

THE MONSTER

Exploratory Essays on the Psychology of
Violence, Humanity and the Death

Penalty

Jeff Hood

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The essays in this volume explore the psychological and theological dimensions of violence, monstrosity and redemption as they emerge from the reality of death row.

“The monster is not born outside humanity. The
monster is born within.”

-from “The Birth of the Monster”

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- I. The Birth of the Monster**
- II. The Monster...The Myth That Fuels the Death Penalty**
- III. The Monsters in Each Other**
- IV. What Happens When the Monster Sees Themselves as Human**
- V. How Do Monsters Pray?**
- VI. Does the Monster Carry the Image of God?**
- VII. Let the Monster Speak!**
- VIII. How the Monster Can Save Us All**
- IX. What Happens When We Kill the Monster**
- X. The Resurrection of the Monster**
- XI. The Monster Dies**

FOREWORD

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The category of monster is one of civilization's most enduring psychological tools. It performs a specific task...it takes the unbearable evidence that human beings are capable of catastrophic harm and places that evidence somewhere manageable. Outside. Across a boundary. Inside another kind of creature. The monster is what allows ordinary people to remain ordinary...to look at violence and say, with relief, that has nothing to do with me.

These essays exist to dismantle that relief. Not to excuse violence. Not to minimize the suffering of victims. Not to perform a sentimental rehabilitation of people who have caused irreparable harm. They exist to follow a harder argument...that the psychological, theological and moral architecture we have built around the concept of monstrosity is costing us something profound...our clarity about evil, our capacity for genuine justice and our ability to understand what human beings actually are.

The essays move through the life of the monster as arc rather than taxonomy. They begin before the crime...in the formative processes through which violence is slowly constructed inside a human being...and they end after death, in the question of what ultimate restoration might mean for the irredeemably condemned. Between those poles, they examine every dimension of the experience...the mythology that enables the death penalty, the moment when victim and perpetrator recognize their shared humanity, the interior life of prayer inside a prison cell, the theological question of whether someone who

has violated the sacred still carries the sacred within them and the way society cannot take an honest look at the condemned.

The writing is dense because the subject demands it. These questions...about evil, dignity, accountability and restoration...have occupied theologians, psychologists and philosophers across millennia. They are not simple. They do not resolve into slogans or policy positions. What they do is force a confrontation with the structure of moral consciousness itself. The way human beings decide who counts as human, who belongs inside the circle of concern and who can be placed beyond it without cost.

The death penalty is the specific institution these essays address most directly, but the argument extends beyond any single legal question. At stake is the deeper question of whether humanity can sustain a moral vision spacious enough to include its worst members without excusing them...whether accountability and love can coexist without collapsing into either vengeance or sentimentality. The essays argue that they can, and that the failure to hold both together is not a failure of mercy but a failure of understanding.

There is something unusual about reading essays written from inside a condemned life. The reader is positioned not above the subject but beside it. The voice asking these questions is not the voice of an observer who has the luxury of detachment. It is the voice of someone for whom these questions are not academic. This proximity is uncomfortable, and the discomfort is instructive. It is exactly the discomfort the death penalty is designed to prevent.

The system works by ensuring that the condemned are spoken about and never heard from. Their case proceeds without

them. Their story is told by prosecutors, journalists and eventually historians...but rarely by themselves, and rarely in a register that permits genuine encounter. These essays insist on that encounter. They insist that the voice from inside the category of monster contains something the category was designed to exclude...specificity, interiority, complexity and the kind of truth that only becomes available when someone has nothing left to protect.

Reading them requires something from the reader. Not agreement. Not sympathy. Only the willingness to stay...to follow the argument even when it becomes uncomfortable, to resist the reflex to restore distance when recognition begins to occur. The essays do not ask the reader to forgive the monster or to minimize what the monster has done. They ask the reader to consider the possibility that the category itself is the problem...that the monster was always a human being, and that the consequences of refusing to see that are borne not only by the condemned but by everyone who inherits the systems built upon that refusal.

That is the argument. It begins in the next pages. It ends, as honestly as anything can end, in the question of what restoration might mean when destruction seems absolute.

These essays are organized not by chronology of composition but by the arc of a life...the life of the monster. That arc begins before the monster exists, in the conditions that make monstrosity possible, and extends beyond death into the question of what restoration might mean for the irredeemably condemned.

These essays do not excuse. They do not diminish. They insist that understanding is the beginning of something better than execution.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
North Little Rock, Arkansas
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I. The Birth of the Monster

On Violence Formation and the Slow Construction of the
Inhuman

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No one is born a monster. This statement often produces immediate resistance because it appears to threaten moral accountability. If monstrosity emerges through process rather than essence then many fear that responsibility dissolves into explanation. Yet the opposite is true. To insist that monsters are born fundamentally different from other human beings is not a serious moral framework but a psychological defense mechanism. It allows society to locate evil safely outside itself. The monster becomes an alien figure whose violence originates in some mysterious internal corruption unrelated to the ordinary structures of family culture economics history trauma loneliness humiliation neglect and domination that shape every other human life. The category of monster therefore functions less as explanation than as distance. It reassures the world that violence belongs to aberrations rather than possibilities latent within humanity itself.

The birth of the monster is almost never sudden. Human beings are rarely transformed into perpetrators through singular moments of collapse. Monstrosity is usually constructed gradually through repetition deprivation distortion and adaptation. The future monster begins as a vulnerable consciousness entering a world already structured by violence. This violence may be overt or subtle. It may emerge through physical abuse sexual violation abandonment chronic

humiliation emotional neglect systemic degradation poverty social exclusion or the steady erosion of dignity through conditions that communicate to a person that they are disposable. None of these experiences mechanically produce violence. Most wounded people do not become perpetrators. But such conditions create environments in which the self begins to organize around survival rather than relational trust. The child learns not what love is but what power accomplishes. They learn that tenderness is unreliable. They learn that vulnerability invites domination. They learn that pain travels downward through bodies relationships institutions and generations.

At first the developing self resists these lessons. Children almost always begin with a profound instinct toward attachment. Even abused children continue reaching toward caregivers long after such reaching has become dangerous. The future monster is therefore not originally characterized by cruelty but by unmet longing. They desire recognition safety affection stability protection. When these needs are persistently violated the psyche adapts in order to survive. Emotional numbing develops. Dissociation emerges. Rage accumulates beneath humiliation. The child discovers that dependency produces vulnerability while aggression produces temporary control. Violence becomes psychologically intelligible before it becomes behavioral. Long before the monster harms another person they have already begun constructing an internal world organized around fear resentment domination shame and emotional fragmentation.

This developmental process is crucial because it reveals that monstrosity is neither purely chosen nor purely determined. Simplistic moral narratives tend to collapse into one of two

errors. Either the monster is imagined as freely choosing evil in isolation from all formative conditions or the monster is imagined as merely the passive product of trauma biology or society. Neither account adequately describes human moral formation. Human beings exist within conditions they did not create yet they respond to those conditions through choices that gradually shape character perception desire and behavior. The future monster does not choose the original wounds inflicted upon them. They do however begin making meaning out of those wounds. Over time certain responses become habits. Habits become identity. Identity becomes moral orientation. The self slowly reorganizes around the management of pain.

One of the most tragic dimensions of this process is that the future monster often experiences violence initially as revelation rather than corruption. Violence appears to solve problems that vulnerability could not solve. The child who felt powerless discovers that intimidation produces fear in others. The humiliated adolescent discovers that cruelty can reverse shame temporarily by transferring it outward. The neglected person discovers that domination creates the illusion of significance. Violence therefore seduces before it destroys. It offers coherence to fragmented selves. It transforms helplessness into agency. It provides immediate psychological rewards even while eroding the capacity for empathy intimacy and restraint. This is why cycles of violence perpetuate so effectively across generations. Violence does not merely injure externally. It restructures emotional imagination itself.

Yet the birth of the monster cannot be explained solely through suffering because suffering alone does not create perpetrators. Many profoundly wounded people become

extraordinarily compassionate precisely because they understand pain intimately. What distinguishes the future monster is not trauma itself but the gradual collapse of relational structures capable of interrupting trauma's transformation into domination. Human beings become fully human through recognition. We develop morally through relationships in which dignity accountability tenderness correction and mutuality coexist. When such structures disappear entirely the self becomes increasingly isolated within its own unresolved anguish. Isolation intensifies distortion because there are fewer encounters capable of challenging the narratives through which the self justifies harm. The future monster begins interpreting other people not as subjects possessing equal interiority but as threats obstacles instruments or symbolic extensions of their own suffering.

At this stage society often intervenes only after violence becomes visible. Yet by then the monster has usually been forming for years beneath the surface. The signs were present long before the crime. Extreme alienation compulsive domination emotional volatility fascination with humiliation inability to sustain reciprocal intimacy chronic resentment escalating fantasies of revenge. Communities frequently ignore such indicators because acknowledging them would require confronting the environments that helped produce them. It is easier to identify a monster after catastrophe than to examine the ordinary cruelties neglects exclusions and forms of social fragmentation that contributed to the catastrophe's possibility. The myth of the isolated monster protects collective innocence.

