

## Execution does not get to the root of the problem

May 15, 2016, By Daniel J. Bauer

I do not know whether others with this same avocation might agree with me. I can tell you, however, that without a strong sense of emotion, I cannot offer words that are worth reading.

That is one of the lessons I've learned as a writer of a weekly column, the avocation I just mentioned.

Only recently did I discover that the word "avocation" is connected to the notion of "distraction." An avocation is supposed to distract us as a hobby does, so that we can rest from our work and afterwards throw ourselves into it with more gusto. I hope to return to this notion below.

I am asking myself how to drum up a few readable words for today. I mentioned strong emotions. Don't I have any strong emotions about recent local news? I do.

But this could be a very big order to deliver. Readers may not be receptive to my views today. I sense I will alienate many of you. I am truly sorry if that occurs.

I cannot imagine gobs of cheering Bauer fans leaping from behind bushes and rushing up to me with open arms and saying, "Good for you for expressing flat out, unvarnished, gut-felt aversion to what our legal system did to Cheng Chieh this week."

The truth is I've plenty of emotion about the execution of Cheng Chieh.

I am well aware that I am in a tiny minority (perhaps as small as 15 per cent of the general population) opposed to the death penalty in Taiwan. And, yes, I know that numerous folks who consider themselves broad-minded, caring individuals, possibly even Biblically-based Christians (and remember we Catholics are Christians, too) with an espoused appreciation for the value and dignity of human life will insist that Cheng Chieh was nothing but a blood-thirsty monster, a psychopath, and a demon, all rolled into one. But Mr. Cheng still shared a common humanity with all the rest of us.

I believe barbaric retribution for barbaric acts does no lasting good, nor brings any true healing for anyone. Capital punishment is not an expression of a society's will to punish, but to take bloody revenge. For me, revenge is always dehumanizing, always harmful in itself.

My cynical side wants to engage in banter. Mr. Cheng killed 4, seriously wounded 22, and traumatized

millions. For heaven's sakes, the Ministry of Justice offered terrific rationale for shooting the man dead.

Don't you agree?

Now that this miscreant has been squished out of existence, our quality of life is immensely upgraded. We're riding in first class! We can breathe easily in public, and enjoy the benefits of a kind, secure, silk-lined society. Our MRT lines are safer now than the streets of heaven above.

And my, my, aren't you also proud of what we "the people" have done? We gave that animal exactly what it deserved, and boy, that sure satisfies our most blessed urges. He got his, all right, and we say, hurray!

Media said they had him lie face down and shot him three times through his back, the bullets smacking him in the old ticker. And not only that! A doctor attending Cheng supposedly took advantage of a last opportunity to scold him. Wow, that's my kind of doctor. That particular news item really warmed my heart.

Satire is so culturally related that I must defend myself here. Several paragraphs above, from "My cynical side" until "warmed my heart," is an attempt at satire. I mean no offense. I rely on intelligent editors and readers who are capable of grasping a literary strategy.

Here is a bit more: Imagine potentially violent criminals in Taiwan this week when they read the headlines, "MRT murderer executed." Can't you just close your eyes and see these guys shake in their boots? The threat of violence against them probably caused upset stomachs and migraine headaches. End of satire.

The name of the game, my friends, is distraction. Arguments about the death penalty distract us from devoting our efforts to educate young people on how to be parents. Our arguing distracts us from our desperate need to develop vastly more competent professional counselors who can reach out into society and pro-actively deal with aberrant behavior before it gets out of hand as it did with Cheng Chieh.

Our quarreling distracts us quite nicely, thank you, from our need to attack the roots of sickness and violence where they thrive, which is in our families and the emotionally impoverished pockets of our own neighborhoods. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## Talking points

- 1) This column focuses on the Q of "capital punishment" / the death penalty in Taiwan ('sz xing'), and the execution last week of the criminal Cheng Chieh (of the very sad MRT attack incident). Some people may feel this is a gloomy topic, and too serious to discuss. Some may feel such a heavy situation does not 'belong' to Fu da students. Does the death penalty debate influence your emotions? Is this an important Q for you? Why or why not?
- 2) The English words "punishment" and "revenge" are quite different. What Chinese words come to your mind to express each term? The author of the column says the death penalty is an act of revenge, and by definition, revenge is not helpful in a society. Was the execution of Cheng Chieh a situation of revenge or punishment?
- 3) Asian cultures appear to especially favor "sz xing." It is more common for some western cultures to express opposition to the death penalty. Why do you think this is so?

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