

Murder Brought Home – How We Choose Justice Over Vengeance

Mother hopes to face her daughter's killer

His plea avoids death penalty, in part by agreeing to meet victims' families

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Thursday, January 11, 2007

The Rev. Cathy Harrington, the mother of one of two young women stabbed to death in Napa two years ago, says she hopes some day to confront, question and even forgive the man who killed her 26-year-old daughter, Leslie Ann Mazzara.

Those desires are reflected in a novel plea bargain that seeks "restorative justice," including plans for an eventual meeting between the victims' families and the killer.

Harrington, a Unitarian minister, and other family members will speak today in Napa County Superior Court when Eric Matthew Copple is sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole for the November 2004 slayings.

"It's easy to come up with a viewpoint about justice or forgiveness or the death penalty when you haven't had to walk through this hell I've been through," Harrington, 55, a parish minister in Ludington, Mich., told The Chronicle. "It's really hard, when someone brutally murders your child, to forgive. ... It's a path you walk toward. I can't even conceive of forgiveness at this point. I hope I can get there at some point."

Copple, a 27-year-old former Napa land surveyor, pleaded guilty last month to the double murder of Mazzara and her roommate, Adriane Insogna, 26, a sanitation district engineer, at their home in Napa. Mazzara, a former South Carolina beauty pageant queen, worked in sales at the Niebaum-Coppola winery.

At today's hearing, Harrington plans to read a lengthy "impact statement" about her daughter's life and murder, which she says "has shattered my faith in the goodness of human beings."

In her statement, Harrington refers to Copple as a "cruel coward" and to her daughter as "a beacon of joy, love and light that people were naturally drawn to."

Prosecutors announced last month that Copple will avoid the death penalty in return for his guilty plea. The plea agreement followed months of negotiation between prosecutors, defense attorneys and representatives for the victims' families.

Harrington said a mediator helped the victim's families "reach the most compassionate outcome for all of us."

The sentencing of Copple to life in prison, she said, may help him eventually accept responsibility for what he did and "get to redemption." She added that it often takes decades for the death sentences of murderers to be carried out because of legal appeals, causing further hardship for victims' families.

"In that way, we're finished with the judicial process," Harrington said. "We chose (the plea agreement) as a better option."

Copple has agreed to meet with victims' family members so that they can confront him and ask him questions. The meeting will occur only if mediators believe it will cause more good than harm.

"As a Unitarian minister, I believe in compassion for every living being," said Harrington. "And I believe that every child is born with an innate worth and dignity. Murderers aren't born, they're made. Some people may disagree, but that's what I believe."

The double homicide occurred in the early hours of Nov. 1, 2004, while the two women were on the second floor of the home they shared. A third female housemate was downstairs and fled the house to alert police, who arrived soon after to find the bodies but not the killer.

Copple turned himself in to police in September 2005, less than a week after police announced a major break in the case: DNA testing had shown that the killer was a white male who smoked a distinctive cigarette, Camel Turkish Golds.

Police said that Copple, who smoked that brand, confessed to the murders. He was charged with two counts of homicide as well as two special circumstances -- multiple murders and lying in wait -- that could have made him eligible for the death penalty.

His motive in the killings is unknown. One of the victims, Insogna, was a co-worker and close friend of Copple's then-fiancee, Lily, who married him two months after the murders.

A Napa police detective testified at a preliminary hearing that Copple had told him that he had gotten drunk and blacked out on the night of the two murders.

"My understanding is that he doesn't even acknowledge remembering the murders," Harrington said. "He either cannot or will not tell us why it happened."

A cottage for abused children is being built in Mazzara's honor in Anderson, S.C., where she grew up on a farm. She was crowned Miss Williamston (S.C.) 2002 and went on to compete in the Miss South Carolina Pageant. She attended the University of Georgia, graduating in 2003 with a degree in philosophy. She worked at a law firm and moved in 2004 to the Bay Area, where her mother was completing seminary studies in Berkeley.

"She was about the happiest I'd ever seen her when she was living in Napa and working at the winery," her mother said. "She had so many gifts. There were a lot of things she could have done."

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This article appeared on page B - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

Statement by the Rev. Cathy Harrington

Thursday, January 11, 2007

The Rev. Cathy Harrington, the mother of Leslie Mazzara, plans to read from this statement today at the sentencing of her killer in Napa County Superior Court:

Thank you. I am Cathy Harrington, Leslie Ann Mazzara's mother. I am also an ordained minister within the Unitarian Universalist tradition. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the court and to the people of Napa. And as difficult and distasteful as I find this task, I will at the end of my remarks choose to speak to Mr. Copple, the cruel coward who murdered my beautiful daughter.

