about, this is not, this is something intentioned—not a contradiction, but in your book you identify a number of reasons why Texas is more ambitious or exuberant or active in actually executing people than other places. And you also point out that both Charlie Beard and Morris Overstreet were not re-elected to the Court of Criminal Appeals, so—

ATWOOD: Right. Right. I think that was the— there had been those factors. I think when I— when some of those things, even when they were— they weren't re-elected to office, the— Morris Street— Morris Overstreet and Charlie Beard, I think that was a number of years ago. I don't know what year it was when they— that happened but early 2000s maybe. I think— I— some of the changes I'm talking about is what I'm seeing in the last even five or six years. There are factors in Texas— in the make-up of Texas that have promoted the death penalty. There's no getting around it. I mean historically, we would hang people that didn't even commit murder, right? I mean that's part of our history. We have the history of the south here. The attitudes towards African Americans and even Mexican people. If they got out of line, they were— they were often hung. So there is this history, but I think that that history is— is more and more becoming a thing of— it really is becoming history.

It's more a thing of the past because, for one thing, we're getting a lot of different people moving into this state, from other states and from other parts of the world. And we especially see it in cities like Houston, Austin, San Antonio and Dallas— places— the big cities in particular you see that.

And so there are— another factor that has gone, I think that when it comes from the people, it has to a certain extent— and still does— promote the death penalty, quite frankly, is the attitude of the Southern Baptist Church. And I'm not afraid to name the Southern Baptist Church. It is— they're the only large Christian denomination that I'm aware of that really promotes— has official teaching in favor of the death penalty. And the Southern Baptists have a lot of influence in the south, including Texas. And so when somebody goes to church on Sunday in a southern Baptist church, they're not gonna hear anything against the death penalty. But I think those voice are getting fewer and fewer. Not that the southern Baptist—

well, even within the Baptist church we have the Baptist Convention of Texas now, which has come out for a moratorium on executions. So this is not all Baptists; this is just a certain segment of Baptists. But they've had a strong voice. They still do have a strong voice.

I tell people every now and then one of the strongest proponents of the death penalty in Houston, Harris County, has been the district attorney Chuck Rosenthal. He just left, but he— and people say, “Chuck Rosenthal, well he must be Jewish.” Well no, Chuck Rosenthal went to the Southern— to Second Baptist Church here. Southern Baptist! He was Southern Baptist. And so there are those voices out there. There are those influences that have been pretty strong and still are strong in places. There are a lot of conservative people in Texas. But I don't necessarily associate somebody being conservative with being in support of the death penalty, necessarily. There are conservative people who are fiscally conservative, or just conservative, but they're not gonna be a big, necessarily, a big supporter of the death penalty. Because one of the things about being conservative is that you don't really trust big government. And we've got plenty of experience that shows that our big government can make mistakes. Seems like that's more obvious everyday. And then— and we've certainly had many mistakes on the death penalty, getting the wrong person. So, when I say— when I say I think Texas is changing and with people that have moved in and people that have moved around, and people becoming more educated, giving them an alternative, like life without parole, I think the state is changing. But I don't see, quite frankly, the real— what I call the right wing politicians giving up on the death penalty soon. Maybe ultimately they will, but not soon.

RAYMOND: It's— it's really interesting and when— I really appreciate at the beginning of the book where you talk about being in a conference I guess in D.C. or somewhere on the east coast and having everybody bash Texas— [inaudible] and having to say to them, it's—look it's not all of us. And yet the question remains, why Texas? And when I hear that Texas, I— when I hear that— when that question occurs, I also think, why Harris County?

ATWOOD: Yeah.

RAYMOND: And you've mentioned one reason. The now former, or district attorney, or about to be— I don't know if it's— he's already stepped down—

ATWOOD: Yeah, he's stepped down.

RAYMOND: Yeah he's down. Rosenthal, but certainly he's been a factor. But what is it about Harris County do you think that it makes it a leader of death penalty?

ATWOOD: I— I think, primarily, it has been the district attorneys that we have had and the support that they've gotten from right wing elements in the county. It wasn't only Rosenthal. It was Johnny Holmes before him and even the district attorney before him, I think, who really embraced the death penalty, and really— We have also, of course, all our judges here are former, worked in the district attorney's office. All of them. All of them are Republican. All of them support the death penalty. So you've had a criminal justice system here, take the D.A. and the judges that have just had this strong pro-death penalty bias. And they— they've had and, of course, overall Houston, with a strong business community, is a rather conservative community— Houston, Harris County. Not so much the city, but when you take in the suburbs and the more rural areas. So they could— they could do this. They could actually do this.

And I think a lot of the people were not even— hardly even sensitive or aware that it was going on. Myself, I lived here, I moved here in '72, and 'course we didn't have the death penalty in '72. That wasn't being carried out. But when it came back in '82— I was here from '82 to like I say the late eighties, working for the Shell Oil Company and we started executing people and I can say I wasn't even aware of it. And I think that's the way for a lot of citizens. They're focused on their family. They're focused on their job. Just the stuff, everyday kind of stuff that's they're dealing with. And they don't think about these— these issues. And so people who are in power, if they want to push a certain agenda, can do it

if— if they don't get a lot of push back from the community. And— and like I said, a lot of people aren't paying attention. Really.

