

**Texas After Violence Project
Interview with Sister Helen Prejean**

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[TAPE 1]

REBECCA LORINS: Okay. So we're here today on December 3rd, with Sister Helen Prejean. This is Rebecca Lorins with the Texas After Violence Project. And thank you for talking with us.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN: Very happy to be here. Very happy about what Texas After Violence is doing. We need this.

LORINS: Great. So what are you doing in Texas today, actually?

PREJEAN: I am in Texas because a woman, Cathy Henderson, was on Texas death row. I met her when I came to visit all the women on death row, in like, 1997 or so. When Karla Faye Tucker was on death row. I met all the women, and among them was Cathy Henderson. Then, as we know, Karla Faye Tucker was executed, another of the other women too, Betty Lou Beets was up for execution. And I get this letter from Cathy, saying, Texas is very serious about killing women. I know you're very busy in what you do but if you could be with me, if I'm executed, if you could be with me, I think you could help me be calm. And I get this letter from her. And normally I just take one person at a time on death row and follow—accompany them for whatever it is. But I knew. I wrote her back right away. I said, Cathy, I'm now your sister. I will be glad to do this. I will come and see you as soon as I can get there. And so I went to visit Cathy. First question. I'm spiritual advisor the whole person. They should live, they shouldn't be killed. That's what I mean by the spiritual life. It's a whole human life and their dignity above all. And I said, what happened at your trial? Tell me about your lawyer. And I knew what she was gonna say. I knew the way it had gone. She had a court appointed attorney who couldn't get any kind of expert witnesses everything. And I walked out of there after the first visit and I knew what I had to do. And it was, I was gonna keep up with Cathy so she'd get letters, she'd know she wasn't alone, and I had to go get a lawyer. And as fortune, providence would happen, these lawyers that had taken a Louisiana case before, they had just—one of them, Michael Banks had just written to me saying, Sister Helen if you ever need help. Well, poor baby, I hit him like a fire hose. I met this woman, we have this case. Michael, can your firm take this case? She needs help. We gotta get experts in there. The whole thing revolved around that she had been babysitting with a baby. The baby was crying and in her family they would do airplane. You sing a kid around. She was barefooted, she steps on a sharp object, the baby flies out of her arms and the baby's dead. And what happened afterwards is probably her most grievous mistake because she panicked, buried the baby, ran off to Missouri. And of course that's why the victim's family—It's not just that their baby—they'd left their baby in the hands of her and the baby died, but that—for a whole month they didn't know what'd happened. And Cathy's had to deal with that. And so anyway the long and short of it is we get the lawyers in there, they get expert witnesses. Can we show that it might have been an accident? They did. They showed that it could have been an accident. The criminal court—appeals court of Texas overturned the death sentence. Which is very unusual, as you know. And so Cathy's alive. So the death sentence was recently overturned. And so now she's at Travis County jail and

I'm still accompanying her as she makes her way through these different stages of what's going to happen with her life next. We know she can't get the death penalty. So we're waiting to see what's going to happen next. But it's all about—see—cause what happened—keeping the dignity of the person. Being there. Presence, fidelity, standing by her that she knows she has her dignity. As you go through all the ups and downs and all the different rules they have and different prisons, just recently she was put into lockdown because there was a rule. She didn't know there was a rule. She thought she was being kind, helping somebody. And suddenly she finds herself in lockdown.

So. All of that is why I'm here and I have met these people like Galia and Walter and this Quaker friends center here that are like the hub of prison ministry, outreach in the community, restorative justice, the way of kindness, compassion, accompaniment, all of the things we are trying to be as a society. So these are my people. I love coming here to this center and being here. So this is the second time I've come and we gather people around. Cathy's friends, her family, people who know her. To talk about just what's happening in the prison where—about her case, but also just about prisons in general and what people can do.

LORINS: So, actually, I'm taken by some of the words you were using like presence and accompaniment and proximity—you didn't use that word, but—so I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about that in relation to storytelling. The idea that two people--right, like--presence and relation to people interacting with one another and that special encounter?

