

Execution about revenge, not justice

Report: A Chinese hospital is selling livers from executed prisoners.

Enough talk of new millenniums and congratulating ourselves on advances of the human condition during the 20th century of recent and bloody memory; let's gang up and kill somebody. Our Massachusetts Legislature not long ago came within only one last-minute vote reversal of reintroducing the death penalty. (Strange for a group storied to be 75 percent Irish Catholic; Pope John Paul II has traveled the world preaching and practicing forgiveness, not vengeance.) Florida recently passed a speeded-up appeal/review process similar to the one pioneered in Texas in order to dispatch convicted murderers much more quickly, in five years instead of seven. Ironically, the last 100 unjustly condemned prisoners who were ultimately freed spent an average seven years on Death Row before being reprieved. Texas is No. 1 in killings by the state — over 100 during George W. Bush's tenure. Florida and Texas, in unhappy coincidence, are Southern states led by the brothers Bush.

Does anyone else see a pattern here?

Revenge, after love, must be the strongest human emotion; to strike back when hit is an automatic response. No thought, no compassion, no reasoning about what we may be doing to ourselves in the moment. Hit hard. Feel better. Instant comfort.

That's why unrepentant killers are portrayed as animals. Animals react, humans are said to be of a higher nature, made in the image of God. Crossing over to the 21st century we Americans find ourselves against the flow of history regarding imposition of the death penalty. Consider this from the January 17, New Yorker: "Capital punishment has been abolished in Europe. In Russia, Boris Yeltsin recently



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commuted seven hundred death sentences ... Amnesty International reported last month, only five other countries beside the United States — Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen — have executed juvenile offenders in the last decade, and Yemen has since banished this practice." America, therefore, is increasingly out of step with the rest of the civilized world. Many of our politicians continue to call for adult trials and death sentences for our nation's juvenile criminals. A policy without hope and, for impulsive young killers, not a deterrent at all.

One of my earliest youthful memories is of my father pointing out the Hospital Hill stone monument to James Halligan and Dominic Daley, saying: "That's where they hung the first two Irishmen who came to Northampton." It was a powerful exercise in grasping one's roots. And, the

story goes, a classic miscarriage of justice. Recently, reading the Hampshire Gazette's account of the event, I found it hard to believe that 15,000 people witnessed the double hanging here June 5, 1806. A crowd that large had to come from many miles around. A grand day out! Maybe that's why I cringe from idly gawking at potential injustice of the terminal sort. My father, in his way, was stating John Donne's meditation: "... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

Justice and forgiveness are not contradictory things. Holyoke Patrolman John DiNapoli's daughter selflessly forgave her father's killer at her father's funeral. In Northern Ireland, after the Inniskillen bombing, a grieving father forgave his daughter's killers on TV, despite the fact that she had died in his arms a few hours before. Thoughtful people like these inspiringly show humankind's capacity to rise above its vengeful nature.

A strong Texas voice against the death penalty is Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of the Galveston-Houston Diocese. Writing in the current issue of Columbia magazine, he makes this case against capital punishment: "Of 17,000 people who commit murder (in the U.S.) each year, roughly 2,000 are eligible for the death sentence and about 250 will actually receive a sentence of death. It is applied disproportionately and indiscriminately to the poor and minorities."

Pray for peace. Work for justice. Those are much more than words on a bumper sticker.

Jim Cahillane, a Northampton native who lives in Williamsburg, writes a monthly column.