

OUT ON THE BORDERLINE

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The execution of murderers Stanley “Tookie” Williams in December and Clarence Ray Allen in January raised the question of whether capital punishment accomplishes one of its main purposes – deterring violent crime. Only people who are rational and can calculate the consequences of their actions and change their behavior accordingly can be deterred by threats like capital punishment. And those who commit violent acts don’t tend to be rational people. This I know from personal experience.

I knew my father was mentally ill, but I never knew the name of his illness until after his death. After his suicide in 2004, my sister and I met with our father’s psychiatrist, and that was the first time I heard the words: Borderline Personality Disorder. It means on the borderline of psychosis. The titles of the books I’ve read since then – *I Hate You, Don’t Leave Me*, and *Sometimes I Act Crazy* – yield some clues about the disease. People who suffer from this illness have multiple neuroses – obsessions, compulsions, paranoia, eating disorders, inappropriate sexuality and substance abuse. Periodically, they have psychotic episodes when they become uncontrollably enraged, violent and destructive.

The main root of the illness lies in childhood abuse and abandonment. My father had an absent father and a severely depressed and destitute mother. He was shuttled around among relatives and periodically returned to his mother and a series of stepfathers, some of whom beat him. In some individuals, this type of abuse creates extremely low self-esteem, obsessive fear of being abandoned, and inability to control anger.

In my father’s case, the illness first manifested itself in alcoholism. He was already an alcoholic in his early 20s. As my father’s illness deepened in his 40s, he veered off into bizarre behavior – multiple affairs while married to my mother, and continuous use of drugs including marijuana, peyote, hashish, cocaine, LSD and ecstasy. He threatened suicide, played Russian roulette and held our family hostage with loaded guns, wrecked cars while drunk, trashed our house, physically attacked family members, disappeared for long periods of time, hallucinated, and once tried to run me over with a

Jeep.

My father’s propensity for violence kept me at a distance for much of my adult life, as his behavior and psychotic episodes continued to increase in scale and severity. He was busted by the DEA for possession of cocaine, he moved

to Costa Rica, was under the FBI for threatening to

periodically to psych for instance, called tell them about the driveway. Because our financial success my father, he had the funds to pay for legal defense and was able to emerge from these scrapes. He steadfastly asserted that there was nothing wrong with him and that he needed no psychiatric treatment. In the mid-1990s, after he made sexual advances to his teenaged stepdaughter, his third wife took him to see her psychiatrist, who finally diagnosed his illness. In a final psychotic episode, he shot himself in the head.

Through his psychotic episodes, substance abuse and other anti-social behavior, my father destroyed his relationships with three successive families and most of his friends, suffered physical calamities like cirrhosis of the liver, had violent altercations with other people, had auto accidents, was arrested, jailed, and lost large chunks of his wealth.

I watched my father repeat his behavior patterns, never assimilating that violent, illegal or unethical behavior was likely to result in negative consequences. Like most mentally ill people, his ability to learn behavioral change, even from his own hard experiences, was severely limited. Many criminals suffer from similar mental illnesses, where they are subject to psychotic episodes, are not able to take responsibility for their behavior, and are unable to connect their behavior with its consequences.

Which brings me back to capital punishment. People who kill, other than in legitimate self defense, are almost by definition suffering from some form of mental impairment and are unlikely to be deterred by threats such as capital punishment because they cannot rationally think through the consequences of their actions. One study reports that 23 percent of incarcerated individuals in the United States have Borderline Personality Disorder, and that it is a common illness among those on death row. Since taking a life is a grave responsibility, and it is not likely to deter most perpetrators of violent crime anyway, why kill people like Williams and Allen? Once convicted, I say lock ’em up forever and give them whatever medications and therapy will temper

surveillance by kill Vice President arrested repeatedly and was confined wards when he, police to his house to “spirit officers” in his