PREJEAN: You know what I've found? That presence is maybe the best gift we ever give to each other. Parents to children; friends with each other; husbands and wives. Presence. And I've learned that through prison visits, because you can't say, "Let's go rent a video or let's go invite friends over, or let's go get pizza." It's the two of you. So, it's in a very restrained environment; which is, what you have is your presence to each other, your conversation, and what you're going to do together in that visit with each other. I have learned—keep learning—from those that I have been privileged to accompany on death row, but other people too, like with Cathy, and presence is everything because we're relational; human beings are relational. You know, we're not meant to be in this solitude of running around our own thoughts inside our own heads: we go crazy. Solitary confinement is one of the worst tortures for any human being. And prisons have all the tortures in it, and that's one of them. So, and also, because when you're in prison, you're like a package in a way: they tell you when to move, they tell you when to get up; they tell you when you're gonna eat; they tell you when you're gonna go for exercise. And it's easy to collapse a sense of agency, of selfhood. Cause you're moved around like a package. But when someone says, "I'm coming to see you," you can experience your personhood. Like there must be something attractive about me as a person that would make a person fly from New Orleans to come see me. And the person then can experience themselves as valued. And then of course, in any relationship, all the best relationships are always mutual. So, this isn't about the kind, generous nun going and pouring herself like water on the dry, parched earth of these poor, needy human beings. There's a relationship that happens, and I receive from it. It's reciprocal; it's mutual; it's Cathy teaches me; I

teach Cathy. We look out for each other. She cares about me; I care about her. And that's what happens through presence. See, cause presence means that I'm going to stop all this circular stuff inside myself: me, what I need, what happened to me, and open, openness.

I love the story of the argument that the sun had with the wind, about the man coming down the road, and he had his coat on and they had an argument and a bet over who could make him take his coat off. So the wind said, "I'm powerful, I know I can make that guy take his coat off." So, the sun said, "You go first." So the wind whipped him around and the man just grabbed his coat and he's holding on, holding on tighter and tighter and tighter till the wind gave up. And the sun came out, and just shone. And got warmer and warmer. So, first he unbuttoned the coat, then he opened the coat, then he took the coat off. That's what relationship does; that is what we do with each other; we build trust.

So, I knew from the beginning, when I first started going to death row to visit Patrick Sonnier, fidelity was going to be the most important thing. Because I knew that road to Angola in Louisiana was filled with broken promises in his life and that what I needed to be was faithful. So, anytime I told him I'm coming, I'd come. Same with Cathy. And then the anticipation of a visit is also part of the joy. It's always to let the person know here's when I'm coming. And then for Cathy, it's also a joy because her friends, her daughter, the lawyers working on her team, the people working together for Cathy: a kind of community can come together, and Cathy plays a really big part in that. She's the first person I've ever been with who says, "Look, when you come, can invite so-and-so and so-and-so? And with all of you gathered together—and I kind of thought of a Jesus thing—kind of like, all of you gather, have a last supper, I can't be there, but you gather because I want all of you to be in a community, and I will be there, although I'll be unseen. I kind of think of it that way.

LORINS: As you're talking about presence and all of these other, sort of elaborations of that in your relational experiences, I'm think again about the roles in story telling and how one of them is listening. And I guess, Im wondering how you personally cultivate compassionate listening. Because there's, you know, ways of hearing someone's story, and then there's deep listening. I'm wondering—

PREJEAN: It's an art that we learn, I think. And, of course, I grew up in a loving family. So, I was used to being listened to as a child. Not overboard. But, I'm going, "Mama, mama, mama," you know, "Look at this" or "Mama, listen to this." So, I was used to being listened to. My daddy too. We would go on long family trips in the summer; we'd be like a month in the family station wagon. So, talking and listening, and storytelling, you know, funny stories, jokes, anecdotes, fun facts to know and tell, signs we were reading. And listening and speaking kind of go together when you have real dialogue. So, to learn to listen is—when I'm conscious of going to someone who hasn't had anybody to listen to them, I know that's the main thing I'm going to be doing. I remember that first visit, that first guy on death row, Patrick Sonnier, I was nervous. What do you say? What's it gonna be like? Can we talk about normal things? He's on death row because he murdered

somebody. I never talked to a murderer. All these categories we have—that I had of him—and the minute I got there, from the time I looked at him and saw that human face, I didn't have to worry at all about what I was going to say as part of the conversation: "If he says this, should I say this?" Ninety-nine percent of that first visit I listened to him. And he senses—human beings, we sense when we're being listened to by somebody who really cares about us, and that is the beginning of the trust I think that happened and keeps happening.

LORINS: You started to talk about your childhood and some of the influence on your love of stories through your parents. I'm wondering, are there any other important markers in your childhood or early development where you think stories played a role?

PREJEAN: Huge. I come from a—we're part Cajun in Louisiana! You cannot sit in a backyard with a whole table full of boiled crabs or shrimp or crawfish for three hours and not learn how to share and swap stories. Conversation back and forth. People in Louisiana cultivate jokes. Hey, what's the latest Boudreaux Thibodeaux joke? So I had a mom and daddy that gave great parties. And whether it's in the formal dining room where the table's all set, or whether it's in the backyard, with crawfish, boiled crawfish heaped on the table, I watched that as a child and I'd hear them laughing. Long after we'd go to bed, we'd go upstairs, they were outside and you could adults talking, laughing, swapping stories, these different personalities you get to know. And I grew up with that. We had it all the time.

