

'If you make a mistake, there's no turning back'

Like Jo Yeates's parents, Bob Curley had wanted his child's killers to be executed. Here he tells **Kaya Burgess** why he changed his mind, while a woman whose father was hanged reveals how his death tore her family apart

PRIORITY moments

Enjoy these and other money saving Christmas offers

Text MOMENTS to 2020

Only on **O₂**

Online and internet-enabled phones. Offers subject to availability during promotional periods. Data charges may apply. See terms at o2.co.uk

I thought his murderers should be put to death. I was so full of anger and rage. If someone robs your house or steals your car, that is one thing, but for someone to kidnap one of your children, kill them in such a heinous way, desecrate their body and dump it where they thought it would never be found...

When Bob Curley's young son Jeffrey was kidnapped and murdered by two paedophiles in America in 1997, he felt very much like the parents of the strangled architect Jo Yeates. After the conviction of her killer Vincent Tabak last month, they said: "For us it is with regret that capital punishment is not a possible option for his sentence." Tabak's conviction has turned the death penalty into a major topic of debate once more, with readers on several news websites calling for prosecutors to "bring back the noose".

No one has been executed in Britain since 1964 when Peter Anthony Allen and Gwynne Owen Evans were hanged, but the death penalty still has widespread support: 22,000 people have signed a petition started by Paul Staines, a blogger, calling for the restoration of capital punishment in the UK. Staines, author of the Guido Fawkes blog, used a recent column in *The Times* to claim that "there has never been a popular majority for ending hanging and opposition to the death penalty has always come from a progressive elite". A counter petition, however, has just notched up its 30,000th signature, with opponents of the death penalty arguing that it offers no way back in cases where a miscarriage of justice has occurred.

Curley's journey is an awful one that the Yeates family are only just embarking on, yet it completely changed his views on the death penalty. "It was October 1, 1997, and Jeffrey was ten years old," Curley tells me from his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a studied calmness. "He was in his grandmother's front yard when two paedophiles — one aged 21, the other 20 — said they'd take him to get a new bicycle, a bicycle they had stolen two weeks before.

"He got in the car and they told him they'd get him the bicycle if he had sex with them. He refused, so they offered him money. He refused that, so they suffocated him with a gasoline-soaked rag, had sex with him after he was dead and dumped his body in a river in Maine. It took police a few days to find him."

Sal Sicari and Charles Jaynes were convicted of Jeffrey's murder and Curley fought hard to bring back the death penalty in Massachusetts to punish his son's killers. His efforts were foiled by a margin of just one vote among the state's lawmakers.

Sicari was imprisoned for life without parole and Jaynes for life with the possibility of parole after 23 years. However, it was not long into their sentences that Curley's views on the death penalty began to change.

"It took a couple of years for me to shift. At first, I would have felt guilty if I wasn't in favour of the death penalty for them, as if it would be in some way disrespectful to Jeffrey not to be. But when things calmed down I realised I had had an up-close view of the criminal justice system and you quickly find out that it's not always fair. Should your ability to afford a good lawyer give you a better chance of avoiding death than someone who can't afford it? I know I couldn't if I was in that



Bob Curley, above, speaks to reporters in 1997 after the kidnapping of his son, Jeffrey, far left. Left: Tina Harris (centre) with her sisters Sandra and Pat in Brighton in 1952



situation. Nothing and nobody's perfect and if you make a mistake, there's no turning back.

"It took me a while to say it in public, but it came to a point where I said: 'Hey, look, I'm not obligated to support the death penalty. You've seen my journey but you don't know where I've been'. I would rather Jeffrey's killers stay in jail and be kept away from society. I wouldn't have them executed."

While the relatives of a murder victim are, quite rightly, the subject of great public sympathy, the effect on the family of the murderer is far less well documented.

Tina Harris, now 68, was just eight years old when her father, Alfred Moore, was hanged in Armley Prison in Leeds in 1952 for the murder of two policemen.

"The policemen's families lost their loved ones, but we lost our father too and we were just forgotten about," Tina explains from her home in London. "We ended up destitute; us kids had to go into a home until my mother was able to get us back together again. I never even told my sons about their grandfather because I didn't want anyone pointing the finger at them. We were moved in and out of schools and half our family emigrated to escape the



The death penalty just creates more bereaved families

The death penalty just creates more bereaved families."

Moore, a prolific burglar, was arrested at his farmhouse in Huddersfield for the murder of Det Insp Duncan Fraser and PC Arthur Jagger, who were shot as a group of officers approached the farm, hoping to catch him returning with stolen goods. Moore was tried and convicted on evidence, based largely on the account of PC Jagger, who picked Moore out of a line-up before dying of his injuries in hospital. Moore was hanged a few months later.

However, the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) is currently investigating Moore's conviction after Steve Lawson, a retired police detective, uncovered a number of weaknesses in the evidence against him, including crucial discrepancies in the timing of a police cordon set up around the crime scene and in the testimony of the

wounded policeman. "I remember whistles blowing on the farm and lights coming towards us and Mum and Dad were panicking," recalls Tina. "Then they took Dad away. My mum must have told us that Dad was going to die, but I don't remember if she told us how. My sister Pat was 10 at the time and had to go to court and answer lots of questions in the police station. She has carried the guilt with her all her life."