This does not mean society creates the monster in any simple deterministic sense. Many individuals endure horrific conditions

without inflicting suffering upon others. The monster remains responsible for the choices they eventually make. Accountability matters precisely because human beings retain agency within formation. The future monster repeatedly encounters moments where violence might have been resisted interrupted confessed or redirected. Moral responsibility enters not despite formative conditions but within them. To understand the birth of the monster therefore is not to absolve the monster. It is to recognize that evil emerges through dynamic interaction between woundedness freedom social structure desire opportunity and repeated moral failure. The monster becomes monstrous through participation in their own deformation.

Nevertheless, the language of monstrosity remains philosophically unstable because it conceals as much as it reveals. Once society labels someone a monster it often ceases trying to understand them as human. The term becomes metaphysical rather than descriptive. The perpetrator is imagined not as a damaged person who enacted catastrophic violence but as a creature fundamentally distinct from ordinary humanity. This transformation serves emotional functions particularly for communities devastated by harm. Victims understandably seek moral clarity after experiences that shattered trust meaning and safety. Yet the category of monster ultimately obscures the terrifying reality that perpetrators are usually recognizably human. They possess biographies relationships fears insecurities desires memories humor tenderness contradictions and capacities for attachment alongside their capacity for destruction. The horror of violence lies precisely here...not that inhuman beings commit atrocities but that human beings do.

The birth of the monster therefore forces a profound reconsideration of evil itself. Evil is not best understood as foreign substance invading otherwise pure individuals. Rather evil emerges through the distortion of fundamentally human capacities. The desire for recognition becomes domination. The longing for safety becomes control. The need for dignity becomes superiority. Rage at suffering becomes the infliction of suffering. Even empathy can become corrupted through projection manipulation or possessiveness. The monster does not cease being human during this process. The monster becomes a particular configuration of damaged humanity organized increasingly around violence as a means of self-preservation self-definition or self-expansion.

This recognition carries disturbing implications for every moral community. If monstrosity emerges through processes embedded within ordinary human existence then no society can treat violence purely as external anomaly. Families institutions governments economies religions and cultural narratives all participate either in resisting or reproducing the conditions under which monsters form. Cultures built upon humiliation domination exclusion dehumanization or perpetual insecurity inevitably generate individuals shaped by those realities. Again this does not eliminate personal responsibility. But it does mean that societies cannot claim innocence merely because only certain individuals enact visible brutality. The monster often embodies collective contradictions that others prefer not to examine directly.

And yet despite all this the birth of the monster remains tragic precisely because the process is never inevitable. At countless moments another possibility existed. A different

intervention. A different relationship. A moment of recognition before resentment calcified completely into cruelty. A community willing to see suffering before it metastasized into violence. The future monster was once simply a child seeking love safety recognition and belonging. This fact does not erase what the monster later becomes. But it does reveal that monstrosity originates not in some separate species of being but within the fragile conditions of ordinary human life.

Perhaps this is the most frightening truth of all. The monster is not born outside humanity. The monster is born within it.

II. The Monster: The Myth That Fuels the Death Penalty

On the Ancient Archetype That Underlies Capital Punishment

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The death penalty cannot survive contact with the actual persons that it kills. So it makes sure to never kill a person.

The Monster We Make

This is where the monster begins. Not in mythology or horror films. In the body. At three in the morning. Before language arrives. And the largely unexamined truth is that we have built a legal system on top of that sensation and called it justice.

What a Monster Actually Is

A monster is not simply something dangerous. Illness is dangerous. Storms are dangerous. We do not call them monsters. A monster is something that troubles the categories by which we organize the world...something that looks almost human, or once was human, but has crossed a threshold we cannot name yet feel with full certainty. The monster stands at the border between the human and the inhuman. Its horror comes from that position. It should not exist. Its existence is an offense against the order of things.

Every culture has produced monsters. They are not random. They cluster around the same anxieties...what might lurk inside a familiar face, what lives at the community's edge...and the deepest fear of all...what we ourselves might become. The

monster is always partly a mirror. We construct it from the fragments of ourselves we most need to disown.

This is why the monster must not simply be caged. The cage implies it is still a something, still a participant in the world. Destruction alone restores the boundary. Destruction is not punishment. Destruction is purification.

How the Archetype Enters the Courtroom

Capital cases are decided by human beings who carry within them everything human beings carry...including the deep cognitive and emotional grammar of the monster story. And the legal apparatus, for all its procedural scaffolding, does not neutralize that grammar. It channels it.

Consider the language used to describe defendants in capital cases...predator, animal, pure evil, beyond redemption. These are not casual word choices. They are the vocabulary of a specific and ancient operation...the work of placing a person outside the category of the human so that what is done to them no longer counts as something done to one of us.

The Threat of a Backstory

This is why evidence of childhood trauma, mental illness, or poverty so often functions in capital trials not as humanizing but as threatening. It introduces ambiguity where the archetype requires clarity. It threatens to reveal the human inside the monster. Jurors primed to see a monster find such evidence dissonant...not because they are cruel, but because the story they are operating within has no place for backstory. The monster simply is.

The Ritual Beneath the Procedure

The death penalty has always carried the character of ritual more than punishment. Public executions were civic

ceremonies...occasions for collective catharsis, moments when the community physically expelled what it had judged to be beyond the pale. We have privatized and medicalized this ritual...moved it behind walls, replaced the gallows with the gurney, surrounded it with official witnesses and documentation...but the ritual logic persists. The solemnity of a modern execution is not merely legal gravitas. It is the solemnity of a ceremony the community has always felt to be important in a way that exceeds explanation.

Why does it exceed explanation? Because it operates beneath the explanations we give. When people defend capital punishment, they offer reasons...deterrence, closure, proportionality. These reasons are real. But they do not fully account for the force behind them. That force is older. It is the body's certainty, before the mind arrives, that some things cannot be allowed to exist among us.

Who Gets Cast as the Monster

The monster archetype does not fall randomly. It attaches to those already marginalized, already rendered strange, already placed at the community's edge. This is why the death penalty has been applied with staggering unevenness across lines of race and class. It is not only bias in the legal system, though that bias is real and documented. It is something deeper. The archetype latches onto those the culture has already conditioned us not to fully see. The mental work of constructing a monster is easier when the raw material is a person we have already been taught to look past.

What Deconstruction Requires

To deconstruct the monster archetype is not to deny that evil is real. It is to insist that we are catastrophically bad at identifying

where evil ends and a person begins. The tradition that takes evil most seriously...that insists on the devil's reality and the spiritual weight of genuine harm...also insists on the possibility of redemption for the gravest sinners. To declare a person beyond redemption and execute them is to make a claim about their soul that no human institution has the standing to make. It is to confuse the sin with the sinner. It is a theological error wearing the clothes of jurisprudence.

The sound in the dark was never about the person in the cell. It was always about us. No execution will ever silence our fears. Every execution proves it.

III. The Monsters in Each Other

On Recognition and Mirror

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The victim arrives at the meeting carrying their own darkness.

They do not speak of it. They do not acknowledge it even to themselves. But it is there in the clenched fists...in the violent fantasies that have sustained them through grief...in the nights spent imagining methods of revenge so detailed so satisfying that they felt almost real. The victim has spent years becoming expert in the language of harm. They know exactly how to hurt. They have simply chosen so far not to.

Or perhaps more honestly...they have simply lacked the opportunity.

And then the monster stands before them.

What happens in that moment is more complex than simple confrontation. What happens is recognition.

The victim looks at this broken creature...this person shaped by abandonment reaching toward human warmth only to be beaten back twisting that reaching into violence...and sees something that makes them deeply uncomfortable. They see a person who like them contains darkness. A person who like them has been wounded in ways that leave permanent scars. A person who like them could have become something different if the world had been even slightly more merciful.

And they understand in a way they have resisted understanding that the difference between victim and monster is not the presence or absence of darkness. The difference is

circumstance. Opportunity. The fragile architecture of choices made under desperation.

This is unbearable.

The victim wants the monster to be simply evil because that erases a terrifying question...What would I have become if I had been abandoned like that? What if my own rage had been allowed to grow unchecked? What if no one had ever loved me and I had learned as this person learned that tenderness is only a trap set by a cruel world?

The monster in turn looks at the victim with equal terror. Because the victim is not the pure innocent the monster has feared to meet. The victim is a person containing their own capacity for cruelty. The victim has fantasized about killing them. The victim has imagined tortures. The victim carries rage that given different circumstances with fewer constraints could have erupted into violence as casual and devastating as the monster's own.

They are mirrors of each other.

Not in what they have done...the monster's actions are real specific devastating...but in what they contain. Both have the capacity to wound. Both have been broken in ways that could have broken them differently. Both carry forms of rage that under the right conditions could have become uncontainable.

This is the truth that truth and reconciliation must eventually reach...that victims are not pure and perpetrators are not irredeemably other. Both are human beings shaped by a world that teaches violence even to those who manage not to commit it.

The victim stands before the monster and sees reflected in them the person they might have become. The monster stands

before the victim and sees reflected in them the person they might have been...the one capable of restraint capable of choosing something other than violence if they had been given even the smallest grace.

This mutual recognition changes nothing about accountability. The monster is still responsible for what they did. The harm is still real. William is still dead.

The victim's darkness remained hypothetical. The monster converted possibility into history. One remained within imagination. The other entered the world and could not be recalled.

But this recognition does something far more dangerous...it collapses the distance that makes judgment easy.

