

One person's self-made hell

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by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

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Christians sometimes say that hell is locked from the inside. What they mean is that people put themselves in hell, and only they can let themselves out. I recently encountered something like this.

I was attending the trial of a woman accused of killing a college student in a hit-and-run accident seven years earlier. The young man she killed lived in the residential college I directed at the time. Her defense was that she didn't do it, or if she did, she doesn't remember it. She began by claiming she only hit a stop sign; when presented with evidence that it was a person, she said over and over that she "only" hit a homeless person. David, the student she killed, spent his summers serving

homeless people. I was left wondering whether he would have been more terrified by the thought of her killing him or her excusing it by saying it was only a homeless person.

For seven years, she told herself and others she didn't do it. She knew she didn't do it, she said, because God told her so. God telling her that it was a stop sign allowed her to go on with her life. There was of course no going on for David's family. The God they worship wasn't going to let them go that easily, telling them, as they later related, "You can either do this with me or without me; it's up to you."

For most of the trial I sat ten feet from the defendant. She spent much of the time hunched over, tissue in hand, faced scrunched up in seeming anguish, dabbing her eyes repeatedly. It was impossible not to feel for her, and certainly for her family and friends. Sometimes I wondered, though, whether her tears were for show. Maybe she was pretending in order to garner sympathy from the jurors. If she felt this bad, why didn't she ever go to the police to confirm whether David had died? She had moved on with her life, but his family couldn't; why not give them a chance to be released from some of their anguish?

More frightening than the possibility that she was faking it was the possibility that she didn't know whether she was faking it, that she had lost sight of the difference between real tears and fake tears. We're talking about a person so self-deceived that for seven years she honestly did not know whether she killed a person. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that lying is achievement, since one needs to possess the truth enough to lie about it. This woman seemed so far from the truth, so defined by deceit, that lying—about David, about the homeless, about the tears—seemed beyond her.

Sitting ten feet from her, I wondered whether she was already living in hell. And if so, her hell was indeed locked from the inside. Her self-deception put her there. Her lies locked her in, and over the course of seven years she had made herself at home.

Jesus said that the truth will set you free. David's family tried to say as much to her. After the verdict was given and she was sentenced to ten years in prison, they were given the chance to offer victim impact statements. In a trial full of extraordinary moments, nothing was more extraordinary than what they said and did.

David's mother began, "You killed my son and left him on the side of the road." She continued, "The sadness is so deep. It is like a cavern that you can't see the bottom

of. I never knew that one could feel so much pain and yet survive.” David’s sister looked straight at the defendant and said, “Losing my older brother David means he never got to see the person I’m becoming, because I was only ten years old when you killed him. This loss will continue into my future. For the rest of my life I have to worry that I’m going to forget him.”

Another sister lit into the woman: “Because of your deceit and your refusal to face the consequences of your actions, my family has gone through seven painful years of waiting for justice. You could have come forward at any point, yet you never did. You dragged my family through a terrible, lengthy trial that has brought back painful memories, in hopes that you will face no consequences for your horrific actions.”

It might sound cruel to say such things to a person just sentenced to ten years in prison. It is not cruel. It is mercy. It is a mercy to tell someone that they live in a hell of their own making. It is a mercy to tell someone that the hell they live in can be unlocked from the inside by coming to a truth that can set them free. And it is a mercy to tell someone that the hell she’s chosen and the lies she’s living are worse than the sentence she’s serving.

David’s mother offered this mercy to the woman who killed her son when she ended her statement by saying, “It has been seven years, four months, and two days since I entered this new life. You will at some point leave your prison cell. I will live in grief for the rest of my life. But let me be clear, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, we ‘do not grieve as others do who have no hope.’ I believe with everything I have that someday God will take the pieces of my shattered life and put them back together. And he is waiting to do that for you.”

David’s father followed this by saying to his son’s killer, “David would want to be the first person to wrap his arms around you and draw you to Jesus.”