

THE EMBODIMENT OF ABOLITION

Jeff Hood

Alli Sullivan

Foreword by Anthony Sanchez

Afterword by Mike Zoosman

The Embodiment of Abolition

Jeff Hood and Alli Sullivan

Published by Complicit Press, 2026.

While every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher assumes no responsibility for errors or omissions, or for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

THE EMBODIMENT OF ABOLITION

First edition. April 15, 2026.

Copyright © 2026 Jeff Hood and Alli Sullivan.

ISBN: 979-8235688544

Written by Jeff Hood and Alli Sullivan.

For the Executed.

CONTENTS

- I. Foreword, Anthony Sanchez**
- II. Humanity**
- III. The Fight**
- IV. Rage**
- V. Grief**
- VI. Truth**
- VII. Alone**
- VIII. Success**
- IX. “The Fight for Anthony Sanchez”: Last Minute
Reflections on the Death of God and an Innocent
Man,**
- X. “I died standing for my innocence rather than
begging for clemency on my knees”**
- XI. Afterword, Mike Zoosman**
- XII. Appendix: Supplementary Essays**

FOREWORD,

This is not the way I expected it to end. I guess we all hope for a different conclusion. For most of us, this path that I'm taking is the one that most of us will take. Regardless, I want to encourage you to think for yourself. You don't need a bunch of advocates and lawyers telling you what is right or wrong for you. If you want to do clemency, do that shit. If you don't want to do clemency, fuck it. Make the right decision for you. Nobody else. You. Also, I realize that my case has caused a bunch of drama. While that wasn't my intention, I'm not sad about it. The more attention that is on all of our cases the better. With regards to advocates and lawyers, trust what they do not what they say. Remember, talk is cheap. Anybody can send out a bunch of shit and stir the pot. Few can actually get our cases out there and get shit done.

Anthony Sanchez

September 20, 2023

Executed, September 21, 2023

HUMANITY,

Our work is about making humanity humane. It is important to note that humanity is not intrinsically humane. In fact, it seems to be the exact opposite. There is so much evil everywhere. Then again, the humane comes from the human. So, there must be some good left somewhere.

We encounter the self in the other. The humane connection comes from the human connection. Letters. Cards. Visits. Phone calls. These are the things that create the human connection...and in the human connection we find the humane. We learn to advocate based on the relationships that we foster with those we are advocating for.

Everybody wants to call these guys monsters. Perhaps the monster in them is the monster in us? We're not all that different...we just are...monsters.

More specifically, we come to a fullness of comprehension when we allow our thoughts to reside on death row. If we can imagine ourselves there, we can begin to imagine the humanity that resides there.

Dehumanization is a trap. We think it is a normal phenomenon. Slowly, we become a part of the dehumanization. Then...before we know it...we too have been dehumanized. When we fight for these folks on death row, we fight for our own humanity. Death row is a place of death because we have made it so. If we are to bring life to such a space, we must bring our humanity to the table.

Light is created by the spark that exists between you and the other; that ultimately makes the other no longer the other.

True human interaction is a symphony of light. The relationships fostered on death row create light...without them...there is none.

There is darkness amongst us. It resides in the hearts of those who are so comfortable killing. The people who work at these facilities are light blockers. It is our job to bring the light in. To demand human relationship. To demand hope. To be light.

One of the things that we regularly do is record various conversations with the folks that we work with. Their voices give evidence of humanity. Their voices remind us of our responsibility to be humane.

Truthfully, these folks are just like anyone else. Some are kind. Some are generous. Some are assholes. Some are innocent. Some are guilty. Some are somewhere in between. Ultimately... They're not God. They're not the devil. They're not angels. They're not demons. They're not perfect. They're human. They're us.

Deep empathy accompanies deep humanity. We must bring the fullness of ourselves to the struggle. Don't hold back. There is no fear in love. To deny the self is to deny humanity...not to embrace it.

We must see death rows as places where humans reside. Nothing more. Nothing less. Existence is the beginning of empathy. It doesn't matter what the human has done...the human is human.

Hate is not humane. The way we treat our enemies says much about our humanity. So many find it easier to love the people on death row than those who want the people on death row executed. We must fight the temptation of hate. That is the only way that we can love.

Humans do not vanish. We exist in each other and with each other. You are. They are. We are.

One must see in order to be seen. It is our job to show both the self and the other.

Connection is intrinsic to the abolitionist experience. We create humanity to humanize all parties involved...including that which is within.

The FIGHT,

What does it mean to fight for the individuals on death row? To fight as an abolitionist? From our experiences, if you want to get into this work, you need to have a really strong backbone. This work is not for the faint of heart. In a line of work with very few wins, where the stakes are incredibly high, you need to have some fight in you. You need to have the fight in you to keep going; to keep on struggling. And when you get knocked down, you need to have the fight to get back up.

Underlying this fight is a sort of moral understanding that the death penalty is just inherently wrong, and that we are fighting against this massive evil. There can be nothing good with the death penalty. But there is something more to this work than just secular discomfort. There is discomfort in the soul, and when you function from the soul, you can keep up the fight far longer than when you're simply functioning from an intellectual place. Many of us have gotten our 30-second elevator pitches down, citing the many rational reasons that the death penalty is wrong, delivering them to anyone who will listen; whether we're at the Fast and Vigil in front of the US Supreme Court, in the airport, or at the grocery store. It's one thing to recite a whole slew of statistics and figures, but no matter how many facts you lay on someone, without the personal experience; without knowing someone who has gone through execution; without going through it yourself; without engaging with the issue on a person level: your fight just does not have the same vigor.

We think that in this line of work, having direct relationships with various individuals on death row is so important, because it creates that soul connection to the issue. We've seen some people in the movement – they don't make those relationships. We get it. Forming strong relationships with real people who are condemned to die only magnifies the trauma, the "hits" we experience on a daily basis. It feels radically different to form these relationships on death row only to see these individuals murdered at the hands of the state one after the next. But without those connections, those relationships, those friendships, just seeing those people as human beings, it's extremely difficult to keep up the motivation to fight for them in the way that you would have if you had gotten to know them on a personal level.

Certainly someone who is not aligned with death penalty abolition does not have a fight in them. However, there are many people – a majority of Americans – who fundamentally oppose executions, without a very personal connection to the struggle, lack the motivation to go beyond simply saying they're against capital punishment.

We oppose executions in general, but it absolutely feels different when you don't know the individual, they're not someone you're closely connected with. For us, one cannot be a true abolitionist without at least some level of real, human engagement with the folks on the rows. To keep the struggle pounding on, you need to have the fight in you, and how can you have the fight if you don't have something or someone that you're fighting for?

Those who have a personal connection to the work really define and differentiate those who are "full-on" abolitionists and

those who simply just oppose it. We live in a space where we have to think about the struggle against the death penalty as being a bottom-up, not a top-down, issue, meaning the only way to bring folks who are on death row to the table in their own right, to fight for their own cause, is to form meaningful relationships with them. To be a true abolitionist is to empower the folks we fight for; folks who have been disempowered for far too long by a system that is out for vengeance.

As abolitionists, when we think about “the fight,” we think about going to the legislature and speaking at rallies, but the real fight is to remind these folks on death row of their own humanity. Often we become distracted in this work and are fighting to just keep the person physically alive, but we cannot forget that the fight is just as much about helping these individuals remain emotionally and spiritually alive. It’s difficult for these folks on the row to remain emotionally and spiritually alive when one after the other, they witness individuals they have come to know and love as family be hauled off, likely never to return, knowing they may be next.

In many ways, this fight is not just a fight, but a war. It is literally a fight to the death. We are exhausting absolutely every resource we can find to make sure that does not happen, but we are up against a state that has an arsenal of resources infinitely greater than ours, dead set on making sure we don’t win. There is a powerful song that comes to mind in this discussion called “Let Me Hurt” by Emily Rowed, in which she describes being in a war “with no armor.” Alli found herself listening to it constantly around Arthur Brown Jr.’s execution, not only because his execution filled us with such immense rage, but because it can often feel like no matter what we do, we are losing. It’s incredibly

easy to spiral down to a pit of hopelessness and despair, where it does not feel like we will ever win.

But we must remember, especially if we forge relationships in this work, that we must be prepared to get hurt. Part of being in the struggle is being able to take the knocks and keep going; to have that fuel, and that spiritual energy that comes from believing in what you're doing.

We talk about having to get up and keep going, but that does not mean we don't experience burnout and fatigue. In fact, it's something that we experience often because of how draining this work can be. The fuel to keep going comes not only from the personal relationships but the loss of those relationships when people you care about are killed. We wish there was a way that we could stay motivated and energized in this work without there being so much grief. Working to abolish the death penalty and stop executions comes with such a rollercoaster of emotions, between all the last minute legal filings, winning in one court only for another to throw the issue out, but still clinging onto hope that something will give. There is always hope until it is over. This is arguably the most exhausting part of the work.

RAGE,

Arthur Brown died less than 24 hours ago. We have been forever changed, our souls filled with rage, and our hearts with despair. Not only did Arthur's family lose their loved one, but the Harris County prosecutor's office knowingly lied and manipulated the victim's families and the entire city of Houston for more than three decades into believing Arthur was this cold-blooded monster. To worsen everything, it is almost certain that when the State of Texas executed Arthur's co-defendant, Marion Dudley in 2006, they executed another innocent man.

Arthur Brown Jr. was the 583rd person executed by the state of Texas since they resumed executions in 1982 following the Gregg decision.

"What is occurring here tonight is not justice, it's murder of an innocent man for a murder that occurred in 1992. For the last 30 years I've proven my innocence to the courts, but the courts blocked me and then refused me access to the ballistics for 20 years; I've proven facts and ballistics to be false. It's been 30 years now, the state refused to turn over evidence. Nine of the ten trial motions were filed for discovery of evidence, but each were denied each time. I asked for DNA, I was denied DNA. My co-defendant was executed in 2006 and if I'm innocent he was innocent and they killed an innocent man, and the state doesn't want the truth to come out. They won't allow me DNA. The victim's son identified on audio tape it wasn't me or the co-defendant. The state hid the evidence so long and good that my own attorneys couldn't find it. Tonight, Texas will kill a second innocent man for a murder that occurred in 1992. I have no further words."

There is a tendency to see rage as evil. Such a tendency is not just problematic but completely contrary to the pursuit of justice. One cannot fight for justice unless they are enraged by injustice.

