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AT HOME: LIVING WITH FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT



*Renaldo Hudson was **sentenced to die** for the brutal murder he freely admits he committed. But while on death row, the once angry and violent hoodlum became an exemplary prisoner and a role model. Should Hudson's remarkable transformation influence his fate?*

A Killer's Turn



AT SIX FEET TWO AND 300 OR SO POUNDS, Renaldo Hudson is one of the biggest men on death row in Illinois. But he's unusual in another way, too: He freely admits his guilt—openly acknowledges that 18 years ago he tortured and murdered a 72-year-old man in a horrific crime. On death row at Pontiac Correctional Center, the largest death row in Illinois, Hudson cracks wise about other inmates' claims of innocence: "Nobody here is guilty except Renaldo."

Hudson, 37, breaks the mold in yet another way. Many people, including some prison guards and officials, agree he is that most unusual of examples—a bad man gone good. The transformation took time. For the first 11 years of his incarceration, he piled up about 25 serious violations on his prison record, including numerous assaults on guards and other prisoners; since September 1994, however, he hasn't been charged with a single violation. That degree of change,

prison officials say, is extraordinarily unusual.

Hudson's journey upward was sparked by a religious conversion—first to Islam, through the Nation of Islam, and then to Christianity. Along the way, he says, he has let go of enough anger and fear to be able to feel his own heart and see the hearts in others. "People need to hear the voice of the guilty," Hudson says. "There are innocent men here; but many more are guilty, and some of us admit what we did, feel remorse every day, and are just trying to make the best of it." He and his supporters say he has a valuable contribution to make to society, especially in counseling troubled kids.

Should Renaldo Hudson nonetheless die? The question may not be theoretical, since a judge ordered a new sentencing hearing four years ago after ruling that the jury's verdict forms used for the trial's capital sentencing phase were defective. The state appealed, and the case was argued before the Illinois Supreme Court. On March 2nd, the court sent the case back to Cook County Circuit Court for a hearing on a separate claim: that gender discrimination was involved in the selection of Hudson's jury. If the court finds there was discrimination, Hudson will get a new trial. If it doesn't, the supreme court will take up the verdict form issue and decide whether Hudson should get a new sentencing hearing. Such a hearing could result in another death sentence, life imprisonment without parole, or a term of years.

Proponents of the death penalty say executing someone like Hudson would protect society in the event that he finally got released and could not control himself, and it would

▲ "I realized that I didn't want to die being good for nothing or no one," says Hudson (above).

serve as retribution for a horrible crime. As Renée Goldfarb, head of the Cook County state's attorney's appeals division, which is handling Hudson's case, says, "This is one of the more gross crimes I remember." Hudson himself says he understands why some people want him to die: "In a tit-for-tat world, it makes sense. I just don't believe it's the right thing to do."

Since the death penalty was reinstated in Illinois in 1977, 12 people have been executed and 13 exonerated. (Of the 164 death row inmates in Illinois, 160 are men and 4 are women; 102 are black, 51 are white, and 11 are Hispanic.) On January 31, 2000, Governor George Ryan declared a moratorium on executions in Illinois, saying too many innocent people had landed on death row. "I believe that a public dialogue must begin on the question of the fairness of the application of the death penalty in Illinois," Ryan explained.

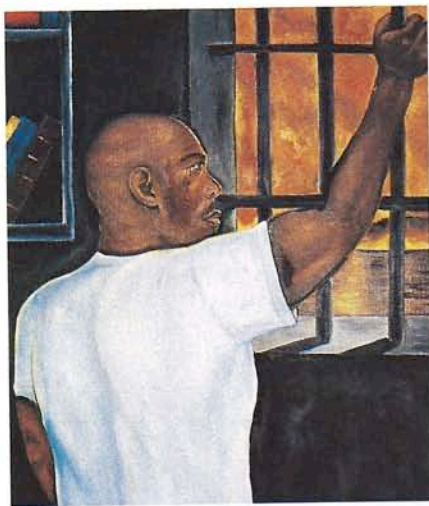
In such a dialogue, the first question is whether the person facing execution is guilty or innocent. But perhaps a second question needs to be asked: What should we do with people who are guilty but have accepted responsibility, feel remorse, and have apparently been rehabilitated?