Last month Troy Davis was executed in the United States, even though seven of the nine witnesses on whose accounts his conviction depended withdrew their testimonies during an appeal.

Tina says: "Even if there was a way to be 100 per cent sure of someone's guilt — and there really never is — the death penalty is still the State doing the exact same thing as the murderer, but legally sanctioned. My dad wanted to go straight when we moved to that farm, but he never had the chance."

The argument over the death penalty's role as a deterrent is further clouded by statistics from the US. These show that in each of the past 21 years the murder rate in American states that do not have the death penalty has been lower than the murder rate in states that still do. Also, research has shown that executing a murderer costs a lot more than imprisoning an offender for life, because of the lengthy appeals processes and high security.

Esther Brown, 78, runs Project Hope, an anti-death penalty group in Alabama that represents a number of people on death row. She says: "Perhaps the death penalty really is the will of the people. But so was lynching. So was racism. All life is sacred. I saw members of my family murdered when I grew up in Germany in the Second World War, but never felt that killing their killers would do anything for me other than contaminate the memory of the person I loved. Closure does not come from somebody else's death, it is something we have to give ourselves."

The Plankton returns next week



Ask Professor Tanya Byron

My school is really academic and I can't cope. Please help



Q I am 17 and in my final year at school. I did my AS levels last year and did OK — two As and two Bs. I know that these are good results but I have done less well than most of the other girls at school, including all my friends.

I am now really struggling in my final year. I am doing three A2 subjects and have been predicted good grades but I have lost all confidence. If I come up against a problem I feel stupid and that I have somehow failed. Before, I would have enjoyed the challenge.

My school is one that always gets good results — it is tough to get into (I started there aged 11) and the expectations are high. Compared with friends at other schools I have always had a lot more work.

I am now really jealous of my friends who are at less pressured schools. They have done well in their ASs but even though their results are not as "good" as mine, they seem so happy and confident in themselves.

I also feel really disconnected from my friends at school — not that they are doing anything to make me feel that way but because I often feel that underneath they think I am really thick, and pity me.

I know my parents are worried about me because they keep asking me what is wrong. My brother says that I've "changed" and am just "a nightmare to be around". I feel sick going to school and spend a lot of time crying in my room. I know there are people who have really tough lives but I just can't help it and don't know what to do.

Laura

A Measuring our personal value against our results as they compare with those of others can lead to real problems.

Your results are not "OK", they are excellent and if they represent the culmination of a lot of hard work and commitment to your study, then you should be mightily proud of yourself.

You are clearly a student in a more academically pressured school where there are high expectations. There is nothing wrong with this unless the pressure becomes so intense that all perspective on "success" is lost.

I went to a school like yours and did not achieve as well as my friends (with grades certainly nowhere near yours). Indeed, my parents were told that I would "never be a high-flyer". I can remember — like you — feeling as if I had failed. My parents, however, worked hard to help me to recognise that personal worth comes from the whole person and that we all have skills and talents — many not measured by the education system — that combine to help us be and do the best we can.

Let me know how you get on. If you have a family problem, e-mail profantonyabyron@thetimes.co.uk

I often see young women at my clinics with profoundly low self-esteem. Some of them develop such a strong sense of self-loathing that they engage in self-destructive behaviour; this could be an eating disorder or self-harm.

On the surface these young women are fantastic — bright, inquisitive and interesting — but they despise themselves. They speak about feeling lost and out of control in highly pressured schools where they are not "the best" and therefore perceive themselves as the worst in all ways.

Often they will talk about controlling their eating or harming themselves as a way of gaining control. So, in effect, self-harming becomes a "coping strategy". I don't want you to develop these strategies because they create an extra layer of problems and distress. I will, therefore, suggest a pragmatic way forward.

The pressures at school have led you to develop a belief that personal success is measured by academic results.

You need support to challenge this belief and develop a sense of self-worth. I suspect that your friends at other schools who are happier feel that way because they have a more holistic sense of their worth. Indeed, why not start with them? Spend time around them and let them help you to recognise what makes you a really great person to know — a person of "worth".

It may help to find other activities that counterbalance the need to study hard and also provide a sense of wellbeing. Find friends to do exercise with (Zumba is great fun — see zumba.com). Consider voluntary work — this will help you to gain a perspective on the stresses in your life.

From your letter, it sounds as if you are experiencing anxiety (there is plenty of good advice at teenage-anxiety.co.uk). Speak to a parent and a trusted teacher, and ask if they can mentor you through this final tough year of school.

Also, if you don't feel comfortable talking to a school counsellor, ask your GP for a referral to a professional. Most of the really successful and accomplished people I know were not the best in their schools. Indeed, for some, this gave them the determination to do the best they could.

I am not saying that getting top grades isn't great, but not everyone can do that — not because they are "stupid" but because the assessment system does not necessarily measure their qualities.

It is unfortunate that we have an education system so driven by targets, and testing only a narrow range of skills and abilities. Those who are happiest in what they do are those who have self-belief, determination and healthy ways of managing the challenges of life; generally these people did not get straight As.

Let me know how you get on. If you have a family problem, e-mail profantonyabyron@thetimes.co.uk