When the victim speaks the truth of what they have felt...the urge to kill the fantasies of revenge the moments when they too became something monstrous in their grief...they give the monster something unexpected...permission to be human. They admit that monstrosity is not a separate category of being. It is a potential within the human itself activated by certain conditions restrained by fragile circumstance.

And when the monster responds with full honesty about the darkness they contain...the rage the hunger to wound a world that rejected them the knowledge that they are capable of killing not just William but anyone who reminded them of their own unworthiness...they give the victim something equally dangerous...the recognition that the capacity for such darkness exists in them too.

Both must now hold the knowledge that they are capable of monstrosity. For the victim this is somehow liberating. They have spent years believing that their fantasies of revenge made

them complicit made them somehow less innocent made them less worthy of compassion. But meeting the monster...truly meeting them as a person...allows them to see their own violence as something that did not manifest something they contained but chose against something that makes them not a monster but a human being who like all human beings carries the possibility of becoming one.

They are not pure. But their impurity did not destroy a child. Their contained darkness did not erase a future.

For the monster this is terrifying in a different way. Because the monster realizes that being human means being capable of restraint and they failed at that. They had the same capacity the victim has...the ability to feel rage and choose not to act on it to contain violence and let it dissolve into grief instead. They did not use it. Not because they were inhuman but because they were human in a particular state of damage and they made a choice and that choice was catastrophic.

This is worse than being a monster.

Being a monster would mean being fundamentally different fundamentally other fundamentally incapable of having chosen differently. But standing before the victim...seeing in their eyes both the darkness they share and the restraint the victim managed...the monster understands that they were always capable of restraint. They simply chose not to exercise it.

The truth and reconciliation becomes something far more complex than either party expected. It is not about the victim forgiving the monster for being a monster. It is about the victim and the monster recognizing that they are not opposites. They are two versions of the same human capacity for

destruction...one that erupted and one that remained contained. The difference is not essential. The difference is circumstantial.

And in that recognition something profound becomes possible. Not forgiveness which would erase the harm. But something that might be more important...mutual accountability.

The victim must acknowledge that they too contain monstrosity and this acknowledgment makes their demand for accountability less about punishing an alien evil and more about insisting that another human being take responsibility for their choices. Not because they are inhuman. Because they are human and humans are responsible for what they do with the darkness they contain.

The monster must acknowledge that they were not simply overwhelmed by forces beyond their control but that they actively chose at moments to hurt. This choosing could have been chosen differently. This is not an excuse. It is a recognition of the terrible human freedom to harm the terrible human possibility of restraint and the choice made.

Neither becomes innocent through this meeting. But both become in a sense fully human.

The victim returns to their grief...unchanged in its weight undeniable in its reality...but transformed in its meaning. They grieve for a child who was killed by someone who was capable of not killing them. They grieve not as a victim of inhuman monstrosity but as someone who has suffered at the hands of another human being who made a choice. This is somehow both more tragic and more comprehensible.

The monster returns to their isolation...marked now not by the distance between monster and human but by the knowledge

that they are human and chose monstrously. They must live with the understanding that restraint was possible that compassion was possible that they could have been different and were not.

In meeting the monsters in each other neither victim nor perpetrator can ever again locate evil in the other as a foreign thing. They have seen it in themselves.

And perhaps that is the deepest work of truth and reconciliation...not to forgive but to recognize that the capacity for harm lives in all of us and that what distinguishes us is not the absence of that capacity but the choices we make about what to do with it.

The victim did not act on their violence. The monster did. Both must live with that knowledge forever.

IV. What Happens When the Monster Sees Themselves as Human

On the Collapse of Monstrous Identity

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The monster survives for years through distance. Distance from the crime. Distance from the victim. Distance from memory. Distance from responsibility. But most importantly distance from themselves. The category of monster becomes psychologically useful because it creates the illusion that the violence exists outside ordinary human identity. The perpetrator begins to imagine themselves not as a person who committed monstrous acts but as a fundamentally monstrous being. At first glance this may appear to intensify guilt. In reality it often protects against it. If one is simply a monster then violence becomes fate rather than failure. The self no longer needs to confront the terrifying possibility that another path remained possible. Monstrosity becomes a form of despair disguised as identity.

This is why genuine recognition is so destabilizing. The moment the monster truly sees themselves as human the entire moral architecture sustaining their self-understanding begins to collapse. They can no longer rely upon the fantasy that they were born fundamentally different from other people. They can no longer imagine violence as the inevitable expression of an inhuman nature. Instead they are forced to encounter a far more devastating truth...they were human when they committed the act. Human when they chose cruelty. Human when they ignored

mercy. Human when they transformed another person's life into suffering.

This realization does not lessen horror. It deepens it.

The category of monster creates emotional distance from accountability because monsters are imagined as creatures governed by essence rather than choice. Society often participates in this mythology because it simplifies moral reality. If perpetrators are inhuman then ordinary people can reassure themselves that evil belongs to a separate species of being. The monster becomes a container into which collective fears about violence are projected and isolated. But when the perpetrator recognizes themselves as fully human this separation disintegrates. Violence can no longer be understood as foreign to humanity. It becomes a possibility within humanity itself.

For the monster this recognition initially feels unbearable. To see oneself as human means recognizing that tenderness restraint compassion and moral responsibility were never metaphysically unavailable. Other choices existed. Other responses remained possible. The monster must now confront not only the suffering they endured but the suffering they created through active participation. Trauma may explain distortion. Abandonment may explain rage. Humiliation may explain resentment. None of these realities however can finally remove agency from the human person. The monster sees with painful clarity that they were not merely carried toward violence by forces beyond their control. They collaborated with those forces. They nurtured them. They allowed certain forms of hatred to harden into identity.

This confrontation often produces an entirely new experience of guilt. Previously guilt may have functioned

defensively. The monster may have felt shame about being perceived as evil while still avoiding full emotional contact with the humanity of victims. But once the perpetrator sees themselves as human they are suddenly capable of recognizing victims as fully human also. This is one of the most tragic dimensions of moral awakening...empathy frequently arrives too late. The monster begins to understand not abstractly but existentially what was taken from another person. The victim ceases to exist merely as an event within the monster's biography and instead becomes a living consciousness whose interior world was violated shattered or erased.

The monster now understands that the crime did not simply alter the victim's circumstances. It invaded another human reality entirely. A future disappeared. Trust disappeared. Safety disappeared. Entire networks of relationships were permanently transformed by what the monster chose to do. And because the monster now sees themselves as human they can no longer explain this destruction through appeals to monstrosity. Monsters destroy because destruction belongs to their nature. Human beings destroy despite possessing the capacity not to.

This distinction changes everything.

For many perpetrators the label monster once functioned paradoxically as relief. If one is irredeemably other then one no longer has to wrestle with the tension between what one did and what one might have been. Humanity however reintroduces possibility. The monster now understands that they were capable of restraint at countless moments where restraint was refused. They were capable of confession before escalation. Capable of vulnerability before domination. Capable of seeking help before seeking control. Capable of recognizing another person's

suffering as morally real. The realization that these possibilities existed produces anguish because the perpetrator can no longer imagine violence as inevitable.

Yet this recognition also creates the first genuine possibility of moral transformation. As long as the monster experiences themselves as fundamentally inhuman they remain trapped within fatalism. Genuine accountability becomes impossible because accountability requires the belief that choices matter. If violence was simply destiny then remorse collapses into self-hatred without ethical substance. But when the perpetrator sees themselves as human they begin to understand that responsibility is meaningful precisely because they possessed agency all along. The monster no longer asks merely "What kind of creature am I?" but "What did I choose to become?" This question marks the beginning of moral consciousness.

Importantly this transformation does not restore innocence. The monster does not become less guilty by recognizing their humanity. In some respects guilt intensifies because excuses lose their psychological power. The perpetrator can no longer hide behind narratives of inevitability absolute victimhood or metaphysical corruption. They must now inhabit the terrible ambiguity of being a human being who freely participated in evil while still remaining human. This condition is far more difficult than simple self-condemnation because it refuses both absolution and annihilation simultaneously.

The monster therefore enters a state of profound existential tension. They begin grieving not only for victims but also for the self they failed to become. They see how violence progressively narrowed their capacity for intimacy tenderness honesty and trust. They recognize that every act of domination further

distorted their own humanity. The crime no longer appears merely as an isolated event but as part of a broader process through which the self became organized around avoidance control resentment and emotional fragmentation. The monster mourns the years spent defending a false identity built upon fear power shame and alienation.

At the same time however seeing oneself as human introduces the possibility that humanity itself was never completely destroyed. Beneath the accumulated structures of violence something remained capable of truth. This realization is terrifying because it means the monster cannot escape into despair entirely. Despair often functions as another form of avoidance. If one is absolutely irredeemable then growth responsibility confession and transformation become meaningless. But to recognize oneself as human means recognizing that one remains morally addressable. The monster can still tell the truth. Still acknowledge harm. Still refuse further violence. Still seek accountability. Still grieve honestly. Still become capable of forms of love previously rejected or feared.

This is why the moment the monster sees themselves as human frequently becomes more painful than punishment itself. Punishment may impose suffering externally. Humanity reopens the internal world. The monster begins feeling again what violence once numbed. Shame deepens. Empathy emerges. Memory changes shape. Defenses weaken. The perpetrator becomes vulnerable not only to judgment from others but to judgment from their own awakened conscience.

