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March 8, 2011

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

Shown below is the testimony I was prepared to give at the hearing on Monday, March 7. I was unable to stay until my name would have come up, so I am submitting it to you in writing. At the end, I will add some additional comments based on something I heard at the hearing.

Testimony on Raised SB 1035
An Act Concerning the Repeal of the Death Penalty
March 7, 2011

Chairman and Members of the Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Al Benford, a resident of Manchester and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Society: East. I will leave it to others to address the financial and discrimination considerations in the administration of the death penalty as it exists today. I will address the moral issue in the best way I know how.

I grew up in a traditional Christian home, learning the 10 Commandments among other religious principles. Those principles still guide my life, although as a UU, I take inspiration from a wider variety of religions and modes of thought. One of the Commandments was "Thou shalt not kill." I have heard that expressed with some variations, but "Thou shalt not kill" I think best represents its meaning. It does not list any exceptions to the rule, although over centuries, cultures have carved out what they see as exceptions, including executing people who have killed others. I see that as adding a crime to the first crime.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I try my best to live up to the UU principles, the first of which is to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That does not say "every person we like" and that would not be much of a challenge. The challenge comes in respecting the worth and dignity of those we don't like and those who have committed horrible acts. If God created the earth and its people, God created those who commit crimes. Who among us would purposely destroy something or someone that God created?

Does a society have a right to protect itself? Without question. Does it have the right to do so by taking a life? I believe not. While my inspiration comes from my religious

heritage, I do not see this as improperly imposing religious values into the law. Many of the documents founding our country and our state show respect for the value of human life. Is it not in the name of respecting the victims that we prosecute perpetrators of murder and assault? We must extend the respect for life to even those who least deserve it. Else it becomes a meaningless principle.

This is not about whether people who commit heinous crimes, (the Cheshire case is the most heinous crime on most people's minds) deserve to die. If anyone "deserves to die," it is those perpetrators. This really is about whether we, as a society deserve to become killers. When an execution occurs, the state is killing someone in the name of all of its citizens. That makes us all complicit in the killing. ***It makes us just like the people we demonize.*** I do not want to be categorized as complicit in any killing. Many years ago, I saw a bumper sticker that said: "Why do we kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong?" It is a logical contradiction to do so.

Cases like the Cheshire case certainly stimulate a lot of emotion, and opposition to repeal of the death penalty is highly emotionally charged. Victims of horrible crimes feel vindictive toward the perpetrators. This is a clear case where the emotions should be respected, but not enacted into law, or in this case prevent the repeal of a law that makes all of us killers.

SB 1035 MUST be passed to prevent further executions. It is not only illogical to kill those who have killed, it is immoral and makes every legislator and citizen complicit in that immorality. Do you, as legislators, want to be complicit in the killing of any person? I, as a citizen, do not.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

During the hearing, in an exchange about what constitutes a "heinous" act, one committee member said that killing, any killing, whether or not it involved torture or any other aggravating factor, was a "heinous" act. Any killing was of somebody's loved one, and that is what constituted a "heinous" act. I would like to point out that an execution involves killing a person who may be "someone's loved one." By that definition, an execution is a "heinous" act, carried out by the state in the name of all of its citizens. I do not wish to be involved in any "heinous" act, either directly or indirectly. What kind of society uses violence to punish violence? I hope you will see the wisdom in the repeal of the death penalty. The death penalty, by definition, dehumanizes the whole state and every person in the state.

Thank you for considering this appeal.


Al Benford