

EYEWITNESS

A 39-year-old television reporter, Karen Davis, saw a psychiatrist at her network employee assistance program a few weeks after witnessing the execution of a murderer. For several years she had been following the story of the inmate as he approached execution. The execution itself was remarkably protracted and gruesome; along with colleagues, she maintained a deathwatch for several hours while various last-minute reprieves were gained and then set aside by judicial bodies. At one point the inmate was actually strapped into the chair when a phone call from a federal judge, literally at the last minute, reprieved him, and the inmate was removed from the gas chamber alive. When execution finally occurred, Karen and her colleagues watched from a distance of about 10 feet through the windows of the gas chamber. The inmate's eyes rolled back in his head, and he began to convulse involuntarily, eventually gasping and drooling as his body was racked by convulsions. After approximately 5 minutes, his body was still, and he was declared dead by prison authorities.

Karen told the psychiatrist, "Once you see someone die, you don't forget what it looks like." She felt that her professional role as an objective recorder was helpful to her initially in that it separated her from her emotional response. She recalled, for example, the sensation of her mouth going dry just at the moment of execution, but this was unaccompanied by any emotional response. A feeling of detachment, which she described as "surreal and macabre," persisted for some days after the event. For a week after the execution, she continued to be detached from her feelings and was "in a daze and not like my usual self." For the last few weeks, since the execution, she has felt unexcited about her work. She was surprised, for example, at her unwillingness to cover a riot that occurred shortly after the execution, a story about which she normally would have been very enthusiastic. Moreover, she described becoming irritable, with angry outbursts at her husband, which prompted him to suggest that they see a marriage counselor. Karen has trouble staying asleep and often has nightmares. She says that she thinks of the event at least daily, having vivid "snapshot" images of the moment of execution.