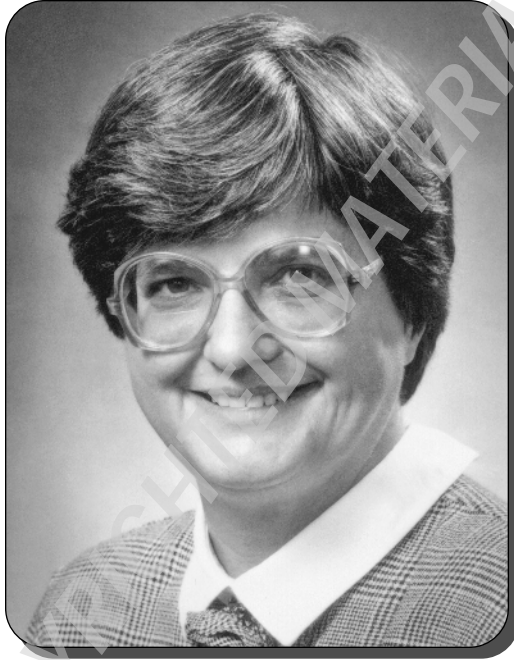


One
Sister Helen Prejean



Some day, after we have mastered the wind, the waves, the tide, and gravity, we shall harness the energies of love. Then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

ON A COLD day in January of 1982, Sister Helen Prejean had a brief conversation with a colleague from the Louisiana State Prison Coalition about becoming a pen pal to a man on death row, a convicted murderer named Patrick Sonnier. She was teaching high school dropouts at an inner city housing project in New Orleans at the time, with no experience working in

prisons and little familiarity with the judicial and political systems that govern the life and death of the inmates. But she took Sonnier's address and sent him a letter. Little did she know that this simple act of kindness would eventually give rise to a personal and spiritual metamorphosis that, along the way, would include a Pulitzer Prize-nominated book, an Academy Award-winning movie, speaking engagements throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan, and the unleashing in her of a passion that is nothing short of inspired.

The root word for inspiration in Greek, *inspiro*, means "to breathe into." Being Sonnier's spiritual advisor and walking with him to his execution, meeting his family and the families of his victims, interacting with the prison officials and politicians who orchestrated his death, all breathed a fire into her that now defines her every thought and action. When her book, *Dead Man Walking*, was released, it hit the *New York Times* best-seller list almost immediately and remained there for eight months. It also catalyzed advocates on both sides of America's system of capital punishment and became an extraordinary example of the power of unconditional love.

I first became aware of Sister Helen's work with death row inmates in 1995, when Tim Robbins's film based on her book was released. I was glad to know she was doing this work. It was important and necessary, I believed. But I kept my distance from the film, even after it won an Academy Award. Though I did not know it then, I came to understand that my reticence was not all that uncommon, that many people keep her work at arm's length for one reason or another. My reserve did not, however, prevent her name from entering my consciousness like a meteor descending to Earth as I sat at my desk one morning four years later musing about women to talk with for this book. Once her name came to me, I intuitively knew she would contribute to the project. I was, however, still eight months away from realizing exactly how she would contribute to my life.

Finding her was relatively easy; as was making a connection with Sister Margaret, her assistant and the guardian of her schedule. I would come to look forward to the sound of Sister Margaret's syrupy Louisiana drawl and self-effacing humor in the months and phone calls ahead. But on the day I first talked with her, she told me only how busy Sister Helen was—and not to get my hopes up.

I faxed Sister Margaret some information about this book as soon as we got off the phone, but it took several months until she could present it to Sister Helen, and several more months until Sister Helen was even able to read it. Once she agreed to talk with me, her presence infused everything I did to prepare for our conversation.