Life then murder. There are not enough words to describe what this feeling is like. It is such an unnatural, abnormal, bizarre feeling. Yes it's grief, but it's grief in a way that so few people ever experience. Grief is a very normal part of the human condition, but experiencing grief, following the murder of somebody – and not just the murder of somebody, but the intentional, premeditated murder of somebody that was planned for and that you were waiting for and you were counting down the days and hours and minutes for – is just so bizarre. Rage is a beyond appropriate reaction.

Whether you know them or not.... Overwhelmed. Heartbroken. Devastated. Such feelings lead to a rage that keeps the fight alive. It's a fuel. Intimacy seems to make the fire burn faster, stronger and brighter. There is a piece of you burning...burning with rage. The soul is made to feel such things. To burn but not burn out.

Arthur Brown doesn't rest in peace. On the contrary, Brown was murdered and his soul will never rest in peace until these unnecessary killings stop. We shouldn't enjoy any sort of peace either. These executions should *haunt* us day in and day out. The disturbance should never let us rest. In our ears, may we hear their names. Over and over, Arthur Brown...Arthur Brown...Arthur Brown.

Rise up in power. Rage for justice. Rest when it stops.

There are no stages to a grief like this. You can't go through stages because the grief doesn't stop. The grief simply is. Hope

seems to be executed and reborn with every execution. Life dies. Life lives.

Without a doubt, people don't see these executions like we do. If they did, they would stop. Most just live blissfully ignorant. Blissfully unaware that they are murderers. Such numbness sucks the soul out of our society. Such numbness must be counteracted by rage. It is our job to demand that society see.

Watching people die doesn't get easier. With each last breath, it becomes harder and harder to breathe. Rage becomes the oxygen that keeps the fight alive.

Fight. Don't stop. Fight.

Grief is a luxury for those not facing the next execution. It's as if you spend too much time grieving the last execution, you will fail to be present for the next. There are so many more in line. We can't stop. In the midst of such horror, it seems like rage is the only feeling worth feeling.

Perhaps, there is a balance. You want to honor the person who has been executed. You don't want an execution to overshadow the majesty of who they were...who they still are. But you must rage. There is no way to honor their memory without rage. It's an incredibly complicated juxtaposition. Then again, maybe it's not...maybe it is just about rage. Honor is rage and rage is honor.

There is no meaning in an execution. It is senseless. There is meaning in resistance. We are the meaning. We are the rage.

Stop trying to make sense of it all. Simply feel. Rage.

It is bizarre to fan the flames of rage. We are told not to feel such things. Those of us who are called to live through it all know that such feelings are inescapable and should be fostered...until our rage burns the death penalty to the ground, once and for all.

GRIEF,

How do you remain human amid constant death? You must allow room for grief. You can't give quarter to numbness. Such numbness is suicide. You will cease to exist. You must feel it deep in your soul.

Grieve for the victims. Grieve for the participants. Grieve for the condemned. Grieve for the government. Grieve.

We are amid a moral apocalypse. Grieve.

People are happy about the execution. Grieve.

I don't know what to say. Grieve.

They see us as the enemy. Grieve.

There is so much hate. Grieve.

Where do we go from here? Grieve.

Surely, grief must be both an origination and a destination for the abolitionist.

TRUTH,

Integrity. The first thing we think about when it comes to truth—that ultimately, we don't get into this work to make shit up. Contrary to what many who don't agree with us believe, we get into this work to promote truth... that truth is sometimes difficult.

The truth is often that the person we are working with has done a horrible, horrible thing, but that ultimately they still do not deserve to be executed. Other times, the truth is that the person we are working with is innocent and does not deserve to pay for something someone else did. The truth remains that capital punishment is morally problematic under any circumstance. For us, maintaining our integrity is among the most important things to maintain in the midst of all of this. We feel that not all activists prioritize integrity, which is why people sometimes think that activists are crazy as hell. And they're not always wrong.

We must be willing to recognize that not everyone is innocent. In fact, only a small percentage of these individuals condemned to die are innocent, but it's still high enough to be an immense locus of concern.

For us to be set free from capital punishment, we must be willing to tell the truth, the truth that the death penalty is wrong, but also the truth about these cases. It can be really difficult. We want to go in believing everyone; or at least that those who say they are innocent, are innocent.

What would you expect of someone who says that they're innocent? When we go into new situations and meet new

individuals who are condemned to die, we tend to be really skeptical. We've met individuals who have said they were innocent, but it does not really add up, or the person you meet is not someone who you align with. Often once we go in and get to know the individual, our experiences with them can pretty quickly skew our perceptions of them one way or the other, even before we see the evidence. After we first met Arthur Brown Jr., despite coming from a very skeptical place, we were inclined to believe in his innocence claim because we had an incredibly difficult time believing that someone who cared so much about other people's wellbeing could have committed the horrible thing Texas alleges he committed.

We did not want to lose credibility and it took us until the last couple of weeks to begin asserting Arthur's innocence to ensure that the information we were putting out there was truthful. With Arthur, because truth is so important to us, it bit us in the ass. Arthur had been screaming this truth for 30 years and we only listened in the last few weeks when there was tangible proof. People are very skeptical of activist's positions on things, especially with death penalty cases, because the vast majority of Americans are led to believe that the system we have is foolproof.

That's simply not true. The system is not truthful. If the system were truthful, the public would be less likely to blindly support it like they do now.

Cameroonian political theorist and anthropological scholar, Achille Mbembe, argues that the "ultimate expression of sovereignty resides" in the state's "power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die." Such a concept, he argues, is rooted in modernity, specifically the "colonial world." To

Mbembe, the existence of “the Other” is central to creating a “fictionalized notion of the enemy;” an exaggerated threat to “life and security” that necessitates the killing of them. By exaggerating the necessity to kill certain people, in this case folks on death row, states are able to “civilize” the ways of killing and “attribute rational objectives to them,” thereby co-opting the public into supporting the killing efforts rather than challenging them.

When someone is sent to death row, or even just prison, for a serious crime they are immediately banished to the status of “the Other”. The government and media strip them of their holistic identity turning them into “monsters” in the eyes of the public, whether each individual actually did what they are accused of or not. It’s a perfect recipe for exaggerating the threat to “life and security”, whereby the state can justify the “necessity” to kill them.

The *State of Exception*, a leading tenant of Mbembe’s worldview, is when there is a “temporal suspension of the state of law.” However, I would take it a step further and suggest that it may not only be a “suspension” of the state of law, but also a suspension of all that is moral and acceptable in a given society. For Mbembe, the dangers of *power* rest in the state’s abilities to manipulate the public into supporting unnecessary violence where they otherwise would not tolerate it.

Ask any person in the United States whether they believe killing another person was acceptable. Without any additional conditions, I can guarantee you almost all of them would be disturbed by the question and agree that it is never acceptable to kill another person. However, when that person is someone who has been completely demonized by the state, who is convicted

of an absolutely heinous crime, who the government continues to manipulate the public into believing is a “monster”, we find ourselves in a *State of Exception* in the United States. The only reason Americans are tolerating these kinds of abuses of power is because they have been co-opted into believing that there is a “rational objective” to kill people who have been condemned by the state.

The vast majority of pro “tough on crime” folks are simultaneously in favor of small government because they don’t trust the government to act in the best interest of its citizens. However, when it comes to the government extending its reach of power to pick and choose who dies, those same folks seem to conveniently forget that such an expression of power is not conducive with small government. A *State of Exception* inconspicuously forces society to abandon all of its moral standards, becoming complacent in egregious acts of violence they wouldn’t ordinarily support.

No one is winning when our government can decide who they want to kill. Not the folks on death row and certainly not the United States of America. Such a condition disempowers everyone in our country who is not actively fighting against such violence from resisting the abuses of the state. The state doesn’t care about any one of us, just like it does not care about the individuals who are condemned to die; it’s merely using us to do its dirty work and we don’t even have a clue.

Ultimately, is the goal truth, or is it to save a life? That answer differs between who you ask. We think almost every death penalty abolitionist will say the goal is to save a life, and some people will put that above truth. If we genuinely believe that the person we are working with is telling the truth based

on their character and the person we have gotten to know, we will gladly spread the truth. But for a lot of activists and death penalty abolitionists, saving a life is more important. It's a weird, and often uncomfortable place to be in, because of course we want to save everyone's life— that's why we do this work, because we don't think any person should be executed regardless of what they did or did not do. But, maintaining our own integrity as an organization, as individual activists, and as people is vital because it will not help our movement if we are out here shouting things that are not true. Perhaps it may help that one person in the moment, but it is not in the best interest of the movement in general.

It's difficult. We are focused on what could do the greatest good for the greatest amount of people, but we were recently asked if we would lie to save a life. We don't know that it's necessarily the right answer but we think our answer would be yes. It just shows how broken, and evil, and malicious the system that we are up against is – that we might have to lie to save a life.

Everyone should be concerned with the truth and it is really unfortunate that we might have to put saving a life above truth because we should not have to do that. But in the battle we are in, we are sometimes forced to do that. It forces us to consider if we are situational ethicists or virtue ethicists, and we think our response would be that we are virtue ethicists. We must tell the truth even if it's not comfortable.

We have to tell the truth in order to be truth and in order to be right. We can't do right without being right. It's a strange place to be in.

Does this movement matter more than the person?

It's a very difficult question to answer because on one hand our goal is to save individual people, however, as abolitionists, our objective is to stop the whole system so that nobody has to go through this torturous process. As we continue to work towards the end goal, we cannot just forget about individual people along the way, which our movement sometimes does. Our movement is often more focused on where we're headed instead of being present and addressing things as they come. There must be a place for both. We can't lose track of where we're at because we are so focused on where we're going.

The goal is truth. And abolition is truth— so the goal is abolition. Each case, taken at its best, can lead us in that direction.

ALONE,

This work is a work of solitude. You can't be an abolitionist if you can't stand alone. People love killing too much. Most of the time nobody is going to want to stand with you.

I made contact. I wrote letters. I went to prison. I visited. I watched him die. I was alone.

I got arrested. I was put in jail. I went to court. I was on probation. I was alone.

I walked in protest. I dodged cars. I stood my ground. I was threatened. I was alone.

Being alone is part of the gig.

The people that you love are most often going to be killed.

This is a unique place to be.

Knowing that your work will most likely leave you alone.

Isolation was all that I experienced after my friend was executed.

