**The road to Damascus**

How little I imagined, as I filed in with this group of alien characters, that the stuffy room they herded us into, which stank of cold tobacco and male perspiration, was to be my road to Damascus.

I had been called up for jury service on the case of a young man from the wrong side of town who was accused of stabbing and killing his father. I was proud to do my civic duty as a respected member of the community - I ran a clothes shop on the Main Street selling tailored suits and shirts to the gentry of our town. I was sure of my values, which had been drummed into me in the course of a strict Presbyterian upbringing, and I was confident that I could apply them impartially in the judgement of this unfortunate boy.

To me, it was an open and shut case. The prosecution had put together damning testimony concerning the boy’s character and his previous entanglements with the law. The circumstantial evidence against him was clear and they even produced a witness who claimed she had seen the murder take place. The boy’s defence was flimsy, to say the least, and his attorney didn’t even sound as if he believed the arguments he was putting forward.

In his instructions to the jury, the Judge told us that if we had no reasonable doubt as to whether he had killed the victim, we had to declare him guilty. As it was a case of murder in the first degree - premeditated homicide - he left us in no doubt that the boy faced the death penalty if that was our conclusion. But our decision had to be unanimous.

Let me be clear that in the absolute, I am against taking human life. But the Law of our State allows for capital punishment as part of the necessary regulation of society and maintenance of law and order. And that Law is based on Christian principles. Why even our Lord Jesus refers to “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”.

So, as we left the Court Room and I thought of the task ahead of me, I had few qualms about my potential role in sentencing that boy to death. Murdering anyone is bad enough, but murdering your own father ...

My fellow jurors seemed to be as convinced as I was and were eager to get the deliberation over quickly, so several of us pushed for an immediate indicative vote on where we stood. Eleven hands went up for “guilty”. Just one guy said he was for “not guilty”.

This man, Juror no. 8 - I never learned his name - was kind of stand-offish: he had never spoken much during the trial until then and seemed happy to keep himself to himself. But when some of the others turned on him angrily and asked him to explain how on earth he could have doubts about the boy’s guilt, he replied calmly and in an educated manner.

He wanted us to discuss the evidence a bit more and started trying to make us feel sorry for the kid, who came from a difficult background, saying that we owed him proper consideration of his case. I didn’t answer him, but I have to say I agreed with those who said that we didn’t owe the boy sympathy. He at least was getting a fair trial, which was more than you could say for the victim. My opinion was that this boy was like so many others in that neighbourhood - they grow up with no discipline, no sense of values and, especially no concept of what is right and what is wrong. For me, they are a menace to society anyway and, if they then turn to killing, well they need to be taken out of society - permanently.

But some of my fellow jurors started getting personal and abusive towards Juror no. 8, so I intervened to calm things down and appealed to everyone that we should just base ourselves on the facts. So that started a whole new discussion, with Juror no. 8 doubting or questioning many of what we thought were the established facts of the case. It came to a head when he brought out a knife which was exactly the same as the one used to kill the victim, a knife which we had been told had been purchased by the accused and was supposed to be unique. This guy had managed to find it in a local junk shop.

I have to say this was a very smart move, which Juror no. 8 followed up by calling for another vote - by secret ballot this time - promising to give up his objections if there were still eleven votes for a guilty verdict.

We voted, and it turned out that one person had changed his opinion to not guilty. This upset a number of the jurors who immediately wanted to know who had changed his mind. They were pretty sure who it was, but in the end it wasn’t the man they had suspected, but rather some mild old guy who now decided that he also wanted to “hear more”.

To cut a long story short, we spent the next hour in futile argument trying to persuade the two dissidents that the evidence stacked up against the accused proved his guilt, while Juror no. 8 spent it calmly putting all of our certainties into question. First of all he showed us that the old man who said he saw the kid leaving the house right after the murder couldn’t have got to his door in time to see him given the distance and the difficulty he had in walking.

That convinced a couple of other jurors to change their mind, but it just annoyed me: I was convinced I knew the truth and I didn’t want this smooth-talking fellow proving that I was wrong. My instinct told me that this kid was bad all through and deserved the punishment he was going to get, even if not all the evidence was conclusive.

So then we get into a big discussion about the stab wound that caused the death. Juror no. 8 has five other people with him by now, some of them experts on knife-fighting apparently, and they are adamant that no-one using a switch knife would stab with a downwards movement, the way the victim had been killed.

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable by then. I suppose the beginnings of a doubt were creeping into my mind. But when they suddenly called for another vote, I felt I hadn’t had time to think it all through properly - I hate being hassled into making a decision - and I stuck to “guilty”. But we were down to just three.

One of the three - Juror no. 10 - was a loud-mouthed fellow who’d been getting on my nerves all afternoon. He kept coming out with bigoted opinions about “those people” who lived in the boy’s neighbourhood. It annoyed me that the others probably put me in the same bag as him. I was at least trying my best to see the facts objectively, whereas he just kept coming out with the same bitter rants directed at anyone who didn’t think like him.

I nevertheless clung to the one remaining piece of testimony that seemed incontrovertible: a woman living across the street could see into the victim’s flat from her bed and actually saw the murder take place. Even if all the other evidence could be called into question and had indeed made me doubt my judgement, I could not see any way round this damning account.

Then someone pointed out that this woman wore strong bifocals and could not possibly have just looked out and seen it happen from her bed in the middle of the night without finding and putting on her glasses first.

They were right! My last certainties wilted away and, in considerable confusion, I realised that valid questions could be put forward concerning all the major evidence. There was no way I could pretend that we did not have “reasonable doubt” about his guilt. And so, under those circumstances, there was no way either that I could send that boy to the electric chair.

It scared me to think that I had taken the whole trial at face value and believed what the prosecution had wanted me to, without question. But that wasn’t all: it raised other important questions. If we had found flaws in the evidence, why hadn’t the defence, why hadn’t the other legal experts? Had the evidence been “rigged”? Did the prosecution deliberately set out to mislay us? Did they want an innocent boy to be executed?

The last resisting juror was finally convinced to change his verdict. As we filed out of that claustrophobic deliberation room and into the Court, I felt that a veil of innocence had been stripped from me. I would no longer accept all that the Authorities presented to me as given facts and undoubtable truths. From now on, I would do my best to reason for myself and give the other person the benefit of the doubt before applying my own subjective judgement.

Based on the dramatised version of *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose