Texas After Violence Project

Interview with Jim Kuhn

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Place:	TAVP Offices, Austin, Texas
Equipment:	Sony Digital 4k Video Camera Recorder FDR-AX1/FDR-AX1E
Recorded On:	Sandisk ExtremePLUS 128 GB SD Card
Interviewer:	Hannah Whelan & Murphy Anne Carter
Videographer:	Murphy Anne Carter
Transcriber:	Hannah Whelan

ABSTRACT

Jim Kuhn is a Librarian and Archivist who is member of the Friends Meeting of Austin, which is a Texas-Based Quaker Community that engages in social justice advocacy against the death penalty.

In his interview with TAVP, Jim discusses his friendship with Terence Andrus, who took his life while on Death Row at the Allan B. Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas. Terence, who was 34 at the time of his death in 2023, left behind a robust creative and intellectual legacy witnessed through his visual artwork, writing, correspondence, and political commentary.

Throughout the conversation, Jim talks about witnessing the inadequate mental health care system and the inhumane physical conditions in Texas prisons, and how intersectional spirituality and artistic co-creation helped him and Terence foster a bond despite these deplorable conditions.

Jim's interview highlights the continued importance of advocating for people on the inside while offering insight into how we can contend with our own complicated grief when the friends we advocate for are no longer with us.

Links related to or mentioned in this interview:

Advice for corresponding with people who are incarcerated

"The Black Rose" musical piece

Sojourner Truth, "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance"

Terence Andrus Website

Hannah Whelan: [00:00:01] It's July 28, 2023, and we are at the TAVP office in Austin, Texas, where we're sitting down with Jim Kuhn, who we will be interviewing for the Texas After Violence Project. In the room we also have Murphy Anne Carter, who is operating sound and video equipment and co-interviewing, and then myself, Hannah Whelan conducting the oral history interview. To get us started, Jim, thank you so much, and can you please tell us about who you are and also perhaps what brings you to this interview with the Texas After Violence Project?

Jim Kuhn: [00:00:34] Thank you. So, yeah, my name is Jim Kuhn. I've lived in Austin since about 2016, before that I lived in New York state, and before that I lived in Maryland. I've bounced around a little bit. When I lived in Maryland, I was very excited when they abolished the death penalty in 2013. I really admired that. I thought it would never happen, and it was inspiring to me. So, when I was coming to Austin for work, I wanted to find an organization I could volunteer with – and that brought some of my professional and personal convictions to bear. I'm a librarian and an archivist. And, so when I learned about Texas After Violence Project, that was one of the first phone calls I made to Austin, was to reach out to the Executive Director and start a conversation. So, since about 2017, I've been a volunteer with Texas After Violence Project.

I have a family background, as well as some personal convictions, that kind of lead this to be a kind of a natural sort of thing for me. I have a close family member who spent some years in a federal penitentiary, and in visiting and corresponding with him, I discovered that I have a little bit of emotional resilience to this kind of work, maybe more so than some other family members. He's out now – we're all good. I don't want to be misconstrued. I mean, it's not easy to go and visit someone in a prison, but there's something about the human connection that really is strong and is, you know – comes to the forefront in meeting with someone behind bars. All the carceral environment stuff, it just sort of falls away. For me, the human bond and the human connection with someone who I care about, who I'm visiting with or corresponding with, is really strong, and that led me to seek out some opportunities to engage in correspondence and in visiting with folks here in Texas on death row. And, you know, I have to say that I recognize that the position that I'm coming from in all of this is really one of privilege. I can walk into and walk out of prisons as I want to. It's not true for so many of us. It's not true for those of us who won't ever be released. It's not true for those of us who have been released and carry that trauma within for the rest of their life, whether healed or unhealed. It's not true for family members of those who are still incarcerated. You know, for me, I can leave that place behind, even as I maintain a relationship with someone inside. That's not true for everyone, but it's really important for me and has been really important for me.

