

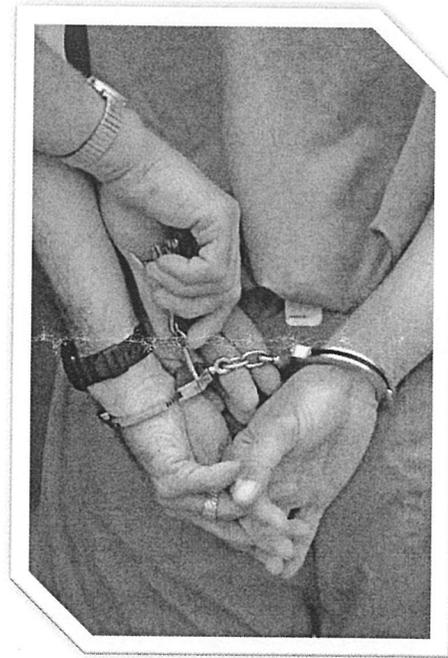
NO PERSON | BY JAMES KEOWN

Lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson answered an interviewer's questions recently with "No person is the worst thing they have done." Stevenson's phrase serves as a rallying cry for those advocating for the abolition of the death penalty. For decades, Stevenson has fought not just to abolish the death penalty, not just to free those wrongfully convicted but also to give agency back to women and men in prison. Stevenson refuses to see those who are incarcerated as anything but people.

Language is a vital element in defending agency. It is also an important tool when battling injustices like a criminal punishment system that seems bent on vengeance above all else. Throughout time and around the world, a key weapon used to dehumanize people has been language. New words regularly enter into lexicons to define collectives of humans as something other than human. And, as history woefully recounts, when one group of people refuses to see another group as people, oppression and violence usually follows. But equally destructive, yet more often overlooked, is the purposeful use of language to re-label or knowingly mislabel an action to conceal the action's true nature in an effort to achieve the same goals.

In Massachusetts, for example, approximately 1000 women and men have been sentenced to die for the crimes they were convicted of committing. The people on Massachusetts' "death row" come from all walks of life. But like most people ensnared in the American criminal punishment system, most of those condemned to die in prison come from poorer communities, had less educational and economic opportunities, and more often than not are people of color.

There, however, will be no protests or candlelight vigils in Massachusetts as those condemned to die pass from this earth. Each death will go unnoticed, except for those who knew the person sentenced to die. In fact, most Massachusetts residents believe that no one has been traditionally executed by the state for decades. The community's ongoing ignoring of the truth comes about due to a veiled obliviousness that is encouraged by the reality that the death penalty is legally outlawed in the Commonwealth. In fact, Massachusetts has long



proudly boasted of its progressive stance on state-sanctioned-killing. But the only thing progressive about the state's ideology on the ultimate punishment is that the state has quietly allowed the death penalty to progress forward each year taking more and more lives.

If recent trends hold up, at least twelve prisoners will die this year behind the walls. The state does not use traditional killing methods such as lethal injection or the gas chamber. Nor does Massachusetts opt for the arcane, yet still federally legal, options like the electric chair, hanging, or a firing squad. Instead, the Commonwealth utilizes the deadliest and cruelest cocktail available to carry out terminal sentences. Policies and time mix to administer the state's *de facto* death sentence: Life Without Parole.

A person's march toward an unnatural death begins the moment a judge issues the sentence of Life Without Parole. The prison system uses restrictive procedures to isolate those locked-up. The longer a person is incarcerated, the more likely it is that the ties that bind them to the outside world will become frayed or snap all together. In addition to isolation, the administration establishes regulations that label those who are sentenced to die in prison as a lesser class of prisoners. And, because of the common decision by governors over the last three decades to abandon the use of commutations, state policy is also used to strip lifers of hope.

According to studies, these factors work in concert with the everyday stresses of prison life to reduce on average a person's life expectancy by ten years.

Court cases challenging the traditional death penalty often use time to measure the inhumaneness of a killing procedure. By this logic, Massachusetts utilizes the most inhumane death protocol in the nation. The grand theatrical performance of the death penalty with a table centered on an overly-lit stage behind a closed, and then opened, then closed again curtain in front of an audience has been replaced. Instead, the terminal procedure for someone sentenced to die via Life Without Parole occurs in the shadows of a permanently drawn curtain of steel and concrete. Here, life fades away much like the fluid in an intravenous drip. And no matter how much a person may change through natural maturing, through rehabilitative programs, or through religious conversion, in the eyes of the criminal punishment system, it is all for naught. Death is the sentenced handed down, and death will be the ultimate sentence carried out.

Those who bravely and successfully championed to abolish the death penalty in Massachusetts after the US Supreme Court affirmed state-sanctioned-killing in 1976 thought at the time LWOP was a more humane sentence. The same justification was made by those who argued for the electric chair to replace hangings; the gas chamber to replace the electric chair; and lethal injections to replace the gas chamber. To truly abolish the death penalty, all forms of

state-imposed death must be erased. Advocates must stop arguing over methods and instead focus on outcomes. People who are not threats to society should not die in prison.

There is a renewed push to finally abolish all forms of state-sanctioned killing in Massachusetts. A new coalition is advocating for the abolition of all LWOP sentences. The state's highest court has already struck down such sentences for juveniles. This work is being done against the backdrop of a governor's race where incumbent Republican governor Charlie Baker has called for the death penalty to be reinstated for those convicted of killing police officers. Baker's election year move clearly communicates to the state's large and politically active law enforcement community that he values their lives above those of common citizens.

The Massachusetts election year battle reinforces the notion that some people in the state wish to create laws based on a vengeance to punish those they do not see as fully human. In this fight of competing proposals, one clearly sees the ideologies driving both initiatives. On one side is a governor and administration that sees cops, citizens, and criminals. On the other side is a growing group of advocates who see people.

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