

“I was aware that everything could have been different”

By Ines Aubert, January 2018

Follow-up to my article [“My Journey with Robert Pruett on death row in Texas”](#) of November 2017, after Robert Pruett was executed on October 12, 2017.

I have been struggling to find a way out of a dilemma for a long time: I feel that I owe the people who learned about Robert and his story through me an explanation.

Did I hear or know that Robert was actually guilty of stabbing Daniel Nagle?

This is not a question that I can simply answer with yes or no. Strangely, over the course of many years, I went from thinking Robert was guilty to believing he was not, and back to assuming he had attacked the officer. Only to again think he was probably innocent, and at the end having confirmed that he most probably was guilty. When I started corresponding with then 22-year-old Robert Pruett in 2002, I took for granted that he was guilty of the crime of which he was accused, as are most inmates on death row. For my pen pal-ships, guilt or innocence is not a decisive factor, and I don't expect the inmate who is appointed to me to be innocent. So, while I anticipated that Robert was guilty, I still felt it was cruel and unjust to punish him with a death sentence and not give him a chance to ever be released. In addition, at the age of sixteen, Robert had been given a 99-year sentence for a crime his father committed, which I consider to be a devastating sentence for a juvenile. I can't imagine how a young person thrown into an adult prison world must feel, lacking the support of a loving family or friends. I have children of my own, and knowing that someone else's sixteen-year-old child is left on his own in prison is a painful thought for me.

At the beginning of our friendship, in his letters to me, Robert stated that he was innocent of the crime for which he was sent to death row, and I was also open to this possibility. Yet, when I visited Robert for the first time in 2003, he

didn't waste any time in telling me that he had in fact stabbed officer Nagle. He said he hadn't wanted to cause his death, and that he regretted it very much. I had already sensed he was admitting this to me between the lines of his letters, and so I answered him that I had actually thought so. Never before have I seen such a load lifted from one's mind the way I did with Robert when I said that. The expression on his face went from worry to immense relief. The fact that I was still there visiting him, although I had sensed he was in fact responsible for the officer's death, I believe, meant a lot to him. Robert didn't have any friends at that time and no support from his family, so to have lost me would have been a huge setback. I thought it to be a good sign that Robert told me that things could be different from what he had written in the letters. Robert and I never delved into the details of his case. I don't know why or if he had possessed a homemade knife or what he had initially planned to do with it. The inner reality of a juvenile in prison with a 99-year sentence and no support from anyone in the free world is beyond my imagination.

About two years later during a visit, I addressed the topic with Robert again, and much to my surprise he reacted as if I had just said something greatly shocking, and with an expression of disbelief on his face, he asked me: "What are you talking about?" This surprised me, and I wondered whether I had just imagined hearing Robert admit his involvement. As it wasn't possible to openly talk about the case in our letters, and only secretly during visits, in theory, such a misunderstanding was feasible.

I feel much for the victims and their families. However, in my pen pal-ships, I focus on our relationship and together we find out what we want to talk about. If my pen pals are ready to discuss their case, I welcome that. I try not to have expectations as to how my pen pals should handle their lives; I don't connect with them to be their tutor or teacher, but simply a person to talk to. I believe every human being needs and deserves that. We both learn from each other in the course of our friendship, but what we pick up is an individual choice. With Robert, there were so many topics to cover that we didn't seem to have the time to

address his case. I admit that I'm surprised today that I didn't try to arrive at an answer regarding Robert's guilt or innocence for so many years. It would not have made any difference in our friendship, though. He had started writing his autobiography, and we were thrilled that I could help him make his voice heard on the Internet, putting everything else aside.

Robert's mailing list grew, and people communicated not only with him, but with me as well. It was only then that I finally tried to find out whether to believe Robert was responsible for Daniel Nagle's death. I asked one of those whom I thought would know, and this person confirmed to me that Robert had told her, too, that he had in fact stabbed Daniel Nagle. As I had lived with that thought years ago already, it wasn't a big surprise to have it confirmed again.

I started feeling bad about all the people on Robert's list who were certain that Robert was innocent. I didn't feel it was my responsibility to intervene in Robert's writings, but all of a sudden, I realized that I was trapped in Robert's story. Generally, I think it's not my responsibility to do something with what people tell others. But in this situation, I felt co-responsible for the entire situation because I had encouraged and supported Robert in writing his autobiography, and it was me who had put it in a sharable form. For some people, it was Robert's alleged innocence that drew them to him. I suddenly questioned whether it had been right of me to share Robert's writings with the world.

The whole situation burdened me to the extent at which I consulted a spiritual advisor to try to determine where my own responsibility in this lay. I knew that a lot of good had come out of Robert's writings, too: people came to understand the cruelty of the death penalty, many realized they should appreciate the good in their everyday lives, others started pen pal-ships with inmates, and more. But still: could something good come out of something that is probably not based on truth? When we spoke about it, Robert expressed clearly: "Yes, of course! Just look at the effect my writings have had!" However, I'm not so sure. In a spiritual context, I feel that it's not right to be untruthful with people who trust us. To me, trust is

a very precious value that should be honored. I don't remember ever having declared Robert as "innocent". I probably said he had a "claim to innocence". I typed the autobiography undecided as to Robert's guilt or innocence.

I have wondered whether Robert would have admitted to the stabbing if the consequences hadn't been so drastic for him: every admission of guilt would have sped up the process leading to execution. The survival instinct is strong, and I suppose that part of Robert just wanted to survive. I understand well that he did whatever necessary to stay alive. I don't know what I would do to save my own life, honestly, and I would not want to find out. What saddens me deeply is that Robert came into such a situation in the first place. I think that in some ways the justice system forced him to make saving his life a priority, no matter what. In November 2016, Robert wrote me in a letter: "I've been thinking about things between us a lot ever since I realized just how tough it has been for you. I've been torn about things for quite some time. Long before you ever even brought it up. It's really an incredibly tough thing for me as well. I hope you realize that I more than understand your point of view, I agree with you on a fundamental level." And he went on: "But sometimes in life all we can do is play the cards we're dealt, work with what we've got, and that's all I've tried to do."

In my opinion, at that time, a first step for Robert would have been to have simply avoided the topic of guilt or innocence in his writings, and instead have stuck to topics he could have openly talked about. He wrote many journals and articles about other topics which are well worth being read. We agreed to remove the homepage from the Internet. I suggested to Robert the idea of an autobiography in which all references to guilt or innocence would be removed, and later created such a version. Robert didn't like this idea very much. It would anyway not have erased the ambiguity of the entire situation.

When Robert was executed, we were in the midst of a discussion about how and when to put the homepage back on the Internet. Robert has passed away, yet the dilemma regarding my sense of responsibility remains. I feel that Robert's

writings should no longer be shared without the mention of its questionability. What I'm certain about is that loving Robert should not be linked to his innocence or his admission of guilt; he was deserving of love in any case.

Many questions remain. What am I supposed to do now? Or even think? I'm worried about the effects any adverse version of Robert's case might have. With this text, have I let Robert down although I loved him? Or on the contrary: is it my responsibility to share what he told me and some other people? Will this story cast a shadow over the friendships with inmates on death row and prevent people from starting one? Or on the contrary, will it cause more people to feel compassion for death row inmates? Will they be better able to understand the incredibly difficult situation of a death row inmate? In the end, will this enhance the negative in the world or the positive?

I feel I need to apologize to those who took for granted that I believed the same as they regarding Robert's innocence. I was aware that everything could have been different, and the fact that I probably hurt people by not sharing my apprehension with them saddens me.

I apologize.