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Seeking clemency in the light of Sandy Hook

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NCR Today

Since last summer, I've been part of a small group working to create an environment where Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon would be more likely to grant clemencies. We've created petitions, written letters, written op-ed essays, spoken with politicians and government staffers. We've met with families of prisoners who have applied for clemency, suggesting ways for them to follow up. Our talking points include public safety and cost savings as well as mercy. Our thought was that after the elections, in the time between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, the governor might be open to the petitions on his desk.

Now, as part of the repercussions echoing across the country from the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, I fear the environment fosters a desire for more punishment, not for clemency.

This is not a small or negligible effect of the shootings. Yes, even legislators sponsored by the National Rifle Association are talking about measures to control guns. And many people are talking about the need for mental health funding, though I don't see any state government, much less the feds, adjusting their budgets to expand mental health care.

But at the same time people are discussing positive actions, there is an undercurrent that sometimes bursts through to the effect that once we have identified these sickos, we can throw them all in prison.

Even among you gentle readers, the small entry I wrote last week before the shootings, which wasn't published until Monday, about life sentences for possession of small amounts of drugs has only two comments, both negative. "They're locked up safe. Don't let 'em out." That's the prevailing wind.

In all the review of shootings past, I haven't heard anyone mention the attack on the Amish little girls in Pennsylvania. I think the absence of calls for revenge from that community has led us to shut them out of our minds. We don't want to hear their simple choice to love one another.

We have, as a society, given ourselves permission to be angry. In the safety of our cars, we give the finger and call one another foul names. We elect politicians who promise to be tough on crime and spend on the military. We view ourselves as generous but we spend our money on ourselves, not on those in need.

The governors and president will show compassion or not. I have done what I could think to do. But a part of what I can call on you and me to learn from so many deaths at Sandy Hook is compassion, mercy and forgiveness for all the wrongs done to us. That's the point of our faith, after all. It's the point of our lives.

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