

**Cell Blocks To Mountaintops  
Video 8A: An Act of Mercy  
Transcript**

**TEXT CARD:**

OREGON STATE PENITENTIARY  
Chaplain's Office - September 28, 2021

**Chaplain Karuna Thompson:** Come on in, we've got everybody on the speaker...

**Sterling Cunio:** Uh oh. Hello, hello?

**Professor Aliza Kaplan:** Sterling?

**Sterling Cunio:** Yeah.

**Professor Aliza Kaplan:** Hi, It's Aliza, Mieke and Chloe and we were wondering whether you wanted to have breakfast with us on November 3rd?

**Aliza Kaplan:** The governor has granted you a commutation for release, and your release date will be November 1st. [Applause]

**Sterling Cunio:** Come here Six, I got no one to hug!

**Anthony Pickens:** ... And on the same day!

**Person in Room:** He's hugging Anthony right now and crying

**Aliza Kaplan:** After the hearing, there was a couple of rulings, both at the U.S. Supreme Court and then in the Oregon court, that were not favorable to incarcerated youth. It left Sterling's options for getting more time off his sentence, really.... he didn't really have a lot of options left.

**Aliza Kaplan:** The clinic was looking at all the people who were incarcerated as youth for possible clemency. If they're looking at his transformation and his rehabilitation, Sterling was an incredible candidate.

**Sterling Cunio:** I promised the plant when it was little bitty that if I ever got out of here, I take it with me.

**Aliza Kaplan:** When she grants clemency and someone's incarcerated. The ask is to commute their sentence to time served. That's what a commutation is.

**Crowd of supporters & family:** (Applause as Sterling exits prison, Cheryl cries into Sterling's arms.)

**Sterling Cunio:** (reciting poem over images of first hours out of prison)

Try to imagine the type of society we could be if we believed it possible to redeem those once deemed incorrigible, and we help them in the penitentiary return as good men to fatherless families.

What kind of society could we be? Once we understand that communing prisoners inspires change and reinforces a rehabilitated belief that good things come from good deeds and that no matter how dark one's history may be, there's reason to believe that commitment to self-improvement will get them through it.

What kind of society could we be? Once we receive personal transformation as a form of justice. If eye for an eye leave the whole world blind, wouldn't we rather see - individuals become better people as amends for misdeeds?

Empower marginalized communities through reuniting families and codifying hope as policy in the form of clemency, and granted it to people like me and Anthony and Terrance Tardy, TJ and Josh Payne. And I can name 20 who if commuted can help heal the city. So please hear my heart's plea and consider forgiveness for those like me.

Those once told our future could hold no good. So we dedicated our existence to a redemptive resistance that defies the narrative that defined us as uncaring thugs. And now stand here today a testament of love.

(visual - Sterling reciting poem)

Because it wasn't the harshness of tough-on-crime, primitive philosophies that changed my mind. It was humane empathy and feminine energy that transformed me. And it wasn't decades of legal battles that freed me. It was an act of mercy in the form of Governor Brown's clemency.

Although free, I carry a burden with me. Despite my liberty, I forever owe a debt to society. So let me tell you what redemption looks like for me.

Redemption is transforming past transgressions into future contributions, offering insights how to switch gunshots at night to illuminating light, illustrating journey. Let them see how even the guilty can become loving.

Redemption is showing those I once hurt before I'm sorry not just in the words conveyed, but how I live each day.

Redemption is once free instead of hanging out to party, I'm at the university asking people to help expand clemency.

So if you're with me, then raise your peace signs quickly so that the world can see, the type of society we can be. Redemption is ending all my poetry with "Love everybody."