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## The Execution Of Ronnie Dunkins

It was midnight going into Friday, July 14 when we were ushered into the very small witness room. Through the full-length window Horace ("Ronnie") Dunkins Jr., 28, black, poor and somewhat retarded, was strapped to the Alabama electric chair. His hair had been shaved. His father, a cousin, his home church pastor, his lawyer and I stood behind the representative prison officials.

I was there because in 1981 I had received Ronnie's name and address from the Death Row Support Project. Through the years of correspondence my family and I had grown very close to him; we were his second family.

There could be no speaking through the heavy glass window. Ronnie formed the words emphatically with his lips: "I love you, father," and then a couple of times to the others of us, "I love you."

Ronnie was bound in the electric chair because of a ghastly crime. Lynn McCurry, white, 26-year-old mother of four, had been raped and murdered. As the newspaper accounts never failed to mention, her nude body was found tied to a tree and had 66 stab wounds.

Ronnie admitted that he and his "rap partner" had committed the rape. But Ronnie denied to the last that he killed Lynn McCurry or was there when the murder was committed. It could, he said, have been his buddy who, by saying that he saw Ronnie kill her, gained for himself a life sentence and is eligible for parole in several years.

For me the strongest reason for believing that Ronnie was not the murderer is that he did not confess to this even at the end. He could not have faked the faith he was living out in his last hours. He believed that all his hope for a future beyond the electric chair depended on being at peace with God. He would not have jeopardized that future by withholding a confession that could have added nothing to the penalty he was paying.

"A scared young lawyer" (in Ronnie's words) was appointed by the court to defend him. Only in the last 10 months of his life did Ronnie belatedly have a team of lawyers who, without pay from Ronnie's family or the state, devoted immense effort to bringing out a number of critical issues.

The most important was that Ronnie was mentally retarded, and that according to the recent Supreme Court ruling a jury must be aware of retardation as a factor to be taken into account. The jury in Ronnie's case had not had this brought to its attention. One juror came forward the final week also with an affidavit to say that if she had known of Ronnie's retardation she would have seen the case differently.

His Miranda rights had also been ignored. His request to have a lawyer during questioning went unheeded.

In the race to get a stay of execution, his lawyer took his appeal from one court level to the next. The courts determined that he could not assert his claims because they had not been raised earlier by his prior appointed and volunteer lawyers. Furthermore, both the Alabama appellate court and the federal district court refused to rule on the merits of his claims, thereby assuring that Ronnie would be executed before his claims were decided or appealed.

There was a composure, almost a serenity, in Ronnie's face as he sat on that instrument of death. It was as if he wanted to say that what they were inflicting on him was not what counted ultimately, and that in faith he knew what counted. In the simplicity of his faith he had told me: "You can't believe how good I feel. The Lord is with me. He will be with me all the way through. I know where I'm going when I leave here."

In a farewell letter to those closest to him he wrote, "Remember me with laughter." On Monday when his family visited him, his sister Teresa said that she and many others would be fasting during the remaining period and she suggested that he fast too. He did, taking no solid food. He said, "I love to eat, but I haven't even gotten hungry. This has been a great time."

The coordinator in the witness room drew the blinds. When he lifted them again, a black cloth hood was over Ronnie's head. The warden, in explaining the procedure to us a few minutes earlier, said, "You will see two flashes of light, and then it will be all over." We stood there in the terrible silence of the witness room, waiting.

The whirring rumble of the generator began. Something was happening, but it didn't really seem to be a full electrocution. The coordinator pulled the blinds and called to a guard at the door, "We're on the wrong jacks." They hadn't even succeeded in getting the electric chair plugged in right. The two doctors were called out of the witness room and did an examination. If they are to be believed, Ronnie was unconscious.

About 10 minutes after the first attempt, the rumble came again. Smoke rose from the seat of the chair.

Ronnie had said, "There is all this uproar about burning flags, which can always be replaced no matter how many are burned. But they go right ahead and burn people, people who cannot be replaced." Our irreplaceable Ronnie had been killed. After the doctors' second examination and 19 minutes after the first try, the presiding prison dignitary could announce into the telephone, "It has been carried out."

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