ON A SUNNY January morning, I drive to Newport Beach, California, an affluent community about fifty miles north of my home outside of San Diego, to meet with Sister Helen. She has flown to California early that morning and will fly out early the next, criss-crossing the country at an unrelenting pace to talk with church groups, college students, politicians, and so forth—audiences of varying sizes, backgrounds, and degrees of receptivity. I will meet her at the convent where she is staying, resting I am told, during the few precious hours she has before she will address the parishioners at Our Lady Queen of Angels Roman Catholic Church. I arrive in Newport Beach early, grab a quick lunch, then make my way through the cordons of elegant communities to the address I have been given.

I have not seen the film yet, but I have read her book. I know that she is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, a community of Catholic women living and working in her native Louisiana. I know that in 1965, after Vatican II, she exchanged her habit and a semi-cloistered life for street clothes and active participation in the social justice movement, and that she worked in the St. Thomas Housing Projects in Baton Rouge for four years before meeting Sonnier. But nothing I've read prepares me for the real thing, for the vital, dynamic woman in her mid-sixties who opens the door and enfolds me in her arms in greeting. She is short and compact; solid like granite. Her embrace opens me, like the man in the parable about the north wind and the sun who bares himself in response to the sun's warmth.

She is easy to be around from the get-go. "Well come on in, Mah-grut," she drawls in her Bayou-laden voice, and escorts me into the living room. "I'll be with you in a minute. I'm on the phone with some folks back East, and as soon as I finish up with them, I'm all yours." From these

few moments of greeting, I know that she will be all mine—that every moment she is with you, no matter who you are, she is always all yours.

I sit on a long beige couch, my back to a large picture window that looks out into the front yard, set up my recording equipment, and wait for her to join me. By the end of the day, I will discover that it's easy to forget she's a nun but never that she is a woman who loves God. She laughs easily and frequently throughout our time together and enjoys it when I laugh with her. She's a Southern storyteller—informal, funny, and unpretentious. Gradually, lovingly, she accompanies me, and all her listeners, toward the heart of her message: "What if each of us were judged solely by the worst thing we ever did in our lives?" she asks. "While I do not condone violence, I do advocate compassion. While I cannot imagine the grief of losing a loved one to violent crime, I also could not bear the pain of living with revenge in my heart. And while it is important to feel safe—as a society and as an individual—each of us must decide for ourselves how to translate outrage into mercy."

Sister Helen finishes her phone call and strides into the room. She sits down opposite me on the couch near the microphone. "Let's do it!" she says. I start our conversation by asking her to tell me about her Order. She talks about its beginning in 1650 in France, then tells me about the tenets on which it was founded.

"Our charism is very broad and has to do with connecting people with people and people with God. Inevitably, as part of this process, we come face to face with all sorts of human wounds, all the painful experiences that separate human beings from each other and from God. Reconciliation and healing need to happen in order for people to move beyond their suffering, so this too, is part of our charism.

"Community also plays an important role in our work. Individualism implies that it's up to one person to get the job done. Community means we stand present together. We recognize that none of us have all the gifts necessary to bring about reconciliation on our own."

Is there a Golden Rule that guides you?

"Our Sisters are rooted in the Gospels, but there are two maxims that mean a great deal to us. The first is 'Never leap ahead of grace, but wait for grace and quietly follow with the gentleness of the spirit of God.' This means that I don't ever have to get cerebral and lay out an elaborate blue-

print about how events should proceed. Nor do I have to try to coerce things into happening or push for answers. There's no tension or stress, no anxious anticipation or grasping for control, because I have an organic sense that I will know what to do when the time comes to do it. I simply wait and watch for grace to unfold like the petals of a flower. There is an energy, a dynamic, and a passion in doing this that I could never willfully mandate or create intellectually."

Her statement is in direct opposition to the dictum that guides my paternal gene pool, the infamous words "Is everything under control?" It's familial code for finding out if the other is safe—or reliable—but it also became a subliminal directive about how to live in an unpredictable, sometimes chaotic world. I'm on intimate terms with the pitfalls of this approach, having taken up my ancestral banner and waved it for many years from the rafters of my subconscious. I've been actively reprogramming the premature leaping and grasping Sister Helen now describes, learning to be more comfortable with not knowing. Having tasted a modicum of success, I recognize the validity of her words immediately and nod my head in agreement as she speaks. Her eyes warm to my response.