Then of course, in going to Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, one of the great things about Catholic ritual is there's silence, and so you're learning to listen. And through meditation, or mystical listening, like with the words of scripture, you learn that whenever you stop talking and you listen, it's not dead inside there, there are all kind of voices that come up. And to learn to listen to the different voices even within myself, which is what meditation is. And I've kept a journal, not a diary; it's a soul journal. It's what's rising up within me; and it's a way I also have of discerning, where, from a point of view of faith, where as a Christian I try to follow the way of Jesus. What is it that I'm called to do? Because we are a people of action, we are doers. We're not just meditators and thinkers. We are people who live to act. And so, what is it? And that's how priorities—I got to do this; I got to do this. I just—something just emerged in my prayer over the last two days. I take one person at a time on death row. I just realized—I'm thinking even of all the guys in Louisiana; I'm thinking of all the guys in Texas. They don't have a spiritual advisor. They don't have anyone. Most people are totally abandoned. And so, is it enough for me to say, I take one person. So, I'm thinking, Louisiana, who's the Catholic chaplain there now? Very decent guy, this priest. What would it mean to contact the diocese of Baton Rouge, and to just say, let's get the name of all the names of all the people on Death Row. Can the Catholic Diocese begin to minister to all those people? Then everyone would have a visitor. Then everyone has someone to listen to them and to accompany them. And so it's not just of who I'm doing, like that's never going to be enough. The cry—you know, my favorite—one of my favorite passages in scripture is the burning bush in Exodus, where what I called from the studies and scriptures I've done—It's one of the first revelations of

the heart of God, of who this Hebrew God Yahweh is. And it is from the burning bush I have heard the cry of my people.

And we live in a busy society, a trivializing society, a consumer society: buy this, buy that, now you can shop online. So that we fill our lives with getting things, or even young people getting caught in it, “I’ve gotta be in the in-crowd, I gotta have these kind of tennis shoes or jeans or whatever. But, “I’ve heard the cry,” well, it took me a long time to hear the cry of the poor in my own city of African American people. I was separated by culture, separated by prejudice, I didn’t even know what white privilege was, and when I awakened to the cry, it’s—I don’t know—I experienced it as mercy because I awakened to it and then it made me come alive because I began to respond and I began to learn. That’s the story in *Dead Man Walking*, the first part of it is waking up, that the gospel of Jesus isn’t about going around, being a nice nun, practicing charity and praying and hoping people get to be in heaven with God one day. Like, what are they going through now, and realizing how insensitive I had been to African American people and their struggles, simply because—not because I was a bad person—I was just cushioned off, it was like gauzed over, protected. Never heard the cry, never saw the suffering in the Jim Crow days. I just thought, this is what culture does to—Oh, it’s better for the races to be separated, honey, they’d tell me. Oh no, it’s better for them to sit in their place in Church, and better for the races to be separate, because you just fight. Better for them to have their own schools. And to awaken out of that of course was the personal encounter with real people who when I woke up in the St. Thomas housing projects—this great nun—Lori Schaff—member of our community—started this place called Hope House twenty years before I woke up. So, I move into the St. Thomas housing projects cause that’s where Hope House was, and the first thing she told me was, Helen, you don’t have to have a blueprint in your back pocket of how you’re gonna obliterate poverty. Just be neighbor. Listen to the people and let them teach you. And from your hearing them and their stories and their suffering, it will arise in your heart what it is that you are called to do. And that’s the way it works.

LORINS: So I'm wondering if you can talk even a little bit more about these obstacles people have to listening. What are people's obstacles and what are ways to—

PREJEAN: Yeah. Well, I would point to just in all of us—This is for all of us, my own as well. I’m writing my—it’s called *River of Fire*, my spiritual journey, which is really going to tell my story, of, we grow up protected—I think of it as like tidal pools. You got the great big ocean out there, but finally, I’m in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Or you’re growing up in Austin, Texas. Or you’re out in the country. Tidal pools, where we get all our signals: this is the way life is; this is the way we do things, honey; this is who you mix with, this is who you don’t. So, culture, and the region of the country we’re in—this is Texas, we’re tough in Texas, we do the death penalty, don’t mess with Texas. All that’s part of a cultural image, so that, “Yeah, we execute these criminals,” and then we hear politicians who come out of the deep South, who run for whatever office, saying “Yeah, the more executions the better. We’ve gotta fight fire with fire, that’s the only language these people know.” All that’s part of culture.