I've learned a lot from these kinds of friendships and fellowships. And at least part of what led me to that work was getting to know Gabe, Executive Director of TAVP, as well as the founder of Texas After Violence Project, Walter Long. Walter is a Quaker. I started attending Friends Meetings of Austin [Quaker community events] shortly after moving to Austin, and that felt increasingly over the years like a kind of a spiritual homecoming for me. I was raised as a Quaker back East, so although I'm now as far as I've ever lived from my family members – nobody's in driving distance. I've got a lot of family on the East Coast, I've got family on the West Coast, family all over – -nobody else in Texas except for me and my wife Ruth, and her mother. But it did really feel like Austin was now a home for me because I had this sort of spiritual community around. So, a bunch of personal convictions, a bunch a bunch of professional activities, some of the kind of spiritual activities and outreach that Friends Meeting of Austin do, all have kind of coalesced, come together to kind of bring me to TAVP and to the the work that I did, and into this interview today about Terence Andrus.

Terence was a friend of mine who I've corresponded with and visited for a number of years at Polunsky [Prison in Texas]. My introduction to Terence came through his attorney, who was looking for a pen pal, a kind of – just a friend for Terence. One of the things that I really admire and that I've always admired about the Friends Meeting of Austin is their work with folks at Polunksy and Mountain View – the two death rows here in Texas. For decades, members and attenders of Friends Meeting of Austin have engaged in friendships with folks living on the row [death row]. In some cases these are explicitly kind of ministerial visits. But in fact, Quakers don't have ministers. I like to think of these as kind of what you might call spiritual friendships, really. It sounds a little highfalutin – it's probably best to just call it a friendship. But I really admired that work. I wanted to kind of get involved in it, as well. And I'm really grateful to that community, because what I have ended up with is kind of surrounded by a group of mentors and kind of seasoned activists and visitors to death row who've been doing this for a long time. And, so, we all drive out to Livingston together, when it's possible, and talk on the trips. That's really nice. So I visited Terence from about 2018 through 2022. Terence – Terence was a really amazing young man. He was 34 when he took his life. He hung himself in his cell at Polunksy on January twenty-first of this year [2023]. He was an artist, a poet, a commentator on politics and the legal system. He was an artistic collaborator. Poems of his have been set to music and performed. He was really eager to share this with the world. And, uh, and, you know, we lost Terence way too early. But there are some things that we have of his that we can share. Obviously, I've got memories of his beautiful smile, and his laugh, and his really easygoing attitude with the guards, with fellow inmates.

He had a smile and a good word for everyone, and I don't think I – or really any of us outside – can understand what it's like at Polunksy and Mountain View. I mean, the statistics are easy to rattle off, but the lived experiences just are unfathomable. We're talking about a nine by twelve foot cell. We're talking about 23 hours a day in isolation. These conditions have been rightfully described as torture. And yet, Terence, uh – like I said, you know, when I see Terence, when I'm with him, all that kind of falls away. There's glass between us. We have to communicate on a telephone headset. There's no physical contact, but I'm like: there he is. You know, there's my friend. And then an hour to an hour and a half visit, I mean, it just flies by.