Before I begin, I would like to say "thank you" to the District Attorney, Gary Lieberstein, and the two prosecuting attorneys, Mark Bossenecker and Rob Wade, who are three of the finest men I have ever met. I am grateful to them for their care and compassion in the handling of this case.

I also want to thank Tammy Krause for supporting my belief in "restorative justice" and for serving as a guide. Without her wisdom, today's process would be much different.

Impact statements are intended to provide an opportunity for the victims to talk about the way the crimes have affected them. I make this statement knowing that I will never be able to capture in words all that losing Leslie has meant for me, for my family and for her friends. No matter how long the statement, there will be things I leave out; no matter how detailed, no description will ever capture the anguish of suffering I feel when I think of Leslie and how her life was so tragically and brutally interrupted. I will deal with this loss for the rest of my life. And this statement only represents one point in a very long and painful journey.

Ecclesiastes says "there is a time for every purpose unto heaven. A time to plant and a time to pluck up, a time to be born and a time to die."

Leslie and Adriane's time to live was taken from them by a brutal and vicious murderer. In the fullness of time, Leslie and Adriane should not have died on Nov. 1, 2004. Their violent deaths were the result of an act of brutality that altered the rhythms of what God hoped for them and destroyed the magnificent, sacred potentiality of two gifted and beautiful young women.

The best way I can describe the ravaged landscape of my life after Leslie's death is to offer the image of a nuclear winter. The road I once traveled, the flowing stream of faith that used to nourish my body and soul, the clean and clear oxygen that was Leslie's life and that once filled my lungs, the brilliant sunshine of her potential that illumined my path are all gone. My broken heart still beats, yet my grief-stricken body struggles for breath and my soul cries out for understanding and mercy.

Mr. Copple, the brutality of your act has not only deprived me of length of years with my daughter Leslie, it has shattered my faith in the goodness of human beings.

"Vulgar" is the word Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel uses for those who choose to turn violence and murder into entertainment. I borrow his words to appeal to everyone to reach for a higher level of our basic humanity. Wiesel writes and I plead with you:

"Listen to survivors and respect their wounded sensibility. Open yourselves to their scarred memories. Mingle your tears with theirs. And, stop insulting the dead."

During the past two years, I have found comfort in Mary, the mother of Jesus, while at the same time envying her because her murdered child was resurrected in the hearts and minds of his disciples. The story of Jesus' life and death offers redemption and hope in a hurting world. No grieving mother should be satisfied with anything less. I, too, want resurrection.

I demand resurrection for Leslie. I want all of you to know the depth and breadth of who my child was and what her life can mean for future generations. I do not want Leslie's life and tragic death to be exploited in any way.

This is the real story:

I have been a mother all of my adult life. Thirty-seven years ago, barely 18 years old, I held my first beautiful son. I remember experiencing a depth of love that I had not known possible. I wasn't at all prepared for the endless and selfless commitment of being a mother. I was forced to grow up fast. By the time I was 22 years old, I had two beautiful redheaded sons. They were all boy: rough-housing, delightful, rambunctious, exasperating, messy, fun, exhausting and endlessly challenging boys.

Being a parent will bring out the best and the worst of a person. The truth is, no matter how hard I tried and no matter how many times I read Dr. Spock, there were moments when I felt I wasn't a very good mother. I adored my sons. I wanted to help them grow up to be happy, decent, successful adults but I worried about them constantly and I wondered what and who they would become.

And then along came Leslie.

I knew the minute that exquisite little creature was placed in my arms on August 1, 1978 that I had been given a rare gift. My mother once told me that every woman should have a daughter, and I suddenly understood why. I was stunned by her utter beauty and delicacy. I named her Leslie, after a friend from High School who was always happy. I wanted more than anything for my children to be happy.

My awe at this baby girl of mine, my little Leslie, never wavered, not even in our worst pre-teen, hormone-raging mother/daughter hellacious moments, I never stopped believing that I was the luckiest mother on the planet. And the real miracle was how her presence transformed her big brothers. Suddenly, they became her staunch protectors: gentle, loving, patient and proud. Leslie was our very own princess.

I left an abusive marriage when Leslie was only four days old. I left because I knew in my heart that if I didn't leave, my children would suffer. I felt had no other choice. Suddenly, I was a single mother with a newborn baby and two sons, but with the help of my loving parents, we survived. My children and I lived below the poverty level and it was a constant struggle, but we made it. All we had was each other, and Leslie was a joy. She brightened our lives and the lives of all she touched.

