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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | March 5, 2011

While serving time at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Lane Nelson spent 18 years as a staff writer and later managing editor for the nation's most renowned prison magazine, *The Angolite*. He covered a wide range of subjects, including Angola's long-term population and hepatitis-C behind bars, and he interviewed and profiled several men just days before their executions. Nelson himself spent two years on death row at one point coming within five days of being executed before a judge overturned his death sentence citing inadequate counsel. Lane Nelson received a pardon based on good behavior and his volunteer work at Angola. In January he rejoined the free world after 29 1/2 years behind bars. Nelson has opened his own business, Capital Punishment Consulting Agency (CPCA), offering services that extend outside the area of the death penalty to general matters concerning criminal justice and prison life, and he is available for speaking engagements.

In this memoir piece, titled *A Death Row Experience: The Summer of 1987*, Nelson writes about a fateful period on Angola's death row when men were being executed just days apart. At the time, Louisiana's death sentences were carried out in the electric chair.

Just before they moved Jimmy to the death house, he took his final shower. It was early in the morning and the 13-cell tier was silent. I lay on my bunk listening to the running water and wondered, How hard is this last shower for Jimmy? Is he thinking, This is the last shower I will ever take?

Now every time I take a shower, the fresh memory of Jimmy haunts me. Soon, in this very spot, I will take my last shower. Will I soak in it, uselessly stalling for time? Will I cry in it?

I now pause in the middle of writing letters and think, In my last hours will I write all the letters I need to write? Will I forget to tell someone good-bye? In the middle of writing someone I love, will the minutes tick away and the guards come for me before I finish?

Louisiana. The summer of 1987. Four men executed in the last nine days. Two of the men I knew well. One praised God with his last words. The other said simply, I think I'd rather be fishing. Two different personalities. Two different spiritual beliefs. Two friends gone. It has left me devastated. I sit on death row and wait.

My wait so far has been five years, six months, and I have remained calm through the course of my appeals. But with my appeals nearing their end and with this sudden string of executions, a storm of fear and questions have pushed their way to the surface. The finality of death now overwhelms me.

The night Jimmy was executed I laid in my bunk and prayed for him, and counted down the minutes with him. Emotionally exhausted, I dozed off and woke up 25-minutes later drenched in sweat and gritting my teeth. I felt empty inside. My watch read 12:15 a.m.

Later that morning as news reports confirmed Jimmy was executed at 12:14 a.m. It was at that moment I began to drown in tortuous questions. Was I overreacting? Was I weaker than the other ten men left on my tier?

Lifting my head out of my hands, I noticed John standing in front of my cell. His hands trembling, his voice quivering. I'll fight the guards when my time comes, he said. His voice did not ring with anger, but cracked with hopelessness.

In the initial stages of his appeals, John has never doubted he would win a new trial, until now. And so I discover I am not alone to my reaction to the Executioner. Like my cell neighbor, I have my own doubts and fears. I find myself rehearsing day and night the orderly and sterile procedure planned for my death: the last shower, the handshakes and good-byes, the heavily escorted walk in tight shackles to the death house, the 12-hour excruciating wait in the death cell, someone shaving my head and legs and afterwards having to wear a diaper. Then, the last short walk to take my seat in the chair that will burn me into eternity.

I also think about giving my last statement, wondering what my final words should be. It is important to me that I say something spiritual, and perhaps something concerning the injustice of capital punishment. I will be nervous for sure staring out at those who witness my execution, most there because they want to see me die. Will I choke on my words and end up saying nothing? Worse, will I ramble on nervously, making no sense to anyone? Or while standing in front of the witnesses, the media vultures, will I decide to say

nothing at all, thinking, Whats the use, what worth will my words have? And nothing I say now is going to stop them from killing me.

There is no evading the thoughts of the execution itself. Like a kid forcing himself to watch a scary part of a horror movie, I find myself forcing thoughts over the execution. Recently, I dug down to the bottom of my locker box and pulled up a book I had read a few years earlier. *The Brethren: Inside the Supreme Court*. Opening it to page 225, one paragraph is enough:

When the executioner throws the switch that send the electric current through the body, the prisoner cringes from torture, his flesh swells and his skin stretches to the point of breaking. He defecates, he urinates, his tongue swells and his eyeballs pop out. In some cases I have been told the eyeballs rest on the cheeks of the condemned. His flesh is so hot it cannot be touched by the human hand.

I close the book and shudder. Thats what it will be like.

Will the pain of 2,400 volts be excruciating? Because I have kept up a strenuous exercise routine the past six years, will the reflex of my physically fit body fight against the surging electricity and prolong the pain? How many times will they throw the switch before they decide Im dead and gone? Will I catch fire? Will I emit a terrible odor?

More disturbing are the spiritual questions that plague me. Does God really exist? If so, will He accept me? Is there a heaven and hell and where will I go? Is there something I am missing, something I dont understand?

For six years I have held faith in God and never doubted my sins have been forgiven. But at this moment I am unsure. Perhaps this fear that engulfs me is an indictment against my faith. Or maybe it is that I just dont want to reach heaven via the electric chair. Whatever it may be, I cannot deny these deep-seated emotions by pretending they dont exist. I cannot lie to myself as I stand at the threshold of eternity. There is no better prescription for self-honesty than staring death in the face.

I am beginning to understand that I should not be ashamed as I feel weak and fearful. There is no shame in honesty. My struggle, then, is to not let fear and doubt have the upper hand.

Once Jimmy finished his shower, the guards allowed him a quick trip down the tier, past each cell to shake hands good-bye. When he reached through my bars I gripped his hand tightly in mine, not wanting to let go. We just stood there in unnerving silence, staring into one anothers eyes. In his I could see a void of acceptance, and my own reflection. Finally, Jimmy broke the silence, Well Lane, be cool my brother. His words floated too simply. They shook me.

Alright Jimmy, and I added, When you get to the death cell do some praying. Its not too late and it sure cant hurt, ya know.

With a weak smile he replied, There you go preaching to me again. You know what time that is. Time for me to go. Softly breaking the tight grip of our hands he and with his eyes watering up he turned and walked away, down the tier and into the waiting arms of the guard team who would chain him up and escort him to the death house. Jimmy did go, forever.

He left me waiting, and struggling to find reassurance my faith will overcome the perplexing questions that storm my mind.



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Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

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@ Destiny : You can never right a wrong with another wrong; one crime (against the first commandment, for the Christians among you) with another crime (against the 1st commandment, i.d.) Moreover since the death penalty exists in the U.S. tens of innocents died and anyways : livelong lasts longer

I just remember what the innocent victims of the perps had to suffer and all sympathy for criminals disappears. They did the crimes.

Wow I just cant even imagine this. How horrible for these people. No matter what their crime this tops any crime I can think of. Torture is what this is. This is just MY opinion. Right, wrong or indifferent. Im sure there are those out there that would argue with my opinion. Difference of opinion I guess.

Wow my mind tries to go there I think I feel it I hurt like I feel it I think I can see it And then I realize no matter how much I think I can I cant. I only know that the ONLY thing that brings relief is the complete knowledge that even in our darkest moments God provides an incredible light I pray we all find it.just as Lane has

Thank you, this is one of the most touching pieces I have read.

I live in the UK where, fortunately, we no longer have the Death Penalty. If there ever was any doubt in my mind of just how barbaric this practice is, this has dispelled them.

How can the taking of a life right the crime?

Thank you, Jim and JeanIf only we could live our lives prepared for executionThe question of where we stand with God might be far more imminent and relevant than it is in the normal course of life

Stan Moody

<https://moodyreport.wordpress.com>

P.O. Box 11374

Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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