Terence was teaching himself how to be a visual artist when he was at Polunksy and, uh, and was doing some amazing work. I brought some, which I'd like to share. This is a piece called *Black Rose* (holds up artwork), and you can sort of see, if you squint a little bit, the outline of a of a rose in the center of this complex pattern.This work of art reminds me of a Ghanaian artist named El Anatsui, who worked in metal, and some of his earliest works were repeating rows of bottle caps. But he would – he would do patterns. This also reminds me of Chuck Close, a paralyzed artist who was left with only very little movement in one hand. So, he – Chuck Close – would move his canvases. He would do a little square, and then he'd move the canvas, he'd move his wheelchair, and do another little square, and then the whole thing would come together. I like this because it's got the Pan-African colors: yellow, red, green, black. But, in the midst is this form that comes out– of the black rose. This is called *Black Rose*, which is also the name of a poem that Terence wrote that was set to music by Keith Allegretti and can be found on [YouTube] in a performance by – sorry, I'm blanking on the name of the baritone…but a really good performance of the poem. This also reminds me a little bit of, I don't know, like a decade ago there were these "magic eye" paintings where if you squint a little bit, you can't see it, but then it pops out and you can't unsee it. And you're like, Oh my God – there it is! What was I looking at when I didn't see it earlier? There's a deeper meaning there for me, which is that despite their best efforts to dehumanize those who are behind bars, as well as those of us who are visiting, it's not going to happen. The humanity pops forward. You're like, Oh my God, what just happened to me? You know, the guards, the metal detectors, the electric gates, the paperwork…you know, finally, you run this gauntlet and then you can finally see your friend. And like I'm saying, you know, all that falls away and the humanity pops forward. So, that's a little bit about the *Black Rose*.

Terence is…oops – I've got another piece of artwork I'd like to share here. This one, *I sell the Shadow to Support the Substance*, is really meaningful to me. We've got a self-portrait here of

Terence wearing a uniform that has the initials D.R. Is it sunrise? Is it sunset? I think it's sunrise. I like the shadow of the letters on the waves. This hearkens back to Sojourner Truth, the 19th century Black abolitionist who sold photographs of herself to fund her trips around the country in support of abolition. And the caption was, I sell the shadow to support the substance – the shadow being the kind of image of herself imprinted on this piece of paper. Terence kind of felt the same way. I mean, this is – this is a young man who really cared about the community he grew up in in Houston and really wanted to make sure that young people didn't fall into the kinds of violence that he got swept up in as a young person. He wanted to sell his works of art and contribute the proceeds to schools in Houston. So, some of his art can now be found on a website – Fine Art America. We've also got his writings, his poetry, and his artwork on TerenceAndrus.com.

I have a poem I'd like to share that Terence wrote, but I'd also like to say something else about "Black Rose." The last lines of the poem, which are available on Keith's site – Keith being the composer of the musical piece – the last two lines of "Black Rose" are: The black rose lives in spite of existing. And that is a little, you know, kind of contradictory or – but it gets back to what I was saying earlier that like despite everybody's effort to warehouse people, turn them into objects, dehumanize them, you know, take away all their agency – these are living, breathing human beings. Terence – the life – I mean, he was just so full of life. And, uh, you know, he was a spiritual seeker, which also resonated with me, because I consider myself that as well. You know, I was raised as a Quaker by ex-Catholics. I have been married to a Jewish woman for 30 years now – over 30 years. And our son was bar mitzvahed. So, I've got a lot of past experience in Jewish holidays and going to temple, and I really like the synagogue. I practice Zen Buddhist meditation for a number of years…I say all this because, you know, the – one of the stereotypes of the prison visitation is that you're there to bring the gospel, or you've got a message that the person that you're visiting with has to hear. And that is not the case with me and with Terence and the other person that I visit. These are dialogues – these are friendships, and we talk all over the map about spirituality, about philosophy, about art, about books. And I can't remember if I've talked with Terence about Martin Buber or not, but Martin Buber is this Jewish theologian and philosopher from the middle of the 20th century who wrote about people and our relationships with other living things as being of kind of two flavors. You can either have an I/It relationship, like, you know, I'm the I, the object is the It – sometimes people get treated that way. But when you are in relationship with another I, things get really interesting. And Martin Buber needed another word, so he used the word Thou. So you've got the I/It relationship and you've got the I/Thou relationship. And Buber said that when you are in the I/Thou relationship, it's the betweenness, it's the relationality where the humanity and the divinity really resides, so that everything else is kind of operational – it's kind of like logistics, like these