"The merit of this approach became particularly clear to me once I started to visit Patrick Sonnier on death row," she says. "I had no special training for being the spiritual advisor to a man condemned to die, no idea where the relationship would take me, and no plan about how to proceed. But God makes a way out of no way. By remaining present to Pat, I learned what to do to help him. I received everything I needed to know about how to be with him—and more.

"Another maxim our Sisters follow is to be a congregation of the great love of God, to be a group of women who love. This may sound like a cliché, like teddy bears and candy hearts, but there is a warmth and love among our Sisters that I find very appealing and that translates into the ability to work for people's good, to be present to those who are suffering."

When you're *in* Love, I say, in the manifestation of God as Love, it's so full and rich that you don't want to be anywhere else.

"Exactly!" she says, and I see the schoolteacher in her come alive. "Being in Love is beyond trying to make things happen. It's beyond willing or intention, beyond goal-setting and strategizing. None of that is the language of Love.

“This doesn’t mean that Love doesn’t get itself organized when it needs to or that Love lacks the discipline to do what’s required to make things happen—especially when you’re dealing with economics and social injustice. Loving is always about being in the presence of a wellspring that carries you. It transcends who you are.”

Is this how you would define spirituality?

“I think spirituality means that the way you live, move, and have your being comes forth out of the depth of Spirit, out of the resonant depths of life, instead of from anything compartmentalized—or mechanistic or cerebral. It’s not determined from the outside. It’s an inner fire and passion.

“For me, spirituality is grounded in the Christian paradigm of Jesus and the way he touched people, the way he loved and included people—especially the most marginalized. It’s about the ways in which I am for you. It’s very broad and deep. It’s challenging. It stretches and beckons you. It’s not settled in or domesticated.”

Domesticated?

“Yes, living a terrarium existence, one that’s defined by specific perimeters you don’t go beyond. Being domesticated is about staying in familiar territory because you’re afraid of change or afraid that you might get hurt.

“Jesus said, ‘Launch into the deep and you’ll have the stars and you’ll have the currents of the water which you will learn to read.’ We have to move beyond our comfort zone and trust we’ll be shown the way.

“There’s a lot in our society that separates us from each other. We’re afraid of the poor, we’re afraid of different races, so we live segregated lives. Martin Luther King used to say that the most segregated hour of the week was 11:00 A.M. on Sunday morning when everyone was tucked inside their own church. We must excavate ourselves from our terrariums and be present to others, especially those who are different than we are.”

This self-excitation you speak of is a lot of work. How do you stay energized to meet the challenge?

“I renew in quietness, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Renewal feeds action; it’s like the inhalation and exhalation of breathing. Re-energizing and contemplation also happen in the presence of the people I serve. Some of my deepest spiritual moments occurred when I walked with Patrick Sonnier to his execution.”

The image her words conjure up in my head is in such stark contrast to what I imagine my own behavior would be in this situation that I gasp. But Sister Helen is not aware of my response—or she lets it pass.

“Suddenly, all life was clear to me,” she declares. “Was I going to be for love or for hate? Was I for compassion or was I for vengeance? The words of Jesus that welled up in me when I walked with Pat were, ‘And the last shall be the first.’ I understood this to mean that all life has value, even the lives that others want to throw away. The experience summoned me to a place of deep spiritual awareness and renewal I will never forget.”

It was a defining moment. Your most essential questions were answered. It must have also brought you great peace.

“Absolutely, but it wasn’t a quiescence where everything was still and unmoving. This peace was fierce and ever-unfolding, always unfinished. It’s a peace born of the harmony of the different parts of ourselves. Surrender has a lot to do with it, saying ‘Yes’ to the Big Adventure, not acquiescing or giving up—launching the little boat of my life out into the deep, as Jesus said.”

