

The Sleazy Semantics of Death Penalty Opponents

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By [Lester Jackson](#), Ph.D.

Stunning ignorance from those who would exalt murderers and dehumanize victims.

"Humanize" the Inhumane!

Anyone familiar with television crime dramas is aware that "humanizing" the inhumane long has been a tactic of fanatics seeking to keep alive murderers convicted of the worst depravity -- while simultaneously sacrificing, with little concern, the lives of decent, innocent law-abiding individuals [sure to be slaughtered](#) by some of those given a "[second chance](#)."

By contrast, other than many prosecutors and those who have lost loved ones, few realize that "humanizing" the depraved involves *dehumanizing* victims. At a minimum, it would certainly be understandable if "compassion" zealots prefer not to think about victims, lest they experience pangs of conscience about the past barbarities they rationalize and the future barbarities they guarantee.

More importantly for these advocates, the objective is to minimize juror consideration of victim agony, while focusing on every possible concocted "mitigating" excuse for savagery. Thus, it long has been a goal of murderer advocates to throw victims out of court. Reversed after four years, that was once an actual fiat of the U.S. Supreme Court. For nearly two decades, Justice Stevens fervently longed to restore that fiat on behalf of convicted murderers. [Described](#) by one legal blogger as "a thoroughly execrable Justice" and "a thoroughly execrable human being," he [complained](#) (7) that introducing evidence of victim suffering would cause juror sympathy for victims and antipathy for convicted murderers. And he [called](#) (1) it a "misnomer" to include among victims the families and friends of anyone murdered. Instead, he disparaged them as mere "third parties."

To make it easier to fight for murderers' lives, it helps many fanatics to motivate themselves not just with unconcern about victims, but with ginned up hostility toward them. They have repeatedly engaged in vile vilification of victims, calling them "uncivilized," "pathological," "bloodthirsty," and even "barbaric" for seeking just punishment of actual convicted barbarians.

Now they not only deny that families and friends are also victims, but also dispute that the latter are even homicide survivors. For example, in responding to [a plea](#) at the website "Homicide Survivors" that the media refrain from equating murder and execution, a commentator named Caroline De Biase [recently provided](#) what should be considered a parody of the [pro-murderer mentality](#).

Accusing capital punishment supporters of "sloppy thinking," this murderer groupie declares it "not accurate" to refer to the "families and friends of a murder victim" as "homicide survivors." Not content to let her assertion stand on its dubious merit, De Biase doubled down, accusing these victims of deliberately twisting the definition of "survivor" for their own ends.

"But perhaps that is your intention," she writes, exclaiming in triumph with heartless insensitivity, as though scoring a point in a game. "If it is, then excuse me for saying, 'Gotcha!'"

A Brief Primer on Language for the Benefit of "Abolitionists"

Ms. De Biase herself is not just "inaccurate"; she is flat-out wrong. Her fundamental flaw is based on ignorance of elementary language. She seems utterly unaware that words frequently have more than one meaning.

For example, as a noun, "cardinal" refers to a bird, a Major League baseball player, a National Football League player, college and high school players on multiple teams, a cape, and a high official of the Roman Catholic Church; as an adjective, "cardinal" describes a number, a color, and a person, rule or principle of prime importance.

As Alice [told](#) Humpty Dumpty: "That's a great deal to make one word mean." Nevertheless, long before Humpty Dumpty became the harsh but generous taskmaster who paid extra to the words he overworked, words were often employed for multiple diverse tasks. There is even a category, [autoantonyms](#), which have contradictory and outright [opposite](#) meanings. For example, "[sanction](#)" refers to both official endorsement and punishment.

The Multiple Commonly Used Meanings of "Survivor"

If their devotion to the cause of rapists and murderers did not drive abolitionists to contempt and even outright hostility toward victims, De Biase and [Emmett Rensin](#), another commentator at "Homicide Survivors" with a similar mindset, might have done their homework. If they had, they would quickly have discovered more than one commonly used meaning for "survivor."