RAYMOND:                                      And yet the D.A.'s and judges seem to think— or something is making them be so— be so protective of the death penalty—

ATWOOD:                                      Well, I think it's partly— there's probably a number of things that go into it. Partly it is that they think that that will help them get reelected if they are. That may be most of it right there. That they can— it's a way they think— I'll support the death penalty, that's the way I'll get— And probably a number of them have again, probably a bunch of them are southern Baptists. I don't know for sure. I haven't done that kind of an analysis. But they're not all southern Baptists. That's for sure. They— I— I— think it's more to do with— I think something has developed in Texas too. I don't know if anybody's tried to measure this. But there's something. The Republican Party in Texas has sort of said in a way that we're gonna embrace the death penalty. I don't know why, necessarily, but they pretty much go in lock step with one another. There aren't too many independent thinkers. And— and actually part of the overall scenario too is that the Democrats have not really— up until recent years— have not been that strongly against it. Sometimes you can't tell a conservative Democrat that much different from a moderate Republican.

RAYMOND:                                      Even Ann Richards.

ATWOOD:                                      Yeah. So. But I— but overall I think it's changing. I think— we're gonna— we're hoping to see changes in the— in Harris County in this next election. We hope we'll get a new District Attorney that'll have a different attitude. We're hoping to get some judges in. Traditionally, the Democrats haven't even run judges in the races. Now I think they're gonna run some judges. I think we'll get some judges with some different attitudes. I think the people are waking up more and more because of a lot of news that's been in the paper about wrong people being on death row, and wrong people being in prison. Innocent people in prison. So there's been a lot of waking up that's, I

think, taking place by the average citizens— sort of a movement, a slow-moving kind of movement that's taking place where things— change is gonna happen. And a lot of people, I mean you think about in Houston— I mean, people from other countries that live here. It's just— it's not like a few hundred, it's thousands and thousands of people from other countries that live here now and they become citizens and they vote. And many times they have different attitudes on these things.

So the old South is sort breaking up in a way. It really is. And I think that's good myself. Some of the old attitudes need to— need to go. They really do need to go. I— many times I have— I've done a lot of study of apartheid in South Africa and I see the— that some of the same, not that we have the apartheid here in the same sense or the racism in the same sense that they had it in South Africa, but in some of the attitudes of people, officials, you see similar kinds of attitudes. I remember one time I was at the state legislature, and a politician got up and he was justifying the death penalty by quoting the Old Testament. I was sitting there listening to him and I was saying, this guy just needs to replace the word death penalty with slavery and it's the same language. It's the same mentality, the same language, the same way of trying to justify it. And it's— it's, but those— those— there are people that still have those attitudes, that are still in power many times. But I think they're going away. And the sooner the better as far as I'm concerned. Sooner the better. And so we'll hopefully have some big changes.

RAYMOND: I want to move back, if it's okay with you, to sort of the nitty gritty. You've talked a lot about family members, both family members of people who've been condemned and family members who have lost somebody to murder. And I wonder if you could talk— you've visited death row; sounds like you've been at the Hospitality House in Huntsville? I wonder if you could talk about what that is actually like. If— I mean, you are not a family member, but— but perhaps you've witnessed what happens, what it's like to visit or what it's like to be at the Hospitality House.

ATWOOD: Well, it's a place that I don't like to go very often, quite frankly, because if I go to the Hospitality House that probably means that somebody

is scheduled for execution and I'm there because he wanted me there or his family wanted me there. And probably the chances are that the execution will take place more often than not. And it's usually a place of— for me it's just a sad place to be. I've been there— I've been between the Hospitality House and just being out in front of the prison during a vigil, I've been there way too many times. I've just— and I've seen— it's hard for me, but to be there with those families, who are having somebody in their family— a husband or a brother or a son or daughter, whoever executed— the pain that they're going through it just— it seeps into you. And if it happens many times, it's so hard.

I used to go up to just about to every execution vigil, even if I didn't know the person. I'd go up there and stand at the prison. And as a vigil and as a protest. But I don't do that as much as I used to. I will always go if I'm asked to go. We also have a vigil here in Houston that we have for people that can't go. But to me what has happened over time because there's been so many, is that it's just become more and more difficult for me to go up there and to be there and to see that pain again and again and again of family members. Sometimes the pain of the family of the victim too because sometimes they'll be over there too. But more often the person being executed. It just about becomes unbearable to do that. And I will go if somebody asks me to for some reason. Just like if somebody asks me to actually witness an execution, like we had Karl Rodenberg asked me to do that— from Germany— asked me to that one time because he had one of his friends that was being executed. And as far as he knew he was the only person that this— the prisoner had asked to be there as his— as his friend. And Carl had never been at an execution before and so he asked me if I'd just be there with him, inside, at the execution. And I did it 'cause— as a thing of friendship. But it just— it— it really wears on you.