The afternoon sun has been blazing through the living room window and the back of my neck is getting sunburned. I rise, reach behind the couch, and tug at the drapery cord until the curtains come together *en masse*. As I go through this process, I think about how open and bold she is, how out-going and unconstrained. Everything about her is vibrant, almost electric—even this peace she now describes. She puts to rest any stereotypical images I have surreptitiously carried around in my head about Catholic nuns since my childhood. I’m curious about what precipitated her decision to become a nun. As I sit back down on the couch, I ask her about this.

“Precipitation probably implies too much of a cause-and-effect relationship,” she says reflectively. “I think it was more of a dawning. I grew up in a loving Catholic family. My parents affirmed all their children and provided us with plenty of opportunities for personal growth. Daddy was a lawyer. From him I got the love of books, of articulation and debate. Mama was a nurse. From her I got compassion. We prayed together and said the Rosary every day. By the time I was in the sixth grade, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. The Sisters who taught me were so alive! They were funny and their faith made sense to me. I think it was born in me then

that, though I'd seen a wonderful family life, there was also a way of loving where you didn't just marry one man and have one family. I wanted a wider sweep for my love, and religious life seemed to me to be the way to do that.

"When I entered the Order in 1957, nuns wore habits and lived a semi-cloistered life." The habit, she tells me, was a by-product of the repression of women in the Middle Ages. In order to have access to the people they served, nuns were forced to dress like widows, the only women permitted to walk the streets alone.

"The habit, the cloister, the long hours of prayer and silence, were formative years for me," she continues. "I developed an interior life. I learned to listen to my inner voice, to be receptive and at home with silence. When Vatican II occurred in 1965, we came out from behind our habits and the cloister and made ourselves more accessible to the people. For the next eleven years, I taught seventh and eighth grade English and was the director of religious education in a parish school. I loved the kids. It was like being in a room full of Alka Seltzers!"

I laugh out loud at the image her words evoke.

"I still feel that I'm a teacher," she says, "because teaching is about *educare*, about opening things up, drawing forth or, as they say in Zen Buddhism, always having a beginner's mind. But now my classroom is big; it's the whole world." She smiles at the prospect.

"By 1980, there was a lot of fermentation going on within our community about how our Sisters should be more involved with the poor. I resisted this at first. I thought it was enough to be kind and charitable and pray for others. Some of the sisters had been active in the '60s and '70s, but not me. I wasn't ready to get involved. I just played my guitar," she says strumming the air, "and loved the children, while Martin Luther King and the others were blasted with fire hoses and sent to jail.

"That June, my community went to Terre Haute, Indiana, to discuss the direction of our work. Sister Marie Augusta Neal, a prominent Catholic sociologist and theologian, was the main speaker at the conference. The second day of her talk, she brought about a huge shift in the spiritual axis of my life."

Her eyes begin to dance. "I still remember the exact words she said that transformed me: 'Jesus preached Good News to the poor and integral

to the Good News was that they would be poor no longer.' At that moment, I realized that social justice, reaching out to excluded people—the poor and the suffering—was essential to the Gospel of Jesus, and that the life I'd been leading was far removed from this experience. I knew then I had to make a change.

"I didn't have a plan. Once again, I just put my little boat out on the current and trusted I would be led to where I needed to be. I went out among the people, first in homeless shelters and then in the St. Thomas Housing Project in New Orleans. I learned from them and a passion was born in me; their suffering galvanized and transformed my heart. You can't be in the presence of people who are suffering, knowing that their pain is the result of an injustice, and still remain neutral. By the time I got the invitation to write to Pat, there was a readiness in me to do that. I'd been prepared for this by all the experiences that preceded it."

It takes guts to not leap ahead of grace at times like that, I say, to even trust that grace will carry you when order has not yet risen from the chaos. And faith. It also takes faith. Did you always believe in God? Have you always had such a deep faith?