In other words, what do we do with Renaldo Hudson?

LIKE MANY OTHER PRISONERS ON DEATH ROW,

Renaldo Hudson had a hard life, even before he ran afoul of the law. He grew up in poverty on Chicago's South Side and in surrounding rural areas. His parents separated when he was just a few years old; Hudson remained with his father. At seven, he saw his twin brother, Ronald, die from a fall down some stairs. Eight years later, his older brother William almost killed Renaldo when he blasted him in the chest with a .12-gauge shotgun. (William, who was 16, shot seven family members that day, killing two. He is serving consecutive life sentences at Tamms Correctional Center, the supermax prison in Alexander County.) Hudson lived in a climate of real violence: According to testimony, family members said Hudson's uncles used two-by-fours as their weapon for disciplining Renaldo and his brothers.

By the time he was 19, Hudson was an angry grade school dropout living with his father and his aunt at 7458 South Kingston Avenue, where his father was the building handyman. In the late afternoon of Monday, June 6, 1983, Hudson was



▲ Hudson's paintings on death row include a self-portrait (top).

partying, as usual, in the neighborhood around the building. He was looking gangster sharp—dressed in a black shirt, black and brown slacks, black buck shoes, a black suede jacket and a black hat. He consumed half a pint of E&J Brandy, smoked some marijuana. Then he packed what's called a blunt—a Tiparillo cigar emptied of tobacco and stuffed with pot, in this case laced with cocaine. The pot-coke combination made Hudson feel stoned and exhilarated at the same time. He came up with a plan to put some easy money in his pockets.

Folke Petersen, an elderly white man, lived alone in the building, and Hudson had noticed that Petersen always walked around carrying a brown plaid bag. Hudson decided that the bag had to contain cash, lots of it. "I figured Mr. Petersen stuffed all that money in his mattress when he got home. So my plan was to get in there, tie him up, get the money out of the mattress, and then run away and live happily ever after," Hudson says now.

Because his father was the handyman, Hudson knew that Petersen had asked to have a light fixed. So at about seven that evening, with part of a blunt left in one pocket and some rope stuffed inside his jacket, Hudson left his apartment, walked down one flight of stairs, and knocked on Petersen's door.

The old man, a carpenter who retained a heavy accent from his native Sweden, had lived in the building for 26 years, long after the neighborhood had changed from white to black. He was a sturdy man, five feet eight, 188 pounds, and in good health, and he was a familiar sight in the neighborhood. He opened his door and let the younger Hudson into his apartment.

Once inside, Renaldo climbed on a small chair and pretended to examine the broken light. When the old man turned around, Hudson jumped on him, putting him into a chokehold. Petersen had a weapon, however, a brown-handled boning knife with a thin curved blade. Hudson wrestled the knife from Petersen and stabbed him in one motion from the belly up and then in the shoulder and neck. "I saw that knife and I just snapped," Hudson says. Petersen, bleeding and holding his chest, went over and lay down on his bed; Hudson sat down in a chair beside the bed, and over the next eight hours stabbed Petersen as many as 60 times. Today, Hudson recalls only a few things from that night: "Mostly different spurts of anger, getting angry with Mr. Petersen. I remember him saying he liked me, and that got me mad and that's when I would stab him. I know it doesn't make sense, but I was getting angry because of how nice he was being."

Hudson remembers watching a Bowery Boys movie and says that sometime during the movie Petersen died. (According to court transcripts, between 3:30 and 4:51 a.m. on June 7, 1983, WGN Channel 9 broadcast the Bowery Boys in *Paris Playboys*.) Hudson trashed the place to make it look like a robbery scene and then grabbed Petersen's brown plaid bag (which had no money in it) and packed it with various items from the apartment. He crammed the knife into the bottom of a stuffed chair, set Petersen's bed on fire, and returned to his apartment.