Religion is part of culture. Or the lack of it is part of culture. So, if you belong to a religious tradition, it's always within human community. It's always gonna show up as a mixed bag. I mean, we never get Jesus pure. You never get Buddhism pure. You never get anybody pure. It's because it's gonna be coded for us and come to us through people that we have experience with. And so, religion can--as we've seen from the right wing religious community that then hooked into politics in the born again Christian, Tea Party mix, you have some of the harshest people in the world, because they're saying things like, well, if they're poor, they must be poor because they could work hard. My granddaddy laid cobblestones, my--and people start telling their story. So it's harsh judgment against people, which right away puts the lens on, and, Don't let them take anything away from me and my hard-working family. So where are people getting this? They get it from their friends. They get it from the political party they belong to or not. All those are sources of the lens that have put on us for us to be able to see. Then of course there's education. If we are blessed to have good teachers, who know that their mission is not to fill our heads in the banking system of education with all kind of facts that we will just spew out on a test and rank high for the school, but realize that it's about awakening curiosity, it's about awakening—Now, what are your gifts? How about reading this book? I heard about this teacher that gave a young kid, early on, the Greek myths. She loved the Greek mythological stories. So here, this kid is reading the Iliad and the Odyssey when he's in eighth grade. And he loved it! His soul! Where's this child and where are the gifts and the bent and the attractions to awaken that in them? So education is also—art can be a huge obstacle. Any signal that comes to a child, and they say it's pretty set now, it's scary. But by the time a child is in third grade they don't have a sense of their ability to learn things and be able to dig into things, and they have a sense of defeat. It's stacked against them from there on out. Somebody could do remedial work and help them to come alive. I think of all of it as coming alive. It's interesting that in Aramaic, that Jesus spoke, there was no word for savior. It was all about I've come and we can have life. We're here with each other to be more alive. We bring each other to life. Education is another one of those places. So yeah, politics. Religion. Education. The movies that are shown. What are the big hits? What keeps being shown on TV? Media, media, media. Feeds us at night with all images of violence, of what's going on in our city no matter how many peaceful things have gone on. So we begin to get an image of ourselves as somebody who could easily be murdered, that danger's all around. They've done studies on Americans. We're the most paranoid people in the world. We think people are waiting to just murder us because that's all the media pumps into people before they go to bed at night. So all those are factors and influences. Then things—marvelous things--can happen that can change us, you know? People began to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When there was still slavery. And they began to break through and see slaves as human beings in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And then—well, I learned this from Walter—bury the chains. The story of the twelve men in a printer shop in London in 1878, who make a decision that the slave trade in Britain is going to end. Well they don't have a snowball's chance in hell of doing that. Ninety percent of the people in the world at that time just took it for granted that some people were property, it's the way life is. How did they do that? In twenty years, by 1807, the British slave trade, by parliament, was made illegal. And it was abolished. How did they do that? We wake each other up. And they found the ways. They wrote a book. They got on the road, they talked to people. They began to make connections that, That sugar you're putting in your tea comes from sugar fields.

Who's working those sugar cane fields? They began to make connections and they got to the women, who couldn't even vote at that time. But they were the householders. They're the ones doing the shopping. So then all of a sudden, Honey, we're not getting any more sugar for your tea because you know where the sugar comes from? So honey, until we don't have those slaves, we're not having sugar in our tea. And so it happens. It's marvelous. And I've experienced it a little bit, because in 1993 when I wrote *Dead Man Walking*, it was the height of support for the death penalty in the United States. In Ninety Six, seventy-eight percent of the American Public supported the death penalty. And in the deep south states that practiced slavery like Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia--it was eighty five percent support. And here this Catholic nun writes a book on the death penalty and it's published in ninety three and came out in paperback in ninety four, what are the chances of this book? And then it made its way. And this is where we know we're participating in a larger providence, we play our little part, but it's all part of the deeper, wider, community of people who work for human rights and for restorative justice that killing is not the way. And that book had its way of going out there. By ninety-four when it was made into a paperback, it went into the lap of Susan Sarandon. Who was filming one of the John Grisham movies in Memphis. *The Client*. She had time in her trailer. Her friend Arlene hands her the book. See, a book has tremendous power. I had to learn the power of a book, cause see, I'm a talker. And we tell stories and I think if you talk and you're doing something, right, you can see your audience, we can go on this ride together, see? But a book—I always pictured a book was passive. Like I always pictured in a bookstore you look at all the books. Like if that book could have a little finger that could come out of the spine and the little finger in the book could go, hey, read me. Read me. Look. I got this story. But the little book has to just sit there. I always thought a book was passive. What could a book do. And then this book begins to go out there and I begin to see the power of the story. I had a great editor. Jason Epstein. I credit him with the book not only seeing the light of day but playing a role in this country of sparking part of the national dialogue that happened. Because when he helped me—when I did the first draft of *Dead Man Walking* I know—I want to take people with me. Never did this before, go to death row, visit the man on death row, look through that man's screen, ooh, he's a human being. You're about human rights, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he has human rights, he shouldn't be tortured, he shouldn't be killed, growing, coming to understand the legal system, everything. He murdered. With his brother, two innocent teenage kids. The boy, David LeBlanc, was just seventeen years old. The young woman, Loretta Bourque, was just eighteen years old. The picture their parents sent into the—for the newspaper was their prom photo—a happy night. And then there's the terrible headline: Teenagers Found Murdered. And when I entered then into this part of the story, oh my God. This man, who's dignity I believe in, who's human rights I believe in, he brutally killed these two innocent kids and their family never saw them alive again. They went to a football game and they never saw them alive again. And I'm with him? That kind of guilt, like, What am I doing with him? And then the big mistake, not reaching out to the victim's families. Because I made an assumption. I'm the spiritual advisor of the man who killed these kids, they are never going to want to see me. Basically, though, when I turned in the first draft to Jason Epstein, he said, Helen, you really downplayed not reaching out to those victim's families. He said, that was a big mistake. You're really downplaying it. You need to—it was cowardice, wasn't it. And while I was saying, they don't want to see me, it was—I was