"Oh, I don't know what it would be like not to believe in God. My image of God is always unfolding though."

She pauses for a moment, then asks me a question. "Have you read the Gospels?" She asks because she is curious to know whether or not I have a frame of reference for what she is about to say.

Some, I tell her.

"Well, it was in the Gospels that I began to see who Jesus was and how he loved, to see the wildness in him."

Her statement makes me grin. I frequently use this same word to describe someone who has a genuine and unyielding commitment to live from their true self. Her comment adds another dimension to my definition—that "wildness" can also be a spiritual *tour de force*.

"His wildness was born of a deep passion—one that was inclusive, but at the same time, it pushed all your boundaries. I think cultural Christianity tries to domesticate that wildness out of Jesus. It treats him like a French poodle—clips and paints his nails, puts a rhinestone collar around his neck and only walks him in certain places. It blesses executions and nuclear submarines in his name. It blesses an economic system that

allows some people to get rich out of their minds while others live in poverty. Jesus said to forgive seven times seventy, to love even your enemies, to invite not just your friends but also the lame and the poor to your banquet. God is a living, emanating center that is loving, not a controlled or controlling vengeful force that wants pain and separatism.”

There is a mixture of reverence and indignation in her voice, a cool burn that both challenges and sustains her. I’m curious if she had any mentors who helped formulate her thinking early on.

“In the beginning, it was my mother. In high school, it was Sister Alice Marie—she was always pushing the edge, reading the latest theology book and challenging us to learn—and Sister Jane Louise. She was more contemplative and gave me books about Saint Therese of Liseaux to read.

“In college, I read Bernard Herring, who took the whole of moral law, so compartmentalized by the Catholic Church, and put it into the context of love, and Gregory Baum, who wrote about the ongoingness of the experience of God, the freshness and continuing revelation of God in our lives. These two theologians had a tremendous impact on me.

“After my meeting with Sister Marie Augusta Neil, she became an important mentor to me. And once she opened me up, I started to devour Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Gandhi—all the great proponents of nonviolence and social transformation.

“The new edge for me now is Thomas Berry’s new cosmology, his ideas of a self-emerging universe and the importance of loving the Earth. I know my mission is to stop the killing of humans, to stop the death penalty and help victims’ families heal. Thanks to Berry, I now see this within a larger context, that nothing on Earth, including the Earth, should be hurt or maimed or killed.”

She tells me that she recently spent time with the Northern Cheyenne Indians in Montana to learn more about how to make a connection to the Earth. She talks about being in their Prayer Lodge, about saying her name to the Four Directions to greet the spirits that reside there, and then recalling her name when her visit ends. “It’s a new way to experience communion,” she says, and a great calm comes over her. “It feels so right.”

These new connections seem as if they have deepened your faith. In *Dead Man Walking*, you wrote that the faith of your childhood was about “a personal relationship with God, inner peace, kindness to others, and

heaven when this life is done.” What characterizes your faith now, the faith of your midlife?

“Making love present in the world and letting love be in my life. What counts now is being with people, especially with those people who are most excluded—death row inmates and their families.

“The word ‘love’ is so bandied about today, but love is the most powerful energy in the world. It’s so important to unleash it. To be present to the dignity of the forgotten, to recognize the beauty of the scarred and maimed, draws forth their goodness and self-respect in a way that nothing else can.

“It isn’t just that I lavish love on them,” she says. “The deepest gifts are always mutual. I’ve received so much from the men I’ve accompanied. It’s not an extrinsic reward. Being with them has summoned forth my own dignity and gifts I never knew I had. It’s been a tremendous grace in my life.” She sighs and rests for a moment in the quiet.

“When I was younger, I prayed for people in the world, but I was praying for people I felt no connection to. It was almost like my dipstick didn’t hit the oil!”

I laugh.

“I am *so* grateful to be awake now. I could have gone my whole life and never really known what the power of love can do, how it can enlighten me and others.”