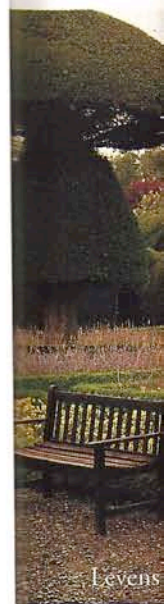
Soon, his aunt smelled smoke and asked Renaldo to call the fire department; Hudson led firefighters up to Petersen's apartment, where they extinguished the small fire, discovered the body, and called

the police. Hudson said she was involved. Renaldo told him; he

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PHOTOGRAPHY: COLLEEN SONTHEIMER

the police. Shortly after the police arrived, Hudson's aunt took an officer aside and said she believed her nephew was involved in the murder. The officers took Renaldo into custody and interrogated him; hours later he confessed.

HUDSON RECALLS THAT IN THOSE DAYS, HE was often so angry he couldn't contain himself, couldn't control the violent urges that swept through his body like a tidal wave. Acquaintances say the force of the anger was palpable—you could touch it. Allan Sincox, one of Hudson's original lawyers from the Cook County public defender's office, says that in his more than 20 years as a defense lawyer he has never seen anyone who has changed like Renaldo Hudson. "From the beginning, there was this anxiety and anger in him," Sincox says. "But it was more than that—he couldn't keep still, couldn't sit down. It seemed to be a physical thing. And he had headaches all the time; you could actually see his head throbbing. If you touched his head, you could actually feel it throb."

Hudson had two trials, in 1985 and 1990; in both, he and his attorneys argued

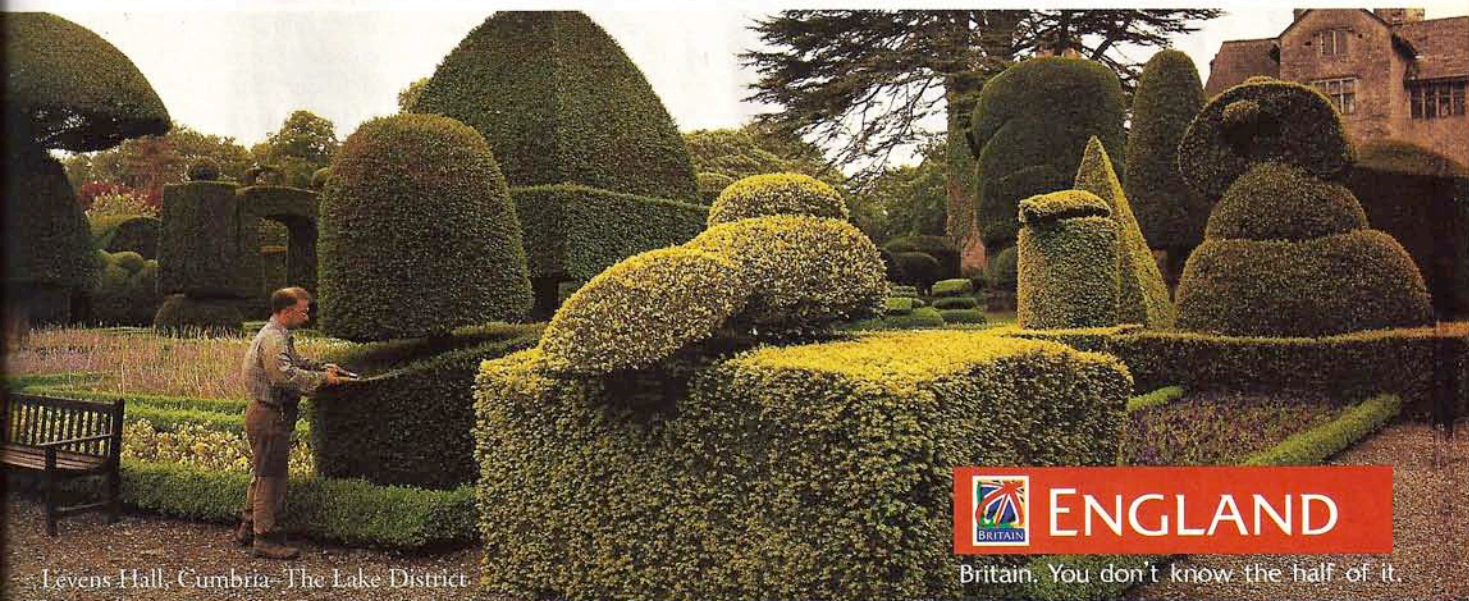
that Hudson was insane at the time of the murder. The first trial ended in a hung jury. Afterwards, Hudson's lawyers encouraged him to plead guilty and take life in prison, but he would have none of it. At the second trial, the jury unanimously rejected the insanity defense, found Hudson guilty, and sentenced him to death. Former Cook County Circuit Court judge James Bailey, who oversaw both trials and is now in private practice, says that the worst thing that could have happened to Hudson was the hung jury. Between the trials, Bailey says, "[Hudson] made a total ass out of himself over at the jail—he tried to escape, including pulling a [replica] gun on a guard—and that really hurt him."

