

SECRETS OF THE KILLING STATE

THE UNTOLD STORY OF LETHAL INJECTION

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EPILOGUE

This book was based on research—copious amounts of it—and the research speaks for itself. But that research has changed me in unexpected ways, and it is only fitting to end by sharing an insight that was not part of this project, but that I learned along the way. I have been writing about the death penalty for almost two decades, and have always viewed condemned prisoners as people who did horrible, unspeakable things (probably), but still deserved the protection of the law. Arguably, even more so. But I confess that I have kept my distance from the humanity of the faceless convicted capital murderers I have been studying all these years.

This project has offered (insisted upon, even) a front-row seat to who these people are. Many, too many to count, found redemption on death row, and prayed to their Lord and Savior, Yahweh or Allah, as they died, some after starting prison ministries. As Saul became Paul, so it is for many on death row.¹ Others were just deeply broken people, desperate to go back to their younger selves and warn them to stop before it was tragically too late. Over and over, this was a theme in the last statements I read. A few went out defiantly, but very few. For the vast majority of these prisoners, it was evident that the person who committed that terrible crime just wasn't there anymore.

This sense was ably conveyed in the post-execution statement of the lawyer for Dustin Lee Honken, one of the prisoners in the federal government's 2020 execution spree. "There was no reason for the government to kill him, in haste or at all," the lawyer stated. "In any case, they failed. The Dustin Honken they wanted to kill is long gone."²

Prison guards said the same of Brian Dorsey in 2024. More than seventy correctional officers signed a letter to Missouri's governor asking

that Dorsey's death sentence be commuted to life without parole. Then one of them wrote an op-ed to make the plea public. "We Corrections Officers Know Brian Dorsey Has Changed. Gov. Parson, Don't Execute Him," the title read.³ "Dorsey has been under a death sentence in Missouri for seventeen years, and there is no dispute that he committed murder," the veteran corrections officer wrote, then stated: "Yet, far from being the 'worst of the worst,' Dorsey exemplifies the growth, transformation and redemption that are possible when someone is committed to turning their life around after making a terrible mistake. . . . There isn't a nicer guy than Brian. . . . We know that he was convicted of murder, but that is not the Brian Dorsey we know."

Brian Dorsey was housed in the 'honor dorm' of the prison. He served as the prison barber for over a decade, cutting the hair of not only his fellow prisoners, but also the warden and prison staff. Imagine what that looked like, the warden trusting a condemned murderer with a pair of scissors at his neck. "Mr. Dorsey is an excellent barber and a kind and respectful man," the corrections officer insisted. "I do not hesitate to say that executing Brian Dorsey would be a pointless cruelty."

Yet once a death warrant is issued, the machinery of death is nearly impossible to halt. The governor declined to intervene, and the prison guards who had come to know and respect Brian Dorsey were then forced to kill him. The op-ed had warned that "taking Dorsey's life would be especially traumatizing for many current and former [prison] staff members, myself included, who have come to respect and care for this exemplary inmate." Surely Brian Dorsey was not the only casualty that day.

As I was putting the finishing touches on this book to send it into production, I felt a deep sorrow, and frankly, shame, knowing that this extraordinary exemplar of redemption was about to be killed by the prison staff who had come to know and respect him. Over seventy prison guards could not save Dorsey, though they tried mightily and were joined by a host of others, including family members of the victims and five of the jurors who sentenced him to death.

Nothing can stop the gears of the machinery of death from grinding. The only way to prevent such senseless acts of cruelty is to retire the machine altogether.

I see this now in a way I didn't before. Before, I saw the law—a long list of broken promises of fairness and procedural protections. I thought of this project as just another broken promise to add to that long list. Now I see humanity in full flower, and I cannot *unsee* it.

This is what studying executions does: it forces us to pay attention to who these people are at the *end*. Not who they were in their worst moment, but who they have become—and who others are capable of becoming. In our mind's eye, we tend to freeze these people in a single moment in time. I myself have done so. But time works changes, and studying executions has been a potent reminder that humans have the greatest capacity to change of all.

A sense of urgency comes with this insight. Today, there are over 2,300 people on death row—all subject to the very state actors you have read about in this book. As you read this, dozens upon dozens of prisoners are scheduled to die at the hands of the state. Each with a story. Most with regret. All more than their worst moment.

The death penalty is not a given. It is a choice, and choices are subject to change. But that would require actually thinking about state killing, and the point of lethal injection is to make it so we don't. This work must be mighty important, because states have gone to extraordinary lengths to maintain the façade of an execution that looks like something else.

In the name of lethal injection, states have broken state and federal laws. They have deliberately breached private contracts and misled sellers with straw purchases. They have asked medical professionals to violate the ethics of their profession. And they have put people like you and me at risk of being cut-off from the medicines we need. Through it all, states have sacrificed not only their professed commitment to humane executions, but also important values—government transparency, regulatory compliance, freedom of contract, respect for the rule of law, and

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the utmost care in the most solemn of duties. Every principle we profess to hold dear must bend a knee to the lie of lethal injection.

There are countless reasons to oppose the death penalty, but the one that lethal injection brings to the fore is a recognition that the state at its most powerful moment is also the state at its worst. The story of lethal injection shows time and again that the state has no business being in the business of killing. How ironic that the execution method adopted to save the death penalty has become the latest reason to get rid of it.

NOTES

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- 1 The story of Saul who became Paul on the road to Damascus is told in the Holy Bible, Acts 9.
- 2 Statement from Shawn Nolan, Attorney for Dustin Honken, www.fd.org. Here is the full statement:

Dustin Honken was redeemed. He recognized and repented for the crimes he had committed, and spent his time in prison atoning for them. . . . Dustin worked every day at the Catholic faith that was at the center of his life. During his time in prison, he cared for everyone he came into contact with: guards, counselors, medical staff, his fellow inmates and his legal team. Over the years he grew incredibly close to his family, becoming a true father, son, brother and friend. There was no reason for the government to kill him, in haste or at all. In any case, they failed. The Dustin Honken they wanted to kill is long gone. The man they killed today was a human being, who could have spent the rest of his days helping others and further redeeming himself. May he rest in peace.
- 3 Timothy Lancaster, *We Corrections Officers Know Brian Dorsey Has Changed. Gov. Parson, Don't Execute Him*, KAN. CITY STAR (April 1, 2024).