Isolation was all that I experienced after my friend was executed.

It's so common that we both said it simultaneously.

What more can one do than give all that they have? Yet, when you give all that you have, you end up alone. The abolitionist does it over and over. The cycle never seems to end.

You don't even have to have known them to feel their loss. In knowing the rejection and isolation, you know them.

Bizarre. That's the only way to describe this solitude.

We've never heard of grief counseling for abolitionists. Maybe we should have.

This is not the type of movement that puts thousands of people in the streets. It's just us. Yet, we know of no other movement that such small numbers have such a big impact. You can stand alone and change the world.

Isolation almost becomes the vehicle for change.

SUCCESS,

Success comes in many different forms when we're talking about the death penalty; abolition work. Certainly stopping someone's execution or exonerating someone or getting them off of death row are all extremely big successes. However, in this work, we take so many hits that it's really important for us to find success everywhere, even when they are small successes along the way.

With Arthur Brown Jr, we didn't stop his execution, but we were able to spread the truth about his case. The truth is that he did not commit the horrifying crime he was accused of. People learned the truth about his case. We planted seeds of doubt into the minds of the public. We made it so that Arthur was not alone in the final moments of his life.

Success can mean many things in our work. Success has to do with humanity. We fight for people's humanity, not just their physical humanity. We're not just talking about saving lives. We're talking about saving spirits— helping people to understand who they are. That they matter. That their families matter. That the families of the victims matter. To show our society that these people matter and that they are not disposable.

The families of the victims and those executed are the forgotten ones. They receive just as much backlash as the person being executed, as if they are responsible for the individual going to death row. It's important that we show up not just for the person being executed but for all of the families. Not just painting the humanity of the person being executed for themselves but for their families too. These families carry the reputations of their loved ones that will stick with them forever.

The victim's families find a certain level of humanity. It's easy for them to think that if we can get the person who killed their loved one executed then their lives will all of a sudden be better. And we know that it is not true. Everytime someone is executed, we are ALL worse off. This conversation is broader than just, "let's execute the monster." That's not to say that many of these people have not done horrible, horrible things. When you smash your kid's head in, that's pretty horrible. Beating people to death and killing a baby are monstrosities. But what these folks on death row show is that the monster in me is the monster in you. That ultimately we all have darkness in us. And part of what we feel in our work is about helping people, and helping the general public to realize we are not all that far removed from the people on death row.

Often we kill these guys with the idea that if we kill them, we are getting rid of our own sin, our own monstrosity, our own evil. Success is to help the people sitting at home look at the person being executed and see themselves in that person. Success can look many different ways in this work.

If we impact anybody, whether they're on our side, whether they're not on our side, whether they're undecided, whether they're party to this process by choice or not, anytime we can impact them on any level that is not just beneficial to our cause, but society at large is success. Impacting any of these people that think the death penalty is a good thing, the people that think we need the death penalty to attain "justice", and think that the only way we can move on is if we kill these monsters. It's a success to be able to impact them in any way, in any tiny amount, to see that this is not the only way we can live or should live, especially because we aren't going to dismantle the death penalty

overnight. It's our job to always remind people that there's a way out of the killing cycle; there is a turnoff before.

It does not have to be like this.

“The Fight for Anthony Sanchez”: Last Minute Reflections on the Death of God and an Innocent Man,

“IS GOD DEAD?” Yes. I’ve seen it. For over a decade, I’ve worked with those whom our society has chosen to execute. I believe that God inhabits the least of these. I believe that God has died repeatedly...and we are the culprits of such a moral catastrophe. It takes courage to allow the mind and heart to journey to such a disturbing place. How can a dead God be worth believing in? On the contrary, perhaps a dead God is the only God worth believing in. Like the woman who reached out for the garment of God and was healed, sometimes it takes weaving through clarity to find something worth grasping for.

Dead Gods are strange teachers. The lessons they teach are not always clear. But like the woman found out, healing doesn’t usually come from the clarity of rational behavior. You see, only the courageous get to be healed. The ones who choose to touch the dead.

Courage is an interesting cultural phenomenon. It’s sort of a linguistical mirage. Everybody talks about it...but nobody seems to actually know the fullness of what they’re describing. It is partial devoid of perfect. I’ve known partial. Then, I was surprised by the perfect.

Jesus the very incarnation of God is drowning in a world of fear and sorrow. Knowing that society is determined to kill him, Jesus asks those that he trusts to sit and watch with him...to engage what is to come...to be present...deadly present.

Sexual assault and murder are obviously not phenomenon one should look past. When I met Anthony Sanchez, I assumed

that I was meeting someone who had sexually assaulted and murdered a beautiful young woman named Juli Busken. Even though Sanchez passionately claimed otherwise, I assumed that he was full of shit. He certainly wouldn't have been the first guy on death row I'd met who was. I was wrong. Time has revealed new truths. If we open our hearts, new truths can reveal to us the fullness of God.

I investigated for myself. I read the transcripts. I engaged the witnesses. I sought out experts. Slowly, I came to a surprising conclusion...there was an innocent man on death row in Oklahoma. Injustice was metastasizing by the day. I knew that it was my duty to sit and watch with him...to stand guard against an approaching moral catastrophe.

In Gethsemane, Jesus knew that he was the victim of a society determined to extract blood from an innocent man. Throughout human history, people seem determined to destroy that which is righteous and just. Instead of fleeing, Jesus remained in the Garden. On his knees, Jesus prays in anguish, "Is there any other way?" The forces of evil were at the gate.

From the beginning, Anthony Sanchez has known that his execution is more than possible. When people on death row find their backs against the wall, most are willing to say or do whatever it takes to save their life. I've seen it...repeatedly. Sanchez is different. From the beginning, he told me that he was not going to compromise his claims of innocence under any circumstance. He hasn't.

Consistently, Sanchez has hated his attorneys. Repeatedly, they've proven unwilling or incapable of fighting for his innocence, even going for almost six years without communicating with him at one point. One of the cruel twists of

fate in our system is that justice is something to be bought and if you don't have the means then you are stuck with the attorneys you have. Such legal hopelessness never deterred Sanchez from maintaining that he was an innocent man.

When the possibility of execution came up, Sanchez told me that he would rather die than waiver in his declaration of innocence. I believe him. Surely, no life is not worth living if you lose your soul in the process. The more that I heard the more that I realized what my job was...remain steadfast in supporting Sanchez in his convictions while doing all that I can to save his life.

Jesus offered no physical resistance. He simply questioned the process, proclaimed his innocence and demanded justice. Injustice has a way of creating insurmountable processes amid assumptions or assignments of guilt. Unquestionably, Oklahoma is one of the epicenters of injustice.

In recent months, Anthony Sanchez has shown unbelievable courage. When he realized that the clemency process would involve an extrajudicial process that declared him to be a monster, his own attorneys refusal to advocate wholeheartedly for his innocence and his participation in a process insurmountably stacked against him, Sanchez decided to reject the opportunity. Even if it meant that he was giving up an opportunity to beg for his life, Sanchez was going to stick with his convictions. Repeatedly he has declared, "I will not participate in a hearing that demands that I act guilty."

Unable to comprehend the inaction of his attorneys in any other way, Sanchez came to the belief that they wanted him to be executed. Even if that isn't true, there seems to be little doubt that all trust was gone. Instead of simply rolling over and

taking their neglect, Sanchez made the decision to fire them, even if that meant acting as his own attorney in the final months of his life. Repeatedly he has declared, “I refuse to stand with anyone who will not stand with me.” It is important to note that Sanchez is not dense to what his decisions could mean. The possibility of his execution looms large over every decision he makes. However, that’s not his primary concern. Repeatedly, Sanchez has declared, “I would rather die standing on my feet in the knowledge of my innocence than begging on my knees for something that I didn’t do.”

Jesus knew what was likely. Unwaveringly, Jesus refused to move or even beg for his life. His convictions mattered much more to him than his life.

The parallels between Jesus’ Gethsemane moment to Sanchez’s current moment are too stark to be ignored. No matter what the cost, Jesus stuck by his principles, even to his detriment. Presently, the decisions that Sanchez has made are based on his principles, even to his possible detriment. Sanchez is an innocent man who refuses to act like a guilty one. He demands justice and justice alone. Sometimes, courage is not a mirage.

In those final hours, the disciples were told to watch and pray. Anthony Sanchez is asking the same of you. Do not fall asleep. Stay awake with us.

God doesn’t have to die.

“I died standing for my innocence rather than begging for clemency on my knees.”,

Anyone who knew Anthony Sanchez will tell you that he was the epitome of courage. He went to his death *“standing for [his] innocence rather than begging for clemency on [his] knees”*. He never once waived from this — from the moment he was found guilty of Juli Busken’s murder in 2006 and uttered to her family, *“I swear to God, I didn’t kill your daughter”*, through to his very last breath.

There were many individuals that had the power to intervene to stop this man-made horror and made a conscious decision not to. Judge Joe Heaton. Attorney General Gentner Drummond. Governor Kevin Stitt. Attorneys Mark Barrett and Randy Coyne. The US Supreme Court. The silence from our own movement as Oklahoma proceeded in killing this innocent man was disturbing. Everywhere we turned, it felt like we were being challenged not only by the state, but by folks in our own movement who are supposed to help us stop these executions.

Anthony and I spent all night “texting” and continued to do so right up until the moment they took him from the cell adjacent to the execution chamber to strap him down and get the IVs ready. He could not sleep. His mind was racing. He would forget what he wanted to say because he said his mind was just *“blank”*. I told him that it was “ok”. Very few people go through the psychological torture of being executed — it was entirely appropriate if he couldn’t calm his mind down.

In those final hours he told me over and over, *“this isnt right alli . i pinky swear i am innocent ... alli i pinky swear i am innocent*

how is this happening ?” and one of the final things he told me was, *“what ever you do dont give up being a lawyer !”* Last August, when my dear friend, Kosoul Chanthakoummane, was being executed he said exactly the same thing to me. Both of these men had been wholly abandoned by the few people that are actually supposed to be on their side — their attorneys. At 4:16am CT Anthony reiterated his sentiments about his former attorneys, *“i dont understand how mark and randell can get away with what ther saying and doing to jeff an death penalty action an me”*.