For a long time, Hudson's behavior mirrored his turbulent state of mind. "I remember there was a story about me in one of the newspapers," Hudson says. "It basically said, 'Renaldo Hudson earned his place on murderer[s] row.' As strange as it may sound, I thought that was an honorable thing. I was like, 'Yeah, you're damn right I did. And I'm more vicious than any of you, so get outta my way.' These are the things that shame me now, to

think about my state of mind back then."

Hudson's change started for real on September 21, 1994. That day, angry at a particular guard, he sat in his cell and rolled a bunch of toilet paper into a tight doughnut. Then he poured water, jelly, and honey into a food can, lit the doughnut, and heated the gooey liquid until it was scalding hot. Finally, he wrapped a towel around the can and waited. When the guard walked by, Hudson launched the napalm-like confection, causing severe burns over half the guard's face. (Hudson pleaded guilty to aggravated battery in Livingston County court and received a five-year sentence.)


This was to be Hudson's last rules infraction. That night, as he sat stewing in solitary—known as "the hole"—the man who was then the supervising guard of death row let Hudson have it. "He said to me, 'I've got a guard over at the hospital and all his family is there worrying about him—we're not sure if he's gonna make it—and you're the one who caused all this. I just want you to think about that.' Man, no one had ever talked to me like that before, and it got me to thinking."



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Shortly after Hudson got out of segregation (he spent a month there for the assault), another death row inmate gave Hudson a tape of Louis Farrakhan, the Chicago-based Nation of Islam leader. "On the tape, Minister Farrakhan asked a question that I couldn't get out of my head: 'What are you good for, or are you good for nothing?' I realized that I didn't want to die being good for nothing or no one." Hudson was, as he says now, "ripe" for a change. Even his fellow inmates on death row didn't want to have anything to do with him. "I was like, 'Damn, I'm not even welcome at a death row party.' You can't get any lower than that."

Hudson turned to the Nation's forceful message of self-respect and self-reliance. That helped "pull me up out of the mud," Hudson says. He detached himself from gang life inside the prison; started teaching himself to read and write; took up painting and other activities to occupy his mind. Through another inmate, Hudson got involved in a program to help at-risk teenage boys, predominantly African American, giving them advice and encouragement to stay out of gangs—and prison. That's when he met Bill Ryan (no relation to Governor Ryan), a social worker involved with Hull House who had put the program together. "Renaldo was pretty aggressive in the way he talked about the Nation and its beliefs," says Ryan, 66, who today heads the Illinois Death Penalty Moratorium Project. "He had more than a smattering of skepticism about whites and white society. That's where he was; but I was impressed with his sincerity about wanting to help black youth."