objects in my life that I need to do things to in order to, you know, move on. But when we're talking about people, there's agency on both sides. And in rereading "Black Rose," those last two lines made me think of Martin Buber. The black rose lives in spite of existing, because that's what the carceral state is trying to do to those of us who care for people who are inside, as well as those of us who are inside, is dehumanize it, make it an I/It, make those of us who are outside put it out of our minds – not our business. And you know that – that ain't right. So Terence and I spent a lot of time talking about philosophy. We spent a lot of time talking about artwork and books. I sent him a lot of books. Uh, I would – I would send him poetry. Here's, uh – I think you can tell already that I have, like, this tendency to over intellectualize a little bit. Here's the difference between me and Terence: I would send Terence a poem that I like, that I read, and I'm like, There's this great poem, and here's why I like it! And so, I write out my little exegesis and tell him about all the things I liked about the poem, what it meant to me. Terence would send me back a poem that he wrote himself. I mean, this man was a real artist and very creative. He liked to call himself Mister Connoisseur of Words, which I just loved. And, so I've got a poem I want to read that he wrote. This poem was written, I believe, in 2022, shortly after he returned to Polunksy from a mental health unit that he was temporarily sent to. He struggled a lot with mental health. And I mean, you talk about the setting of Polunksy. Can you imagine, you know, suffering from mental health issues under those circumstances? It's just brutal. And I mean, if you look at the website for Polunksy, it says they've got mental health services. I don't know what that means, but Terence only got a counselor's attention, only got medication that could help, when he wasn't at Polunksy. And you have to be really, really, really, suffering in order to be sent, you know, to the mental health facilities, because there is no money for mental health. At any rate, he sent me this poem shortly after returning from – I think it's called Jester [Beauford H. Jester III Unit]. It's called "Homage."

(Kuhn begins reading)

I saw a bird today
Soaring where caged birds sing,
And in harmony, I sang,
"Glory to wind and wings."
Though skies gift this moment's key
The mystic was unlocked
When mind and song's fluttering
Escaped will, for the bird's wings;

Consciously pushing a journey
Away, beyond the caged birds' singing.

I like this poem a lot. It's got some echoes of Maya Angelou in there. It's also – it also means a lot to me because of a story that Terence told me about an experience he had with an owl kind of landing on the grillwork outside his window and flapping his wings and just looking at him. It sounded like an amazing experience, and one that stuck with him and certainly has stuck with me. Terence's poems, as I said, have been set to music. Many of them are online and available. This one means a lot to me because it is – you know, he, he had a lot of hope, and he had reason for hope. In – I believe it was 2020? Yeah, 2020. The Supreme Court kicked the case back to – Andrus v. Texas – kicked it back to Texas and said: Y'all followed the rules not at all – do over. As you can tell, I'm not a lawyer, so I got the terms wrong. Uh, change in the court. Uh, re-submittal to the Supreme Court. Lots of amicus briefs from across the political spectrum. Uh, and the new court responded, and keep in mind, this is after they kicked it back to Texas saying, Do over. So what did Texas do? Texas said, Uh, no we're good, we checked it all, we don't feel we need to change anything. The Supreme Court basically just got, you know, dissed, kicked to the curb by by Texas. And they're like, you know, under this new court, they're like, Eh, okay. So they refused to hear the case, even though we've got, uh, politically conservative, you know, submissions, we've got submissions from bishops from – anyway, it was – the only way to describe this is, is cruel. And, on the part of the court, uh, I don't know, it seems a little unprecedented to me, you know, as an institution, the court says, That ain't right – do it again. And then they say, No. And you're like, Okay, no, never mind. Uh, there's, there's something wrong. So, you know, Terence had a lot of hope and then he didn't. And I think it was crushing. It was certainly crushing to those of us who cared about him. And I'm – (pauses) you know, the situation with Terence was wrong on so many levels, but the piece of it that I think is kind of most important is the person that we're talking about. So we can talk about like, you know, they didn't follow procedure, or they had good amicus briefs, or they had a lot of good things to say about the terrible counsel that he received, the lack of evidence being admitted that should have been admitted, all these procedural issues. But in the end, you know, the most important piece of all this is Terence. And, you know, talking about caged bird singing – that was Terence, and I miss him. Terence faced an uphill battle, like everyone does who's on the row. Terence was really inspired to hear stories of folks who got sent to general – folks who got out. I mean, it's happened very recently.