Just a few days before Anthony’s execution, Randy, Anthony’s former attorney, suggested to the Associated Press that we were using the “myth of Anthony Sanchez, an innocent man facing his death, as a publicity fundraising campaign”. Randy could not have been more wrong. We pushed Anthony’s innocence so hard because his own attorneys refused to — we believed wholeheartedly that Anthony did not murder Juli Busken that cold December morning in 1996. Anthony’s voice and agency were silenced for far too long. That needed to change.

Despite being in this work for some time and seeing just how few wins there are, I don’t think any of us truly believed that it would have come down to this. Even in the final hours of Anthony’s life, he kept asking me if I believed he still had a chance. We were waiting on SCOTUS to rule. Once something gets to SCOTUS, we are almost certain how it will end — even still, we had a chance. A small chance, but it was a chance — a chance, that something would give and Anthony would get some, any, amount of relief. I told him to hold onto that chance. It was all we had at that point.

We did not succeed in saving a life this time, but we succeeded in giving Anthony his voice. Many people along the way questioned Anthony's decisions, and suggested that he was being coerced by his spiritual advisor, but those of us who knew Anthony, know he made those decisions on his own. Anthony was courage. If he was going to do things, he was going to do them his way — and he did. In one of the final conversations¹ he had with his spiritual advisor, Anthony affirmed that he had no regrets with how his campaign played out — *"If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change anything. I made the decisions that I had to make. With your help, I was able to be something more than a prisoner...a real person. Thank you, Jeff."*

We get into this work to make those on the inside feel seen — to make them human again. For far too long, condemned individuals have been stripped of their human-ness and made out to be something they are not. Anthony was no monster. He was no murderer. He was a son. A brother. A father. A grandfather. An artist. And he was our friend. Those of us who knew Anthony will tell you how much of a privilege it was to have known him. And how much of a void was left when his life was taken.

There is no justice in killing another person. And there certainly was no justice, yesterday, when Oklahoma murdered Anthony for something he did not do. Our world is not a better place without Anthony in it.

"Anthony Sanchez died how he lived, courageously standing upon his convictions rather than begging for mercy on his knees. May we all go and do likewise." ~The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

1. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jeffhood/the-final-visit-alone-with-anthony-sanchez-on-his-last-day/>

Rest in Power, dear friend. You are free, at last.
#FreeAnthonySanchez

AFTERWORD,

May this sacred testimony of Alli Sullivan and the Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood help to open hearts and minds to bring to fruition the *success* that these dyed-in-the-wool death penalty abolitionists envision. Every individual whose mind is changed on this issue, as mine was years ago, brings our society and humanity closer to victory in the mission - now more urgent than ever - of upholding the sanctity of life itself. The direct connections that Ms. Sullivan and Rev. Hood have forged with those facing imminent execution calls to mind the charge that Jewish philosopher Martin Buber made a century ago in his renowned volume *I and Thou*: "Spirit is not in the I but between I and You." It is that *Ruakh HaKodesh* - Holy Spirit - that drives the souls of so many abolitionists. It is no wonder that Buber joined many other Jewish human rights icons in his opposition to Israel's execution of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, which he called "a great mistake."²

By bearing direct witness to human beings counting down their days to state-sponsored murder, Ms. Sullivan and Rev. Hood have borne witness to the inherent psychological torture that occurs every single time the government puts to death a prisoner - innocent or guilty - against his or her will. It is for this reason that Albert Camus, in his *Reflections on the Guillotine* (1957), rightfully condemned any nation that puts its prisoners to death, writing:

"But what then is capital punishment but the most premeditated of murders, to which no criminal's deed, however calculated it may be, can be compared? For there to be equivalence, the death penalty would have to punish a criminal who had warned his victim of the date at which he would inflict a horrible death on him and who, from that moment onward, had confined him at his mercy for months. Such a monster is not encountered in private life."

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/06/05/archives/buber-calls-eichmann-execution-great-mistake-israeli-philosopher.html>

This is a reality that I, too, have regularly encountered from my nearly daily correspondence with the condemned. The result is a grotesque warping of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's "Five Stages of Grief" into the whirlwind of fight, rage, grief, and isolation that Ms. Sullivan and Rev. Hood have depicted so powerfully in these pages. The result is an unmitigated abomination.

As Elie Wiesel famously said of capital punishment: "death should never be the answer in a civilized society."³ Indeed, as Ms. Sullivan and Rev. Hood have demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt: the death penalty condemns the society that enacts it infinitely more than any individual it condemns to die; indeed, it condemns us *all*.

And so, the thousands of members of the group I co-founded, L'chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty stand with Ms. Sullivan and Rev. Hood as we ceaselessly chant: "L'chaim...to Life!"

Aza Chamavet Ahava ("Love is as strong as death.") - Song of Songs 8:6

Cantor Michael J. Zoosman, MSM

Board Certified Chaplain –Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains

Co-Founder: L'chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty⁴

Advisory Committee Member, Death Penalty Action⁵

3. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/death-is-not-the-answer/>

4. <https://m.facebook.com/groups/996205437512710/?ref=sharehttps://m.facebook.com/groups/996205437512710/?ref%3Dshare&cexp=95948&mibextid=S66gvF>

5. <https://deathpenaltyaction.org/jewish-action/>

APPENDIX

Supplementary Essays

THE EMBODIMENT OF ABOLITION

Healing Through Engaging the Wounds of Others

Jeff Hood

Introduction: Healing as the Heart of Abolition

To embody the abolition of the death penalty is to understand, first of all, that the work is not primarily legal. It is relational. It is something that happens between people long before it happens in a statute. The abolitionist stance rests on a conviction about what human beings owe one another, and that conviction is tested not in legislative hearings but in the daily decisions we make about whose pain we are willing to see and whose pain we are willing to help carry. A person who has internalized abolition is a person who has quietly committed to engaging the wounds of others, including the wounds of those society has taught us to turn away from, and who has come to understand that such engagement is not charity but the very shape of healing.

Healing, in the sense this essay will develop, is not the disappearance of injury. It is the slow work by which an injury becomes something other than a prison. A wound that is met by another person, honestly and without flinching, begins to loosen its grip on the one who bears it. A wound that is left alone hardens into isolation, and isolation eventually becomes the engine of more harm. If abolition is a healing movement—and it is—then the people who embody it must be willing to do the patient, unheroic work of moving toward the wounds they encounter instead of away from them. This movement toward is the first act of abolition, and every other act is downstream of it.

The sections that follow explore what this embodied, healing-centered abolition looks like in practice. They examine how we treat people who have caused harm and people who have been harmed, how we speak, how we listen, how we raise children and participate in communities, how we handle our own wounds so that we are not reenacting them on others, and how we keep hope alive in a culture that still largely believes that inflicting pain is the most serious form of justice. None of these practices requires a degree or a title. All of them are available to any person willing to begin.

I. Seeing the Wound Before the Crime

The death penalty is sustained by a particular way of seeing other people, and embodying abolition begins with learning to see differently. The punitive gaze looks at a person who has done harm and sees only the harm. The abolitionist gaze looks at the same person and sees the harm without losing sight of the person—sees the wound underneath the crime, the history underneath the wound, and the humanity underneath the history. This is not a naive refusal to acknowledge wrongdoing. It is a deeper acknowledgment: the recognition that no act of violence emerges from nowhere, and that a society unwilling to trace violence to its sources will keep producing the same outcomes it claims to deplore.

Almost every person on death row carries a life history marked by wounds that were never engaged. Poverty, abuse, untreated mental illness, addiction, abandonment, and the cumulative weight of racism and neglect form a pattern so consistent across capital cases that it cannot be dismissed as coincidence. To notice this pattern is not to excuse what was done. It is to insist that the story of the crime is incomplete

without the story of the wounds that preceded it, and that a justice system uninterested in the earlier chapters is a system committed to the cruelty of starting every story at its worst page.

Embodying abolition, then, involves a discipline of widening our frame. When we encounter news of a violent act, our first impulse is often to demand punishment, and the demand feels righteous because it is fueled by real grief and real fear. Abolitionist practice does not suppress these feelings; it asks what else we are willing to ask about. Who was this person before this happened? What wounds went unattended? What warning signs were missed, and by whom? These questions do not soften our response to harm. They clarify it by insisting that a serious response must include attention to the conditions that made the harm possible.

This way of seeing is a form of healing work in itself, because the refusal to reduce a person to their worst moment is the first thing any wounded person needs from anyone who hopes to help them. Those who have caused harm are, among other things, people whose own wounds were never met in time. Meeting them late is still better than not meeting them at all, and the meeting is what abolition, in its deepest sense, is about.

II. Accountability as Repair, Not Erasure

One of the most common misunderstandings of abolition is that it is soft on accountability. In fact, abolition takes accountability more seriously than the death penalty does, because it refuses the shortcut of erasure. To kill a person for what they did is to end the possibility of their ever reckoning with what they did. It closes the book on the story before the hardest chapter can be written. Embodied abolition insists on keeping the book open—on the slow, costly, relational work of

helping a person face what they have done, sit with its weight, and participate in whatever repair remains possible.

Accountability, understood this way, is not the same as punishment. Punishment is something done to a person. Accountability is something a person does, with the help of others who refuse to let them escape into denial or self-pity. The death penalty delivers punishment at maximum volume while delivering almost no accountability at all. It removes the person before the reckoning can occur, and in doing so it cheats everyone: the person who never had to face the full human meaning of their act, the victims who never got the acknowledgment only the person who harmed them can give, and the community that never got to see what genuine repair might have looked like.

In daily life, we can practice this distinction in small ways. When someone close to us causes harm—when a friend is careless with us, when a family member hurts someone we love, when we ourselves fall short—we can resist the impulse to reach for the biggest punishment available and instead ask what actual accountability would require. An apology that means something. A change of behavior that lasts. A conversation that does not paper over what happened but also does not reduce the person to the event. These are small acts, and yet they are rehearsals for a different civilization, one in which our first move in the face of harm is toward repair rather than toward elimination.

Repair also has a deeply healing function for the person who caused harm, which is a truth our culture resists. We tend to believe that the perpetrator does not deserve healing, that their pain is a just consequence of what they did. But a person who

cannot heal is a person who cannot take responsibility, because responsibility requires enough stability of self to face oneself honestly. Denying healing to those who have done harm guarantees the cycle will continue. Engaging their wounds—without minimizing what they did—is the only route to the kind of accountability that actually transforms anything.