really scared. That they'd be angry, that they'd reject me, that they'd throw me out of the house. He said, look, write your story. But don't just take people with you on the peaks of the waves when you're doing all right. Take them on the cross when you make mistakes. Then they're gonna trust you. As a storyteller. Cause we all wanna kind of couch things, oh, here's what I did well. So you take them there. So in the second draft, he helped me tremendously. He also helped me, he said, you buried all of your information about the death penalty, how race plays a part, how poverty plays a part. It's all in footnotes. Only a scholar's going to read footnotes. The secret of good storytelling is people are gonna read for story, but you weave in all the important parts of information you want them to know about how the death penalty works. The scholars later will dig deeper, but before a person closes the cover of that book they're gonna know all the important things about how the death penalty works that you want them to see. And that's the art of good writing. So he helped tremendously. So Susan, when she gets the book, see, she sees that I am really going over to both sides of it. The book has been reissued, the twentieth anniversary, it's very unusual for a publisher to do, but they see it as important in the discourse in the country. Random House. Really big publisher, part of Bertelmen's now, it's huge. But Susan could see. Here's a nun getting in over her head. She doesn't know what she's doing. That's helpful for a story. Because people are gonna follow the [inaudible]—I got a letter from a man after he went to see the movie *Dead Man Walking*, he said, Sister, I'm gonna tell you, I said to myself, that nun no more knows what she's getting herself into with that convict, he's gonna con her and that's part of the story, see. Here comes somebody who doesn't know what they're doing. And Susan Sarandon loves to talk about it and so does Tim Robbins. Here's a nun getting in over her head, and when you see Susan in the film *Dead Man Walking* you see her going to the prison, her eyes real big, she's scared. Getting into something, boy this is new territory, I don't know what I'm doing. Anybody can follow that kind of journey. Just compare it to here she is speaking before Congress, here she is saying this is why the death penalty's wrong. For us then like the picture's closed. It's kind of like when you take a saint and you make 'em a saint. You put 'em on a pedestal. There's a disconnect if people are too perfect, if they're too accomplished. And this came out in a lot of ways as we were writing the script of the film. There was a scene when I was with my family, and Mama says to me, "Helen, honey, what has drawn you? This is the end of the line, people here. They're on death row. Wouldn't your time be better spent with the children in Saint Thomas, like saving them from going to prison and death row?" And I was an active part of writing the script with them. We worked on it together. And I had written in, a pretty nice little "Jesus speech," cause I had said, "Well, Mama, Jesus was always with the margined people, the outcasts, the people nobody cared about. I'm just trying to do what Jesus did." So Susan Sarandon's looking at that, she says, "Well,"—she crosses out my whole Jesus speech and says, "It kind of sounds like the company line. Here goes the nun now. She's gonna give us the Jesus speech. Of course! That's what nuns do. Predictable." She says, "How about this, and she wrote one little sentence in it. Mama. I feel more caught than drawn. He asked me to come." Anybody watching this journey can be part of that. Yeah. You get caught. So you're going. You don't know where it's going to go. And then I called Susan the hero of the film because she realized we needed a new kind of narrative film about the death penalty. What you'd call the master narrative, predictable, formulaic film that had been in the United States up to the time the dead man walking was, the whole film was about is he innocent, guilty, is she innocent guilty. Okay, yeah, we find

out they're guilty. Ends with the execution, justice is done, end of film, end of reflection. And she said, we have to bring—and keep bringing—the audience over to both sides of this suffering. Because what we're told—oh, this is the way we're gonna help our victims' family, we're gonna get justice for them.