Their own "sloppy thinking" is rooted in the mistaken assumption that every word must have but one meaning -- and therefore "survivor" has only one meaning. It is absolutely true that, in common usage, someone who lives through a life-threatening illness or injury is said to have "survived" and is thus a "survivor." And one who dies has not "survived." Clearly, "homicide survivor" does not oxymoronically refer to the ludicrous caricature of a dead "survivor." Of course, those murdered are not "survivors." But that does not end the matter.

[Webster's Third New International Dictionary](#) contains the following additional definitions for "survivor":

- a) one that outlives another: one remaining alive after another's death; b) one of two or more legally designated persons...who outlives one or more of the others ... c) one living through a time, event or development marked by the death of others.

But it is not necessary to seek a large printed dictionary. By consulting any internet dictionary (e.g., [here](#) or [here](#)), anyone acting in good faith would instantly discover that "survivor" is *very commonly* used to describe those who outlive others, including parents, siblings, children, and spouses. Also, the word should be familiar to anyone who has a will leaving bequests to heirs.

Have Rensin and De Biase never met or heard of "[surviving heirs](#)" and "surviving spouses"? Millions of widows and widowers have signed tax returns as "surviving spouses," and the IRS provides [explicit instructions](#) for them. Indeed, IRS [Form 706](#) and its [instructions](#) repeatedly mention "surviving" spouses, co-tenants, joint tenants, and nonfamily members. The federal government also provides [life insurance](#) for the parents, widows, and widowers who are "survivors" of federal employees. Finally, one would have to live in total isolation to avoid knowing any of the [millions](#) upon millions receiving Social Security "survivors' benefits." Moreover, the federal government [devotes](#) many [publications](#) to the subject.

In sum, no murder victim is a survivor; but based on all these examples of *common usage*, only the disingenuous, the willfully obtuse, or the malicious would refuse to acknowledge that a homicide survivor is someone who has outlived and been left behind by one or more beloved homicide victims.

A Critical Distinction

Use of the term "homicide survivors" has been defended on the ground that a murder victim's loved ones are also victims. This mixes up two very distinct points.

First, the loved ones of murder victims are "survivors" because they *outlived* the victims, period.

Second, *the loved ones left behind by murder are described as survivors not because they are victims; they are victims because they are homicide survivors*. Families and friends of murdered individuals are not only "survivors" of victims; they are victims in their own right -- a fact disputed, as noted, by Justice Stevens, who denied that survivors are victims at all. In reality, they are [victims two times over](#): a) they suffer the trauma of losing someone dear and a vital part of their own lives, and b) they are unnecessarily (and therefore unjustifiably) tormented by the De Biases of the world by being forced to endure [decades of torture](#) by supercilious self-styled "compassionate" judges.

The Lesson for Homicide Survivors

There is a tendency, especially among decent people, to avoid questioning motives. They believe -- or desperately want to believe -- that persons of good will can strongly yet respectfully and civilly disagree.

Well, the problem for homicide survivors is that they are not dealing with people of good faith and good will. Without realizing it, most death penalty supporters are in a struggle between those called by Reinhold Niebuhr [The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness](#). As explained [elsewhere](#), an "unbridgeable values chasm" exists between homicide survivors and their tormenters.

So this is not a matter of respectful disagreement between like-minded people who adhere to the same values but differ on how to further them. This is a bitter conflict between people with diametrically opposed values -- and morality. Homicide survivors, who are also victims, confront ruthless, cruel, [dishonest](#) people who have a cavalier disregard, if not outright contempt, for victim suffering.

At the end of the day, if defenders of barbarity such as Rensin and De Biase demonstrate anything beyond their own bile, it is that victims are confronted by enemies -- sometimes mortal enemies. Every new barbarity (including [additional murders](#)) committed by a spared murderer demonstrates beyond a scintilla of doubt that abolitionists are the mortal enemies of the decent law-abiding.

Acknowledging this horrifying reality is an absolutely necessary first step if tortured surviving victims are ever to be accorded respect, decency, and justice.

The original is slightly modified here.

Lester Jackson, Ph.D., a former college political science teacher, views mainstream [media suppression](#) of the truth as essential to harmful judicial activism. His recent articles are collected [here](#).