And it— and I know it wears on other people too. I— I know it wears on the prison staff— on the wardens— on the people that are actually carrying this out. They're not all for the death penalty up there. I've had— I had a guard one time coming up— come up to me, I was standing by that yellow tape that they put in front of the prison during an execution, and I had a guard come up and he just saw me standing there— he'd probably seen me there before. And he said— he just came up and whispered in my ear, he says, "There are



many, many of us inside who are against what's going on here." He says, "We can't stand publicly. We would lose our job." There are former wardens who are against the death penalty. Some of them have been reluctant to speak out like— like Reverend Carol Pickett spoke out after being Chaplain there for many years. He spoke up but he knows there's a price he's going to have to pay. I mean he doesn't live in Huntsville anymore. There's a reason for that. I mean he became like a persona non grata to the prison system, to the officials in the prison system— not all the people, but the officials after he spoke out against the death penalty. So if a warden does that, a former warden, that same thing's gonna happen to him. And so— but a number of them are against the death penalty, and they've— they've— they've told how this just really is not good for the soul. That's all there is to it. For anybody.

Now we have— sometimes we've had people involved in our movement against the death penalty who have had somebody on death row, like a son or daughter, or somebody— uncle, and they've been coming to our meetings, been very active, and what I usually anticipate after, if their family member is executed, is that they will drop off after that. And it's very understandable. Sometimes there'll be a rare person who will stay in it— stay involved. But usually the pain has been so tremendous that they just need to get on with their lives. They need to move forward with their lives. And that means not being involved in the movement anymore. It's very understandable that they would want to have a change.

Now sometimes, we like— I became very good friends with Guy and Ursula Landrum, whose son Anthony— their grandson Anthony was executed. And we have dinner with them every now and then because we were so close, but— but not with the intensity that we were doing at one time. So, there's just so much pain involved in this. The death penalty victimizes really everybody. It certainly— at least the person being executed, that person's family.

In a way it really does victimize the families of the crime victims because for one thing they've been promised that this is going to bring closure or healing to them and it doesn't happen. They've had to wait maybe ten or fifteen years for this execution to take place. It's

been like a roller coaster for them. And then sometimes they get up to the time when it's supposed to happen and it doesn't happen because of some change in the law or something. And so they experience this roller coaster ride, frustration, and then they don't get closure.

The people in the prison system who have to do this every time. The citizens of the state who this is all being done in their name, really. It's costing millions and millions of dollars to do, which if that money were used for prevention it would be so much better for the people of the state. So, and as far as I can see, like I said before, this is being pushed by almost like right wing ideology, at this point, in the state by officials that embrace that. And so they're— they're doing a lot of harm in my opinion to Texas and to the people of Texas with this mentality that they have that pushes the death penalty.

RAYMOND: I know that this is extremely painful, but you— so if you don't want to answer, don't, of course. You have witnessed, you witnessed James Allridge and Dominique Green's—

ATWOOD: And one other person.

RAYMOND: And one other person. Can you tell us, or will you tell us about those executions, what it was actually like to witness them?

ATWOOD: Yeah. The first one was James and that was August of 2004. The three that I've witnessed were all in 2004. And, with James, the real agony begins when you visit the person on that last day. For me— you're— They transport the person to be executed over from the Polunsky Unit in Livingston to the Walls Unit in Huntsville in the afternoon. He can visit family and friends up 'til twelve noon. But the most, the pain really begins—I mean you're visiting— you know it's the last time. First of all, you're going to be able to visit this person. And he knows that. And he knows that it's going to be the last time that he really gets to say anything to his family, particularly his family.

And you're sitting there that morning of the day of the execution and having this last visit, and then at twelve noon the guards come and knock on the door of the cage and say, "That's it." And they take him out. And they handcuff him and take him out. And you know— and just the look on their face when they know that this is their last visit is [sighs]. And so— and then— and then you usually do something, get a bite to eat or something. And then you drive yourself over to Huntsville. And you end up usually going to that Hospitality House. And he can, the prisoner can make some last moment telephone calls over there. And then you, if you're gonna witness the execution, there's a chaplain who will advise you what's going on. And if you've been there once, you've heard the story. It's always the same.

And then I think around five o'clock you go over to the administration building in front of the prison, the witnesses, and you're escorted all the time. The chaplain is there. There's usually two guards. And you sit in a room for a while and— up until a little bit before six. A room that's just a— like a— it's like a— there's like a Coke machine there. It's just like a— anything— like a little lunch room, almost, where you get a Coke or get a bite to eat or something. And you just sit there. And you're just sitting there. And sometimes you talk among yourselves. But sometimes you're just so despondent about what's gonna happen in a short time, you really don't have any things to say. And the Chaplain's there and he's trying to be helpful, by saying "Anything you want to talk about? We can talk about it now." The people have such deep emotions about what's going on that it's—they're almost beyond words. It's beyond words at that point. And so, then a little bit before six and they take you out from that building and you go over to the prison as a group. And then you walk through this one room, and you just usually keep moving back to the little building where the execution chamber is. It's very small. You don't— it's not a big building at all. It's just a small little building. And you'll walk through the door, or they escort you, and you are in the area, the observation area for the execution. There are no chairs like you see in some movies. You stand. And pull back the screen, and there's the person you know, just laid out on the execution gurney all ready to go. And the needles are in.

Everything has happened before you see him. He's laid out ready to be executed. And that is just horrific to see that. All you can see as a witness— usually the reporters that are gonna witness it are with you. At least that's been my experience. And so they're there. They're sort of standing in the back. They're trying to get a comment or something. Something for the report. And with James Allridge, I was there with Sister Helen Prejean, and a couple of his brothers, Bill Pelke, and there were some reporters there. And when I saw James laid out on that table after knowing him for all those years and knowing he was just a live vibrant human being with tremendous gifts and talents, and they were about to kill him. You can't see. And you look in the room and all you see is him on the table. And you see the warden and you see the chaplain. You can't see any of the witnesses on the other side for the family of the victim. They don't see you either. All you see is them.

