"Dead Man Walking" Stage Reading

The Fort Lewis College Theater Program put on a spectacular stage reading of this years common reading book, Dead Man Walking by Sister Helen Prejean.

A stage reading is a step before a play. While the blocking, script, and sound effects are all presented, there are no costumes, props, or stage sets. As one scene plays, the rest of the cast sit silently, blending their black attire in with the 16 black chairs placed in the center of the stage.

The story itself, while emotional and well thought out, did not sway me in my beliefs in the slightest. For those who do not know, Dead Man Walking is the story of Sister Helen Prejean’s fight to keep a man from receiving the death penalty and the people and emotions she experienced on the way.

As I watched the reading, I could not help but notice that some key figures had been left out of the story: the
victims of previous crimes and the police officers who worked the case. As the child of a police officer, I think that spending so much time focusing on the rights of the criminal as a human while treating the people who have to interact and arrest that criminal as less than human is a gross distortion of values. Even within this story, the police are mindlessly blamed for their negative interactions with both the criminal and the victims. In most of today's modern media, we find it hard to respect the people who go to work every day knowing they may not come home at the end of it.

I mean no disrespect to the views and beliefs of Sister Helen Prejean or any of the people who have had a strong connection to her story. I simply do not feel as if her story had the intended impact upon me.

When looking at her story through a rhetorical analysis lens, I probably was not her target audience. She was writing her story to people who share at least some fundamental beliefs in common with her, such as religious belief or human rights. I also must remember who she is as an author. As a nun within the Catholic Church, she has a base set of beliefs built upon that faith. Being raised from a Jewish faith, I do not have a great enough understanding of her beliefs to either believe or condemn them. Her beliefs are simply beyond my realm of understanding.

I must also admit that my only interaction with her book was from the stage reading last night. I have not read the actual published piece.

In reaction to the presentation of the piece itself, without looking deeper into content as I have done above, I was almost moved to tears many times. The performers did a wonderful job of becoming their characters and playing out an intensely emotional story. In the question session following the production, the actors gave very interesting anecdotes of their interactions and evolution of thought throughout the
creating of the production.

A special shoutout to fellow scholar Chloe Speshok for your wonderful performance.