Her eyes well up. Mine too. We smile at each other. I wait in the silence for a moment before I ask my next question.

You wrote that witnessing Sonnier’s death was like a second baptism for you. Obviously, the direction of your outer work changed. How did the experience affect your interior life?

There is a palpable energy shift in the room, the deepening that happens when a conversation centers around the inner workings of a life. There is no hesitation in her voice, no self-consciousness. She shares herself freely.

“It focused all my energies,” she says. “I had become a witness to a story that needed to be told. Though I didn’t know how I would do it, I knew I had to play my part in bringing what I’d seen to the world so we could stop the killing. I had a mandate. From that point on, I knew I would not scatter my energies—I would not spend my time doing anything, attend any

meetings, that were not about essential things, about solving the problems of those who were suffering.

“Pat’s death also taught me about spiritual resistance. I could no longer sit around and wait for things to change. I had a responsibility to act, to take a moral stand. Gandhi said that we have to actively resist what is evil. We have to expose evil. Otherwise people who don’t know what’s really going on buy into it.

“My experience with Pat also helped me develop compassion for my audiences, for the people who listen to my story. When I share what happened to me, I am very generous in telling my stories because I take my listeners to places they have not been and connect them with people they would not otherwise meet. I don’t preach or beat anybody over the head. I trust the audience to reflect on what they’ve heard and then do with it what they can.”

I’ve noticed this throughout our conversation but it becomes particularly obvious to me at the lecture she delivers later that night at the church. I sit alone near the front of the sanctuary after having spent the day with her, wondering if anyone in the room even realizes they will have an experience they may not soon forget. She jokes with us and tells us about the mistakes she made when she began this work. She tells us about her fear of facing the families of Sonnier’s victims and her concerns about her ability to help Sonnier—weaving the light and dark, the warp and weft of her experience, with skill and grace. The audience relaxes, our hearts and minds open, the lids of our individual terrariums lift a little. Her stories make witnesses of the parishioners of Our Lady Queen of Angels Roman Catholic Church. Some day, they too, may have a story to tell. Maybe it won’t be about working with death row inmates. Maybe they will feel called to help at a homeless shelter or to stand by a friend in need. Maybe they won’t do anything at all.

Sister Helen and I talk about this very thing earlier that afternoon, about how it’s not easy for some of us to heed this kind of call because we lack experience with those who are suffering or because we’re afraid, for any number of reasons, to act on what we believe. So we accept the status quo. Or we drift. Or we ignore and deny.

“Conformity and obedience,” she says. “That’s where it comes from. Do what you’re told. Never get angry. Don’t ruffle any feathers. These are

the internal messages that hold us back. We have to learn to form our own opinions and trust our own perceptions. Especially women. Without this, we have no ethical independence.”

There’s not a trace of judgment in her voice. She knows firsthand about the barriers that keep us each from pushing the lids off of our air-tight terrariums.

“It’s not that people aren’t good or kind. We’re all struggling with something. Most of us just operate the best we can within our terrarium. We can, however, blast the top off that terrarium and change. Witnessing the suffering of another human being was for me the transformative experience, the beginning of my passion for justice. I try to give others that experience through my stories so they can have a wider context to operate from, so they too can venture forth.”

Venture physically and emotionally?

“Yes. If you’re not meeting people who are different than you are, you will believe every stereotypical thing you hear about them.”

You write frankly about the appalling conditions in the prisons, the inequities in the criminal justice system, the sorrow and rage of the victims’ families, the humiliation of the prisoners’ families, and the terror of the men you walk to their death. What sustains you in the face of such violence and despair? How do you keep from getting pulled down by it?

She looks me square in the eyes. “It goes back to the ability to be present with people. When I accompany these inmates to their death, I leave myself—even my fear—behind. I’m totally focused on them. It’s the same thing when I sit with the victims’ families. I’m not thinking about myself at all.