Terence was not murdered by the state, although they obviously dearly wanted to. Instead, he took his own life. Those of us who've lost friends to suicide – it's a special kind of grief. Special is the wrong word. It's a different kind of grief. And, you know, I think it's inevitable to feel some survivor's guilt, to feel like, gosh, I wish I could have done something differently. I wish I could have seen him one last time. I wish I had, you know, sent him a different letter. I wish I knew why that holiday card came back with "refused" stamped on it. You never know what – the guards are just like impatient because you wrote your return address wrong or something. But, one of the things that was really helpful to me was, uh – in mourning Terence – was said to me by someone who's been visiting folks on death row for many, many years and pointed out that in a way, this could be interpreted as an act of agency. He took the power away from the state. What a terrible calculus. What a really, really rotten deal. Texas has executed, as of July 1 of this year, 583 people – way more than any other state. They didn't get Terence, and they never will. Terence left behind a lot of grieving people – family members, friends. He was – he was suffering. He was suffering a lot at the end there. As part of my kind of spiritual journey, I have collected what I like to think of as secular hymns, songs by people who, you know, they're not singing religious songs, but they have this kind of spiritual quality to them. And some of those songs have really meant a lot to me after losing people in my own life, and especially after losing Terence. Lucinda Williams and Patti Smith. I don't think these were Terence's jams, but that's okay. They meant a lot to me, and I'm just going to share a couple of lines from a couple of songs. Lucinda – she wrote a song called "Sweet Old World." It's given me some solace in recent months.

(Kuhn begins singing)

See what you lost when you left this world
This sweet old world
What you lost when you left this world
This sweet old world
Millions of us in love
Promises made good
Your own flesh and blood

Looking for some truth
Dancing with no shoes
The beat, the rhythm, the blues

Kuhn: [00:34:01] It's a beautiful song.

Whelan: [00:34:02] Yeah.

Kuhn: [00:34:03] There's a lot to it. She sang the song – wrote the song for a family friend who committed suicide. And she's written a number of songs about suicide. I might rewrite those lyrics – so, like she says, See what you lost when you left this world. Polunsky is not a sweet old world, but let me say what we lost when Terence left this world: we lost a poet, we lost a political commentator – a very politically astute commentator. He's published in the Harvard Review. We lost an artist – an artistic collaborator. We lost a kind and gentle young man who regretted a terrible thing. What – what we lost. Very – very different kind of artist, Patti Smith. But, you know, not that different. She wrote a song called “Paths That Cross.” She wrote this for her close friend, Robert Mapplethorpe and his life partner, Sam Wagstaff. And it meant a lot to me when my mother passed away, and it's meant a lot to me, you know, since Terence's loss. And Patti Smith was not my mother's jam either, but it doesn't mean it hasn't meant a lot to me. “Paths That Cross.”

(Kuhn begins singing)

Speak to me
Speak to me heart
All things renew
Hearts will mend
Round the bend
Paths that cross, will cross again
Rise up, hold the reins
We'll meet again, I don't know when
Hold tight, bye bye
Paths that cross, will cross again