If somebody killed your daughter, how would you feel about their getting life in prison? They're alive she's dead forever. Only one justice, one way of justice, and that is if they kill they deserve to die too, and we're gonna do this for the victim's family. And she said, we have to explode that. We have to show. And the film—Tim Robbins felt very happy when victims' families were getting in touch with him after the film *Dead Man Walking* came out. Because they saw how sensitively he dealt with victims' families. And by sensitive means—no caricatures. What do you expect of a victim's family? A father's daughter has been killed. You see him screaming into the TV lens, "I wanna kill him with my own hands! I wish I could pull the switch! I wanna see him experience pain!" A caricature of a human being who's in great trauma, outrage, grief, all in chaos inside himself. And so they show, in the film *Dead Man Walking*, you have the Percys, who come to the whole thing about the death penalty, yes, this is what we think justice will be, they go through the film, they witness the execution, they walk off the screen, and as far as we know about the Percys, they're fine with that. They don't have any questions. But then the other victim's family, Earl Delacroix, who's son had been killed, you see that he wants the execution too, this is what everybody's telling him, This is what justice is gonna be. And then we see him after the execution, coming to me, again, there at the graveyard, they're just burying Matthew Poncelet, and he goes, "I don't know why I'm here." Clearly in his face, you know that witnessing the execution was not enough, and then—Susan gave us these lines in the film, too—"Sister," he says, "I don't have your faith." And she says, "It's not faith, it's work." We have to play a part in this. Maybe we can find a way together. And the film actually ends with prayer. It ends with my praying with Earl Delacroix, who in the book *A Dead Man Walking* was really Lloyd LeBlanc, who's son had been killed, and I would go to this chapel to pray with him. And he's the real hero of the book, cause he's a man who was thrown into the crucible of suffering. Losing his only son, and found a way out of it through forgiveness. Which, he said, people see as weakness. In this society, everybody thinks forgiveness is weak, like you're condoning it. Oh, you killed my son, I forgive you—means it's okay. It's not okay. You can never condone it. But his journey—and he's the most exciting one, I think, in the whole revelation—everybody goes through a change in a film, in a good film. And as Susan Sarandon said to Sean Penn, the one who goes through the most change is the hero of the story. And of course that's Sean Penn dealing with what he did and finally owning it and taking responsibility. But the victim's family goes through change, too. Because as Lloyd LeBlanc, the real guy in the story, told me, "Sister, everybody was saying to me, Lloyd, you lost your only son. You gotta be for the death penalty or look like you didn't love David. You gotta be for it, or what's wrong with you." He said, "That's all I was hearing. Sister, you weren't there"—and I wasn't, that was my big sin—and the way he came through it was, he said, "I went there. I said they're right, I see how my wife's suffering, my daughter, all of us." And he said, "I wanna pull the switch, I went to that place," he said. "I wanna see their pain, they caused us pain. I wanna see their pain, I wanna see them die for what they did." And then he reached a point and he said—and he did his hands like this—and he said, "Uh-uh. They killed my son, and I'm not gonna

let 'em kill me. Because I've always been a kind person. I love to help people. It's just who I am, and I was losing it. I was becoming this person filled with this hatred and bitterness. They killed my son and I'm not letting them kill me. And I'mma do what Jesus did." And he set his face to go down the road. The last words in *Dead Man Walking* are about this man and the last sentence of the book is, "Forgiveness was never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for, struggled for, and won." And I've found, in dealing with victims' families, who is the community around them? What tidal pool are they in? What else is going on in their life? The people I've found who are the most isolated, or haven't had solid, good relationships in family, get fixated on the execution as the way that their gonna do the right thing for their son or daughter. And I mean, poor parents. Nobody's a perfect parent. And then suddenly your child is killed. And so all of those things, whatever guilt-- which everybody has, and because this culture of ours says, This is how you really show you love your child, you're for the death penalty. And this is what we're gonna do for you. And it re-victimizes them, so often. And that's why when New Jersey did away with the death penalty bout four years ago, sixty-two murder victims' families testified before the legislature. Said, Don't kill for us. The death penalty re-victimizes us. You're telling us we're gonna wait ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years, and then you're gonna summon us to a place where we can send a representative to watch you kill the one who killed our loved one? And that's supposed to heal us? And they're getting a kind of notoriety. Nobody knows the name of the victims. Everybody knows Ted Bundy. Everybody knows Timothy McVeigh. Everybody knows the name. It's a kind of notoriety they get and we're even more lost. And our wound is open and public. So the media can come to us every time there's a change in the disposition or status of the case because it's public knowledge. Well how do you feel now? You got another stay of execution. And it just keeps jerking them around. And so more and more of them have figured out, That doesn't heal us. We need to be able to build our family back together. And if we never hear his name again, if he goes into prison and we never hear his name again, that is the way we can begin to move on with our lives. Because his life would be settled. So it's actually this promise of so-called closure-- which only psychiatrists knew in the sixties, it's interesting--but when the death penalty started coming in, you started hearing that word "closure." Closure. And I've been in the death chamber here in Texas, where over five-hundred people have been killed, and all in our names, supposedly to help us not to be a society of violence. Such a profound moral contradiction, which kids get. Patrick Quigley's daddy was working on Wayne Feld's case in Louisiana, he was a vietnam vet who had killed a man in a bar. Louisiana was gonna execute him. Bill's a lawyer, sitting by Patrick's bed, cause Patrick was going through this thing with monsters under his bed. So Bill Quigley and Debbie his wife would take turns sitting. Bill's reading, Wayne Feld's case, Patrick says, Dad, what did he do? He said, Well, son, he did a terrible thing. The worst thing you can do. He killed a man. He got in a fight in a bar. And Patrick said, well, Dad, what are they gonna do to him? He said, well, they wanna execute him. They wanna kill him, and I'm the lawyer on the team trying to save his life. And then Patrick said, well Dad, who's gonna kill them for killing him? Kids get it. It's called the Patrick Question. I know of two master's theses that have been written on Patrick's Question. Well, who will kill them for killing him?