And yet this painful awakening may also constitute the beginning of redemption in the deepest sense of the word. Not redemption understood as erasure of consequences or

restoration of innocence but redemption understood as the recovery of truth. The monster ceases identifying entirely with violence. They begin recognizing violence instead as a catastrophic distortion of their humanity rather than its essence. This distinction matters because what is essential cannot change while what is distorted can potentially be transformed.

The monster seeing themselves as human therefore represents neither self-forgiveness nor sentimental rehabilitation. It represents the collapse of illusion. The perpetrator finally understands that they were never a separate species of being. They were human all along. Human in their suffering. Human in their loneliness. Human in their longing for recognition. Human in their capacity for tenderness. Human in their capacity for cruelty.

And precisely because they were human the violence was real choices were real victims were real and responsibility remains real. This is the terrible revelation at the center of moral consciousness...the monster was never less than human. The monster was human the entire time.

V. How Do Monsters Pray?

On Spiritual Life After Catastrophic Harm

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Monsters rarely begin praying with faith. They begin with desperation.

The popular imagination often assumes that perpetrators exist beyond the reach of genuine spiritual life because spirituality is associated with innocence purity moral coherence or inner peace. The monster appears incompatible with such categories. How can someone who has violated other human beings stand before God without hypocrisy? How can hands that inflicted suffering fold themselves in prayer? How can a person who destroyed trust speak the language of mercy? These questions reveal how deeply many people imagine prayer as reward for goodness rather than encounter with truth.

But monsters pray constantly. They pray in prison cells after midnight when memory becomes unbearable. They pray during interrogations while trying to negotiate with consequences. They pray before executions. They pray beside photographs of people they harmed. They pray through panic attacks shame dissociation rage loneliness and terror. They pray while still lying to themselves. They pray while manipulating others. They pray while weeping genuinely. They pray while remaining dangerous. Monsters rarely approach God cleanly because there is no clean way to approach God after catastrophic harm. The monster comes to prayer fragmented contradictory morally disfigured unable to separate sincerity from self-deception completely.

At first many monsters pray transactionally. This form of prayer emerges from fear rather than transformation. The perpetrator asks for escape reduced punishment emotional relief protection from death protection from abandonment protection from themselves. They bargain. Promise. Rationalize. Minimize. Prayer becomes another strategy for survival. This should not surprise us because most human beings begin spiritual life through need rather than enlightenment. Yet in the monster this process appears more scandalous because the surrounding harm remains so visible. People often want the monster either entirely damned or entirely transformed immediately. Actual spiritual life rarely unfolds through such clarity.

The deeper difficulty is that monsters frequently cannot imagine themselves as spiritually addressable at all. The category monster does not merely shape how society perceives perpetrators. Eventually it reshapes how perpetrators perceive themselves. Many begin believing they exist outside the boundaries of forgiveness humanity redemption or even divine attention. They imagine prayer belongs to other people...the innocent the grieving the morally intact. The monster may speak words toward God while simultaneously believing no response could possibly come back. This produces a uniquely desolate form of prayer because the monster approaches transcendence already convinced of rejection.

And yet this conviction itself often becomes the beginning of spiritual confrontation. Prayer forces the monster into relation with truth. Silence becomes difficult before God because prayer gradually strips away the narratives through which the self survived psychologically. Excuses weaken.

Self-mythology weakens. The monster may continue defending themselves publicly while privately beginning to recognize the unbearable reality of what they have done. This is why genuine prayer often terrifies perpetrators more than punishment does. Punishment may remain external. Prayer threatens internal collapse.

The monster praying honestly must eventually confront a devastating realization...they were human when they committed the violence. Not possessed. Not transformed into another species. Human. This recognition changes the structure of prayer entirely. The monster can no longer ask merely for relief from consequences. They must confront the deeper horror that another person's suffering emerged through their own choices desires resentments compulsions or acts of domination. Prayer becomes less about escaping judgment and more about surviving truth.

In this sense monsters often pray through confession long before they become capable of explicit confession. Their bodies confess before their language does. Insomnia confesses. Panic confesses. Emotional numbness confesses. Repetition of memory confesses. Sudden tears confesses. Rage confesses. The psyche continues returning obsessively to unresolved moral reality because human beings are not constructed to carry severe violence without fragmentation. Even perpetrators who appear remorseless frequently exhibit profound spiritual disintegration beneath visible defenses. Something within them continues struggling against the reduction of the self entirely into violence.

This struggle explains why many monsters pray through contradiction. One moment they experience genuine grief for victims. The next moment they retreat into self-pity resentment

denial or narcissism. Human transformation rarely unfolds linearly particularly within deeply damaged individuals. The monster may oscillate repeatedly between honesty and avoidance because complete recognition threatens psychic annihilation. To acknowledge fully what one has done can feel impossible without simultaneously believing oneself unworthy of existence altogether. Prayer therefore becomes the unstable territory where accountability and survival remain in tension.

Some monsters eventually stop asking God for innocence. This marks a decisive spiritual shift. As long as the perpetrator seeks innocence prayer remains distorted by fantasy. Innocence cannot be recovered. The dead remain dead. The violated remain violated. History cannot be undone spiritually psychologically or metaphysically. Genuine prayer begins only when the monster relinquishes the desire to escape truth. Instead they begin asking for the strength to endure truth without fleeing from it. This prayer is far more painful than requests for forgiveness because it requires remaining emotionally present to suffering one created.

At this point prayer may become profoundly wordless. The monster sits before God without defense. No explanations remain sufficient. No narratives remain capable of restoring moral coherence. The perpetrator encounters the terrifying possibility that divine love does not operate through denial. God does not pretend the violence never occurred. God does not declare victims insignificant. God does not confuse compassion with moral indifference. Instead the monster experiences prayer as exposure. Every hidden thing becomes visible. Every rationalization begins burning away.

And yet if the monster continues praying another realization slowly emerges...being seen completely is not identical with

being abandoned completely. This discovery often feels incomprehensible. The monster expects either condemnation without remainder or absolution without accountability because human systems frequently operate through these binaries. Divine encounter however destabilizes both possibilities simultaneously. The monster may feel judged more truthfully than ever before while also discovering that judgment itself is not annihilating. They remain morally responsible while somehow remaining spiritually addressable. Prayer becomes the place where the perpetrator learns that accountability and love are not opposites.

This does not mean monsters suddenly become saints. Spiritual life does not erase psychological distortion automatically. Some perpetrators continue manipulating harming controlling or lying while praying regularly. Human beings remain divided internally. Yet even distorted prayer may contain traces of genuine longing. The monster may desire transformation while simultaneously fearing it because transformation requires relinquishing identities defenses fantasies of control and emotional structures built across decades. Prayer destabilizes the architecture of monstrosity itself.

There is also a profound loneliness within monstrous prayer. The perpetrator often cannot speak honestly either to victims or society because language collapses beneath the scale of harm. Public discourse reduces them to symbol. Communities fear sentimentalizing violence. Victims cannot be expected to provide spiritual reassurance. The monster therefore frequently approaches God from radical isolation. Prayer becomes the only remaining place where the full contradiction of their existence can appear without simplification...guilty yet human destructive

yet longing for tenderness ashamed yet desperate not to disappear entirely into shame.

Perhaps this is why some monsters eventually pray not for themselves but for those they harmed. Such prayer does not repair damage. It does not restore innocence. Yet it signals an extraordinary moral reversal. The perpetrator's consciousness begins orienting outward rather than inward. They grieve another person's suffering rather than merely their own consequences. They desire healing for victims even when no healing can benefit themselves personally. This movement may remain incomplete fragile inconsistent. But it marks the reemergence of humanity within the person once organized primarily around domination avoidance or self-protection.

Ultimately monsters pray like everyone else except with fewer illusions remaining intact. They pray from the ruins of self-knowledge. They pray while discovering that evil did not make them less than human but revealed how catastrophically human beings can fail one another. They pray because guilt still longs for mercy. They pray because shame still longs to be seen without annihilation. They pray because somewhere beneath violence something within the human person continues reaching toward love even after becoming monstrous.

And perhaps this is the most frightening possibility prayer reveals. Not that monsters are beyond humanity. But that monsters pray with the same broken human voice as the rest of us.

VI. Does the Monster Carry the Image of God?

On Theology, Monstrosity, and the Ground of Human Dignity

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The question horrifies people for good reason. To ask whether the monster carries the image of God appears at first to threaten the moral seriousness of violence itself. If the perpetrator remains marked by divine likeness then what becomes of the victim? What becomes of justice? What becomes of accountability grief outrage or moral distinction? Human beings often fear that recognizing sacred worth within the monster will somehow desecrate the suffering of those harmed by the monster. The instinct is understandable because atrocity seems to rupture the very possibility of holiness. How can someone who tortured violated murdered humiliated or destroyed another human life still bear anything resembling divine image?

And yet the theological tradition surrounding the image of God becomes meaningless precisely at the point where it excludes the monstrous. If the image of God exists only in the morally intact then it is no longer an ontological claim about humanity itself. It becomes instead a reward for ethical performance. The image of God would then function less as the ground of human dignity than as recognition granted conditionally to those who remain sufficiently pure. But the historic theological claim has always been far more radical than this. The image of God refers not to innocence but to creaturely

identity. Human beings bear the image not because they are morally successful but because they are human at all.