You know, I like this song because, uh, Patti is saying goodbye, but it's not for good. She's got this hope – she's got this, you know – Paths that cross will cross again, will meet again. There's some agency here. She's like, yeah, things will renew, hearts will mend, rise up, hold the reins. You know, kind of forward looking. Lucinda's reflecting on past loss, Patty's looking forward. I don't know. I don't know whether my theology has any kind of sense that we'll meet again. But I love the

sentiment, and I love the song, and I just have to say that Lucinda is right – this is a sweet world. It's way less sweet with Terence not in it any longer. Patty is right – we got to rise up, we got to hold those reins and, you know, hearts do mend. But, you know – I don't know, I will never know what Terence went through at Polunsky. What I do know is that he was suffering a lot. And out of that suffering, he made incredible works of art. This one (holds up piece of artwork), this is one of the last ones that he created that I know about. I don't know its title. He would mail me works and I would pass them along to Gretchen [Terence's attorney]. I think this had a title written on the back, but I don't know what it is at this point. I think of this as a self-portrait of Terence – beautiful, flowering, you know, gorgeous, bursting with life and color, surrounded by darkness. The darkness is not going to win. And so that's, you know, that's what I want to kind of carry forward, is these memories and these kinds of creative works that tell you, well – remind me and tell everyone else – the man was here, and did a lot, and created a lot. And his creativity is important not just to those of us who knew him, but there's meaning – spiritual meaning, also comforting meaning, in the works that he generously shared with us out of unspeakable conditions.

Whelan: [00:40:04] Thank you so much.

Kuhn: [00:40:04] Yeah. Thanks.

Whelan: [00:40:07] It sounds like you and others who loved Terence are engaged in this process of kind of building his archive, and collecting creative works, and writing really beautiful tributes. Can you share with us about that process or other ways in which you're kind of moving his legacy forward and sharing?

Kuhn: [00:40:28] Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, that's one of the questions that I've got is how to make – thank you for using the word legacy – make this loss a legacy, because it's a big loss. But – and it hasn't been that long – it hasn't even been a year. We've been – Gretchen is Terence's attorney who has been talking with a bunch of us who knew him and has been gathering material together. We've got a website, TerenceAndrus.com, which I encourage people to to check out. It's got links to his artwork, it's got many of his poetry, it's got links to his other writings, his back story. One of the things that I like to think about is a traditional Jewish saying, May their memory be a blessing. And this is really important to me because, you know, it's a traditional saying and it sounds lovely, but it's actually – in the way I read it, and the way I have read about it, it's not about memory necessarily. It's about what we can do next. Blessings don't, like, come from above. They're not

given to us by the gods or whatever. It takes work. And may his memory be a blessing is like an admonition. It's like telling – his memory telling us: make this matter, carry it forward. And the point that this reminds me of in Jewish theology is an idea called tikkun olam, which is a phrase that in Hebrew means repair of the world. And depending on your Jewish theology, it may mean different things. Some people say that it means that we are engaged in co-creation of the world with the creator – It's unfinished. It needs to be repaired, and the only ones that can repair it are humans. Others think – if you believe in messiahs – that only when the world is repaired will the Messiah come. Uh, I don't know, frankly, where my thoughts lie, but what I do love is this idea that the world is broken and it requires us to repair it, and that the memory of those we have lost can inspire us to acts of… you know, if you're a Christian, you might call acts of loving kindness, acts of activism, acts of engagement with those who have less than than us. Acts of giving and and– and work. So, you know, I miss – I miss Terence a lot. I miss making new memories with him. But I want to give some thought as to what I can do to make his memory be a blessing. And, you know, there's something that TAVP is active in which I really admire. As you know, I'm a Librarian, and an Archivist – I'm not a mental health care professional. I have some training in mental health first aid, I act as a victim advocate on campus at UT. So I have some training in, in kind of crisis intervention, but I'm not a Social Worker. I really, really admire the project that TAVP has of giving support to family members of those who are incarcerated, and guidance to mental health professionals for how best to help the children of those who are behind bars. And that's one of the ways that I think we really need to think about making Terence's loss turn into a kind of a legacy, is to think about how we can improve mental health behind – for for those who are inside, not just those who are inside, but their support systems, their friends, their family members. And so some of what I hope for in, you know, remembering Terence and carrying this forward is that there may be some work around that. I don't know what that would be. It's one of those moments where I kind of wish I had another lifetime so I could pursue another career. But bandwidth is what it is.