After Ryan left Hull House and the mentoring program fell apart, he started visiting Hudson on a more personal level. Over time he began to notice "an evolutionary change" in Hudson. "I think you can see a higher power's hand in this. I saw Renaldo move from the Nation of Islam—a faith I respect a lot—into Christianity. And I think that had a lot to do with Renaldo's accepting responsibility."

In March 1999 it hit Ryan just how complete a change Hudson had undergone. That's when Andrew Kokoraleis, a white man, was executed—the last execution before Governor Ryan's moratorium. "What happens to a person on death row when his execution comes near is that the other people move away from him; they don't want to even talk to him,"

Bill Ryan says. "But Renaldo got closer to Kokoraleis as the date approached. That's when I saw a genuine spirituality in Renaldo, because he was moving beyond himself into something bigger."

Ryan, who works with many death row inmates, says Hudson is the only one he has ever met who freely admitted his guilt. "There are other guys who have changed, but the change in Renaldo is the most dramatic I've seen," Ryan says.

Hudson says he still respects the Nation of Islam; but he began to read the Bible seriously and felt drawn back to Christianity—he'd had some exposure to the Baptist church when he was a child. "Islam teaches that your good deeds have to outweigh your bad deeds for you to reach salvation. But I can never give back Mr. Petersen's life. In the Bible it says, 'He whose sins are as red as crimson I will make white as snow.' You can be forgiven for anything if you turn from your wicked ways."

A key step for Hudson was taking responsibility for what he had done. "After I got beyond pointing fingers, worrying about what William [his brother] did or my dad did, I started to ask, Why am I doing what I'm doing? Since then I have been in a constant process of changing."

Public defender Allan Sincox, who has talked with Hudson as a friend about every month for almost ten years, has had the chance to witness that process of change, to see Hudson calming down, focusing—growing up. "The thing that convinces me he's sincere is that it's been going on with me for so long. I haven't heard a strong complaint or a nasty word out of his mouth about anybody or anything for years."

His fellow inmates were at first skeptical about the change. Hudson had to announce his personal and religious conversion by not doing things he had willingly done before—like passing along shanks or guns or drugs, or planning reprisals against other inmates in different gangs. That, he says, took more guts than he thought it would. "On the outside it might be, 'Well, that's evidence that he's changing his life for the better.' But on this side, man, it's 'He doesn't have what it takes anymore; he's gone soft.'" Over time, the pressure eased. "I wasn't afraid because of anyone threatening me," Hudson says. "It was my inner ghosts that were haunting me. How do you fulfill your sense of your own manhood now, when before you satisfied it with assaults and anger and vulgar

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The prison staff noticed the change and made Hudson a trusty, a special position allowing a prisoner to work outside his cell without restraints—a privilege accorded few condemned inmates. (Two years ago, a new prison administration barred death row inmates from holding the position.)

Fellow inmates have seen the change up close. William Bracey, 59, on death row since a 1981 murder conviction, says, "I witnessed what was once a hard, cold, selfish man transform into a humble, warm, caring man." Delbert Heard, 36, who has been on death row since 1996, echoes Bracey. "No matter what the administration does to us, Renaldo always keeps a positive attitude. He also passes his positivity on to other inmates. I call him 'the inmate counselor,' because he always gives advice to us to help us stay out of trouble."