III. Empathy as a Daily Discipline

Empathy is often treated as a feeling that either strikes us or does not, a mood that arrives on its own schedule. Abolition requires us to treat it instead as a discipline—something we practice whether or not we feel like it, something that can be trained, deepened, and extended to people we would not have chosen. The capital punishment system depends on a narrow empathy, one that flows easily toward people who look like us or whose suffering matches our own, and stops cold at the boundaries of race, class, and prior behavior. Embodied abolition works to widen that flow until it reaches everyone, including people the culture has instructed us to treat as unreachable.

The discipline begins with listening. Not listening in order to respond, and not listening in order to evaluate, but listening in the way a person listens when they have decided that the speaker deserves the full attention of another human being. This kind of listening is rare enough that its absence goes unnoticed and its presence is sometimes mistaken for magic. In fact it is simply the practice of keeping yourself out of the way long enough for another person to finish arriving in the room. Abolition depends on this, because the stories of the people the system targets are almost never listened to in this way. Listening to them is not

optional for someone who wants to live out abolition; it is the basic requirement.

Empathy as a discipline also means practicing on people who are inconvenient. It is not hard to feel for a blameless victim; almost everyone can do that. It is harder to feel for a person whose suffering does not come in an acceptable package—the person who is angry, the person who has hurt others, the person who has made choices we disapprove of. These are the people whose wounds are most likely to be ignored, because engaging them costs us something. An abolitionist practice of empathy insists on engaging them anyway, not because they have earned it, but because healing does not track desert, and a world organized around who deserves what is the world that produced the death penalty in the first place.

Finally, the discipline of empathy includes the willingness to examine our own reluctance. When we notice that our compassion has a limit—that it stops at a certain kind of person, or a certain kind of crime, or a certain kind of history—we can treat the limit as information. Where did it come from? Whose interests does it serve? What would it take to soften it, not naively, but honestly? These questions are part of the inner work of abolition, and they are the work that prevents our outer advocacy from becoming a performance that leaves the deeper habits untouched.

IV. The Wound of the Victim's Family

One of the most persistent myths about the death penalty is that it serves victims' families, and embodying abolition requires us to take this myth apart with care, because taking it apart cannot mean ignoring the wound at its center. Victims' families carry a form of grief that is almost impossible to describe to

those who have not borne it. Any honest abolitionism begins by acknowledging the weight of that grief and refusing to instrumentalize it, either in favor of or against capital punishment. The question is not whether the grief is real. It is obviously real. The question is whether the death penalty actually engages it in a healing way, and the evidence, once we look, says clearly that it does not.

Many family members of murder victims have spoken publicly about the way the capital punishment process prolongs and complicates their grief. Decades of appeals, retraumatizing hearings, the rehearsing of the worst day of their lives in front of strangers, the forced identification with a state apparatus that may not share their values, the strange suspended state of waiting for an execution that may or may not ever happen—all of this adds layers of wounding to the original wound. Some families want the execution and some do not, and both groups deserve to be heard, but the testimony of those who have come to oppose the death penalty even after losing a loved one to violence is particularly important, because it comes from precisely the position the system claims to serve.

An abolitionism rooted in healing takes the wound of the victim's family seriously enough to ask what they actually need, rather than assuming. What they often need is acknowledgment, not just from a judge but from the community. They need practical support that does not end when the news cameras leave. They need space to grieve without being drafted into a political drama. They need, sometimes, the chance to speak to the person who hurt them, if that is something they want. They need, always, to be treated as full human beings with their own evolving feelings rather than as symbolic props in a legal

proceeding. None of these needs is met by an execution, and several of them are actively obstructed by the capital punishment process.

Embodying abolition means showing up for these needs directly, in whatever ways we can. It means supporting organizations that accompany victims' families without imposing a political agenda on them. It means listening when they speak, especially when what they say is complicated. It means recognizing that the healing of these wounds is not something any outsider can deliver, but that all of us have a role to play in creating the conditions under which healing becomes possible. That role is quiet, and it is not glamorous, and it matters more than almost anything else abolition asks of us.

V. The Language We Use

Language is not decoration. It is the shape our thinking takes in public, and over time it is the shape our thinking takes in private too. The words we use to describe people who have done harm, or people who are suffering, or people who have been caught up in the legal system, either invite engagement with their wounds or close the door on it. Embodied abolition attends to language as a serious ethical practice, because the word choices we accept without thinking are the same word choices that make the death penalty seem reasonable to millions of otherwise thoughtful people.

Consider the difference between calling someone a monster and calling them a person who did something monstrous. The first formulation removes them from the human community entirely; once it is accepted, almost any treatment of them becomes justifiable, because monsters, by definition, are not like us. The second formulation holds together two truths that the

punitive mind wants to separate: the reality of what was done, and the continuing humanity of the one who did it. Holding these truths together is not a rhetorical trick. It is an act of moral realism, and it is harder than the alternative, which is why it is rarer.

The same principle applies to the quieter vocabulary of the system. Words like offender, inmate, felon, and convict present a person as wholly defined by their relationship to the legal apparatus. These words efface history, interiority, and the possibility of change. Choosing to say a person who was convicted, or a person serving a sentence, takes an extra second and returns something essential to the person being spoken about. This is not political correctness; it is linguistic honesty. The extra second is the sound of someone refusing to let the shorthand do their thinking for them.

Attending to language also means noticing the vocabulary we use about ourselves and our own wounds. When we describe our pain in ways that deny its seriousness, or in ways that justify retaliation, we are training ourselves in the same patterns that sustain the broader punitive culture. Speaking more honestly about what we feel, what we need, and what would actually help, is a small rehearsal for a larger way of being in the world. Abolition, like any deep cultural shift, lives or dies in the smallest habits, and speech is among the smallest and most consequential of them.

VI. Engaging the Wounds of Those Inside

The people most directly affected by the death penalty are those who live in its shadow: the men and women on death row, and the larger population of incarcerated people whose lives are shaped by the same punitive logic. Embodying abolition means

finding ways to engage their wounds, even across the formidable barriers the system has built. These barriers are not accidental. They exist precisely because the legitimacy of capital punishment depends on the public's not knowing the people it kills. Every letter, every visit, every conversation, every published story that complicates the public's image of the condemned is, in a small way, an act of abolition.

The simplest form of this engagement is correspondence. Writing to a person on death row costs almost nothing and means more than most outsiders can imagine. The letters do not have to be profound. They can be about ordinary life, about books, about the weather, about whatever the writer would share with any friend. The point is not the content. The point is the weekly evidence that someone outside the walls has not forgotten, that the human world has not closed over. For a person whose days are structured around isolation and whose future is officially a date of death, this evidence is medicine. It does not reverse the wound, but it keeps the wound from becoming the whole story.

Visitation is another form, for those who can do it. Sitting across a table or a glass partition from a person the state has condemned is an act that changes the visitor as much as the visited. It dismantles the abstractions that sustain the death penalty from a safe distance. The person in front of you turns out not to be the figure painted by the prosecutor. The person in front of you turns out to be a person, with humor and boredom and worry and hope, and this plain fact, once experienced, cannot be unexperienced. Many abolitionists trace their commitment to a single visit that ended an abstraction they had not realized they were carrying.

Beyond letters and visits, engagement with the wounds of those inside includes supporting the organizations that do this work at scale, amplifying the writing and art of incarcerated people, and refusing, in our ordinary conversations, to talk about prisoners as though they were a category rather than a set of persons. All of these are acts of healing in the sense this essay is using the word: they are refusals of the isolation the system relies on, and they are offerings of the kind of company that lets wounds begin to loosen their grip.

VII. Inside the Chamber: Responsibility to Everyone in the Room

No section of this essay has been harder to write than this one, because the execution chamber is the place where abolition either becomes flesh or reveals itself to have been only an argument. Most of us will never enter one. The people who do enter—chaplains, attorneys, witnesses, family members, correctional staff, reporters—come out changed in ways they struggle to articulate, and their reports agree on one thing: the room does not look like what you expected, and the people in it are not who you expected either. Embodying abolition requires that we think carefully about that room, even from a distance, because the habits of thought we develop about the people inside it determine whether our opposition to the death penalty is merely a position we hold or a way of being we inhabit.

The first thing to understand is that an execution chamber is not populated by villains and heroes. It is populated by human beings, most of them doing jobs they did not entirely choose, inside a system that has arranged for no one in particular to be responsible for what is about to happen. The warden is not a sadist. The tie-down team is not a death squad. The physician, if

there is one, is not a torturer. These are ordinary people, many of them privately ambivalent, who have been enlisted by the state to perform a task the state would rather not perform openly itself. Abolition that forgets this becomes its own kind of cruelty, because it lets us imagine that the problem is a handful of bad actors rather than a structure that implicates all of us.

Consider the correctional officers who work the death house. Many of them have served for decades, and many of them carry wounds the public never hears about. Studies of staff who participate in executions report rates of post-traumatic stress, depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation that rival those found in combat veterans. Officers describe waking up in the night remembering faces. They describe the way their marriages thinned. They describe the strange isolation of a job they are not allowed to discuss with anyone outside the walls. An abolitionism that does not see these wounds is an abolitionism that has decided some wounds are more worthy of attention than others, and that decision is exactly the logic the death penalty runs on. We cannot borrow the enemy's sorting system and call it justice.

I want to stay a little longer with the correctional officers, because the rush to move past them is itself a symptom of the problem. Most Americans think about the death penalty, when they think about it at all, as a contest between the state and the condemned, with the state treated as a faceless abstraction. The officers are the face the state does not want you to see. They are the ones who walk a man his last hundred steps. They are the ones who answer the phone at three in the morning when a stay comes down and a gurney has to be unstrapped and a whole staff has to be sent home with no language for what just did not

happen. They are the ones who remember the name of every man they have escorted, and most of them remember in a way that does not leave room for forgetting.

Listen to former officers long enough and you begin to hear a recurring pattern in their accounts. The first execution is the one they thought they could handle. The second is the one that surprised them. By the fourth or fifth they noticed they were drinking more. By the tenth they noticed their wives had started sleeping in the other room. By the fifteenth they noticed they could not remember the face of the man whose tie-down they had helped with two executions ago, and the not-remembering scared them more than the remembering had. These are not the confessions of weak men. They are the confessions of men who were asked to do something the human nervous system is not built to do repeatedly, and who found out, one execution at a time, what the cost actually was.

