

What's in the Brown Paper Bag?

by Luis Ramirez--Texas DCJ
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Luis Ramirez

I'm about to share with you a story whose telling is long past due. It's a familiar story to most of you reading this from death row. And now it's one that all of you in the "free world" may benefit from. This is the story of my first day on the row.

I came here in May of 1999. The exact date is something that I can't recall. I do remember arriving in the afternoon. I was placed in a cell on H-20 wing over at the Ellis Unit in Huntsville, TX. A tsunami of emotions and thoughts were going through my mind at the time. I remember the only things in the cell were a mattress, pillow, a couple of sheets, a pillow case, a roll of toilet paper, and a blanket. I remember sitting there, utterly lost.

The first person I met there was Napoleon Beasley. Back then, death row prisoners still worked. His job at the time was to clean up the wing and help serve during meal times. He was walking around sweeping the pod in these ridiculous looking rubber boots. He came up to the bars on my cell and asked me if I was new. I told him that I had just arrived on death row. He asked what my name is. I told him, not seeing any harm in it. He then stepped back where he could see all three tiers. He hollered at everyone, "There's a new man here. He just drove up. His name is Luis Ramirez."

When he did that, I didn't know what to make of it at first. I thought I had made some kind of mistake. You see? Like most of you, I was of the impression that everyone on death row was evil. I thought I would find hundreds of "Hannibal Lecters" in here. And now, they all knew my name. I thought, "Oh well, that's strike one." I was sure that they would soon begin harassing me. This is what happens in the movies, after all.

Well, that's not what happened. After supper was served, Napoleon was once again sweeping the floors. As he passed my cell, he swept a brown paper bag into it. I asked him "What's this"? He said for me to look inside and continued on his way. Man, I didn't know what to expect! I was certain it was something bad. Curiosity did get the best of me though. I carefully opened the bag. What I found was the last thing I ever expected to find on death row, and everything I needed. The bag contained some stamps, envelopes, notepad, pen, soap, shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush, a pastry, a soda, and a couple packs of Ramen noodles. I remember asking Napoleon where this came from.

He told me that everyone had pitched in. That they knew that I didn't have anything and that it may be a while before I could get them. I asked him to find out who had contributed. I wanted to pay them back. He said, "It's not like that. Just remember, the next time you see someone come here like you, you pitch in something."

I sat there on my bunk with my brown paper bag of goodies, and thought about what had just happened to me. The last things I expected to find on death row were kindness and generosity. I thought of how many times I had seen "good people" of the world pass by some man, woman, or child holding a sign that read, "Hungry", or "Will work for food."

I'm guilty of the same. I just passed them by. By the end of the block, or upon reaching my destination, that poor, hungry, tattered, and perhaps dirty soul had been forgotten, lost among my daily challenges and struggles with life. Yet, here on death row, among the worst of the worst, I didn't have to hold up a sign. They knew what I needed and they took it upon themselves to meet those needs.

They did this without any expectation of reimbursement or compensation. They did this for a stranger, not a known friend. I don't know what they felt when they committed this act of incredible kindness. I only know that, unlike them, twelve "good people" had deemed me beyond redemption. The only remedy that these "good people" could offer us was death. Somehow what these "good people" saw and what I was seeing didn't add up. How could these men, who just showed me so much humanity, be considered the "worst of the worst?"

It chills me to my core when I think about it. Those twelve "good people" were given this enormous God-like responsibility. They had to decide who lives and who dies. The state of Texas gave them this responsibility. But the state didn't give them any God-like training. I'm sure that they all meant well. They probably thought, as the DA and judge told them, that they were doing their civic duty. I personally have never considered murder a civic duty.

That aside, how many times have we gotten this wrong? I'm on the inside looking out now. I have that advantage over you. So I can tell you this: I have yet to meet a man here who I feel is beyond redemption. If you take a good look, and I invite you to do that, you may just come to realize how often you have been wrong.

Ever since Napoleon was executed, for a crime he committed as a teen, I've wanted to share this story with his family. I've never been able to find anyone with their address. If anyone out there can share this with them, I would appreciate it very much. I would like for them to know that their son was a good man. One who I will never forget. I want for them to know how sorry I am that we as a society failed them and him. I still find it ridiculous that we as a people feel that we cannot teach or love our young properly. I'm appalled at the idea that a teen is beyond redemption, that the only solution that we can offer is death. It's tragic that this is being pointed out to the "good people" by one of the "worst of the worst." God help us all.

What was in the brown paper bag? I found caring, kindness, love, humanity, and compassion of a scale that I've never seen the "good people" in the free world show towards one another.

[The following appeared as "editor's information" on the website <http://www.november.org/stayinfo/breaking/Ramirez.html>. The author of this piece, Luis Ramirez, is presently on death row in Texas, housed in the infamous "Polunsky Unit" [formerly known as the Terrell Unit--ed.] at Livingston State Prison in Livingston, Texas. He emphatically claims he is innocent of the murder for which he was convicted. Napoleon Beasley, age 25, was executed by the state of Texas on May 28, 2002, for a homicide committed when he was 17 years old. Napoleon, an African-American teenager, was convicted and sentenced to death by an all-white jury. His case sparked massive outrage and protest from the entire international community.]