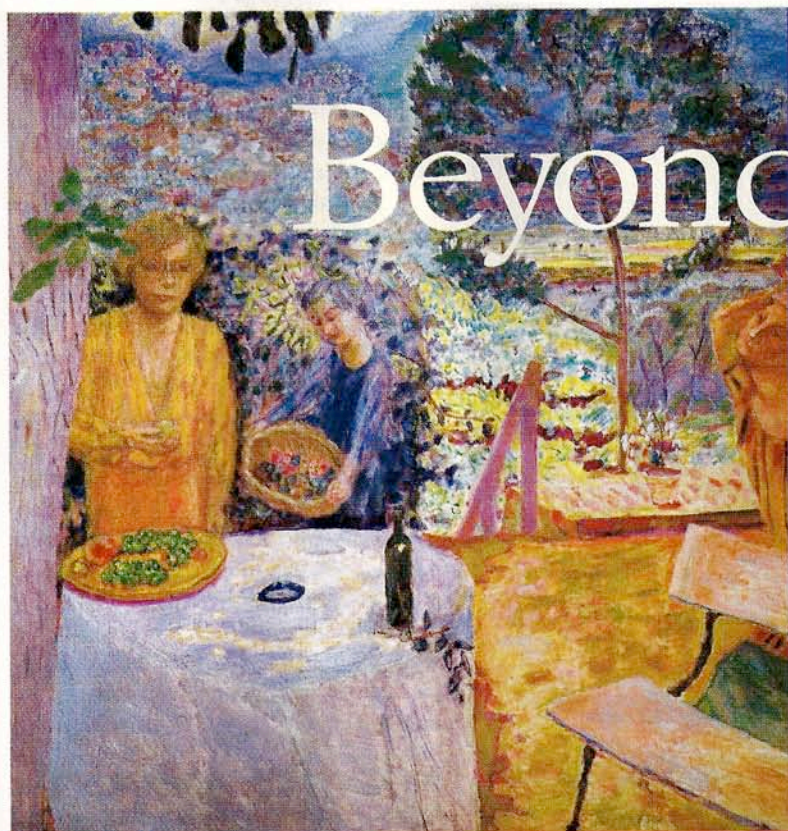
Several former and present Pontiac guards and officials agree that Hudson is a different man these days (they requested that their names not be used because talking to the media is against department

policy). One former death row guard who observed Hudson before and after says, "He really shaped up, went to Bible study, and took up leisure time activities. He actually became a model prisoner. He seemed pretty well squared away with God." A Department of Corrections administrator who spoke with several Pontiac officials well acquainted with Hudson has this to say: "They told me this guy [Hudson] is not troublesome anymore. In fact, they said he's a model inmate, which is something we never say."

Another former Pontiac employee says, "[As a trusty], he never did anything that made us feel that it was a bad decision. He did over and beyond what he needed to." The former administrator describes how sometimes guards would show disrespect to Hudson for no particular reason: "But [Hudson] never got caught up in reacting to them. He'd tell me, 'The old devil came up to me today and tried to trick me.'" Hudson, he says, would do fine in the real world. "I think Renaldo Hudson could live a normal life. My gut feeling is that he could go and never commit a crime again."

AS EVERYONE (INCLUDING HUDSON) AGREES, though, the only real test of Hudson's change would come if he ever got back on the streets. "How would he behave then, with no guards and no bars?" asks Wayne Meyer, the prosecutor at Hudson's first trial. "I don't have any reason to question his religious conversion right now, but people [like Hudson] can be pretty scary. If he were released from prison, God, the cost in terms of blood if he lost his faith..."

Renée Goldfarb, of the state's attorney's appeals division, says she believes the death penalty should be reaffirmed in Hudson's case. "The bottom line question is, Was it appropriate for him to get the death sentence? Yes, it was. And there has been no evidence of any constitutional deprivation viable under the postconviction hearing act." Goldfarb then pauses. "I really say to myself, This is a horrible guy. How long did it take for the victim to die, eight hours? Think of the agony." (Folke Petersen apparently did not have immediate family in the Chicago area at the time of his murder, and none could be located to interview for this story.)