When I opened my eyes in the morning, she would be standing in her crib at the end of my bed waiting for me to wake up. With that sparkling sweet smile, she would begin my day with her first word, "Hi!" How could I be depressed with that welcome every morning? Don't

get me wrong -- when she hit puberty, we had some rough mornings. We had our moments like every parent and child, but I never stopped loving her, even in those rare times when it was hard to like her.

I felt a deep responsibility to provide Leslie with every opportunity to learn, grow and become all that God intended her to become. I truly believed that she had a purpose on Earth and I, by some miracle, was chosen to be her mother. Leslie was a beam -- a beacon of joy, love and light that people were naturally drawn to. As the song says, "it seemed to me that sunshine walked beside her."

She especially loved to read, which she learned to do by age four, and she loved to dance. She began studying ballet seriously at the age of six and danced with the Greenville Ballet throughout high school. She turned down a full dance scholarship to a South Carolina University to attend the college of her dreams, the University of Georgia. Before entering college, Leslie and her friend Kelly spent the summer studying with the Alvin Ailey Dance Company in New York City. That was when Leslie discovered the great big wonderful world and all its possibility and it seemed that she was finished with dance and it broke my heart. But all wasn't wasted. She carried herself with the poise and grace of a prima ballerina for the rest of her life. With her own unique blend of southern charm, impeccable manners, raw intelligence, natural beauty, unending compassion, sharp wit and delightful sense of humor, spontaneity, and integrity, she was a shining star.

I took out enough parent loans to pay out-of-state tuition because I felt she deserved to attend the school of her choice. Less than 5 percent of out-of-state applicants were admitted. It was an honor. I'm still paying those parent loans. But you know, I don't regret it for a minute, especially now, because I could never forgive myself if I had made her choose a lesser school because of money.

Leslie was more than a beautiful girl, she was a beautiful soul. Leslie loved children. She had a knack with them -- especially with handicapped kids. She went to the YMCA day camp every summer and earned her lifesaving certificate and taught swimming lessons to young children. Leslie attended a large local Baptist church with her friends because they had an active youth group. One morning after church, she came home and announced that she was no longer a Baptist. She said when the pastor said that the two little boys from the YMCA she taught swimming to, and who she loved, were going to hell because they were Muslim, she knew he must be wrong. This wasn't the God she believed in.

I was never as proud of my daughter as I was that day. And you know, she didn't stop going to that church and that youth group. She was able to discover her own spiritual path without condemning others for their beliefs. Leslie loved that church and the many friends she had there.

When she was in middle school, she earned the privilege of attending the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts. She attended every summer, first as a participant, and then she was invited to attend as an assistant. It was an amazing opportunity. Her discipline was dance, but she was exposed to all of the performing and visual arts and attended performances by countless distinguished writers and poets such as Maya Angelou and Kurt Vonnegut.

She was president of the Beta Club and a member of the National Honor Society. She graduated with honors.

She was a little spoiled. I don't mind admitting that. We all treated her like a princess, even her brothers. That was easy. Leslie never knew anything but pure love. This is a tremendous comfort to me now, to know in my heart that Leslie knew how much she was cherished. Not once in her life did she ever feel unloved. In fact, it hurt her to see children abused, abandoned or unloved. This is what moved her to help pass legislation in South Carolina to protect children. Yes, she was a beauty queen. Her brothers liked to tease her and called her "Miss Possum Kingdom" because Williamston, S.C. isn't a very big town, but the truth is, they were really proud of her. And there are no words to express my gratitude to the town of Williamston for the respect and love they have shown for my daughter.

I wasn't thrilled when she chose to compete in a beauty contest, but in hindsight, I'm grateful. She told me that she loved every minute of it. In addition to the positive contributions she made in protecting children, she made many cherished friends.

Leslie worked at a Montessori School for awhile in college in Athens, Georgia. It was her dream to meet her perfect partner and have a family. She wanted more than anything in the world to have four boys. Four sons. I would roll my eyes in disbelief, but she was serious. Four children that she will never have; babies that I will never hold in my arms.

After Leslie's funeral in South Carolina, and just two weeks after the senseless and brutal murder of my only daughter, my precious Leslie, I and the people of my Congregation chose to go ahead with my long planned for ordination/installation as a minister in Michigan. An empty chair bearing a single red rose in the front row of the church gave voice to the silent agony of her absence.