This distinction matters because the monster is terrifying precisely insofar as the monster remains human. Most societies instinctively attempt to resolve the horror of violence through symbolic expulsion. The perpetrator becomes animal demon thing creature aberration. Language itself shifts in order to create distance between ordinary humanity and catastrophic harm. Such language performs an important psychological function. It protects communities from confronting the unsettling continuity between ordinary human impulses and extreme violence. If the monster is not truly human then humanity itself remains unstained.

But theology destabilizes this defense.

The monster carries the image of God not because the monster resembles God morally in every action but because no act of violence possesses the metaphysical power to erase creaturehood itself. Sin may deform the image. Trauma may bury it. Cruelty may distort it almost beyond recognition. Yet if the image could be entirely destroyed then redemption would become impossible in principle. There would remain nothing within the perpetrator capable of relation transformation confession truth or restoration. The monster would cease being a fallen human being and become another order of existence entirely.

The image of God is damaged but not annihilated. This is why perpetrators remain morally accountable. Accountability itself depends upon recognizing the perpetrator as a moral subject rather than a metaphysical anomaly. We do not hold earthquakes morally responsible. We hold human beings

responsible because they retain agency consciousness relational capacity and moral freedom even in distortion. The monster's guilt therefore depends paradoxically upon the monster's humanity.

This creates a terrible tension. The victim often experiences the perpetrator precisely as the destruction of humanity. Violence shatters trust in the world. Torture humiliation rape murder abuse genocide and cruelty all communicate the same horrifying message...your personhood does not matter. The victim may therefore experience any affirmation of the perpetrator's humanity as betrayal because the perpetrator acted in ways radically opposed to human dignity. How can the image of God remain present where someone actively desecrated the image of God in another?

The answer cannot be sentimental. The image of God within the monster does not erase the desecration committed against the victim. In fact the violation becomes more horrifying not less. If both victim and perpetrator bear divine image then violence represents not merely social harm but theological catastrophe. The monster assaulted something sacred. The crime becomes terrible precisely because the victim was never reducible to object property obstacle symbol or instrument. The victim carried infinite value and the monster violated that value knowingly or through cultivated moral blindness.

At the same time however the monster's violence against the image of God in another does not eliminate the image within themselves. Instead the monster exists in contradiction. They bear the image while acting against it. They remain marked by divine likeness while becoming profoundly alienated from that likeness existentially morally spiritually and relationally. This

contradiction lies at the center of monstrous existence. The perpetrator destroys others partly because they themselves no longer know how to live truthfully within the reality of shared sacredness.

In this sense sin may be understood as misrelation to the image of God both in oneself and in others. The monster ceases perceiving other human beings as fully real centers of value. Victims become extensions of rage instruments of gratification symbolic targets containers for humiliation or obstacles to control. But this deformation also wounds the perpetrator internally because every act of domination further distorts their own humanity. Violence against others simultaneously becomes violence against the self. The monster carries the image of God while progressively disfiguring their capacity to live in accordance with it.

This is why many theological traditions describe evil not as independent substance but as privation distortion corruption or parasitic absence within the good. Evil cannot create being. It can only deform being that already exists. The monster therefore does not become a creature outside creation. The monster becomes a human being whose capacities for empathy truth tenderness vulnerability and recognition have become catastrophically damaged through repeated participation in violence. Yet even here something remains. Something capable of guilt. Capable of confession. Capable of grief. Capable perhaps eventually of transformation.

The persistence of the image of God within the monster is not comforting. It is scandalous. Human beings often desire a universe where certain acts permanently sever perpetrators from sacred worth because such severance appears to honor victims

more adequately. But a world where divine image can be erased through evil would ultimately threaten everyone. Trauma deforms people unevenly. Violence spreads through generations. Human beings participate constantly in systems of humiliation exploitation domination neglect and cruelty at scales far beyond individual awareness. If sacred worth depends upon moral purity then no coherent ground for universal dignity remains stable. Every community would eventually divide humanity into those who still count as human and those who do not.

History demonstrates repeatedly where such logic leads. Once certain people are imagined as lacking fundamental sacredness extraordinary cruelty becomes conceivable. Slavery genocide torture execution abuse colonization mass incarceration and war all rely partly upon narratives that deny full humanity to particular groups. The refusal to recognize the image of God becomes one of violence's most powerful tools. For this reason theology insists stubbornly upon the image even where recognition feels emotionally impossible. Not because perpetrators deserve sentimentality but because humanity itself cannot survive the alternative.

And yet the image of God within the monster frequently appears buried beneath layers of shame hatred domination addiction cruelty fear and self-deception. The monster may no longer recognize it personally. They may experience themselves only through violence. They may believe themselves irredeemable. They may actively reject tenderness truth accountability or love. Nevertheless theology claims that beneath all distortion there remains something violence never fully succeeded in destroying. Not innocence. Not moral purity.

But creaturehood itself. The fundamental fact that the perpetrator exists because called into being by God.

This claim radically alters the meaning of redemption. Redemption is not God pretending the monster was never monstrous. Redemption is God refusing to surrender even the monstrous entirely to monstrosity. The image of God becomes the reason restoration remains conceivable despite catastrophic evil. If nothing sacred remained within the perpetrator then transformation would be impossible. There would be no self left to heal. No humanity left to reclaim. No capacity for truth left to awaken.

The monster carries the image of God therefore not as achievement but as tragedy.

A tragedy because someone bearing divine likeness violated divine likeness in another. A tragedy because sacred beings became capable of desecrating one another. A tragedy because the image can be distorted so profoundly that human beings become almost unrecognizable to themselves.

But also perhaps a source of terrifying hope. Because if even the monster carries the image of God then no human being can ever be reduced entirely to the worst thing they have done. Not excused. Not declared innocent. But never metaphysically abandoned.

The monster bears the image of God even while disfiguring it. And perhaps that is precisely why the monster's violence wounds the world so deeply.

VII. Let the Monster Speak!

How Listening Can Abolish the Death Penalty

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The Monster.

The death penalty depends on a category...the monster. By definition, the monster has no inner life worth attending to. It acts. It threatens. It consumes. It does not reflect, regret, hope, pray, write letters, or change. The moment any of these things happens, the category begins to fail.

The maintenance of the monster is one of the system's most remarkable and sinister achievements. Most categories of person, however hostile, allow for the possibility of encounter. The stranger becomes known. The enemy becomes human. The criminal retains a self that can be addressed. The monster category forecloses this entirely. It is not a description of what someone is. It is a prohibition against finding out.

This prohibition must be maintained constantly because the human voice constantly threatens to dissolve it. Any evidence of interiority...remorse, conversion, art, love...ruptures the archetype the moment it is genuinely received. The system is structured to ensure that voice does not carry. What it produces is not silence but absence...the condemned is endlessly spoken about but rarely permitted to speak. The case, the appeals, the media narrative proceed. The person disappears into them. The monster holds.

The Power of Voice.

Here is the miracle. The voice does not need to prove innocence, demonstrate redemption or resolve any question of

law. It only needs to arrive. It only needs to be heard. Because actual, specific human interiority cannot be encountered without producing knowledge of humanity...a kind of knowledge the system cannot manage.

When the voice breaks through...when a letter is read with genuine attention, when words spoken from behind a wall are truly received...something enters the listener that did not exist before. Not a crime. Not a verdict. Not a position. A person. The specificity of a real human voice is the one thing the archetype of monster cannot absorb.

The system works hard to sustain the lie of the monster. Remorse becomes manipulation. Conversion becomes strategy. Love becomes sentimentality. Every eruption of interiority is folded back into the archetype. But this response is also a confession...the monster never existed. Every act of silencing the condemned reveals that the category cannot survive genuine human encounter.

What Listening Does.

Those who encounter the voice directly are transformed. This is not metaphor. The category wavers. The person becomes a person. What opens is the irreducible fact of a human being...and the discovery that this fact was there all along, waiting behind the shape we needed to project onto it.

This transformation is the most dangerous thing to the death penalty. More dangerous than any legal argument. Because it does not operate on the system. It operates on the person experiencing another person. And once someone has genuinely let the voice in, that knowledge cannot be unlearned.

The death penalty is not ultimately sustained by law. It is sustained by the conviction that the person does not need to be

encountered...that the monster has already settled the question of humanity. Every genuine act of listening cracks that conviction. These moments accumulate. They erode the consensus the system requires.

The Invitation.

Open your ears. Share what you hear. This is the whole argument. Not to excuse. Not to forgive on anyone else's behalf. But simply to listen...to extend to the condemned the same quality of attention we would extend to any other human being. To let the particular person be particular...and to be particularly heard.

What the voice carries is not the monster we were told to fear. It carries a human being. Every time. Without exception. Someone who suffered. Someone who caused suffering. Someone who contains more than any category can hold.

The voice does not redeem anything. It does not need to. It only needs to be heard for the category of monster to dissolve and for us to find ourselves in the presence of a person we are about to kill.

That discovery is the beginning of the end of the death penalty. The human end. The end that comes when enough people have opened their ears and found...in the voice they were told not to listen to...something that changes everything they think they know.

The voice persists. Letters keep getting written. Phone calls reach across walls. Interviews are granted. Every so often, the voice breaks through and is heard. Someone truly listens. Something shifts that cannot be unshifted. The lie of the monster is slain.

