

Prelude to Punishment

Bill Boudreau

This afternoon, the jury found the defendant guilty. Now, as judge, it's my duty to pronounce punishment.

Here I sit in my study and stare at a wall bookcase that contains books of laws, essays, literature, history, theses, theories, and hypothesizes that span the spectrum of human thoughts and practices. Many of those volumes scream an interpreted resolution of punishment. But I question the legitimacy of its accuracy.

In a time before the written word, and periods leading to the present, my verdict would be simple. Depending on which tribe, kingdom, or family I belonged to, the decision would be swift and permanent. A revengeful act, I'd be hailed a hero, a leader, and maybe become a legend. But if I'd found myself on the opposing side of authority, I'd be a fugitive, a quarry, or thrown in a dungeon of torture, and suffer a ruthless fate.

Primitive time to the 21st century, in the name of a god, religion or culture, man has bestowed culturally accepted retributions. We think ourselves humane in how we do it, but to reach where we are today, the methods have been brutal — club to the skull, sword or an arrow through the heart, burn at the stake, chop of the head, hang from a tree or gallows, impaled, or electric chair. The methods, whether judged by one man, fanatics, kings, emperors, or religious doctrines, all inflicted ordeal before the executioner's blow.

However, I'm to abide by today's evolved laws. Still, I hear a faint holler for primitive resolution. My learned values, forced upon me at an early age, my professional teachings and practices keep that notion suppressed.

A knock on the door interrupts my musing. "Come in."

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“Your Honor, do you need me for anything before I leave for the night?”

“No, Martha ... Martha, you’ve been a real help in the six months since Lucy passed away.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. Yes, she was a fine woman.”

“Martha, don’t call me, ‘Your Honor.’ Call me ‘Steve.’”

“Okay, good night.”

“Good night. See you in the morning.”

The door closes.

I miss Lucy. She went so quickly. It’s difficult to adjust without her after being married 52 years. I no longer have her to discuss my cases, when I have doubts — she often provided wise interpretations.

What is it that nags me? Rarely have I speculated on such a wide range of penalties. Why do I reach deep in the primal before rising to the summit of today’s proclaimed right, wrong, justice, and punishment? I know of colleagues who have terminated their lives rather than pronouncing judgment. Is that a choice? Would I be with Lucy?

I’ll go to bed early, take sleeping aids. Tomorrow may bring clarity and objectivity.

Bedside, I swallow sedatives.

Sleep came, but not an unconscious slumber, more like being transported to another medium, a reality dream: In a mist I see the silhouette of a robed figure that stands at the entrance of a cave. Peering, I do not see facial features in the cowl, just darkness. Out of a large hollow sleeve, a long bony hand holds a staff.

A voice booms. “I’m your guide. Come.”

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Drawn, I move closer and stand in front of the cave greeter.

“I’m going to show you macabre grottos,” he says.

He guides me into the cave as he recites a preamble. “I know you’ve pondered seeing your last evening and be where the sun is silent. But you must see the alternate universe before you decide to pursue that dark journey.”

We begin to descend a three-foot ledge that spirals in tightening circles, like a huge screw.

He says the trail ends at a pit of bubbling, fuming molten rock. “On our way to the bottom, you’ll see sinners endure punishment commensurate to the evil committed.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Beyond earthly time — each scene shows living people in different passages of humankind. If you were to stand still in front of a grotto, in fading and emerging images you’d see the depraved suffer deserving penalties ... you may recognize some.

“At the bottom,” he points his staff at a suspended bridge, “those who cross that bridge over the liquid rock will reach a better place, while underneath the most evil perpetrators boil forever, never consumed.”

The first grotto emerges and I see humans looking upward, as if yearning for an opening in the dark overcast sky. A little further downward, the stone cavity depicts men tied and anchored, heads above burgundy water, as piranhas chew on their penises and testicles. Women are not spared the agony.

“It’s clear what sins they committed,” my guide says. “Pedophiles and rapists endure far more severe anguish. As we progress, you’ll see faces of your time — their fates prescribed.”