PREJEAN: And in the killing chamber here in Texas, you have these three witnessing stations. One is the official witnesses—they're across. The gurney's

of the victims. And the image that came to me, which I've done in talks ever since and it's the way I wrote the book, with Jason helping me even in the writing of the book--is the image of the cross, which is so misinterpreted, of Jesus on the cross. Because there's a terrible theology of atonement, Yeah, you did the crime, you're gonna suffer on the cross. Through your death and the death penalty you're gonna get eternal life. Really wrongly interpreted. But to me, it's the stretching out on both arms that it stretches us. That on one of the arms is the perpetrator of the crime. So let's stand in the outrage. let's face what the perpetrator has done. So what ought we to do to him? On the other arm is the innocent victim, wake up on an ordinary day, before the day's over your life is shattered, your child is dead, your wife is having a mental breakdown, and what do we do as a society? And the secret I've found out--not so much a secret, but the journey is to fairly go over to both sides of that cross. So I spend as much time in a talk, talking about the journey of victim's families as I do about the man who did the crime and his last hours in the execution chamber and that whole protocol of death, how the guards are involved, what happens to them and the whole thing.

PREJEAN: And that's the way Tim Robbins structured the film of *Dead Man Walking*. And I just heard from him in the final editing of it, when Matthew Poncelet finally acknowledges guilt and confesses what he did and asks you know forgiveness of the victim's family, the people editing with Tim said, "Tim, you got the audience now," cause, you know, through all the film, you don't like him, you know he's not being responsible. "Don't show the crime again." And Tim Robbins said, "I don't want to have the audience." And so in the final scene, you go back and see the victims killed. So then the audience leaves in silence as the theater manager said because they're thinking, Here's a terrible crime; we know he did it; he was executed; here are the victims suffering and what was done to them. And it then takes the discussion and dialogue into the heart of the audience. What are we going to do about this?

LORINS: So—that still prompts me to think about the different spaces you bring stories to. Because we already talked about listening to stories, but there's also story sharing and the spaces in which you share stories can affect the telling of them, the listening of them, and you mentioned the way the media look for stories. I was thinking earlier when you were talking about stories in your religious life—I was thinking about the space of the confessional as a kind of place to kind of tell—to talk about your experiences.

PREJEAN: Mm-hm. Well, when it's done well. The confessional—see, the community is really—it can be. A confession to a priest can be a space in which we say a story of what we've done wrong and what we're not proud about because we're trying to break out of it. Wherever we can be in the presence of someone who's compassionate and merciful, and can help us to be honest. We have to trust. If you don't trust, you're never going to share this. So the confessional is a means—The pope we have now: I don't know where he came from; I think he was just dropped right out of the sky in the Catholic Church. Cause he's saying to priests about confession, "Mercy. Compassion to people. You're not the one to be the censor," and so forth. So—the confessional. But when you think of the role of community: husbands and wives, friends

with each other. When we can really trust somebody to say, “I’m going to tell you this is the worst thing I ever did. Imagine the groundwork of trust before you can say that to anybody. And there’s a lot of ways we go to confession to each other. Receive it and then help each other then heal from it. And then, that’s the good thing about a friend is that we can trust them. Yeah—I’m sure we must have shot the roll by now.