The institutional response to this suffering is almost always silence. Departments of corrections do not as a rule fund long-term mental health care for their execution teams. They do not debrief after executions in any format that would allow genuine processing. They do not track long-term outcomes for the officers who participated. They do not warn new hires about what the work might eventually do to them. An officer who begins to struggle is often quietly transferred rather than supported, and the transfer is coded as reassignment rather than injury, and his official file will contain no indication that anything about the execution chamber contributed to his decline. This silence is not an oversight. It is structural. To acknowledge the wounds the work causes would be to acknowledge that the work is wounding, and the legitimacy of

the whole enterprise depends on its being able to pretend otherwise.

Our responsibility to these officers therefore includes a refusal to cooperate with the institutional silence. When a former officer speaks publicly about what the job did to him, we listen, and we amplify, and we do not require him to denounce every one of his former colleagues as a condition of being heard. When a current officer confides to a chaplain or a family member or a friend that he is not okay, we understand that his not-okayness is important information about the system we are trying to change. When we speak about the death penalty in public, we make a point of including the staff among the people the punishment is harming, not as a rhetorical move but because it is true. An abolitionist movement that cannot bring itself to say, out loud, that the tie-down team is also being wounded is an abolitionist movement that has not yet understood its own convictions.

There is a further responsibility, and it is more difficult. Some of the officers who staff these executions hold political views we do not share, and some of them have participated in the work with what looks from the outside like enthusiasm, and some of them have said things publicly that make us wince. Our responsibility to them is not contingent on their being the kind of officers we would have hoped for. It is contingent on their being human, which they are, and on their wounds being real, which they are, and on our convictions about dignity applying without exception, which they must if they are to mean anything. The easy compassion is for the officer who has already converted. The harder and more necessary compassion is for the

one who has not, and may never, and is still being destroyed by what he is being asked to do.

I have met corrections officers who cried in my truck after an execution because there was nowhere else they were permitted to cry. I have met a warden who asked me, with no irony, whether I thought God could forgive a man for doing his job well. I have met a captain who kept a private list of the names of every man his team had killed, and who read the list to himself on the anniversary of each one because he believed somebody had to remember. These men are not my allies in any conventional sense. They did not sign our petitions. They did not march. But they are the ones whose wounds taught me what the death penalty actually costs the people who run it, and any accounting of the costs of capital punishment that does not include them is an accounting that is lying to itself.

What, concretely, do we owe the officers and the warden? We owe them honesty about what the job is doing to them, which the institution will not give them. We owe them public language that distinguishes what they do from who they are, so that their humanity is not absorbed into their role. We owe them the recognition that many of them already doubt the work, and that a movement willing to welcome their doubts without demanding their confession is a movement that can eventually change how executions are staffed at all. Several of the most powerful voices in the abolition movement today belong to former corrections officials who left the profession after one execution too many, and whose testimony would never have been possible if abolitionists had treated them as enemies rather than as people whose wounds deserved engagement.

The media is another set of people in the room, and their responsibility and ours are more entangled than either side usually admits. Reporters who cover executions carry their own secondary trauma, often unacknowledged by their editors and unprotected by their contracts. They see what the witnesses see, and then they are expected to produce clean copy about it within the hour. Many of them develop, over time, a professional distance that functions as armor, and the armor leaks into their language, and the language they use to describe executions leaks back into the public consciousness as the ordinary way of thinking about the subject. The flat wire-service sentence—the offender was pronounced dead at such-and-such a time—is not neutral. It is the residue of a reporter protecting herself from what she just watched.

Our responsibility to reporters is to take their work seriously as work, and to help them do it better when we can. This means offering them the human stories that bureaucratic sources will not offer. It means trusting them with complexity rather than handing them slogans. It means, when a reporter asks a difficult question, answering with the same honesty we would want in return. And it means recognizing that some reporters, after enough time covering executions, come to their own quiet opposition to the death penalty, and that their writing becomes one of the most effective forces in the slow public change we are working toward. Among them are men and women who witnessed dozens of executions before finally writing the piece that changed their careers and some of their readers. That piece was possible because someone, somewhere, had treated them as human beings rather than as conduits.

The victim's family may or may not be physically present in the chamber, but their presence is everywhere in the room. The state has invoked them as the reason the killing is happening, whether or not they asked to be invoked. Some will be in the witness area. Some will have stayed away. Some will be watching from another state on a prosecutor's recommendation. Some will have reconciled with the condemned and will be grieving a second loss. The diversity of positions within a single family is almost never represented in the public narrative, which prefers a unified chorus of demand for blood. Embodying abolition means refusing to flatten this family into a prop, and it means showing up for whatever their actual needs turn out to be, including needs that complicate our own political clarity.

I have come to believe that our responsibility to the victim's family begins long before the execution date and continues long after it. It begins when we refuse to use their grief as ammunition for arguments they did not authorize. It continues when we offer them practical support—meals, rides, childcare, company—that does not come with conditions. It continues when we amplify the voices of those among them who oppose the execution, without silencing those who support it. It continues, most importantly, when we are willing to sit with them in the weeks after the killing has happened, because the promised closure will not arrive, and the disappointment of that non-arrival is one of the loneliest griefs the death penalty produces. Almost no one prepares them for this. We can be the ones who do.

The condemned person's family carries a wound the public rarely acknowledges at all. They have lost someone too, and they are losing him in a way that permits no ordinary mourning. They cannot hold a normal wake. They cannot expect sympathy from

coworkers or neighbors. They are often themselves treated as guilty by association, their own children bullied at school, their own jobs quietly threatened. And on the day of the execution, they are asked to witness or to refrain from witnessing, and either choice will haunt them. The mothers of the condemned have taught me more about love than almost anyone I have ever met, and I will not forgive any abolitionism that forgets their names.

I want to stay with the condemned person's family for several more paragraphs, because this is the wound our movement has most consistently failed to engage with the seriousness it deserves. Our public rhetoric tends to focus, understandably, on the condemned themselves and on victims' families, and the family of the person about to be killed gets pushed into a kind of footnote even among people who care. This is a failure of attention, and the people it fails are among the most wounded in the entire landscape of capital punishment, and they have been wounded largely in silence for as long as the death penalty has existed.

Think for a moment about what it is to be the sister of a man on death row. You have spent years trying to understand what happened, trying to square the brother you grew up with against the charges that were filed, trying to love him across a plexiglass barrier for visits you had to save up for, trying to keep his daughter connected to him through letters and phone calls that cost money you did not have, trying to shield your own children from the parts of the story the news reported, trying to keep your job when your co-workers found out, trying to go to church in a town where everyone knows your last name, trying to sleep at night while the execution date kept getting moved.

And then, eventually, the final date holds, and you have to decide whether to be in the witness room or not, and either choice will follow you for the rest of your life.

Or think about what it is to be the mother. I have sat with these mothers. The grief is not like other grief I have encountered. It is compounded by the inability to mourn publicly. It is compounded by the knowledge that many of the people she will meet, for the rest of her life, will believe her son deserved what happened to him. It is compounded by the fact that she could do nothing to stop it, and that her powerlessness was orchestrated by a state that counted her objection as less than a whisper. It is compounded by love, and the love is the largest part, because she loves him the way any mother loves her child, and the state has told her that this love is inadmissible as evidence and inadmissible as grief and inadmissible as testimony about who her son actually was.

Think about the children. The condemned man was, to the state, an offender. To a specific child somewhere, he was dad. The child is now, by bureaucratic decree, the child of an executed person, which is a category the schools have no protocol for, which the counselors have not been trained to address, which the other parents at pickup will handle by quietly keeping their distance. The child will grow up carrying a grief she did not ask for and a stigma she did not earn, and she will encounter, at various points in her life, strangers who suggest to her that her father's death was good news. Our responsibility to this child is enormous and the resources we have allocated to meeting it are almost nothing.

What do these families actually need from us, practically? They need the things that any grieving family needs, delivered

without the qualifications that their loved one's status seems to invite. They need food. They need rides. They need someone to pick up the other children from school in the week before the execution date. They need someone to help with the phone calls that have to be made. They need someone who knows how to sit with them without speaking, because speaking is usually the wrong move. They need, afterward, someone who will say the name of their dead in ordinary conversation, because ordinary conversation is where the stigma is enforced, and every casual mention is a small act of resistance against it. None of this requires expertise. All of it requires showing up.

They also need us to help them tell their story if and when they decide they want to. Not all of them will. Some will choose privacy, and privacy deserves respect. But some will reach a point, sometimes years later, where they want to speak publicly about what happened to their family, and when that moment comes they should find a movement waiting for them with a microphone and a platform and an editor and a lawyer and whatever else is needed to make the telling possible and safe. Several of the most transformative voices in abolition in recent years have belonged to exactly these family members, whose testimony reaches audiences that our movement's professionals cannot. Creating the infrastructure for their voices is one of the most important and least glamorous things we can do.

And there is one thing more, and it is the hardest. The condemned person's family will sometimes carry complicated feelings about the person they are about to lose. A son who hurt someone they also loved. A brother whose crime they are still trying to understand. A father whose guilt or innocence they are not certain of. These complications do not disqualify their

grief. If anything, the complications intensify it, because they cannot mourn him cleanly, and the culture around them will not let them mourn him at all. Our responsibility is to hold space for the mess. To say: you are allowed to love him and to be devastated by what he did. You are allowed to believe both that he deserved better and that someone else also deserved better. You are allowed to grieve a person about whom the world has already decided, and your grief is not a betrayal of anyone. This permission, offered without condition, is sometimes the only thing that lets these families survive the weeks after an execution with any part of themselves intact.

What we owe these families is the kind of presence that expects nothing. They do not need us to make speeches about their son's case. They need us to sit with them in the waiting room while the appeals run out. They need us to hold them when the word comes. They need us to help them plan a funeral that most funeral homes would rather not handle, and to stand beside them at a graveside where the other mourners may be afraid to be seen. They need us to remember their loved one's birthday in the years after. None of this is visible from a podium. All of it is the actual work of abolition as a practice of healing, and all of it is available to anyone willing to show up without an agenda.

The condemned themselves are, of course, at the center of the room, and our responsibility to them has been the subject of much of this essay. What I want to add here is something specific about the last hours. A person about to be executed has very few choices left, and almost all of the remaining choices are about how to spend the final time. Some want to pray. Some want to joke. Some want silence. Some want to speak to every witness

by name. Some want to look at the ceiling and think about the ocean. Our job, if we are fortunate enough to be present, is to follow their lead without imposing our own theology, politics, or need for closure. The chamber is not a platform for the living. It is the dying person's last room, and the manners that belong in it are the manners that belong at any deathbed, intensified by the injustice of what is about to occur.