Leslie's absence is palpable, yet her life will continue to speak for itself -- her memory will live on, not only in the hearts and minds of those who knew her and loved her, but in her legacy:

Leslie's compassion will spill over into the lives of abused and abandoned children who find sanctuary and respect and love in the cottage now being built in her honor.

Her love and joy will remain in this world in the thousands of small acts of compassion her friends will perform when they remember Leslie.

Her life will remain in this world in my personal vow to spend the rest of my life cherishing her life as a promise of healing in a broken world and in my desire to bless every memory as "sacred gift."

Her courage will remain in the world whenever anyone, as I believe Leslie did for Adriane, goes to the aid of their neighbor or friend.

Her love will remain in the world when in my own ministry I am reminded that every life is a precious gift, and that every moment, even those that are most devoid of any light, are fragile, precious, and must be honored.

Throughout this ordeal, without the love and support of friends, family, and church members, I would have surely perished. I am still only partially alive today; a part of me died when Leslie was taken from my life. With the tremendous weight and responsibilities of parish ministry and the never ending raw pain and vast emptiness that reside in my heart, I struggle every day. Leslie's absence accompanies me in everything I do, everywhere I go,

everything I see that reminds me of her. C.S. Lewis captures this curse of endless grief in a passage he wrote after losing his wife to cancer: "Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything."

I am grateful for Leslie's life. I am grateful that she lived her life fully and that in the months before her death, she was as happy as I had ever seen her. She was in love with her job, she was in love with life and she was in love. For this and for Leslie I will be forever grateful.

Mr. Copple:

Not only you, but your loved ones, are about to travel on a significant and perilous journey. For the rest of your life you and your family will, unfortunately, experience what both your victims and our loved ones have felt:

Terror; desperation; hopelessness; violence; extreme fear; the collapse of everything you hold dear; the fragility of life; the loss of belief in personal safety; confusion and anger; the loss of physical contact with loved ones; despair; the relentless images that assault your dreams and deny you rest; the horror of knowing you cannot protect your loved ones from brutal acts of destruction.

You and your loved ones will come to know what it means to journey through hell, seemingly without end.

As your mother and your family will take this journey with you and will grieve as I do for the loss of their child, I pray for them, Eric -- they who once held the promise of such potential for life in their arms.

I'm told, Mr. Copple, that you have found God since your senseless rampage. Certainly while finding God sets you on the road to redemption, God does not grant cheap grace. Your salvation will come only when you accept full responsibility for what you have done, not only to Leslie and Adriane and our families, but to your own family and friends. This will be very hard, as it will be difficult to practice the forgiveness that you seek in the terrible and violent world you are about to enter.

But it is right for us to hope that sometime, somewhere down the long road ahead you will learn to take these murders into your heart like a man, and let the guilt tear and rip apart your heart from the inside out, as your senseless and violent act resulting in the murders of Leslie and Adriane have done to all who loved them and whose lives they touched.

I know that I will navigate the rest of my life with a broken heart. As a mother and a minister I wish I could tell you that I forgive you. At this time, I cannot. In fact, I can imagine that one day, when the shock and pain of hearing what Leslie endured eases, I might likely wish you were sitting on death row. Maybe it might make me feel better to know you will spend the rest of your life sitting in prison, wondering when and how you will die: waiting, wondering when they will come to kill you -- terrified. It may seem only fair after what you have done.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke suggests that we think of God as a direction. I do vow to walk in the direction of forgiveness toward God. Not for your sake, but for my own. I may never get there, but I know if I do not try, hatred and anger will likely kill what's left of this broken body of mine. If I do not try, I will also make a mockery of Leslie's belief in life.

I also pray that I remember that my Unitarian Universalist faith teaches me that every human being on Earth has inherent worth and dignity, even you. And I pray that one day I will feel a measure of compassion and possible forgiveness even for you.

I pray that some day I can be released from the hellish nightmares that plague my thoughts both day and night. I pray that somehow I can find something redemptive in this horrific tragedy that you have heaped on our lives.

I pray to a God that I cannot even find most days, to give me a moment's insight, just one holy instant when I might find something redemptive in this nightmare, some measure of wisdom that might provide every parent all that they need to love and nurture their children.

I pray that all children might become all that God intended for them to be -- that they will grow up to be loving and compassionate toward others and live decent, happy lives.

I pray that we will one day become a more compassionate nation and work toward creating a better world where every baby is recognized as a sacred gift deserving to be loved and nurtured.

And, finally, I pray that, one day, never again will any mother's child grow up to be a murderer.

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