

# COLUMNISTS

## Do we create stumbling blocks for others?

Generally, I think in advance about my Lenten reading, planning months ahead to reread Dante's *Purgatorio* or Therese's *Autobiography of a Soul*. But this year, I hadn't considered Lent at all when on Feb. 1, a review copy of *Death Blossoms* by Mumia Abu-Jamal arrived in the mail.

*Death Blossoms* is a set of 121 meditations by a prison inmate on death row. Mumia was convicted in 1982 of murdering a policeman. He has always proclaimed his innocence. But this is not a book about his case. It is a book about human suffering in the image and likeness of God, resisting evil and, when evil cannot be held at bay, bearing it for love of others. I read it straight through that Sunday and Monday.

One reflection quotes from *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran. Gibran wrote that the one who falls on the road falls for those behind as a caution to them about the stumbling block in the path; and he falls for those ahead of him who though stronger and more fleet of foot, did not pause to remove the stone. Many of those in prison fell because we, the strong and fleet of foot, did not remove the stumbling blocks. And we use them as examples, even increase the burden of their suffering, to de-



ordinary time

By SISTER MARY ANN MCGIVERN, SL

ter others.

I'd been thinking about complacency and resistance to evil before the book arrived. Two Saturdays ago I went to a theology talk for nuns. The speaker described some ways to resist institutional evil. The evil I thought of then is the suffering of farm workers. One institutional effort to help them is the boycott of table grapes until farm labor contracts include pesticide controls. Nuns have been strong supporters of justice for agricultural workers for 25 years — but recently table grapes have reappeared in many convent refrigerators, not because the pesticide use has dropped or farm workers are being paid living wages, but because we too are lazy

and complicit. We benefit from the sufferings of the men, women and children in the fields by getting cheap, tasty food. We got tired of sacrificing grapes.

Mumia Abu-Jamal's book, *Death Blossoms*, is about suffering caused by institutional or structural evil. Mumia reminds us that Jesus' suffering and death on the cross continues today in the body of the imprisoned poor who suffer under a structural evil that denies their humanity.

"Here in death row," Mumia wrote, "in the confined sub-stratum of a society where every father is childless, and every man fatherless, those of us who have known the bond of father-son love may at least re-live it in our minds, perhaps even draw strength from it. Those who have not — the unloved — find it virtually impossible to love. They live alienated from everyone around them, at war even with their own families.

"Here in this manmade hell, there are countless young men bubbling with bitter hatreds and roiling resentments against their absent fathers. Several have taken to the odd habit of calling me "Papa," an endearment whose irony escapes them .... It took a trip, a trek to the shiny, burnished

steel mirror on the wall, where I found my father's face staring back at me, to recognize reality. I am he ... and they are me."

Mumia wrote about his spiritual journey, his political upbringing, fellow inmates, Cuba and black militancy. His data and opinions may shock our complacent spirit. But if we seek to protect and honor life, we must sacrifice our squeamish sensibilities and open ourselves to a black man's experience of truth on death row.

African-American writers Cornel West and Julia Wright have written introductory material for the book. It concludes with an interview with Mumia and a biography.

The information and analysis these sections provide puts Mumia's reflections in an historical and literary context. But Mumia's own image at the center of the book of a spider weaving its web in a neighboring cell "in the antiseptic stillness of a supermaximum security prison block" is an image of Mumia himself, spinning a thread of words from his heart to ours.

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Sister McGivern is executive director of the St. Louis Economic Conversion Project based in St. Louis, Mo.

## Tradition provides means to consider cloning

Current news items often occupy the time and attention of moral theologians and teachers of ethics. In the past few weeks, for example, we've seen quite a bit of excitement around the question of cloning. This is because after quite a few years of suggestions and research, someone finally cloned a sheep. Then just this past weekend a source in Oregon announced the cloning of a pair of monkeys.

Right away everyone begins offering an opinion. Jay Leno and David Letterman make humorous comments. My niece, age 12, is happy because now-endangered species won't have to be lost. Commentators on talk shows assure us that we will soon be replicating Michael Jordan and have a league filled with teams that play basketball as well as the Bulls. Other more sinister observers picture vast laboratories filled with human beings generated and nurtured so that we can harvest their organs to replace our own diseased ones.

Some people have phoned my office to ask what the pope says about cloning. So far I haven't heard the pope make any statements about the sheep or the monkeys. I can point out, though, that we have



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

a developed tradition that contains some important moral principles and ideas that can help the pope — and all of us — think responsibly about this new technology.

In addition to "dipping into" the main principles of our tradition, we can refer to concrete documents issued by the church on related topics that can help us. In 1987, for example, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an instruction on "Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation."

That document in turn relied on principles of long standing in our tradition and arrived at several conclusions regarding new reproductive technologies. Many

of the main principles used in that document apply much more widely than just to reproductive technologies. Some of them can help us think through the cloning issue, too. For example, Catholic moral theology has from the very beginning opposed any use of the human individual. Human beings are ends in themselves. To reduce the human person to a commodity to be used for some other social, medical, or technological good is immoral.

Beyond that document, and for those who are used to using the language and ideals of human rights, we can say that Catholicism is not alone among the world's ethical systems that claim that human beings have the "right" to parents, presumably even to married parents.

Without waiting for the pope, Vatican congregations, or bishops' conferences to issue official teachings about developments like the cloning of human beings, we are already able to bring some of our long-standing moral notions to such questions. Our belief in the dignity of the human person helps us to draw some initial conclusions about the question of cloning and the prospect of "using" human beings.

Our convictions help us to recognize that there are limits to what we can tolerate.

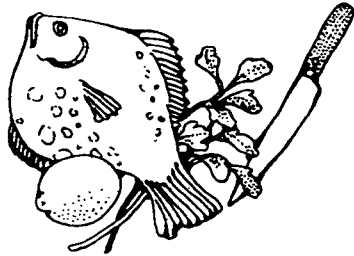
This question helps me appreciate again the wisdom that accompanied our diocesan Synod back in the early 1990s. Through the Synod we placed a high priority on life-long religious education and on the consistent ethic of life. These two pillars could not have proven to be more significant. They prepare us to respond to the reality that issues change, and that we need to learn more in order to respond to new questions in the light of our faith.

We seem to have matured as a people of faith more comfortable with our growing appreciation of the fact that "the faith we have received" simply cannot be reduced to fit on some 3x5-inch index card able to resolve the complex questions we need to address today. More of us, it seems, are growing increasingly aware that a rigid pre-formed blueprint for dealing with life simply doesn't work — not if we're going to bring a living faith to the big questions and issues of our time.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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