Well I saw James I just started—I literally broke down and cried. And I think Sister Helen grabbed my arm or something and said, "It's okay, Dave." She said, "If you don't— if you don't cry, you're not human." That's what I think her comment was. And she'd been to a number of executions, and she didn't know James as well as I did. She— his brothers obviously knew him the best. And then probably me. And then the other people. So, he— he turns his head toward you, sort of like this and gives his last— the warden asks for his last words— and he gives his last words. They have a little microphone up above and he says his last words. And he had— he said some very beautiful things.

And then when it's over, the warden gives some signal. I don't know if he does it the same every time. But one time he'd just take off his glasses and that would start the execution. And before, in a very short time, usually, if everything goes right, he's dead— like James died very quickly. And you sort of hear a sound that is sort of a— you hear a (sighs hard and fast). Something like that. (Sighs hard and fast again) And I guess it's the air going out of their lungs. I don't know. And then he's dead. And then a doctor comes in and certifies that he's dead. And that's it and then they close the thing and you're out. It's like almost a— I don't know, it's so routine that for them I guess it's almost— it's just hard to describe. Just— I mean.

First time when you see it— that had the biggest impact on me was James, cause it was the first time. Dominique had a similar impact on me; it wasn't quite as strong because it was the second time. And I guess, if it goes on the third time— wasn't— well, I didn't know the guy that well. I knew him, but I didn't know him quite as well as Thomas or James, or James and Dominique. So I can imagine if you did that ten or fifteen, twenty times, you would get certain immunity to it all, I guess. Oh I think it still would wear on you every time. But Reverend Pickett talks about it.

And then it's done for and they open up the door and you go out. They say, "Come this way" and you stream back across on to the building across the street to the administration building. And you can look out, when you're going across that street you can look down and see where the protesters are. That's usually where I've been. And I know the people that are out there. But it's sort of a— it's like you're in a different world when all that happens. It's like you've been taken someplace else.

It's— When Jim Willett retired as warden— he is now the head of the Texas prison museum— between you and me he's against the death penalty. He's never spoken out publicly on it. But he did say when he retired, there was an article in the Houston Chronicle, and he said, "We're doing something unnatural there." Used that word, unnatural. It sort of hinted— gave you a hint about what he thought. And that's probably a good word, 'cause what they're doing is unnatural. I mean, it's evil and it's unnatural. I wish we could get Willett to come on this publicly. He'd be a very good voice but he hasn't been willing to do it. And so you're just sort of in a time warp almost, you feel like it just— God.

And with Dominique, because of the last minute appeals that were being considered by the Supreme Court, it didn't all stop it, and it didn't all happen right around six. Didn't happen 'til about eight o'clock. And so we— we were there sitting in that horrible little room with the Coke machine for a couple hours while that was going on, sort of hoping that maybe something was gonna stop the execution. But it didn't. And so we just went. We just sat there. We didn't have hardly anything to say to each other. You just— you're— you're so stressed out over what's happening. (sighs) It's horrible. It's looking at evil like I

mentioned before. It's an evil thing that's happening and you're witnessing it. Just like if you were in one of those Nazi concentration camps where they were killing people. It's an evil thing that's going on there and this is evil. I don't make that comparison usually because— 'cause people get very upset if you make any comparison like that. But it still is an evil thing that's happening.

And it does remind me a lot of, I don't know— you read about South Africa and Apartheid and what happened there and the attitudes of the officials, the control and domination of a whole segment of their population by certain elements. There are similarities. There really are. I'm convinced of that. They had the— that Truth and Reconciliation Commission is just a fantastic thing. I've spoken about that a few times to people here in Texas, and I don't think they get what I'm talking about. I said, "Why don't we do this?" A lot of people, a lot of families of victims don't— one of the things they would really like is for the person who committed the crime to admit that they committed the crime and to say they're sorry. That would just go so far for a lot of people. And a lot of people— a lot of prisoners won't do it because they think right up to almost the last moment, something might happen and they'd be shooting themselves in the foot for doing that. So why don't we have a truth and reconciliation hearing where if the person who committed the crime will admit to it and tell the truth about what happened— I don't think we'll ever go as far as South Africa where they didn't even prosecute people that far, but you take the death penalty off the books. It just goes off the books. Like a plea deal in a way. I plea guilty, you— why don't we just do something like that? It just seems like everyone would be so much more— it would be more restorative. It would be the restorative kind of justice, rather than retributive justice that we have now so strongly. But we're not there yet. I think we're moving in that direction though. I really do. But we're not there yet.

RAYMOND: I read in the book—I don't think in the book that you talk about the third execution that you witnessed specifically, but James was in August and then October Dominique I think that was—

ATWOOD:    Yeah, October was Dominique's. James' was August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Dominique was October 26<sup>th</sup>. I did a twenty-one-day fast prior to that too. And I would go up and sit up in front of the prison. I do that every now and then. Sometimes under the right circumstances, I'll still do that. I won't— I will— I will go up and just sit there at a time when people aren't normally there. I got a chair I pull out of my car, and I got a "Stop Execution" sign, and I'll just sit there with my sign for several hours. I did that during that time when I was fasting. And I did that for a number of days before the execution in October. And then— and then in November— let me think. I'm trying to get my dates right. November was when Anthony was executed, which I didn't witness. That was when I was outside. And I did the civil disobedience.