And then there is the question of the state itself, which is also in the room whether or not anyone names it. The state is represented by the paperwork, by the protocol, by the phone that may or may not ring with a stay, by the witnesses from the attorney general's office, by the clock on the wall that has been synchronized to some other clock somewhere else. The state wants the room to feel procedural. Our responsibility is to refuse that framing without turning the refusal into spectacle. Dignity is the opposite of spectacle. The dignity we offer in that room—through the specific names we speak, the specific stories we remember, the specific silences we keep—is the most pointed possible rebuke to the bureaucratic neutrality the state is trying to impose, and it is a rebuke the state cannot easily answer.

Now I want to address directly the question the section title raises: how do we step out of opposition and into abolition? The difference matters more than it first appears. Opposition is a position we take against something; abolition is a way of being that makes the thing it opposes increasingly impossible. Opposition is satisfied with being right; abolition is not satisfied until something has changed, including ourselves. Opposition can be performed at a distance; abolition demands proximity. Opposition sorts the world into allies and enemies; abolition refuses the sorting and insists on the humanity of the people on

every side of the argument, including the ones who are signing the death warrants.

Stepping out of opposition and into abolition begins with a willingness to drop the moral scoreboard. As long as our primary satisfaction comes from being on the right side of an issue, we will treat the people on the other side as material for our self-righteousness, and they will feel it and withdraw, and no one will be moved. The moment we are willing to engage a prosecutor, a warden, a juror, a legislator as a full human being—someone whose wounds we are also interested in—something becomes possible that opposition alone could never produce. Minds change in the gap opened by unexpected respect. They do not change in response to being correctly scolded.

The second move is to notice when our opposition has become a way of protecting ourselves from the grief the work actually requires. It is easier to be angry at the system than to weep for the specific men it has killed. It is easier to write a sharp tweet than to answer the letter from the mother of a condemned man. Opposition is, among other things, a mechanism for keeping the grief at arm's length, because the grief would unmake us if we let it all the way in. Abolition asks us to let the grief in, not all at once, but as a regular practice, because grief that is metabolized becomes compassion, and compassion is what the work actually runs on. Unmetabolized grief becomes bitterness, and bitterness has never ended an execution.

The third move is to begin engaging the specific people in the execution chamber as people we are responsible to. This does not require access we do not have. It requires a reorientation of imagination. When we read about an upcoming execution,

we can include in our attention not only the condemned but the warden who will preside, the officers who will strap him down, the reporter who will describe it, the two families who will grieve, the chaplain who will be there or be refused permission to be there. We can hold all of them in mind as people whose wounds are part of the wound the death penalty is inflicting. This imaginative practice, repeated, reshapes what abolition means for us. It stops being a cause we support and starts being a community we belong to—a community that includes people who do not yet know they are members.

The fourth move, and perhaps the most difficult, is to stop needing the transformation of the other person in order to keep engaging them. Opposition engages people in order to change them, and gives up when they will not change. Abolition engages people because they are people, and continues engaging them regardless of whether they ever come around. Some wardens will retire having presided over many executions and having never publicly questioned a single one, and our responsibility to them is not contingent on whether they eventually make the speech we wanted them to make. We show up because they are in the room, and the room is ours to share with them, and the sharing is the work whether or not it produces the result we would have chosen.

Finally, stepping into abolition means accepting that the room is larger than we thought. It is not only the death chamber. It is the courtroom, the appellate office, the governor's mansion, the newsroom, the classroom, the dinner table, the church basement, the prison visitation booth, the cemetery. All of these are rooms where the execution chamber casts a shadow, and all of them are rooms where the work of abolition can be practiced.

We are called to show up in the one we are in, with the people we are with, for the time that we have. That is everything abolition has ever been, and it is enough, and there is nothing else we are waiting for permission to begin doing.

VIII. Confronting Our Own Wounds

No one comes to abolition without their own wounds, and embodied abolition includes the work of tending to those wounds rather than exporting them into the movement or onto the people we hope to help. This is perhaps the least discussed aspect of the work, and in my experience it is the one most responsible for the failures and flameouts of well-meaning advocates. A person whose own injuries are unattended will, almost inevitably, begin to use the suffering of others as a theater in which to act out their own unprocessed material, and the result will be harmful to everyone involved, whatever the advocate's stated intentions.

Many of us are drawn to abolition because something in the system has hurt us or someone we love. This is a legitimate doorway. The work does not require that we pretend otherwise. What it requires is honesty about what we are carrying, and a commitment to tending to it alongside, not through, the work itself. Therapy, spiritual practice, trusted friendships, community, rest, and the simple willingness to let ourselves feel what we have not yet let ourselves feel—these are not distractions from abolition. They are infrastructure for it. An abolitionist whose wounds are being engaged is an abolitionist who can engage the wounds of others without turning the encounter into a hall of mirrors.

Confronting our own wounds also means taking seriously the ways in which punitive culture has shaped us from

childhood. Most of us were raised inside a logic of reward and punishment so pervasive that we do not recognize it as a logic at all. We were taught to want to see wrongdoers suffer. We were taught that fairness means balancing harm with harm. We were taught that safety comes from the threat of retaliation. These lessons are inside us whether we endorse them consciously or not, and they surface in moments of stress or fear. Embodying abolition means noticing them, naming them, and choosing, again and again, not to be run by them.

This inner work is slow, and it is never finished. The goal is not to arrive at a place of pure abolitionist clarity, free from any punitive residue. The goal is to become aware enough of our own patterns that we can catch them in time to choose otherwise. Every time we do, the pattern loosens slightly, and the range of responses available to us widens. This widening, happening in thousands of people at once, is what cultural change actually looks like when you get close enough to see it.

IX. Raising the Next Generation

If abolition is a healing practice, then the rooms in which it is most urgently needed are the rooms where children are being formed. Children learn what justice means not from lectures but from the responses the adults around them make to harm. A child who is shouted at when she breaks something learns that accidents are crimes and that authority responds with anger. A child whose parents sit down with her and ask what happened and what can be done to make it right learns something entirely different, and carries that something into every relationship she will have for the rest of her life.

Embodying abolition in the raising of children does not mean abandoning structure or refusing to set limits. It means

setting limits without contempt, correcting without shaming, and using the small incidents of daily life as opportunities to rehearse the habits the larger culture so badly needs. When a child hurts a sibling, the response can be an escalating chain of punishment, or it can be a conversation that takes the hurt seriously, invites the one who caused it to face what happened, and makes room for repair. The second response takes longer. It is also what is actually teaching the child what responsibility means.

This kind of parenting, or teaching, or mentoring, is a direct confrontation with the punitive reflex our culture has installed in most of us. It is disorienting at first, because it asks us to slow down when everything in us wants to react quickly. It asks us to stay present to the discomfort of an unresolved situation rather than reaching for the instant relief of punishment. And it asks us to trust that children, given the chance, are capable of engaging their own mistakes with something other than fear. They are. Most of the fear they eventually bring to their own mistakes was installed by adults who could not tolerate the discomfort of sitting with them.

What we model for children about wounds—theirs, ours, other people's—is what they will carry into adulthood. If we model that wounds are shameful and should be hidden, they will hide them. If we model that wounds are occasions for judgment, they will judge. If we model that wounds are places where connection happens, they will grow up able to offer that connection to others. No legal reform can match the power of a generation raised in this second way. Abolition, at its longest horizon, is the slow replacement of punitive habits with healing habits, one child and one household at a time.

X. Community and the Work Beyond the Self

Individual practice is necessary, but it is not sufficient. The death penalty is sustained by institutions, and it will be ended by organized action alongside the personal transformation this essay has been describing. Embodying abolition includes participating, at whatever level we can, in the collective work of dismantling the apparatus of capital punishment and building alternatives that prioritize healing. This is not the same as saying everyone must become an activist in the conventional sense. It is saying that the private practice of abolition, unaccompanied by any concern for the larger structures, is incomplete.

Community engagement can take many forms. Some people write letters to legislators. Some attend hearings. Some join vigils outside prisons on nights of scheduled executions. Some donate to innocence projects, or to legal defense organizations, or to groups that support the families of both victims and incarcerated people. Some use their professional skills—teachers, lawyers, artists, doctors, clergy—to bring abolitionist perspectives into rooms where those perspectives would otherwise be absent. None of these contributions is small. The movement is built from thousands of such contributions, most of them invisible to history, all of them necessary.

Perhaps the most important community practice is the simple one of talking with the people in our daily lives about these questions, honestly and without arrogance. Most Americans have never been asked to think carefully about the death penalty. The subject arises in the news and then disappears. A neighbor, a coworker, a family member asked a thoughtful question in a moment of calm can begin to think in ways they have not been invited to think before. Embodied abolition

includes being the person willing to raise the question, to listen to the answer, and to stay in the conversation longer than comfort would suggest. Persuasion is a healing practice when it is done without contempt.

Community also means finding and sustaining a community of fellow travelers. The work of abolition is heavy, and the people doing it need each other. Isolation is the enemy of every movement and every healer, and abolitionists are both. Whatever form of community is available—formal or informal, religious or secular, in person or online—is worth seeking out and investing in. The companionship of others who understand the work is not a luxury. It is what makes the work sustainable over the long run, and the long run is the only run that matters.

XI. Patience, Failure, and the Long Horizon

Cultural change is measured in decades, not weeks, and anyone who embodies abolition will have to make peace with a pace that the news cycle does not reward. Executions will continue while you are doing this work. Cases you care about will be lost. People you have come to love will be killed by the state. You will sometimes respond to situations in ways that contradict your own values, and you will have to forgive yourself and try again. The work is not a project with a clean deadline. It is a direction, walked in the company of others, across a lifetime.

Patience of this kind is a spiritual achievement as much as a political one. It requires a relationship with hope that does not depend on short-term victories, and a relationship with grief that does not collapse into despair. These are not easy balances to hold, and most of us lose them regularly. What matters is not holding them perfectly but returning to them, again and again, when we notice we have drifted. Every return is itself an act of

abolition, because it refuses the temptation to give up on the possibility of a different world.