“Each person I’m with needs something different and I have to be attentive to what that is. Dobie, another man I accompanied to execution, needed me to be his coach. He was very scared. In those last hours of his life, I said things to him like, ‘Dobie, you’re about to do the bravest thing you’ve ever done. Jesus is here with you and you will have all you need to get through. I’m here with you, too.’ I took him moment by moment to his death, keeping him focused in the present every step along the way.

“After an execution, I thaw out. That’s when I get in touch with the horror of it all. But when it’s happening, I’m so drawn out of myself that I don’t feel my own feelings. Each time, I seem to be moving in a circle of

light. God's grace is there. Strength is there. I have what I need to do what I must do."

I start to commend her courage, but she holds her hand up and stops my words in midair. "I never use that word about myself. I'm only doing what love requires. Love dignifies people. Execution is such a shameful, stigmatizing thing. The message these men get is that they are disposable human waste, human trash. It's not a time to be silent. I don't intrude, but I do provide a presence that's there as they need me. Love carries me through. That's what sustains me."

Is this something you consciously think about doing beforehand or is it something you move into when the time is right?

"I move into it. Having walked with five inmates to their execution, I now know what to expect. There's a readiness in me to move into that circle of light. It's unlike anything I experience anywhere else. Time absolutely stops and yet it absolutely races."

As she talks, I feel myself slipping into that rarefied place within that wraps me in stillness like a babe in swaddling clothes. For just a brief moment, I have a sense of what she is talking about—the strength and safety and comfort that fuel her ability to do the work she does. I look at her and smile. She tells me how much she is enjoying our conversation, and I well up. "I'm so glad," I say quietly. I wipe my eyes and ask my next question.

One of the things that so moved me in your book was the way you confronted every criticism hurled at you about your involvement with these men, how you examined yourself with unblinking honesty, how you did not subordinate your conscience or sense of self in the face of the pressure to back down. How were you able to keep from giving in to what others thought you should do? To not feel hurt?

"None of that criticism touched me. It was as if the words just pinged off me. I had been in this white hot crucible of seeing these men executed and their suffering was almost like a shield. I also knew that what my critics were saying was not really about me personally; they were acting out of their own pain. I was sensitive to the comments about not reaching out to the victims' families because there was truth in that. I'd been afraid to confront them in the beginning, afraid I would be overwhelmed by their grief and anger, afraid of their rejection. To be in the presence of

people who are in that much pain and know I'd added to their pain, caused me great turmoil. But I knew I would change that, that I would never again be with anyone on death row without first contacting the victims' families. They almost always reject my help. They can't understand how I can be for the person who killed their loved one and also be for them. But I reach out anyway."

She takes a minute to reflect. "You asked me earlier about my definition of spirituality. I think spirituality is also about the reconciliation of opposites. It's about diving deep inside yourself beyond the polarities to a place of unity where everything holds together."

It's holistic.

"It's very holistic. Initially, it seems as if you have to choose one thing or another; if you're against executions you must also be against victims' families. But that's not true. When you operate out of the wounded places within yourself, places that are not your truest, the extremes seem irreconcilable. Life is too deep for cynicism or polarization. It just is. Compassion enables you to transcend these polarities at a place within yourself where you stand for the dignity of every human life."

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. They are the answer to a paradox I've often wrestled with regarding self and other: When I operate out of the wounded places within myself, care of self and care of other seem irreconcilable. Move beyond my wounds, and beyond either/or, one-or-the-other. Stand for the dignity of every human being—even myself. There is no polarization in that; no decision to make. There is only unity, only Oneness, only Love.

Wow.

Have you ever been in a place where it seemed like there was no way out, no light at the end of the tunnel? Have you ever had a "dark night of the soul"?

"I've been in what St. Ignatius of Loyola calls 'desolation,' where I was confused, searching, agitated, and argumentative. That was after Vatican II, when I didn't yet have a big enough agenda for my soul. A big part of my compassion for my audiences is because I know what it's like to live removed from suffering people and the large issues of our day that call for social justice. I was forty years old before I understood that the Gospel of Jesus meant that getting involved is the way to transform the world.