Whelan: [00:46:33] Well, in the spirit of learning, I'm curious what – through your friendship with Terence– you feel like you've either learned or unlearned about yourself?

Kuhn: [00:46:45] Yeah, thanks. I like that. One of the things that has really been real for me is the relationship with Terence. We wrote back and forth a lot. We visited. I wasn't able to visit as often as I wanted, but I learned – I learned a lot from Terence. And one of the things about myself that changed for the better…i'm really grateful to Terence for – this is going to sound a little crazy, but maybe, maybe not. I don't know. I always had this really resentful attitude towards the guards and

the prison authorities and the people employed by the state to do these terrible things. You know, when I was visiting family, there were misunderstandings, there were mistakes. There were, you know, times that we were turned away. There were frustrations. And, of course, the ridiculously dehumanizing and debilitating things that you go through to prepare for a visit with someone who's inside – strip searches and body cavity checks. I – the whole thing is inhuman. But I have a new feeling of tenderness towards those who find themselves working under these circumstances. I mean, to go into – to go into prison work? Oh, talk about a dehumanizing experience. I mean, talk about a life sentence. I mean, I don't – I don't know what to think about the folks that work in these places, except that I now – which I used to not do – treat them with a little bit of respect and kindness. These are cages that we have built for fellow human beings. How? At what cost? At what cost? It's a deep one. And it hits everybody who's touched by this trauma, this system built on and perpetuating trauma, in so many ways. And so, I try and uh – I try and tread with a light foot and have a smile because in the end we're all human. And the thing that, uh, that I've – so I feel like I've sort of unlearned some toxic behaviors – toxic to me. Because holding that kind of rancor is difficult, and healing from trauma requires letting go of some of that kind of thing.

Um, I've also, you know, I've learned a lot about Texas. I've learned a lot about the criminal justice system. I've learned a lot about Houston. I've learned a lot about the terrible systems outside of the bars that so many of us are shaped by. And those are systems of poverty, systems of white supremacy, systems of oppression. One of the reasons why I like this so much (holds up *I sell the Shadow to Support the Substance* artwork by Terence) is because this draws a clear line back through the centuries to slavery, which are the roots of the modern day carceral system – the carceral state – that, you know… slavery wasn't abolished, they just call it by different names. And I've learned that there are places for like, what you might call righteous indignation and anger, and there are places where compassion and, you know, kind of speaking with your heart are more important. "Speak to me, heart," you know? Patti Smith. So, I recently attended for the first time a vigil outside of the Walls Unit [Hunstville Unit] when the friend of a friend was being executed – Gary Green. So a bunch of us went from Friends Meeting of Austin to support our friend who had been corresponding and visiting with Gary, so we could all gather together and provide our friends some support and be there to witness. And, uh, I was really moved and happy to be there, in part because of the loud, foulmouthed, raucous anger of the crowd and – calling it like it is, calling down the wrath of the gods on the state of Texas. It was bracing. It was a little rejuvenating. But in the end, I think what I need to carry with me is less of that anger and more of the kind of human piece, you know, where what I can do is maintain ongoing…I will call them spiritual friendships with

folks who are inside, because it's nourishing to my spirit. We got the two I’s in communion with each other – the I and the Thou. I also, you know, there's – there's some really hard aspects to all of this that are contradictory and pull you in multiple directions and you feel multiple things at the same time that don't make sense with each other. It's – and I have to say that there are days when I, I feel complicit. You know, I pay taxes in this state. But, where we can go together is also one of those contradictory and kind of hard to articulate things, and what I'd like to say there is that I still feel that Terence is with me. And, I think that that's the way it is when you lose someone you love and a close, close friend. And so, you know, I, I lost a dear friend, but we're together going to make this memory a blessing. That's my goal anyway.