LORINS: We’re coming to the end here, yeah.

PREJEAN: We’re coming to the end? [laughter] Anyway that’s interesting, though. The space. And it makes me think about what spaces did I have to tell this story.

LORINS: Okay, hold on. Let’s maybe do a few more minutes and—

PREJEAN: Yeah.

[TAPE 1 ENDS]

[TAPE 2]

REBECCA LORINS: I'll tell you — So, here we are again with Sister Helen. So we were just talking about spaces in which we tell stories and how that can affect the listening and the telling.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN: I soon learned to bring this story to the public about someone who's done a terrible murder. He's executed and the story of the victim's family. A piece in this was missing. The story would never take hold in the public. And that piece that would be missing would be to stand with people in the outrage that we feel when innocent people are killed. And I learned, that if I don't stand with them in the outrage of this, and really get into this life shattered, this child alive standing in the kitchen—this was David LeBlanc, seventeen year old boy, getting ready to go to a football game with his girlfriend—standing by that kitchen sink. His mama had given him a new long-sleeve blue velour shirt. And he's rubbing the arms, saying Mama, this is going to keep me warm at the football game tonight. And later, his daddy saying, Yeah, but it sure couldn't keep him alive. To just stand in outrage, that—I think it's ethical to feel outrage. We have to stand in outrage. We can't so quickly move over to the human rights and the need to have a compassionate society. If we don't—and I learned this—if I didn't learn to stand with the public, that I'm taking from scratch in this story now, this isn't a Quaker group at a Friends meeting. This is the American public, in Texas, or anywhere, that if I ever omitted that, or cut it short, they couldn't come with me on the rest of the story. It's kind of like what happened with the students when I was first trying out the story and trying to tell it at Loyola University in New Orleans. And they go, you don't care about the victims, all you care is about the human rights of this guy. And they're—they're spewing it out. They're just rejecting it. They—and all their energies then are you don't care about the victims, you don't care about the victims. So that brought me much deeper and into my own outrage. Because then you're putting yourself on a kind of cross, to stand in the ambiguity and the tension of being outraged on the one hand, and then the other, to be able to be with this person as a human being.

It's a presence that I have to constantly strive for because when you're with people, and you see what they're suffering on death row, and you also know all the mistakes in the justice system that people don't have a clue about, it's really easy to get in the one-sidedness of their human rights and compassion for them. But when we take the public through a story, we have got to bring them over to the fire of both sides of this. And I had to learn that—had to learn that. See, because, for example, we just had something that happened in Louisiana. The heat index in people's bodies on death row, for eighty days, reached a hundred and sixty because the new death row's built out of bricks with just louvers for windows because it was supposed to be air-conditioned. The ventilation broke soon after they built it. The hot sun of the Western sky would beat on the walls, they have no cross-ventilation, and people are breaking down under the heat. A lawsuit's filed that they have to deal with the heat cause it's cruel and unusual punishment. I get that. And then, when the word got out in the news, letters to the editor in the Baton Rouge paper, one after the other. Yeah, let them sweat it out on death row. You know what you do? Take a picture of their victim. Put it in that good hot cell because their victim doesn't feel anything. They're

buried under the ground. Let them sweat it out. Let them have breakdowns from the heat. Their victim doesn't feel anything.

And all these letters to the editor were just a heavy strand of don't try to make us feel sorry for these people. Because, see, the killing of a human person is the ultimate abyss. It's a chasm that's crossed then. So the way we deal with that and help people to stand there, it's not going to be short, quick discussions. One of the things we soon learned, those of us trying to end the death penalty, the time to have discourse with the public is not at executions. Cause the way the media presents it is, here's the terrible crime, here's the punishment, we're going to be fair on both sides, give it equal space, that's their formulaic thing that they've gotten into. That's not when you're going to move people. You have to be able to bring people into a space where you can deal with the horror of it, but you can also prepare the way for what human rights means, and that it's about us as a society. What does it mean for us? But you have to bring people there. You can't start there. You can't start with compassion and human rights for the one, for the perpetrator of the crime. You gotta descend, it's the only way. And then, to come through it. And what's good about books, when people are reading, they're silent. They're not debating. They're using their imaginations. They're going to all those places. It's very intimate. I'm imagining this, oh my god, look, I've been through the murder of those two teenage—but look now, the guards are bringing him in, they're strapping him in. This guard is saying he can't sleep afterwards because he knows he's helping to kill somebody who's defenseless. They can go to all those places inside and it can be a deeper reflection. It's a way—a book is a safe space to break open a story. And you can change the attitudes of a lifetime by reading a book.

LORINS: Thank you, Sister Helen.

PREJEAN: Thank you. Great conversation. We talked —

[TAPE 2 ENDS]