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William Kunkle, the prominent Chicago attorney who was the lead prosecutor in the John Wayne Gacy trial, is a death penalty proponent, and he does not hesitate in saying he believes Hudson should be executed. "It's the only appropriate punishment for the crime he committed," Kunkle says. "Society needs retribution to satisfy the scales of justice on behalf of the citizens of the state." Kunkle adds that nothing in current Illinois law provides any relief for someone who may have had a positive change of character in prison after committing a heinous crime. "Under the law of Illinois, that's completely irrelevant," he says.

Karen McIntyre doesn't believe in the death penalty in all cases, but there's no doubt in her mind about repeat killers, "monsters" like Gacy and George DelVecchio. Unfortunately, McIntyre is very familiar with DelVecchio: On the night of December 22, 1977, he broke into her Northwest Side home and killed her six-year-old son, Tony Canzoneri, and then beat and raped her. DelVecchio probably would have killed her, too, but the phone rang, distracting him and allowing her to escape. DelVecchio, who was 47 when he was executed in November of 1995, had been convicted of murder in 1965 but was paroled from prison in 1973. Four years later, he murdered McIntyre's son, for which he received the death sentence.

"I went through pure hell for 18 years, not knowing if this guy would get out," says McIntyre, now 50 and a Cook County sheriff's deputy. "I didn't want to hear about a life sentence—if he'd really gotten life the first time, he wouldn't have been out to kill my son." McIntyre, who has three other sons, was at Stateville Correctional Center in Joliet the night DelVecchio was executed by lethal injection. Her only regret is that she wasn't allowed to witness his death in person—she had to watch on a small TV as DelVecchio breathed his last.

"It felt like a cloud was lifted," she says. "I thought, This guy's not going to come back and hurt anyone. Justice was finally served."

ON A DREARY WEDNESDAY MORNING IN EARLY December, four death row inmates sit with friends or family members, talking, playing cards, or reading the Bible in the visiting room of the condemned unit at Pontiac. It is usually not this crowded—

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visits are up as the holidays approach. The four inmates each wear tense, pained expressions as they maneuver in their seats, jangling their hand and leg chains.

Renaldo Hudson shuffles in and he looks different—well rested, healthy. No baggy circles under his eyes, no live-wire tension. Hudson says he simply feels better these days. “Can you imagine walking around with a dark cloud over your head, always feeling depressed and cynical? That’s the way I was,” he says. “But now I wake up optimistic; my spirit tells me that today is another day, and I’m here and there’s so much to be thankful for.”

Right now he’s using his reading, writing, and artistic abilities to put together a newspaper, the *Death Row Express*. He wants to tell his story. “I think there’s a great testimony of hope in it, about what God can do to change people,” he says. “I want to tell my story and give glory to God.”

During more than a dozen interviews with *Chicago*, both at the prison and over the phone, Hudson never raised his voice or refused to answer even the toughest question. He was reflective, at times funny, in trying to make sense of who he was 18 years ago and who he is today. “People only will change if they have a reason to change,” he says. “One of my reasons is the experience of being able to care about other people. If you’ve had that feeling all your life, then you don’t know what it feels like to *start* feeling that way.”

In a terrible irony, Hudson’s lawyer, Richard Cunningham, was murdered on March 1st, the day before the supreme court ordered the new hearing for Hudson. Cunningham, 56, was stabbed to death, allegedly by his 26-year-old son, Jesse, who had a history of mental illness. “I’m glad the last thing I said to Richard was that I loved him,” says Hudson. “I’m so sad. But I know he’s in a better place, with our Lord Jesus Christ. And legally this is a victory—it’s a tribute to Richard—so there’s some sweet in the bitter.”

So Hudson still has a chance to avoid execution and even be free one day. But whatever happens, Hudson says, he is prepared to deal with it, because it’s all in God’s hands. “I’ll accept whatever judgment God gives my life,” he says. Since he can’t undo the past, he says, he is trying to do the best he can with the present—and the future. “I can’t resurrect Mr. Petersen, but I think I’m resurrecting Renaldo Hudson.” ■



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