RAYMOND:    It doesn't sound like an accident that you'd be moved to civil disobedience after actually seeing these executions—

ATWOOD:    Yeah—

RAYMOND:    Can you tell us about that?

ATWOOD:    Well I think it was something that was building, although, like I say in the book, I didn't— I did not— I had not made a conscious decision ahead of time to do civil disobedience that day. Now, we tried one time to do a civil disobedience up at Austin— I don't know— I don't think that's in the book. We created this great big banner, which just said "Stop Executions." And five of us with Texas Coalition stood in front of the state capitol at those doors at the south side and the banner covered the front doors except for about this much space. So people could still go in and out and we had— we were standing out there with it. And we had— and we were planning on getting arrested. We had worked it with the attorney and everything was all planned and our goal was to get arrested. And we stood out there with this big banner and the police from inside the capitol came out and said, "You guys can't have that banner here. If you don't move it off we're going to arrest you." And they're all speaking to me because where they came out the door, there I was. And I said, "Well, okay. Come ahead. We're ready."

And they'd go back in and nothing happened. Another hour went by or half hour, say about a half hour, and they come, "All right, we'll get the paddy wagon coming. You guys are gonna be out of here soon." And I say, "Okay, we're ready to go." Went back in. Came out a third time. I think all together maybe four times. Third time came out and said, "The paddy wagon is here. You either roll this thing up now or you are out of here." We said, "Okay, come arrest us. We're ready to be arrested." And went back in. And they didn't come out again. Now this about over a two-hour period. Finally, we said— we were— we had a certain amount of time we were gonna do this.

So finally, we roll up our banner. Walk in and there are all these capitol police there. And we said, "What's it take to get arrested around here?" And they sort of laughed. We said, "Aren't you gonna arrest us?" They said, "No, we decided not to arrest you." And we said, "What if we unroll our banner inside here? We really could get in people's way. Will you arrest us then?" And they said, "We've decided we are not gonna arrest you." And they didn't arrest us. We were all set up. We'd been told that if you're gonna do civil disobedience anywhere, Austin would be the best place. I don't know if that's true or not. But that's what we were told. And so that's everything we had our attorney say.

The thing up in—with Anthony up in— up in— we were also told where there were two places— two worst places to get arrested and go to the County Jail were Walker County up in Huntsville, and Smith County up in Tyler, Texas— was the two places you didn't want to do this. So, of course, I'm up there at Anthony's execution and didn't have plans to do this but I got— we knew—it's because we knew Guy and Ursula Landrum so well, and— and I visited the grandson, and both my wife and I were there. And, of course, I had no discussion with my wife about doing anything like this. And so she's standing on one side of Ursula, and I'm on the other side, and Ursula just starts trembling and shaking. And Guy was inside with Anthony for the execution. We were very worried about him because he'd had some heart problems. And we thought it might kill him. And— but Ursula was outside and she was trembling and I don't know something just inside just motivated me. I said I gotta do something more. I just gave my sign to one person. Gave my keys, gave my wallet, gave my cell phone, gave everything and Peggy, she's looking at me, What



are you doing stuffing this stuff in my pocket? It was November, so she had on a big winter coat. And it was pretty cold. And I said, and I— there was a guy right across the tape. And I said, “I’m coming across as a protest.” And he said, “Well sir, if you do that you’ll be arrested.” I said, “I know.” And I did it. I went across, lifted up the tape and went under, and, immediately they said— immediately I was arrested and handcuffed.

Never been handcuffed in my life. They held me outside the prison ‘til the execution was completed. And then I went over— I thought I was gonna be spending that night in jail. I’d never, never been arrested before— hardly ever even got a ticket for a traffic ticket. And so off I went to the county jail and I was processed, and I thought I was in there for the night. I didn’t know how long I’d be there. But my wife found somebody to bail me out that night. So after about two or three hours they— I was released on bail. I was—I did the whole thing with the mug shot and everything. I tried to smile for the mug shot, ‘cause you know how those mug shots you look so bad? Everybody. Terrible. I tried. I said, “I’m gonna have a good mug shot.” I looked at it later on and it was horrible. I look like the most dangerous depraved criminal in the world. Like, Don’t let this guy move into your neighborhood. I don’t know if they waited until I stopped smiling and then clicked it or what.

But, so anyway, I was bailed out that night, but then I— they set up a trial date and I went and I pled guilty. I was guilty. I didn’t see any reason not pleading guilty to what I’d done cause it was pretty obvious what I’d done. And, but I was give an opportunity either to have like a \$500 dollar fine, or five days in jail. And I said, “Well, I just didn’t do this so I could pay five hundred dollars to Walker County here.” So I said, “I’ll take the five days in jail,” which I did. Just, in the whole scope of things, not a very long time. For me it was a very long, but believe me—five days in the county jail. It was in January. It was cold. They didn’t have heat in the prison. They issued me a civil war era blanket that was about paper-thin. I could not get warm. And I learned how to use— you didn’t have a pillow. So I learned that you get one roll of toilet paper, so that was my pillow. Learned how to use toilet paper. You get— you adapt pretty quickly. But also, it was a crazy place to be. God, I wouldn’t wish that on anybody.

