

The New York Times

I Wish the Jury Had Not Sentenced My Family's Killer to Death

Nov. 1, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET



The author, Sharon Risher, with a photograph of her mother, Ethel Lance, who was killed in the Charleston, S.C., church shooting in 2015. Kennedy Carter for The New York Times

This week, Nikolas Cruz, who killed 17 people in the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., will be formally sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, and the families of those who were killed or injured will again have [a chance to speak](#) about the irreparable harm done to them.

I understand the anguish some of [those families expressed](#) last month after the jury decided to spare the gunman's life. That's because I have sat in a similar courtroom, under similar circumstances. Dylann Roof, a white supremacist, murdered my mother, two cousins and six others in 2015 at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C. For that, he was sentenced to death.

I would never tell anyone how to feel in such a situation. I can only share my own story. And having lived through this awful experience — the loss of my loved ones, followed by a trial in which we had to hear about the terrible details of the murders again and to revisit all of the pain — I can say that Mr. Roof's death sentence did not bring my family closure. It only prolonged our agony.

How can families of victims not want vengeance for what the killer has done? I was very conflicted throughout Mr. Roof's trial. It brought me new misery to see such a young man with so much hate in his heart. But by the time the sentencing phase ended, I felt that killing him would do nothing to help me heal. After much prayer and asking God to help me, I knew in my heart that killing him would not solve anything.

Because he was sentenced to death, we are still suffering in ways that could have been avoided. Five years ago, Mr. Roof's first appeal [was rejected](#). It was two years after his crime, but just the experience of that appeal being a headline brought back all of the horror of his violence, renewing our wounds. Every time our case is in the news, I am returned to that terrible day and the searing pain of the weeks, months and years that followed. It almost feels as if he gets to continue the terror he intended to create, because the focus is on him, while his victims' families wait for the supposed finality of an execution that may never come.



Paintings of the author's family members who were killed. Clockwise from bottom left, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance and Tywanza Sanders. Kennedy Carter for The New York Times

This is the unintended but very real consequence of the death penalty. Rather than helping my family heal, Dylann Roof's death sentence has done the opposite.

Based on my experience and that of many others whom I know, some of the families of the Parkland victims may discover that Mr. Cruz's sentence of life in prison brings them more peace in the end. After all, life without the possibility of parole might better be understood as death by incarceration. I certainly agree that such killers should never be free.

I hope that Nikolas Cruz's sentence can be a turning point for the families, that it will allow them to move toward healing. We can never get our loved ones back. But for me, not having the uncertainty of a death sentence hanging over me would make it easier to focus on the positive memories of those I lost.

In the years since Mr. Roof's trial, I have become active in the movement to abolish the death penalty. There are many reasons to oppose it, including that racism and other injustices taint the justice system in the United States. Getting rid of the death penalty also would bring a close to these torturous years of appeals for so many of us.

I pray that God will give the Parkland families comfort, and that God will give Nikolas Cruz the opportunity to understand and accept responsibility for what he has done and that he can find a way to use the remainder of his life for good, even in prison.

For everyone else, I want to say this: Please don't speak for victims and their families or tell us what to think. The most powerful thing that you can do for family members of murder victims is simply to offer authentic and nonjudgmental presence. We just need to know that we have a community around us that is about love.

Sharon Risher is the daughter of Ethel Lance, and the cousin of Tywanza Sanders and Susie Jackson, victims in the 2015 massacre at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C. She is the chair of the board of Death Penalty Action and associate minister at New Emmanuel Congregational United Church of Christ in Charlotte, N.C.

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