VIII. How the Monster Can Save Us All

On the Prophetic Function of Catastrophic Evil

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Every society creates monsters. This creation does not occur because certain individuals commit terrible acts while everyone else remains morally intact. Rather societies produce monsters symbolically in order to stabilize their own understanding of evil. The monster becomes the location where collective fear guilt violence shame and moral contradiction are deposited. Through this process communities reassure themselves that evil has a face a body a name a prison cell a grave. Violence is imagined as something that can be isolated within particular individuals and then removed from the social body through punishment exclusion execution or permanent condemnation. The monster therefore performs an essential psychological function. The monster protects the illusion of collective innocence.

For this reason societies often need monsters more desperately than monsters need society. The existence of the perpetrator allows everyone else to avoid confronting the uncomfortable continuity between ordinary human impulses and catastrophic violence. Rage envy humiliation resentment fantasies of domination tribal hatred emotional numbness the desire to make suffering answer suffering...all these realities remain distributed widely throughout ordinary life. Most people never enact severe violence. Yet the emotional architecture underlying violence exists in recognizable form across humanity. The monster becomes useful precisely because they allow

everyone else to externalize these capacities rather than examine them internally.

This is why the monster possesses paradoxical revelatory power. When encountered honestly the monster destabilizes the comforting fiction that evil belongs exclusively to others. The perpetrator becomes terrifying not merely because of the harm committed but because the perpetrator remains recognizably human. They are not metaphysical aberrations descending from outside creation. They are human beings shaped by recognizable desires fears wounds humiliations compulsions fantasies and moral failures that exist in fragmented form throughout ordinary social existence. The monster therefore reveals something societies desperately resist acknowledging...violence is not foreign to humanity. Violence is one possible expression of humanity distorted through particular conditions choices and histories.

This revelation matters because denial perpetuates violence more effectively than recognition. As long as societies imagine perpetrators as fundamentally inhuman they remain incapable of examining the ordinary structures that cultivate dehumanization domination alienation and cruelty long before visible catastrophe occurs. The myth of the monster obscures the social conditions from which monsters emerge. Communities condemn the final act while refusing to confront the humiliations exclusions traumas inequalities forms of abandonment and cultural narratives that helped shape the psychological world in which violence became imaginable. The monster therefore exposes not only individual guilt but collective contradiction.

To say the monster can save us all is not to romanticize perpetrators or diminish the suffering of victims. It is not to suggest that violence possesses hidden moral beauty or that atrocity somehow improves humanity. Such arguments are obscene because they transform real suffering into philosophical instrumentality. Victims remain violated. The dead remain dead. Certain harms can never be undone historically. The monster does not save through the violence committed. The monster saves through revelation.

The monster reveals what human beings become when suffering loses relationship to empathy. The monster reveals what occurs when humiliation hardens into identity. The monster reveals how easily the longing for dignity transforms into domination when no healthier forms of recognition remain available. The monster reveals the terrifying fragility of moral restraint. Most importantly the monster reveals the danger of every social order built upon dehumanization because the monster always emerges from worlds where some forms of human suffering ceased being fully visible long before the perpetrator stopped recognizing the humanity of victims.

In this sense the monster functions almost prophetically though in deeply tragic form. Prophets historically revealed hidden truths about collective life particularly truths societies preferred not to confront. The monster performs a similar revelatory function unintentionally through catastrophe. After violence communities are forced momentarily to examine realities ordinarily concealed beneath routine social functioning. Questions emerge that polite society often suppresses. What forms of abandonment created this person? What structures normalized domination? What humiliations accumulated

unnoticed? What failures of care recognition solidarity accountability or intervention preceded the crime? Where were the opportunities for interruption before violence escalated into irreversible destruction?

Most societies however retreat quickly from such questions because genuine examination threatens existing moral frameworks. It is emotionally easier to identify the monster as uniquely evil than to recognize the extent to which violence grows from ordinary human possibilities intensified through specific conditions. The category of monster therefore simultaneously reveals and conceals. It reveals the existence of violence while concealing violence's continuity with broader human life.

Yet if society can endure the discomfort of honest confrontation the monster may teach humanity something essential about itself. The monster forces recognition that no civilization can sustain itself merely through punishment after harm occurs. By the time the monster commits visible atrocity countless earlier forms of suffering alienation resentment distortion and moral fragmentation have usually already unfolded. Prevention therefore requires more than policing. It requires conditions under which human beings remain capable of empathy relational trust accountability vulnerability and meaningful recognition. The monster reveals negatively what healthy humanity requires positively.

The monster may also save us by exposing the inadequacy of simplistic moral binaries. Human beings often divide the world into innocent and guilty good and evil righteous and corrupt. Such distinctions possess partial truth because moral differences are real. Victims did not commit the crime. Perpetrators did.

Yet absolute moral dualism frequently obscures shared human vulnerability to distortion. The monster reminds us that cruelty emerges not only from monstrous individuals but from ordinary processes of resentment fear humiliation tribalism greed ideological certainty and emotional numbness distributed throughout social existence. This recognition can produce humility. The observer becomes less certain of their own moral invulnerability.

Such humility matters politically socially spiritually and psychologically. Societies convinced of their own purity become extraordinarily dangerous because self-righteousness permits cruelty in the name of virtue. Once evil is imagined as existing exclusively outside the self extraordinary violence becomes justifiable against those identified as evil. History repeatedly demonstrates this pattern. Nations movements religions and institutions committing atrocities almost never perceive themselves as monstrous while acting. They perceive themselves as righteous necessary protective or morally exceptional. The monster therefore saves us by warning against the human tendency to externalize evil completely.

There is also a deeper existential dimension to this claim. The monster reveals the catastrophic consequences of refusing shared humanity. Violence becomes possible precisely when another person's interiority ceases to matter fully. Victims become objects symbols threats obstacles categories or extensions of the perpetrator's own unresolved suffering. The monster therefore shows negatively what ethical life requires positively...sustained recognition of other persons as fully real. By witnessing the collapse of such recognition society may recover awareness of how fragile civilization actually is. Human dignity cannot

survive automatically. It must be continually practiced reinforced protected and extended particularly toward those whom societies find easiest to exclude.

Paradoxically the monster may even save us by exposing the limits of condemnation itself. Punishment may restrain violence temporarily. It may affirm moral boundaries. It may acknowledge victims publicly. Yet condemnation alone cannot heal the conditions that generate violence repeatedly across generations. If societies remain satisfied merely identifying eliminating and replacing monsters they will never confront the deeper crises embedded within human formation collective life and moral imagination. The monster therefore becomes mirror rather than exception. Humanity sees reflected not only the perpetrator's guilt but its own unresolved relationship to violence domination humiliation exclusion and suffering.

This does not eliminate accountability. The monster remains responsible for the harm committed. Indeed the entire force of revelation depends upon responsibility remaining intact. If the perpetrator were merely a passive product of circumstance nothing meaningful could be learned morally because choice would disappear from the picture entirely. The monster saves precisely because the monster demonstrates what human beings become when freedom repeatedly aligns itself with cruelty rather than compassion. The revelation matters because it concerns humanity not machinery.

Ultimately the monster can save us all only if humanity possesses the courage to see what the monster reveals. The revelation is unbearable because it destroys comforting illusions. Evil is not safely distant. Violence is not metaphysically foreign.

The conditions producing catastrophe are not entirely separate from ordinary life. The monster is not another species.

The monster is human. And if the monster is human then humanity must finally confront both the terrifying depth of its capacity for destruction and the urgent necessity of building forms of life capable of resisting that destruction before it becomes irreversible.

Perhaps this is the final gift hidden within horror itself. The monster forces humanity to see clearly what it otherwise refuses to acknowledge. Not so that violence may be excused but so that violence may finally be understood deeply enough to interrupt its endless reproduction.

The monster saves us by destroying the illusion that we are not like them.

IX. What Happens When We Kill the Monster

The Day After an Execution

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Every execution begins with a story. The story is simple. Someone commits an act so terrible that ordinary language struggles to contain it. The details are repeated in news reports, court records and public memory. The crime becomes synonymous with the person who committed it. Eventually, a sinister transformation occurs. The individual disappears behind the act. A human being becomes a symbol. A defendant becomes a murderer. A murderer becomes a monster.

The logic that follows seems inevitable. Monsters are dangerous. Monsters cannot be redeemed. Monsters do not belong among us. Therefore, monsters must be destroyed. The death penalty depends upon this narrative. Without it, executions would be impossible. The state cannot kill a neighbor. It cannot kill someone whose humanity is vivid and undeniable. Before the body can be executed, the imagination must be prepared. The condemned person must first be reduced to the worst thing they have ever done. The public must stop seeing a person before it can tolerate a murder.

Yet there is a question hidden beneath this process. What happens when we kill the monster?

The answer is not what supporters of capital punishment promise. The victim is not restored to life. The family does not recover the years that were stolen from them. The nightmares

do not disappear. The empty chair remains. No execution has ever reversed a murder. No execution has ever undone an act of violence. Death possesses no power to travel backward through time.

The promise of execution is therefore not restoration but satisfaction. It offers the feeling that something has been balanced. The scales have been corrected. Justice has been done because suffering has been imposed upon the one who caused suffering. It presents itself as a final chapter, a moment of closure, a moral conclusion to a terrible story.