That's— I was in a tank with eleven other guys. All younger than me. They didn't— they didn't know why I was there. They probably thought I was a vagrant. 'Cause I probably looked like one at that point. And— but after about two days in there, I noticed that all of a sudden there was a change in attitude on the part of the prisoners on me. And what had happened— I think the Huntsville paper had come out in the meantime, and run an article with my picture about what I'd done. And some of the prisoners found out about it and realized why I was in there. And— but it's a horrible place to be. You get Kool-Aid to drink. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, food, bad. But the worst thing was being cold. And then I had— I was on a top bunk in this— in this cell. So I had to climb up and I could climb up all right to get to that top bunk. Getting down was a hard thing. I didn't have anything to hold onto hardly to get off the top bunk.

And— but it was okay. I mean I wanted to do it. I wanted to do it as a symbolic protest against the death penalty. That's really what I wanted to do it for. And so I felt very good about doing it. Not that it was pleasant to be there. And this thing about, you're gonna have a lot of quiet time and you can meditate and you can write and you can read. I didn't have any books. I think somebody brought me a book, but it never got to me. The guys that were in jail were so noisy. They had a TV there that was blasting all the time, mostly playing cartoons. It was just like a miserable, wild, crazy experience. And sleeping. Your hours are totally screwed up on sleeping because a lot of the people they don't— they don't sleep. Or they sleep during the day, and then they are loud and noisy at night. So it was nothing— I was glad to get back to my own bed. (Laughs) That was for sure. But I'm glad I did it. And— I don't know what— you never know what impact you have on something like that. But I felt like I had to do it at the time.

RAYMOND: Did you have any trouble getting back in prison to visit people after that happened?

ATWOOD: No. I can't— the—I think there were more people in and out of the prison system both admired what I did. Even some of the people that were

maybe in the prison system admired it. They—they could take retribution on if they wanted to. But they didn't. And I know a number of people in the prison. I even know the current warden that's up there now. One time I was sitting out front of his prison with my sign, doing one of these all-afternoon kind of things. And I'm sitting there and I usually—I'll have something that I'm reading too, at least that I can read. And I was sitting there and all of a sudden there was this big huge figure in front of me and I looked up, cause I didn't see him coming. It was the warden. And he came out and he said—I think his name was Connolly—and he says, "You know I know we're sort of on opposite sides of this issue, but I want to just tell you that I really admire what you're doing."

And I—I really—really appreciated that and I thought it was kind of courageous on his part because, probably within five minutes everybody in that prison—that's a big prison—probably knew what happened. That guard—there's a guard right up there observing it all. I'm sure he got on the phone and said, "Now the warden's out here talking to this guy." Maybe they didn't know what the warden said, but the fact that he came out—So, there are a lot of people in the prison system that know who I am. And like I say, I think a lot of people in there don't like the death penalty at all. They'd rather get rid of it. Just go on with their normal life and not have it.

It's very hard for them to kill people. It's hard on anybody. And they—some of 'em get to know these people. I mean, they know that maybe they've done something bad in their life but they're not the worst thing in the world. And they might do some good if they were given a chance. I think—I've always said that I think one of factors that will do in the death penalty in Texas will be people in the prison system or have been part of the prison system. That's why Reverend Carol Pickett when he speaks is so powerful. He's been there. He's heard—he's seen it first-hand. So he's got this credibility. If we could get some wardens to come with us and do this, it would be just wonderful. The—the other really powerful voice is the voice of a family member of somebody who's been murdered who, despite what they've gone through and all the pain say, "This is not the right way to go." That's a very powerful voice. And—and the voice of the exonerated prisoners are powerful. They've gone through and been wrongly convicted. 'Cause there are a lot of people that

the death penalty doesn't bother them from a moral perspective. But an unfair, flawed criminal justice system does affect them. And they don't like to see that. And so the voice of the exonerated prisoners is a powerful testimony to those people. That you can—the system is not perfect. The people—I've—I've been in a debate with a district attorney, and he, the D.A. would say, "There's no way an innocent person can be put on death row. They've gone through the trial. They've gone through their appeals." Well, my answer to them if they have not had a good attorney during the original trial or during the appeals, it's very easy to end up on death row even though you're innocent.

RAYMOND: David you were talking about the voice of the exonerated and we had to change tapes.

ATWOOD: Right. They have a powerful voice because they demonstrate better than anybody that you can put the wrong person on death row, that the system we have now, and that we'll probably always have, is not a perfect system. Mistakes can be made. There's flaws in the system. There are biases in the system. And we can end up with the wrong person on death row. And personally, I feel we've executed a number of innocent people in the state of Texas, some of whom I'm pretty familiar with. Seems like as time goes on, more and more people are identified. We know we've had a number of innocent people that have been released. They were the fortunate ones that were lucky enough to have their innocence discovered. But how many innocent people have we executed? I think there've been several. There just has to be. Unfortunately, you can go to death row without DNA evidence. But to get off from death row and somebody to say totally that you're totally innocent, it seems like it takes DNA to go the other direction. But there are a number of cases where the evidence is so strong—mistaken eyewitness testimony— We've got a couple now where— one guy who was executed, Willingham, they said he set this fire and another investigator came along and said, "Well, it's just a fire. There's no evidence that this was set." So you have a number of those cases that are— strongly point to innocence, and you can't correct these mistakes if you've executed somebody.