“There are times when I get tired.” She tells me about her schedule, where she’s been and where she’s yet to go in how many days. It’s relentless. “And there were times when I was afraid. Sometimes I have moments when things seem futile. What steadies me though, is that I know my commitment and passion will not waiver—not because I’m willing it, but because I am so carried by it. I don’t pull from my own resources. I have a fidelity to the men who looked in my eyes before they died. When you witness what I’ve witnessed, you don’t forget it. Though it’s been a struggle to watch them die and see these families suffer, it’s also served to stoke my passion and augment my mission.” After a pause, she says, “I don’t think of darkness as a bad thing, though. We are conceived and swim in darkness until we are born. Darkness is fertile and fecund. It’s a womb. It brings interiority.”

And it helps you understand that you really can’t do anything without the grace of God.

“Yes,” she says, “God is everything in this: the power and the life that brings you into the big waters, then dissolves the boundaries quietly, gently, like the unfolding of the petals of a rose. Ego becomes dominant when your personal agenda is small. You become self-conscious and competitive because it’s what you think you need to do in order to survive. When your little boat gets caught up on a wave that’s bigger than you are, ego drops away.”

She tells me about making the movie with Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon. “Media people always ask me what it was like to have Susan portray me. Of course, it’s interesting. But as I watched the filming, I just moved right back into the original event and that holy ground where I met all those suffering people. What I do isn’t about me. Being famous just means that more people know about you and can ask you to help them.”

Is there anything you would do differently?

She thinks about this for a nanosecond, then shakes her head no. “I think the whole universe is involved with the things that happen within us, so there’s a certain wisdom about why something occurs and a certain timing. It’s the providence of God. That said, I truly wouldn’t know how to redesign my life.”

What do you think is your greatest accomplishment?

"I never use this word either. A gift I've been able to share is that I can tell these stories and will continue to do so until we eliminate the death penalty."

Her hands rise and touch her heart. "I've been given so much. I've been loved more than the law allows. Thanks doesn't even cut it. I don't even want anyone to thank me because the experience itself is thanks enough."

Is there a secret to your success?

"When I was on the book tour, my escort in Chicago carried a little card in his wallet that said, 'Seek excellence and avoid success.' Success will kill you! It can give you a false sense of satisfaction and keep you from continuing to grow. I don't think in those terms."

Do you have any advice you would like to give to others?

"Giving advice is something I don't do much of."

I rephrase the question and ask her what she likes to share with others.

"Stories that, hopefully, can be a sounding board for others or can spark their potential, that talk about how life unfolds and that interiority is important. My stories are about stretching our horizons, about being in touch with and listening to all kinds of people, and about how we've got to develop all aspects of ourselves—especially our minds and the poet or artist within us. My stories talk about the significance of friendship and how we must cultivate friendship like a garden. It's so precious and so beautiful, a way of being in relationship that allows us to share our dreams and our love. My stories are also about community and how we don't do anything alone." She smiles at me.

When you leave this Earth and all is said and done, for what or how would you like to be remembered?

Without missing a beat, she answers, "That I rejoiced in love when I met it, and that love flowed out of me into other human beings."

Of this I have no doubt.

To Learn More About the Life and Work of
Sister Helen Prejean

Contact:

On the Web: www.prejean.org
www.moratoriumcampaign.org

Read:

- *Dead Man Walking*, Vintage Books
- *The Death of Innocents*, Random House

Listen:

- *Dead Man Walking*, Sony Records
- *Dead Man Walking—The Opera*,
www.home.pacbell.net/dstein1/jh/n_dmw.htm

View:

- *Dead Man Walking*, directed by Tim Robbins, Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1995
- *And Then One Night*, a documentary on the making of the opera *Dead Man Walking*, made by KQED and shown on PBS