

Front Porch Peace
Lauren Olson – July 2011

Although I've quickly fallen in love with this vibrant Capital city that I have the temporary privilege of calling home, "peaceful" is not the first word I would use to describe it. With its tumultuous tourism and terrible traffic, DC might seem more like a headache than a calming cup of front porch tea. But my perceptions have evolved as I slowly gain an insider's perspective.

In the week leading up to the Death Penalty Fast and Vigil, I surprisingly found myself growing more anxious and nervous about the notion of parading up and down the steps of the Supreme Court with an attention-grabbing poster, chanting anti-death penalty slogans among a crowd of veteran demonstrators who were bound to be more traveled and experienced than I in the trenches and avenues of activism.

"I'm not really a protest person," I would start to say when friends inquired into my weekend plans. "But, I'm going to this 'protest thing' against the death penalty."

To my pleasant surprise my first protest experience was far from what I fearfully envisioned. When I eventually gathered up enough courage to find my way down to the Supreme Court to meet these "intimidating activists," what I found waiting for me on those famous Washington steps forever dispelled my protest panic and misconceptions. I was privileged to encounter peaceful people who passed along little life lessons.

What can a protest really accomplish anyway?

For me, the experience wasn't just about holding up a message printed on a large banner commemorating the 138 innocent lives lost to capital punishment. Rather, it was about the conversations I had *behind* that banner with fellow protesters. One, to my surprise, was not an aging, antagonistic activist. He was a young, Midwest guy. Not much older than I. He became interested in the abolition movement after *coincidentally* walking by that very Fast and Vigil years ago. His passion against the death penalty was born by simply picking up a pamphlet. Reading that pamphlet. And then making the *non-coincidental* decision to cross the line and become the advocate instead of the observer.

Little Lesson Learned: While four days of fasting and protesting may not bring an immediate end to the death penalty, the signs, songs, and slogans might have opened up one heart to the vengeful effects that capital punishment has on American society. And that one convert, I've realized, is enough to make a difference.

A Consistent Ethic of Life

In contrast with the "casual convert" I met, another fellow protester was a long-time pro-life advocate from her college days and beyond. She reminded me, and others, that the pro-life movement is from beginning to end, conception to death.

She embodied an admirable consistent ethic of life. If we are going to advocate against the ending of life in the womb, we should think equally as hard about ending life through an imperfect justice system.

Little Lesson Learned: This consistent, pro-life advocate reminds me of the importance of dedicating yourself to a cause, whatever it may be, and not being afraid to stick with it.

Witness to Innocence

Some of the more touching moments of the Fast and Vigil came from listening to the stories of those personally affected by the death penalty. For example, Gary Drinkard spent six years on death row for a robbery and murder it was physically impossible for him to commit. Gary was assigned two lawyers; one specializing in commercial litigation and the other in bankruptcy. Due to poor representation and the failure to present two key witnesses, Gary's conviction rested on witnesses who fabricated testimony against him. In exchange for testifying, the criminal charges against the prosecution's witnesses were dropped.

Little Lesson Learned: Gary and other death row exonerees remind me that everyone, both the innocent and guilty, deserves a dedicated defense lawyer.

I knew in the moment I walked away from the Fast and Vigil that the experience would remain a highlight of my summer in DC. However, it wasn't until a week later when I was standing on the steps of the Capital with hundreds of other Washingtonians listening to the Dalai Lama's "World Peace Talk" that I was able to articulate the personal significance of attending the protest.

It was the Dalai Lama's simple message that struck a chord with my recent death penalty experience and rings true for all: peace and justice are not instilled by the published opinions of Supreme Court justices. Neither do they emanate from UN Proclamations. True change is initiated in *common individual effort*. On that same day Archbishop Desmond Tutu echoed the Dalai Lama's message when he said, "Change doesn't come from huge waves. Rather it begins with small ripples. Peace comes in the way we interact with our families, how we speak to our friends, and our attitudes at work."

I approached the Fast and Vigil expecting a parade of forceful activists. What I found was a small group of individual peace-makers dedicated to a common cause of ending a broken system of capital punishment.

What I love about DC is not the fast-paced life or towering monuments. More so, I've enjoyed sitting on the front porches of my quaint little neighborhood with new roommates and friends, talking about and listening to things that matter most to us: where we come from; where we are now; and where we hope to go.

As my time in Washington crawls to its conclusion, I think of those I met at the Fast and Vigil, in addition to the Dalai Lama's wise words, and realize it has all been a sweet sip of a little front porch peace.