You can't correct it. You just can't. So, it's just a good reason I think that most people who are logical—they don't even have to go at it from a moral perspective should say this is not a system we should have in place because it's a fallible system. And mistakes are made.

RAYMOND: I understand that you though, from your Catholic beliefs and your moral beliefs, maybe you would [inaudible]. I don't know, that's probably an impossible question—are against the death penalty under any circumstances?

ATWOOD: Right. Right.

RAYMOND: One thing I wonder about is some of these issues with attorneys who don't do anything with incompetence, with corruption, and or so forth on the part of district attorneys or whoever, some of those problems you are trying to address in one form or another. Standards, developing a set of standards for defense attorneys, the creation of the West Texas Regional Public Defender.

ATWOOD: Right.

RAYMOND: Now that we do have access to DNA testing, and we have the district attorney now in Dallas who's reopening cases to look, even to say, I think he's guilty, but he didn't get a fair trial, perhaps. One of the things that I wonder is that, say we—say Texas actually did try to have a strong system of legal assistance for people charged with capital murders, and say we did have a strong system of appellate attorneys. Are those—it's sort of the reform or abolition question, do you work for those in that—and save some people in the meantime, and yet does that lead to a cleaner and more efficient, more well-supported system of capital punishment? I mean, what do you think of all that?

ATWOOD: I think that— first of all, all the reforms that they talk about, I'm really for them. And even if it makes the system— if it makes a better system, I think that's good. I just— I don't think we'll ever get to the point where we'll have a

system that can't make mistakes, even with improvements. In fact, if we had a system that really was a very good system and people who are poor had really good attorneys and had really good, not only for the trial, but for the appeals, probably we'd have very few people going to death row. So it's almost like you would bring about abolition in a very different way.

There are some states where that happens, I think Colorado is one right now where they have the death penalty on the book, but hardly anybody goes to death row because of their system. That doesn't mean that dangerous prisoners are out on the street, it just means they're going in for long prison sentences rather than the death penalty. So I think that—I'm for the reforms, all the reforms we can get make a better system because it's not only good for people on death row but for people who are not facing death. I think that there would be— let's say you created a system that was almost perfect. So you're not—it's extremely rare that you'd get the wrong person.

I think there are a lot of arguments still against the death penalty. And one of 'em is the—a lot of people don't want to talk about it, but is the financial aspect of it. It's always gonna be more, much more, expensive. Because to have that perfect system, with the best attorneys and the extensive appeals, that's a very expensive proposition that I think has a negative effect on even the families of the victims, who are waiting for this thing to happen and it takes a long time.

There's always the moral question. I think that that doesn't seem to effect as many people as I would think it would affect. But I mean I hope with time this whole concept of the sanctity of life will become a stronger element in—in our society so that we would never choose to take human life if we have, especially if we have a good alternative, which we do now. We have life without parole. That's a very harsh punishment in itself and a lot of people don't like life without—I don't like life without parole as such, but I prefer it to the death penalty because then you've got the possibility if you find a mistake later on you can correct the situation.

I think with the time though I think that the idea that we should really hold life as being sacred is a concept that I hope will grow. Because it goes way beyond even the death penalty. It goes to some of the other social issues. How do we treat our children? Goes into issues of war and everything. It's very broad. We'd be I think so much better off as the human race if we'd give more emphasis to that. Again, I think there is a—it's hard to measure, but I think that the death penalty has a negative effect on society. Sometimes that's referred to as a brutalizing effect. There are some people who have tried to measure that and I think they have measured it: that murders go up after an execution. I don't know if that's true or not, but I am convinced that there is a brutalizing effect of the death penalty on people. I think it is on people in the prison system, I think it is on society in general. If you're—if you're taking a human being and killing that person, and it's totally unnecessary, that just cannot be good for us in general as people, that we're doing that—that we're backing that and saying that's okay. I think it cheapens human life and degrades life across the board. So, I would push for the reforms, get the best criminal justice system we can, and then continue just to push for abolition of the death penalty.

RAYMOND:                         You've talked about what you say are changes in support among Texans in general for abolition— changes in perceptions of the death penalty. As a committed Catholic you've also been attentive to church, churches' views, church action and church inaction at times or lower action than you would want. Are you seeing any changes in the Catholic Churches' either teachings about the death penalty or views specifically within practicing Catholics about the death penalty?

ATWOOD:                         Well, one of the things that's happened, if you take say the last fifteen years or so, Catholics in general have changed in general as a result of the Catholic Church speaking out pretty strongly against the death penalty. I think the polls have shown a change, and that's good. What I am concerned with right now in 2008 is I see somewhat of a—I think a slackening of the Catholic Church in terms of the attention to this issue. There have been among the bishops in the United States, I mean our own bishop here, Bishop Fiorenza in Austin—in Houston was one of our strongest, and still is a strong supporter. Now he's retired now. And a lot of the really good things that happened

in the Catholic Church was because he personally promoted it. He was president of the— of the Catholic— the bishops organization for a while. And he strongly influenced the picture for quite a while. He's retired now and I think some of the bishops that I run up against now seem to me more conservative, not as strong on the death penalty as he has been. That concerns me. I would like to see the Catholic Church— the Catholic Church put into effect what they called— this was sort of the culmination of everything that they'd done, in 2005 they put in the Catholic Campaign to end the death penalty. And made it sort of an official part of the church teachings more than they had before. And that was great.

