Dead Man Walking – Indepth Essay, Research Paper

The motion picture Dead Man Walking provided a non-fiction insight into the

world of crime, justice, and capital punishment. The film cast several characters from

different backgrounds and opinion sets in direct conflict with one another. Several small

topics and one major topic, capital punishment, were explored over the duration of the

movie. While the opinions and reactions of people to Dead Man Walking may vary, the

one constant is that people will have a reaction.

Sister Helen Preje, the Catholic nun, appeared to be a genuinely concerned person

who took a real interest in the condemned prisoner. She came from a strong background

but chose to “give back” to others. Sister Helen explained her need to “give back” during

the film and appeared to be completely serious about her commitment to helping others.

Sister Helen did not wear her habit during the course of the film. Many people have a

stereotypical vision of Catholic nuns: the habit, seemingly out-of-touch thoughts and

ideals, and older and/or without any vitality. Sister Helen showed what being a Catholic

and a Catholic nun is truly about. She accepted a call for help from a complete stranger.

Instead of turning away or giving up, she persisted, showing what love and, in a way,

courage could do under such dire circumstances. Through it all, she did it with spirit, life,

vitality, and strength. Her relationship with the convict, Matthew Poncelet, was on two

levels. The first was as a friend and confidant. Sister Helen was the first to truly explore

Matthew for Matthew. Others tried to learn about him, but only to vilify or condemn him.

The second level was as a messenger of religion, a messenger of God. For the very first

time, Matthew was given the opportunity to realize his worth as a human, and his worth

in the eyes of God. Through this understanding, he was able to realize the value of all

human life, including those who he murdered. Sister Helen’s relationship with the families

of Matthew and the victims was honest and up-front. She approached each with a hopeful

attitude, trying to understand them while also trying to give them peace. In each instance,

she was uncertain and apprehensive. This fact is not surprising, however, because Sister

Helen is only human, and her religion is human as well. The only path to certainty is

experience, and this was Sister Helen’s first time as spiritual advisor to a death-row

inmate. All in all, Sister Helen was a shining example of strength, courage, and love that

all people could look up to.

In the beginning of the film, Matthew Poncelet was not a likable character. He

was stubborn, arrogant, biased, hateful, and seemed to want company only for his own

amusement. He did not appear to care about his crime, nor those whose lives his crime

changed forever. However, he appeared to let down a guard during the course of the film,

which revealed a less-monstrous human being struggling internally with a fact about

himself that he could not erase, with pride, and with a need to outlet his internal feelings.

His anger about his sentencing was justified; his accomplice and apparent leader was only

given a life sentence while he was to die. While this is certainly an unfair situation, it is

unfair because the accomplice deserved the maximum penalty under the law as much as

Poncelet. Towards the end of the film, Poncelet appeared to be a changed person. He

learned, with the help of Sister Helen, that the truth would save him. And in admitting the

truth, he learned the value of life and of love. He said in his final few hours, ” I needed

to die to find love ” But, in the end, he appeared to truly accept his actions, the

repercussions of his actions, and his fate. He was truly sorry and changed in the end.

Earl Delacroix was the father of the teenage boy who was murdered by Matthew

Poncelet. He harbored a lot of hatred and sadness because of the slaying. To make

matters worse, the murder of his son caused a rift between Earl and his wife, eventually

leading to the filing of divorce papers. In a way, Matthew Poncelet killed Earl’s son,

his marriage, and his heart. Anyone whose interpersonal relationships have been affected

by outside influences could easily relate to Earl, an honest man with a good heart.

Obviously, anyone who has lost a child or even a loved one would relate to the strain,

sadness, loss, and emptiness Earl felt after his son was suddenly taken from him. But

the feeling that many, including myself, can relate to is the helplessness when a relationship

dear to you starts slipping away because of outside influences and situations that are

beyond your control. Those situations do not need to involve murder, but they could

include different family values, intolerant friends or family, sickness, employment

differences or changes, geographical changes, educational differences, and more. Earl’s

situation shows how fragile interpersonal relationships truly are, and how people must

actively participate in relationships together, and not rely on one aspect to hold it strong.

Earl’s son was that aspect for his marriage.

The parents of the slain teenage girl, whose daughter was not murdered by

Poncelet but was raped by him, were justifiably upset when they learned that someone

was taking the time to apparently try to save the murderer. They asked Sister Helen

at one point “How can you sit with that scum?”, and asked her to leave their home when

they realized that she had not become as bloodthirsty as they were. It was understandable

that they felt hurt by a Catholic nun’s decision to attempt to help someone who had

no value for human life. However, their attacks on Sister Helen, no matter how passive

aggressive, were reprehensible. The family, unlike Mr. Delacroix, showed no interest in

being helped to understand her situation. They simply wanted her, and everyone else,

to call for blood. The family did not want to see any equal justice for Matthew Poncelet

and his accomplice, they simply wanted either or both dead. Furthermore, it appeared that

they needed Matthew’s death for themselves rather than for the sake of justice, or for

their daughter. At the end of the film, during Matthew’s last words to Earl Delacroix,

they griped, “What about us?!” One would wonder what would happen to their

relationship after the death of Poncelet. Or, what would happen between them and their

other daughter. The movie left such questions unanswered, but one is forced to question

whether or not the capital punishment of Matthew Poncelet truly served as a healing

for that family, or whether it was only the beginning of trouble for them. People tend

to hold on to a problem or severe, urgent situation as a driving force. Sometimes, without

proper channeling of their feelings and anger, the closure of such a situation leaves a void

too large to be overcome. While the answer may not be known in this particular case,

their actions and statements cause viewers to question it.

The film shows that capital punishment affects more people and lives than one

would perceive. It also shows there is value in every human life, and with proper

guidance, anyone can change. Matthew Poncelet was not a danger to society at the

end of the film. He had been humbled and had made a conscious decision to attempt,

in any way he could, to ease the pain he had caused. He provides hope that anyone

in his situation could become a better person, and could possibly affect lives in a

positive way. While it might be stretching such an observation to say that a convicted

murderer should be let free, it would be fair to say that a life sentence is not merely

wasting tax-dollars. A life sentence allows a person to reflect upon his or her past

and change the person that he or she is. It allows for the possibility of helping others

to not make the same mistakes. Sister Helen stated “I’m just trying to follow the

example of Jesus who said every person is worth more than her/her worse act.”

This statement is relevant to her situation because indeed she was trying to show

Matthew that he was a human being, not an animal or worse. She also was trying

to help his family deal with Matthew’s actions, and move on knowing that he was

a person who made a mistake. In many ways, that statement could very well have

been the thesis statement of the movie. Sister Helen, like Jesus, befriended the

society-labeled “vermin”, and gave him some semblance of self worth, importance,

and most important of all, dignity.