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We continue. The next vista shows gargoyles packing, rod-ramming food down people's throats, force-feeding them, their stomachs becoming bigger and bigger until they regurgitate the contents in a pond of vomit. Then the beasts push the mass of flesh, more like rolling it, to wallow in the stinky undigested bog. "Excess beyond need," the robed escort says.

"Does this go on forever?"

He didn't answer.

"Think of the waste while so many suffer hunger. Those who commit more than one kind of sin must endure the punishments in sequence, like chapters in a novel that always comes back to the beginning."

Inching downward, we arrive at a grotto that depicts sinners who lived in material abundance and unimaginable wealth far beyond their need. My guide says. "The worst ones to suffer are those who do not earn their excess, and because of their wealth and influence are exempted from toil duties, such as soldiers on battlefields, and acquire cushiony jobs — monarchies, religious hierarchies, collaboration of the powerful, some presidents and prime ministers. Ill-intended mega church preachers and owners, many corporate CEOs, dictators, politicians, and so on, are not excused. They are parasites, bloodsuckers that feed off the unfortunate human's sweat. The penalty, as you see, is to scrounge dumps, on hands and knees for crumbs, trying to satisfy a constant deep hunger, wander and fight tooth-and-nail with their own kind for clothing and shelter."

I examine closer and behind dirty faces, long matted hair, and ragged clothes, I identify a few.

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At the next level, we came upon the sight of perpetrators, slaughterers, torturers of heretics.

“What you see here is the punishment for having massacred thousands and thousands of heretics, for example the Cathers, those who dared express different views than the authority of the Church.”

I see steaming oil poured down their throats, left to burn at stakes, their bodies never to incinerate.

I cannot ignore the stench and screams. The thick toxic fume almost stops my lungs from functioning. No imagination could have conjured the human sounds of torment. I felt a sensation of shame for being human.

Next hollow, I witness punishments for personal violence. In scenes that flashed, perpetrators shout for mercy as they endure the penalty for cruelty committed on spouses and children. In equal agony are the ones who brutalize the weak and those who derive pleasure by inflicting pain on others — sadists.

And then, I observe familiar people who had been in power and initiated unnecessary wars that massacred millions. In the midst, I see facial expressions of those who ordered torture, but who had not participated in the acts — stayed away in plush offices or thrones not to get their fingers dirty, so to speak, that gave them the feeling they are not responsible. Not astonished, but bewildered, I see those who initiated human conflicts for personal gains, begging and in laments promise to repent — the powerful over the weak, evil over good, without regard for the unfortunate.

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Stepping down to the next level are those guilty of fraud, deeds done to the unsuspecting, unknowing, not-so-well-to-do, and the trusting. Included in the scene are corrupt religious preachers, bureaucrats, marketers, capitalists, and government officials. I had not thought — probably because the crimes were done in privacy and secrecy — that the punisher views fraud as severe as exhibited in the grotto.

Reaching the bottom of the pit, I had witnessed punishment for traitors, false loyalty, deceit, and racism — a multitude of Judas, more variety of faked marketers, and swindlers.

At the bridge over molten rock, where the savage souls reside, absolute evil brews in all its forms, and seeks to contaminate the innocents and dominate all — Beware!

My escort says he cannot traverse over the boiling fire. “It’s not my world out there, beyond.”

Magma beneath my feet, no rails, I cross the suspended bridge without falling by the wayside, almost tripped a few times as if nudged.

Morning, I awake! Heart pounding, I lift my head off the soaked pillow. Was that the land of Id?

Standing, I dress, no breakfast, drive to the courthouse.

The bailiff announces my arrival in the courtroom. Everyone stands. I signal the audience to sit. Behind the bench, sitting, I remain silent while peering at the convict’s eyes. “Will the prisoner, please rise,” holding my gaze, “with the power bestowed in me, and you found guilty by this court, you must pay for the crime of using your power to order the killing and suffering of

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thousands and thousands for selfish and personal and cohorts' gains, I pronounce the punishment
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