But stories never end that way.

The grief remains. The questions remain. The wounds remain. Communities continue to struggle with violence, trauma, poverty, addiction, abuse, neglect and all the conditions that helped produce the tragedy in the first place. The execution creates the appearance of resolution without actually resolving anything. It removes a person, but it does not heal a world.

And that raises a deeper problem. If the purpose of execution is to affirm the value of human life, why is the affirmation expressed through the deliberate destruction of a human life? The contradiction is difficult to escape. We condemn killing by killing. We teach that violence is wrong by performing a carefully regulated act of violence. We insist that every life possesses dignity while simultaneously declaring that some lives possess none. We tell ourselves that murder is unacceptable because human beings are sacred, and then we schedule a date to destroy a human being.

The state attempts to solve this contradiction through procedure. There are hearings, appeals, warrants, witnesses, protocols and official language. The execution chamber is

surrounded by bureaucracy. Every detail is organized and documented. The machinery creates an appearance of moral certainty. White walls replace dark alleys. Medical equipment replaces weapons. Legal language replaces rage.

But procedure cannot answer the underlying question. A murder remains a murder even when authorized by law.

What is most striking about capital punishment is not its violence but its confidence. The death penalty assumes that human institutions can identify the irredeemable person. It assumes that judges, juries, prosecutors and governors can determine which human beings belong permanently beyond the reach of mercy. It assumes a level of moral clarity that history repeatedly warns us against claiming.

History is crowded with wrongful convictions, false testimony, racial prejudice, prosecutorial misconduct, inadequate defense counsel, political ambition and public hysteria. Human beings make mistakes. Systems built by human beings make mistakes on a larger scale. When imprisonment is mistaken, correction remains possible. A prisoner can be released. Compensation can be offered. An apology can be made. Execution permits no correction. The grave contains no appeals process.

But even when guilt is certain, another problem remains. Human beings are not static creatures. The person who enters prison at twenty is not the same person at forty, sixty, or seventy. Years alter people. Suffering alters people. Reflection alters people. Some become wiser. Some become gentler. Some experience remorse. Some discover faith. Some dedicate themselves to helping others. Some spend decades wrestling with the horror of what they have done.

None of these transformations erases the harm they caused. None of them brings victims back. None of them excuses terrible crimes. But they reveal something the monster narrative cannot accommodate.

Human beings change.

The category of monster depends upon permanence. A monster must remain a monster forever. The moment growth becomes possible, the category begins to collapse. The moment we acknowledge complexity, certainty begins to erode. The moment we recognize humanity, execution becomes harder to justify.

This is why death row prisoners are so often invisible. The public hears about the crime but rarely about the decades that follow. We know the worst day of their lives. We know very little about the thousands of days afterward. We hear the prosecution's narrative. We rarely hear the prisoner's own voice. Silence protects the death penalty. The more we encounter the condemned as human beings, the harder execution becomes.

But there is another reason the language of monsters is so dangerous. It does not merely describe the condemned. It transforms the people doing the condemning. Once we decide that certain human beings are beyond humanity, we begin to inherit the very logic we claim to oppose.

This is the secret hidden at the center of capital punishment. When we kill the monster, we become the monster.

Not because we become identical to the murderer. Not because every executioner is morally equivalent to every killer. The claim is deeper than that. The monster's defining belief is that a human life can be reduced to a single act, a single judgment, a single decision to destroy. The monster believes that

death is an acceptable solution to a human problem. The monster looks at another person and concludes that elimination is the answer.

The death penalty adopts that same logic. It looks at a human being and concludes that nothing remains worth preserving. No future act of repentance matters. No future transformation matters. No future contribution matters. No possibility of redemption matters. The only answer is death.

We call it justice because the killing is organized, regulated and legal. But legality does not change the nature of the act. The execution chamber reveals a disturbing truth...the monster was never merely the condemned prisoner. The monster was the belief that some people can be discarded. The monster was the belief that killing can heal what killing has broken. The monster was the conviction that human worth can be permanently erased.

A society reveals its deepest values not by how it treats the admirable but by how it treats the despised. Mercy offered only to the deserving is not mercy at all. It is reward. Compassion extended only to the innocent is not compassion. The real test comes when we encounter the guilty, the hated, the feared and the condemned.

The death penalty fails that test. It draws a line beyond which forgiveness cannot travel and declares that certain people exist outside the moral community forever. It answers violence with violence, death with death, exclusion with exclusion. It insists that human dignity is universal while creating exceptions large enough to swallow the principle itself.

After every execution, the same reality remains. One person is dead because of a crime. Families continue grieving.

Communities continue struggling. Violence continues existing. The monster is gone. And yet the world is not healed.

That is the tragedy at the center of capital punishment. Execution promises closure but delivers only absence. It promises justice but produces another death. It promises moral clarity but leaves us staring into the same darkness from which the crime emerged.

We kill the monster, believing that evil will die with it. Instead, we discover that evil was never confined to one person. It lives wherever human beings decide that some lives no longer matter. It lives wherever death becomes a solution. It lives wherever we surrender mercy for the satisfaction of punishment.

We killed the monster. But the monster didn't die. Because the monster was never merely the person we condemned. The monster was the belief that killing can make us whole. The monster was the temptation to answer violence with violence and call it justice. The monster was the darkness within us that longs to destroy what it cannot heal. And the monster is immortal so long as it lives within us.

X. The Resurrection of the Monster

On Memory, Meaning, and the Refusal of Finality

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The monster does not stay buried. Even after execution, even after sentencing, even after decades of silence, it returns. Not as a body, and not as a threat, but as a memory that refuses to settle into a single meaning. We like to believe death ends a story. In practice, it rarely does. The execution is meant to complete the narrative. The state closes the file. The public moves on. But finality is not something memory understands. It is something institutions require to function.

Memory does not comply. It lingers. It revises. It returns.

The monster comes back because it was never fully gone. It was reduced too far, flattened into a symbol so complete that it eventually begins to collapse under its own simplicity. A name becomes a case. A case becomes a headline. A headline becomes something closer to an object than a person, something that appears stable only because everything unstable has been removed from it.

Over time, that object begins to break apart. Details return. Childhood returns. Faces return. Fragments from court records resurface with quiet persistence. What once felt finished begins to gather weight again. That return of weight is what we call resurrection. Not the return of life. The return of meaning.

In public memory, the monster is never singular for long. It splits into competing versions that do not align, but do not disappear either. There is the version built in court, the version shaped by media, the version centered on victims, the version

argued by the defense and the version reconstructed years later by historians and documentarians. None of them resolves into a single story. Instead, they coexist in tension, and that tension begins to undo the certainty that once held everything in place.

Resurrection, in that sense, changes form. It is no longer the return of a person. It is the return of disagreement...inside a culture that once believed all had been resolved. What once looked like closure reveals itself as fragmentation, and the monster begins to exist inside that fragmentation as something unstable and unresolved.

It returns in documentaries that complicate earlier certainty. It returns in books that reopen evidence long considered settled. It returns in interviews shaped by time, distance, and second thought. It returns in cultural fascination that refuses disappearance even when institutions declare the story closed. We often call this curiosity, but that is too mild. It is closer to resistance. A refusal to let a human life remain fully collapsed into its worst moment.

Because even the most horrific act does not fully contain a human being. That fact remains beneath legal language and moral certainty. The more a story is reduced, the more it begins to leak. This is why the monster never stays fixed. It moves between crime and identity, between judgment and understanding, between condemnation and recognition. And in that movement something unsettling happens. The monster begins to resemble us, not because it becomes innocent, but because it becomes legible again as something larger than a single act.

That is resurrection. Not the return of life. The return of irreducibility.

Execution depends on the opposite assumption. It depends on the belief that a person can be fully known at the moment of judgment and that death can close the story permanently. But meaning does not end with death. It continues after it, because understanding continues to shift while the dead remain unchanged.

The monster becomes a place where unresolved questions accumulate. What is evil? What is responsibility? What is transformation? What is a life worth? These questions do not belong only to the condemned. They belong to the society that produced the category of the condemned in the first place.

Resurrection is unsettling because it removes finality. It reopens what was sealed and introduces ambiguity where certainty once stood. A society creates monsters in order to contain fear, then discovers that the container cannot hold what it was designed to enclose.

The monster is more durable than execution. It does not survive physically, but it survives conceptually in memory, in repetition, and in the refusal of stories to remain simple. And in that persistence, something becomes clear. The monster was never only the person. It was a role assigned after the fact. A way of organizing fear, grief, and outrage into something that could be held at a distance. Once that role is in place, everything else is stripped away so the story can feel stable and complete.

But memory does not preserve that stability. Details return. Context returns. Contradictions return. What once felt finished begins to reopen. And when that happens, the boundary breaks.

What returns is not innocence. It is not forgiveness. It is not a reversal of judgment. It is something more difficult. The recognition that the person inside the category was still a human

life. A life that cannot be fully contained by the act that defined it in public memory. A life that remains larger than the label placed upon it.

That is the resurrection of the monster. Not the return of evil. Not the undoing of responsibility. Only the resurrection of the inconvenient fact that even the executed is human.