Whelan: [57:28] Thank you so much, Jim. Murphy, I’m wondering if I pass it to you if there are questions you may have?

Murphy Anne Carter: [57:35] Yeah. Thank you so much. Is there anything that you want to add? Is there anything else you want to share?

Kuhn: [57:45] Mm hmm. Well, um. You know, the – Ryan McKinny is the name of the baritone who sings “Black Rose.” And in the YouTube video, which he did during the pandemic, he talks about the importance of reaching out to those who are incarcerated. He met Terence through, some, I think, write a prisoner website, and encourages people to to reach out. And he says, you know, you might make a friend. And he's right. I have to say that visiting Polunksy and maybe this dates back to my own, you know, kind of lived experience as being someone who visits people in prison – Polunsky is an inhuman place. But it ain’t all that – you know, you can go. You can visit with someone and have a really inspiring chat. It can be a little distracting, you know? One of the things about the visitation room is that a lot of the people there are lawyers and a lot of the other people there are preachers. There aren’t too many who are there just to, like, visit a friend. And so, you know, I don't have a lot – I don't have a lot to preach. As you’ve seen, I'm capable of preaching, but I don't have a lot to preach. I don't go to preach to visit Terence or others. I go to – I go to talk with friends, and it's my sense that that experience is deeply meaningful. I have to say, it's deeply meaningful to me. I can only imagine how much more important it is to folks inside. So, if you're wondering how to get started, you can do like me. Find a poem that you like. Write it out. Say a word or two about why it's important to you, why you like it. Ask the question: what have you read recently that you like? Do have a book that you like – that you liked a lot? Mail it off. If they don't read it, don't worry about it, they'll pass it on to someone else. If they – I send a lot of books and,

uh, you got to be careful because, you know, sometimes there's a limit to the amount of property that they can have, and they get dinged if they've got too much, too much going on in their cells. But, uh, you know, there are, there are ways to start a conversation that are not that hard. Martin Buber says you find yourself sitting on a park bench next to a stranger. You can have a human relationship with that person. It can – there's an I in that relationship just waiting to happen there. One of the things that I admire about The Friends is that – the Austin Quakers – is that they've been doing this for a long time and they've been encouraging others to do it as well, not because they've got some kind of gospel that they want everyone to bring to the world. But in fact they've got a beautiful "Advice for Corresponding with Prisoners on Death Row" document. It's two pages long, and we can link in the show notes. But the, the, uh, there are people who have done this and done this for years and grown as individuals…through correspondence and visiting. And those of us who've done it, we've made friends, we've grown as individuals. I have gained more than I've lost. I've, I've lost a lot. Terence is no longer with us. I will always miss him. But I feel like I've gained a lot from him. And I would just say, you know, it's not easy, but it's not that hard to strike up a conversation with another human being. Yeah.

Carter: [01:03:15] Thank you so much. I feel like that braids together this practice of creativity and spirituality, and friendship, and you just connected those perfectly.

Kuhn: [01:03:29] Yeah. Nice. Thank you. Yeah, so I miss Terence. We all miss him. And, uh, the level of loss – uh, this gets back to your question about what have I learned and unlearned. I've learned that losses don't need to be, you know, uh, things that stop you in your tracks. The level of loss is so immense – 583 people [executed in Texas] since 1976. It's just…incalculable. And yet we are still here and still pushing and still loving those who are inside. And that's not going to change. You know, Texas isn't going to win (laughs).

Whelan: [01:04:35] Amen to that.

Carter: [01:04:37] I was going to say, is there a better sentence to utter?

Whelan: [01:04:40] Thank you so much for taking the time with us today, Jim. Unless there's anything else you'd like to talk about, we can close our interview.

Kuhn: [01:04:51] No. I think that's great. Thank you.