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# Bill Nemitz: An appeal to Ayla's killer: Listen to your conscience

Perhaps the news that her mother is seeking to have the toddler declared dead will trigger remorse in whoever removed that smiling face from this world.

BY **BILL NEMITZ** COLUMNIST



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She's back. More than five years after 20-month-old Ayla Reynolds vanished without a trace, there she was Wednesday once again on the front page, smiling back at a world she no longer inhabits.

Somewhere out there, we can only hope, that photo is driving someone insane.

The latest news, as always, is maddeningly insufficient: Ayla's mother, [Trista Reynolds](#), is asking a probate court to formally declare her daughter dead and thus pave the way to a wrongful death lawsuit against the child's father, Justin DiPietro.



Ayla Reynolds

It's a tragedy most of Maine can recite by now:

On the morning of Dec. 17, 2011, [Ayla was reported missing from her grandmother's home in Waterville](#), where she'd been staying with DiPietro, his sister, Elisha DiPietro, and his girlfriend at the time, Courtney Roberts.

Police found the toddler's blood inside the house. But the three adults there all claimed that she'd been abducted during the night and that they saw nothing, heard nothing and had nothing whatsoever to do with her disappearance.

Investigators, who long have assumed that Ayla was the victim of foul play inside the home, don't believe them. In a statement six weeks after the little girl went missing, Maine State Police spokesman Steve McCausland said the trio's claim "doesn't pass the straight-face test."

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Fast forward to a year ago last week. In an interview with the TV show "Crime Watch Daily," a tearful Trista Reynolds said, "Part of me always wonders if she was yelling out for me and wondering why I wasn't there to save and protect her like I was supposed to. ... It haunts me every day."

Indeed it must. Grief, especially for a lost child, never fully evaporates.

Nor does guilt. Assuming Ayla was in fact murdered, what do we make of the person who killed her and, to this day, hides in silence?

## Put more simply: Can a murderer have a conscience?

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Some would say no. Once someone descends into the depravity of taking another person's life, this thinking goes, the murderer's only priority is to evade apprehension and avoid a dark future behind bars.

In most cases, that's probably true.

But not in all cases.

Two months ago, a full 35 years after he killed 13-year-old Carrie Ann Jopek and buried her under a neighbor's porch in Milwaukee, Jose Ferreira Jr., now 51, was sentenced to seven years in prison.

Long a suspect in the case, Ferreira finally snapped in October of 2015. He confessed first to his wife, then to a crisis hotline, a TV station and finally police.

On the day he was to be tried for second-degree murder, Ferreira waived the statute of limitations and accepted a plea deal on two lesser charges – attempted second-degree sexual assault, with use of force, and false imprisonment.

What drove him to confess?

The victim's mother, Carolyn Tousignant, in a recent interview with the Huffington Post, shared something Ferreira told her way back when her daughter's remains were discovered in late 1983.

“He told me, ‘Your daughter's haunting me,’ ” she recalled. “And I believe she was.”

Next up is Steven Goff.

In April of 2013, the 41-year-old mechanic turned himself in to police and confessed to the 1990 murder of Frederick “Ricky” Hart behind a condominium complex in Galloway, New Jersey.

A hunter tripped over Hart's decomposed body a year after the killing. The cause of the 15-year-

old boy's death: multiple stab wounds.

Alan Rickel, a friend of Goff's, later explained to ABC News what compelled the confession.

"He said he'd been living with this since he was 17, 18, having nightmares," Rickel said. "He sees the kid's mother in nightmares, saying, 'How can you do this to my family?' He had a 1,000-pound elephant sitting on his chest. He said that he had to confess, to tell the truth, and meet his maker."

As Goff himself later put it to the Press of Atlantic City, "I didn't develop compassion and remorse until I got older." But when his guilt finally caught up with him, "it tore into me. It tore into me like razors."

Closer to home, Steven Cutting, then of Palmyra, wasn't even a suspect in the 1995 murder of 26-year-old William Greenwood of Westbrook.

Yet there Cutting sat 13 years later, confessing to a relative that he'd shot Greenwood after he'd picked him up hitchhiking in Portland and the two got into a fight.

The relative then told police, to whom Cutting repeated his confession. After he eventually pleaded guilty to manslaughter, prosecutors said the case would not have been solved had Cutting not put the spotlight on himself.

And now we have Ayla Reynolds. An innocent child who, if her mother's request is granted at a probate hearing scheduled for September, at long last will be declared legally dead. Forever gone.

My guess is that the person who killed her, whoever you are, knows all about this latest development.

I'll bet that every time that cherubic face appears in Maine's newspapers or on the 6 o'clock news, you have to avert your eyes – not out of anguish, but out of pure, unremitting guilt.

And late at night, while the rest of the world sleeps, I imagine you lie awake, trying to outrun those flashbacks that run roughshod over your memory.

If her mother has achieved one thing these past five-plus years, it's that Ayla will not soon be forgotten.

That picture – the clear blue eyes, the toothy smile, the sheer happiness at being alive – leaves all of Maine with the distinct impression that she’s looking at each and every one of us.

So go ahead, whoever snuffed out that smile. Have the courage at least to look back, long and hard, at the happy little girl who should now be finishing first grade.

May she haunt you every day of your life.

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