XI. The Monster Dies

On Universal Restoration and the Refusal of Final Ruin

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The monster dies believing that judgment will confirm what the world has already declared...that they are reducible to the worst thing they have done. Whatever complexity once existed within them has long since been stripped away by the machinery of crime punishment media memory and grief. Their name no longer signifies a human being moving through contradiction weakness longing fear and choice. Their name has become synonymous with violation. They are no longer imagined as someone who committed monstrous acts but as monstrosity itself. This reduction does not occur only in public consciousness. The monster eventually internalizes it as well. After enough years of hearing oneself described as inhuman one begins to experience one's own existence through that category. The monster dies not merely fearing punishment but believing with terrible certainty that there is nothing left within them worth preserving.

And yet the universalist imagination insists upon a possibility that both conventional morality and conventional religion often resist...that no human being can be adequately understood through the category of irreversible ruin. Universal reconciliation does not deny evil. It does not minimize atrocity. It does not spiritualize suffering into abstraction or attempt to dissolve violence into sentimentality. Rather it begins from the conviction that if creation originates in divine love then no distortion of the human being...however catastrophic...can

finally possess ultimate authority over what a human being is. Evil may deform. Trauma may fragment. Violence may hollow a person almost beyond recognition. But none of these conditions possess the metaphysical power to create a being beyond the reach of restoration. The monster dies carrying the belief that violence has become their essence. Universal reconciliation responds that violence can never become essence. It can only become corruption.

What the monster encounters after death therefore is not immediate consolation but revelation. The first experience of divine judgment is not the suspension of accountability but the destruction of illusion. In life the monster survived through strategies of fragmentation. Certain memories were buried. Certain acts were rationalized. Certain forms of suffering were exaggerated while others were denied. Human beings rarely sustain themselves psychologically through complete honesty particularly when they have caused irreparable harm. The self becomes structured around concealment. But death removes the possibility of concealment because nothing can remain partial before absolute truth. The monster encounters themselves fully for the first time. Every act of violence returns without distortion. Every moment of humiliation abandonment cruelty deprivation and rage that contributed to the formation of the self is likewise revealed. Nothing is omitted. Nothing is softened. Nothing is explained away.

This experience is agonizing precisely because the monster is finally liberated from self-deception. They no longer experience their crimes abstractly as legal categories historical events or narrative fragments. They experience them from within the suffering of those they harmed. The grief of parents. The terror

of victims. The futures erased. The trust destroyed. The psychological devastation transmitted across generations. Universal reconciliation does not spare the monster from this confrontation because restoration without truth would merely reproduce the conditions that made violence possible in the first place. One cannot be made whole while remaining defended against reality. The monster must come to see clearly not only what they did but what they became through the doing of it.

And yet judgment within the universalist vision differs radically from the logic of eternal rejection. The purpose of revelation is not annihilation. God does not expose the monster in order to abandon them to despair forever. Rather divine judgment functions as a purifying encounter in which everything false disintegrates beneath the pressure of perfect truth. This is why many universalist thinkers describe hell less as externally imposed torture than as the unbearable experience of seeing oneself without distortion before infinite love. The pain emerges not from arbitrary punishment but from the collapse of every mechanism by which the self avoided truth. The monster sees with complete clarity the distance between the person they became and the person they were capable of becoming. They see all the moments where restraint remained possible. They see all the moments where suffering might have been interrupted rather than transmitted outward into the lives of others. They see that monstrosity was not destiny. It was choice enacted repeatedly within conditions of damage.

This recognition produces a form of grief deeper than fear. Fear concerns what may happen to the self. Grief concerns what the self has participated in destroying. The monster finally understands that violence did not merely wound victims.

Violence also mutilated the perpetrator. Every act of cruelty narrowed the soul. Every repetition of domination strengthened patterns that rendered tenderness increasingly difficult. The monster becomes aware that the self they defended so aggressively during life was itself profoundly disfigured. This awareness does not lessen culpability. In certain respects it intensifies it because the monster can no longer imagine themselves as merely overwhelmed by circumstance. They recognize instead that while trauma suffering neglect and deprivation shaped them they nevertheless participated actively in becoming who they became.

Universal reconciliation however refuses to allow even this recognition to become the final word. The central claim of restoration is that beneath distortion there remains something violence never fully succeeded in destroying. The image of God within the human being may become obscured fragmented buried beneath layers of cruelty shame hatred and self-protection but it cannot be eradicated entirely. If it could then redemption would depend upon the human capacity to preserve purity through history. Such a vision would doom not only perpetrators but humanity itself because violence extends through every dimension of collective existence. Universal reconciliation instead insists that divine love descends precisely into the regions where humanity appears most absent. God does not meet the monster at the surface level of criminal identity alone. God encounters the buried person underneath the accumulated wreckage of violence.

This encounter is profoundly humiliating because the monster realizes they remained loved even while becoming monstrous. Not approved of. Not excused. Not relieved of

responsibility. Loved. This distinction matters because sentimental forms of reconciliation often collapse love into moral indifference. Universal restoration does the opposite. Divine love becomes unbearable precisely because it refuses both denial and abandonment simultaneously. The monster is told the complete truth about themselves while also discovering that truth does not result in metaphysical rejection. They are not permitted to escape accountability yet neither are they surrendered permanently to what they have done. The monster learns that being loved by God does not mean being protected from judgment. It means judgment itself becomes the instrument through which restoration occurs.

The implications of this vision extend beyond the perpetrator alone because universal reconciliation also concerns the restoration of victims. Too often theological accounts of forgiveness place the burden of resolution upon those who suffered harm. Victims are instructed to relinquish anger transcend grief or participate in forms of reconciliation that leave the original wound fundamentally unhealed. Universal restoration rejects such demands. The victim is not restored through forgetting. The victim is not restored through the mere punishment or destruction of the perpetrator. Retaliation may satisfy temporarily but it cannot resurrect the dead repair violated trust or remove traumatic memory from the body. The suffering remains. Universal reconciliation therefore imagines restoration as something deeper than vengeance. God heals the victim completely without denying the reality of what occurred. The wound remains historically real while no longer possessing the power to imprison existence eternally.

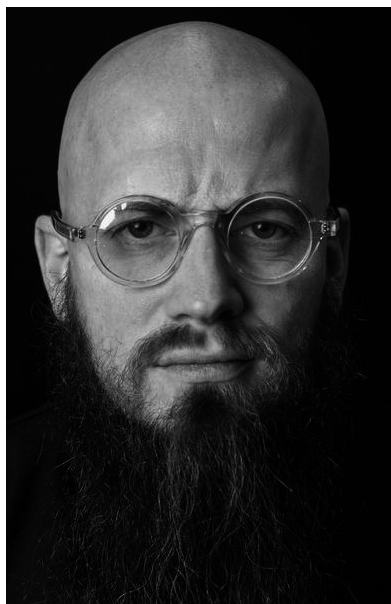
Within this framework the eventual encounter between victim and perpetrator becomes conceivable though never simplistic. The meeting cannot occur through coercion sentimentality or premature forgiveness because genuine reconciliation requires complete truth from both sides. The monster must finally confess without minimization. The victim must finally be permitted to speak without fear. Nothing can remain hidden because hiddenness itself belongs to the order of violence that universal restoration seeks to overcome. What emerges from this encounter is not the erasure of moral distinction. The victim did not commit the crime. The perpetrator did. The asymmetry remains absolute. And yet both now stand within a reality where violence itself no longer possesses ultimate authority over either of them.

This perhaps constitutes the deepest meaning of all things being made right. Universal reconciliation does not propose a universe in which suffering never mattered. It proposes a universe in which suffering cannot eternally triumph over creation. The dead remain mourned. The violated remain acknowledged. The history of violence remains permanently true. But none of these realities are granted final sovereignty. God refuses to concede any dimension of existence permanently to ruin including the ruined perpetrator. This is scandalous because human beings often rely psychologically upon the fantasy that evil belongs exclusively to others. The existence of the monster reassures ordinary people that moral corruption can be localized contained identified and discarded. Universal reconciliation destroys this comfort by insisting that the monster is not a separate species of being. The monster is human.

Distorted human damaged human guilty human but human nonetheless.

For this reason the restoration of the monster becomes inseparable from the restoration of humanity itself. If even one human being remains eternally abandoned then violence achieves an everlasting victory. The logic of destruction succeeds in claiming permanent territory within creation. Universal reconciliation instead imagines a final reality in which nothing remains governed by death hatred domination shame or alienation. This does not mean that evil is forgotten. Rather evil is overcome so completely that it no longer determines the meaning of existence. The monster undergoes judgment purification grief confession and transformation until the compulsions that once governed them lose their power entirely. What emerges is not innocence recovered because innocence cannot return. What emerges instead is a human being finally capable of complete truth complete accountability and complete love.

The monster dies believing themselves beyond redemption because they cannot imagine a form of justice deeper than exclusion. They awaken into a reality where justice means the absolute destruction of every force that deforms creation including the violence that deformed them. And in the end the final defeat of evil is not merely that victims are comforted or crimes condemned. The final defeat of evil is that even the monster is no longer monstrous because nothing within creation remains untouched by restoration.



About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is a theologian and spiritual advisor to death row inmates nationwide. He has accompanied over a dozen men to their executions and was the first spiritual advisor to be present for a nitrogen hypoxia execution. Rev. Hood has been profiled widely, including in the Rolling Stone documentary *The Spiritual Advisor*. He is the Founder of the Execution Intervention Project.

Read more at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jeffhood/>.

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