Failure is a teacher in this work, not an exit ramp. When we fall back into punitive thinking, or snap at someone, or give up on a person we said we would not give up on, the failure is data. It tells us something about where our own healing is still incomplete, and about what the next round of inner work needs to address. A movement full of people willing to learn from their failures is a movement that improves over time. A movement full of people pretending not to have failed is a movement that hides its wounds and eventually calcifies around them.

The long horizon is also a source of freedom. If the work is generational, then no single person has to complete it, and no single day's defeat is final. We inherit the efforts of those who came before us—the abolitionists of past centuries, the reformers who chipped away at the scope of capital punishment, the advocates whose names we will never know—and we hand what we have done to those who come after. This inheritance is a kind of company across time, and it is one of the deeper consolations available to anyone who takes up this work seriously.

XII. Hope as a Practice

Hope, in the abolitionist sense, is not optimism. Optimism predicts that things will improve. Hope commits to acting as though improvement is worth working for, regardless of the prediction. Embodied abolition depends on this second kind of hope, because the first kind will not survive contact with the actual pace of change. The people who have lasted in this work are not the ones who believed victory was around the corner. They are the ones who decided that the work was worth doing

even if victory was far off, and who then discovered, years in, that the doing had changed them in ways that made the question of victory less urgent than it had seemed at the start.

Hope as a practice is nourished by paying attention to the small healings that happen along the way. A letter answered. A visit that went better than expected. A mind changed in a conversation you did not think was going anywhere. A governor, somewhere, who granted clemency for reasons that included arguments you helped circulate. An exoneree who walked out of a prison and into the arms of people who had never stopped believing in them. None of these small healings is enough on its own. All of them, accumulated across the movement, are what the movement actually consists of.

Hope is also nourished by the refusal to pretend. Abolitionists do not need to believe that the system is on the verge of collapse, and they do not need to deny that things sometimes get worse before they get better. What they need is to keep showing up with their eyes open, honest about what they are seeing and committed anyway. Honesty and commitment are the two ingredients of the kind of hope that lasts. Anything less honest curdles into denial; anything less committed dissolves into cynicism. Between these two failures, there is a narrow path, and embodied abolition is the daily practice of walking it.

Finally, hope is a gift we give to others, whether or not we feel it ourselves on a given day. The person on death row who receives our letter does not need us to feel optimistic. They need us to keep writing. The family of a victim who has turned against the death penalty does not need us to promise them a quick cultural shift. They need us to keep showing up alongside them. The child who is watching how we respond to harm does not

need us to have all the answers. They need us to keep modeling a different way. Hope, in this sense, is not a feeling to be manufactured. It is a set of actions we perform for one another until the actions begin to produce, in us and in those around us, something that feels like hope from the inside.

Conclusion: The World We Are Building in the Meantime

The death penalty will end. It will end because enough people, across enough generations, refused to accept that killing is a legitimate expression of justice. It will end because the wounds it causes and the wounds it fails to heal became, at last, too visible to ignore. It will end because the work of embodied abolition—done in homes, classrooms, churches, prisons, courtrooms, and streets—gradually made the older way unthinkable. Our job is not to know when this ending will come. Our job is to act, in the meantime, as though the world after its ending is already present in the way we live.

That world is not a fantasy. It is being built, in miniature, every time a person engages the wound of another instead of turning away. It is being built every time a parent chooses repair over punishment. It is being built every time a community supports a victim's family without instrumentalizing their grief. It is being built every time a letter is sent to a man on death row who had begun to believe that no one outside would ever write again. These small acts are not consolation prizes for the absence of larger victory. They are the larger victory, visible in the only form it ever takes: one wound at a time, one person at a time, one choice at a time.

To embody abolition is to live as a citizen of that world before its formal arrival. It is to refuse, in a thousand quiet ways,

the logic that produces executions, and to practice, in an equal number of quiet ways, the logic of healing that will eventually replace it. Most of this work will never be seen. Most of it will not feel important while it is happening. All of it counts. The people who have done this work before us would tell us, if they could, that the quiet parts are the parts that actually change anything, and that the loud parts are almost always downstream of a great deal of unseen tending.

If there is a single instruction this essay wants to leave with its reader, it is this: find one wound near you that you have been avoiding, and move toward it. It may be the wound of a person in your family whom you have written off. It may be the wound of a stranger whose story has reached you and unsettled you. It may be your own wound, held at arm's length for years. Whichever it is, begin there. The beginning does not have to be large. The beginning only has to be real. Healing will follow, not because you are skilled, but because you have stopped refusing to be present, and presence is what wounds have been waiting for the whole time. Abolition begins exactly at the place where that presence is offered, and it continues wherever that presence is offered next.

THE LIE

On Dishonesty, Trust, and the Ethics of Staying

Jeff Hood

The Fracture

Working with someone on death row already places you in a strange moral and emotional terrain. Trust is not assumed. It is built slowly, often over years of letters, phone calls, visits, and shared reflection. So when you begin to suspect that the person you are working with is lying to you, it does not land like a simple correction of fact. It lands like a fracture in the relationship itself, and sometimes in your own sense of judgment, purpose, and even ethics. The ground you thought you were standing on shifts, and what surfaces is not only a question about them but a question about you.

Dissonance Before Certainty

The first thing that usually happens is not certainty but dissonance. Something does not line up. A detail shifts between conversations. A timeline changes. A story that once felt grounded begins to feel slightly staged, or overly polished in a way that does not match how real memory behaves. Most people doing this work dismiss that feeling at first. You tell yourself that memory is unreliable under trauma, and death row is nothing if not trauma. You rationalize the inconsistencies because the alternative feels worse. Once you admit the possibility of dishonesty, you also have to confront what that means about the relationship you thought you had, and about the hours you have already invested in believing it.

Suspicion, once it enters, rarely leaves quietly. You begin to revisit old letters or recordings. You look for patterns instead of isolated contradictions. You start noticing what was always

emphasized and what was always missing. Sometimes the lie is dramatic, but more often it is subtle: an embellished detail that improves a narrative, a softened responsibility, a repositioning of blame, a story that always seems to cast the speaker in a slightly more survivable light. The subtle lies are the hardest, because they do not announce themselves. They accumulate, until one day you realize you have been quietly translating around them for months.

The Pressure Not to Withdraw

This is where the work becomes emotionally complicated in a way that outsiders often misunderstand. In death row advocacy, you are not just evaluating truth claims. You are holding space for someone society has already decided is disposable. That creates a powerful internal pressure to not be the person who withdraws trust. Most of us doing this work are consciously resisting a system built on disbelief, dehumanization, and permanent condemnation. So when dishonesty appears, it can feel as though you are being forced into alignment with the very system you have set yourself against. Skepticism begins to feel like betrayal. Discernment begins to feel like interrogation. The instruments the state uses against the condemned seem, for a moment, to be the only instruments available to you, and you recoil from picking them up.

This is why discovering a lie is rarely just about the lie itself. It becomes a test of your framework for human worth. If your commitment to a person's humanity depends on their never deceiving you, then your commitment was never really to their humanity. It was to a version of them you could comfortably defend. The lie exposes this, and the exposure is painful, because

most of us would prefer to believe our care was less conditional than it turns out to be.

The Threshold

At some point, avoidance stops working. You reach a threshold where the inconsistencies are too many or too significant to dismiss, and now you have to decide what kind of honesty you are going to practice in response. Do you confront it directly? Do you test it indirectly through careful questions? Do you continue the relationship but quietly recalibrate how much you trust? Or do you step back entirely? Each option carries moral weight, and none of them feel clean.

If you confront the person, you may be met with denial, anger, or a revised explanation that complicates things further. On death row, where control over narrative is one of the few remaining forms of agency, people can cling tightly to whatever version of themselves they have been able to construct. Being challenged can feel less like accountability and more like the erosion of an identity that has been painstakingly assembled in a place designed to dismantle identity. If you stay silent, you risk becoming complicit in a shared fiction, and you may come to resent the relationship over time even if you continue it outwardly. If you withdraw, you may later wonder whether you abandoned someone at their most vulnerable point over something that, in the larger scale of their suffering, might not have changed anything essential about their humanity.

Lies as Survival

What complicates this further is that lies on death row are rarely just about deception for its own sake. They often function as survival mechanisms. A person who has been stripped of legal, physical, and social power may learn to reshape narratives as a

form of psychological endurance. In that sense, lying can be less about manipulation and more about maintaining dignity, hope, or coherence in an environment designed to erase all three. None of this makes the lie harmless. But it does make it legible. It situates the dishonesty inside a life, rather than treating it as the defining feature of a character.

The real turning point in this kind of experience is not usually the discovery of dishonesty itself. It is the moment you realize you are no longer asking, *is this true*, but instead, *what does truth mean here*, and *what do I do with it*? In death row relationships, truth is never just factual. It is relational. It is tied to power, to survival, and to the fragile construction of meaning inside an environment built on finality. A question that sounds simple in the free world does not stay simple once it passes through those walls.

Calibrated Trust

Over time, many people learn to hold a more complex posture. They stop treating trust as binary, either fully granted or fully revoked, and begin instead to calibrate it. They come to say, implicitly or explicitly: *I can care about you without believing everything you say. I can stay present without surrendering discernment. I can honor your humanity without endorsing every version of your story.* This is not cynicism. It is a kind of ethical maturity that only emerges when idealism meets sustained contradiction, and it is one of the quieter gifts this work can give you, even though it arrives dressed as a loss.

And yet, even with that maturity, something remains unsettled. Discovering a lie from someone on death row forces a confrontation with your own needs: your need to believe in coherence, your need for meaningful connection, your need for

clarity in a system that offers almost none of it. You learn that your capacity to keep showing up depends partly on letting go of the idea that the relationship will resolve itself into something clean. It will not. It will stay complicated, and your job is to stay anyway.

What Remains

In the end, what you are really figuring out is not just whether someone is lying to you. You are figuring out what kind of truth-teller you can afford to be in a world where survival, narrative, and justice are constantly entangled, and where even the most vulnerable people are still fully human, capable of both honesty and distortion, sometimes in the same breath. To keep loving them through that, without pretending it is not happening, is one of the hardest and most ordinary acts this work asks of anyone. It is also, quietly, part of what abolition has always meant.

About the Publisher

Complicit Press publishes books that expose state violence, demand moral reckoning, and amplify silenced voices. Our authors are witnesses, not accomplices. Proceeds go to the nonprofit Execution Intervention Project. Read more at executionintervention.org/complicitpress