The problem is they haven't done anything. They haven't implemented it. It's down on paper. And it's very easy to put stuff on paper and then put 'em on the shelf and you forget about it. And I think that's what's happened. And one of the things I've been working on is to try to not let that happen, or at least do everything I can as a Catholic lay person to implement that program. For instance, I set up a separate website that's what I call the Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty. Just to try to implement it. 'Cause when this thing came into place I talked to some people I know in the Catholic Church in Texas and said, "This is wonderful, now what are you gonna do with it?" It's the Catholic Church, the official Catholic Church.

And I kept waiting. And one year went by. The second year went by. Nothing was happening. And sadly, that's really the situation right now. There have been Catholic lay people like myself that have been active. But in terms of the bishops in Texas, for example, really doing anything, that they haven't done it. And so I'm very concerned about that. I really am. And I think that the— they've always— when it comes to the death penalty, the Catholic statements have always— there's a little bit of a loophole in there of, We're against the death penalty unless it's needed to protect society.

Well the reality is that there's no way that you can justify the death penalty now because you have secure prisons everywhere basically. You can put someone in prison to protect society. You can't justify the death penalty. You can't say, "We gotta kill this person in



order to protect society.” You can’t make that argument. And so the church ought to close that loophole a hundred percent. They should. I think. And that would—that would prevent the Catholics who still support the death penalty— they can’t use that loophole anymore, which they will use it if they can, as we know. So you gotta close that loophole and then they oughta do some things that would really reaffirm their strong opposition. Now they should do some more things. They oughta— the Catholic bishops of Texas should take this— this Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty and say we are gonna implement this in Texas, this is how we’re gonna do it. I’ve been talking to some people about how they should do it. They need to do it. But they haven’t done it yet.

And they could do some symbolic things. For example, we’ve got a person up in Huntsville, or up in Livingston on death row, a guy named Chuck Thompson, who is a Catholic lay person who became a Franciscan lay person while on death row, through the influence of a Catholic priest. Not a Catholic priest from around here. A Catholic priest from Boston actually. So, he’s a Franciscan, and I visited him and he said to me, “Dave, they took away church services years ago and I’d really like to be able to go to Catholic mass with my, some of my friends who are Catholic.” So I bring this up—I brought this up with the Catholic bishops. I says, “Why don’t you press for allowing church services—not just for Catholics, but for anybody that wants church?” And that’s never happened. I’ve asked one of the bishops if he would go up and visit this particular person on death row. And that would symbolically speak tons about commitment and concern. And that bishop hasn’t done that yet.

Personally, I’ll tell you, I think this might be something we’ll talk about editing a little bit, but personally, I think the Catholic Church is so consumed with the abortion issue that it can’t see past the end of its nose sometimes. That’s just a flat out statement. They just— this abortion issue has just consumed them. And I’m talking about the bishops. I’m not saying the Catholic population overall. I don’t know why that is. I think it’s wrong. I don’t think things are in balance right now. I think things are out of balance. But the thing about the death penalty, if you give attention to the death penalty and say that the life of somebody on death row, somebody who’s actually committed murder is very important and we should

not take their life. Here is the hardest person to make this case for. If you do that with that person, that takes all these life issues. It's like, it brings them up. Right? And it strengthens the whole message on the sanctity of life if you do it for a death row prisoner.

And the church right now puts all its emphasis on the unborn child, the innocent unborn child. Well, it just—I just think they—they need to develop this more. And maybe they will. I mean I—I—I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. But I'm a little concerned right now that the death penalty is sort of slid back a little in the Catholic Church in the last two or three years. I really am. And I see it somewhat related to the retiring of Joseph Fiorenza as bishop, cause he was a strong proponent. And more conservative bishops coming in to emphasize other things. So it has me concerned.

RAYMOND: Are there people who are bishops or priests coming up in the generations that give you do give you hope on this issue?

ATWOOD: Yeah. Yeah there are—there are young priests who are I think— Cardinal Bernardin from Chicago talked about the consistent ethic of life, which is something I strongly believe in. And there are, I think, a number of young priests that really embrace that concept of the consistent ethic of life. And there are some that don't. I mean, there are some priests that don't. But there are a lot that I think do. I think that that's where we have to go. I really do. And so there are—there are people out there.

I mean I get sometimes we—we're gonna have a program in November up at Huntsville. I talked to Andy Reevis of the Texas Catholic Conference about a— to do a march for life, or procession for life starting at the Catholic Church in Huntsville and going over to the prison. And they broadened that somewhat to include some other life issues. That was not my original intent. I really just wanted to have a focus on the death penalty. That's gonna be in November. I don't know how that's gonna turn out. We'll find out. I hope it will be all right. But it was one thought I had about how to get the Catholics more involved in the death penalty issue. And we'll see how that develops. So, I think things have dropped off a little. I'm concerned. I really am. There are some very conservative elements in the



but there are wonderful people there.” I have confidence that it will turn out good. It’s slow, sometimes way too slow. But I have confidence it will happen.

RAYMOND: Thank you very much.

ATWOOD: Okay.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

