

Death Row's Rainbow Effect: A Spectrum of Responses to Living under a Death Sentence

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"People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."

– James Baldwin

I pause on survey statement 3: "Our jumpsuits are red but fade to pink over the years. We fade too, like our jumpsuits. Our fading jumpsuits are a reminder of our eroding humanity here."

It reminds me of a conversation I had with a fellow man on Death Row several years ago — before the courts commuted his sentence to Life Without Possibility of Parole (LWOP). I had shared the poem from which this statement was pulled, before it was published in *Bone Orchard*. I still remember the gist of what he'd said, how animated he was, waving his thickly muscled arms around, pointing at the concrete walls, sweeping them to indicate the dayroom with its steel tables and the men slouching there. He said,

"Whereas 'fading' is a natural process, this is an *unnatural* environment, and it causes unnatural results. It's unnatural the way our bodies deteriorate. Our bodies are not designed to stay in constant contact with concrete and steel all day every day for decades. Look at how many guys have back problems, neck problems, shoulder problems. That's not to mention all the processed foods they feed us. Look at how many have died of cancer here — at least one in ten of us. That can't be right. The rate is too high. Then the stress, how it messes up our minds. Look at us, we're all fucked up, half of us on psych meds, the other half too proud to ask for it. It's unnatural. We don't just fade. Call me paranoid but this feels more *systematic* — since there's a moratorium on executions, they kill us by *incarceration*."

He's been here about twenty years, half his life, so he's seen plenty of fading bodies and minds.

I finish reading the last two survey statements in Dr. Johnson's text, inviting me to do an investigative report for his press, BleakHouse Publishing. I look at my watch: 4 p.m. I have two hours before I am scheduled to call a friend. *Well, let's see how many guys I can survey for Dr. J...* I grab my pad, a pen, and step out of my corner cell on the tier. I quickly scan the dayroom for people, then look right and left down the L-shaped tier to count how many doors are open, lean over the railing to check the cells below. *Hmmm, four doors closed, three guys in the dayroom — one on the payphone, one in the shower, one watching TV. Looks like I'll have to go room to room.* Since the survey consists of just five short statements, I figure it should take only a few minutes per person. Times twenty. Tally their answers, then I'm done. Two hours should be plenty.

I approach an open door a couple cells down from mine. "Knock-knock!" I say loudly, then, "You appropriate? Not on the toilet? Got all your clothes on?" I've had my eyes burnt by wrinkled butts before, so I never look into a cell without first doing a verbal inspection.

I hear a groaned reply, "Huuunh? What? Yea... I'm straight." It sounds slurry. *Crap, he's medicated.* I sigh, step into his doorway, then chirp like a Jehovah's Witness, "Hi! Uh... are you okay? Do you know what day it is? How many fingers am I holding up?"

Chuckling at my rapid-fire questions, a 60ish white dude with leathery skin struggles to sit up and turns to face me. Leatherman has been watching a movie on his tablet. He taps the screen to pause it, pulls out his earbuds, and sets it all on the bunk. I say, "Hey, sorry to interrupt. Can I bother you for a couple minutes? Yeah? Okay. Do you remember about eighteen months ago I surveyed everybody in here about your thoughts on what made serving time on Death Row different from serving time with a release date?"

Leatherman stares at me blankly. I slowly shake my head, he shakes his, so I continue. "Anyway, this is sort of a follow-up. This professor and I had turned those survey results into a book—" I stop when he starts glancing at his tablet. I decide to get right to the point, "Okay, if you're willing, I'd like to read you five quick statements. Each one represents a description I gave in the book about how I personally have experienced different aspects of Death Row at various points.

"For each statement you may answer one of five ways: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. Do you follow?" I ask. He nods but shakes his head at the same time, then glances at his tablet again. "Don't worry!" I say. "I'll walk you through it!"

Ten minutes later, he thanks me and restarts his movie, and I go looking for my next person. Already, I can tell I'll have to distill the first statement, because it's eight lines from a poem. These men are not poets. When I'd read it to Leatherman, his eyes glazed over and I'd had to simplify it to: "The atmosphere in here feels like *death*. Do you agree with that or disagree? Disagree, okay — just regular disagree or strongly disagree?"

I make a mental note about statement 1 as I tally Leatherman's answers into my survey grid. Then, I go downstairs and approach a stocky guy who's standing in his cell's doorway. I ask, "Can I borrow you for a few minutes, get your opinion on some stuff?" He says sure and backsteps to his bunk, sits down, crosses his arms, and stares at me expectantly. I launch into my spiel, and while I'm talking someone sidles up and says, "What book was that? I remember you asking us that question, but I didn't know you turned our answers into a book. That's kinda cool." He is a short, pot-bellied man with a heavy country accent.

I say, "Well, sometimes I work with this professor who teaches about justice, law, and criminology. He also does research about conditions of confinement, so we wanted to try to capture what it's like for us on Death Row. That's how we came up with that one-question survey: What makes serving time with a death sentence distinct from serving time with a release date?"

"Since I only have a clear access to the men on our pod, I asked everyone in here then collated our responses — almost everyone in here had served time before coming here, by the way. There were so many similar responses that I was able to combine them into some composite answers, and altogether, I had a list of seventeen distinct features that described what it's like living with a death sentence. Then, we either adapted or wrote from scratch poems and essays to explore each feature and gathered them all into a book, *Bone Orchard*. So, really, the book captures the *range* of our collective experience more so than any one person's specific experience. Individually, I may identify with, say, ten or twelve features from The List, while *you* might identify with fourteen, but not necessarily the same ones I did.

"And that's why we're having this discussion. In the book, I made statements about how I personally have experienced Death Row, how I have interpreted aspects of it, sentiments I've formed. In discussions with Dr. J, my coauthor, and many audience members at talks and interviews about our book, the same questions keep popping up: If most of the features represent composites, what might the individual distinctions look like?

"Or regarding features I personally identify with, how do the rest of you feel about the same feature? "I've explained that because each of us is unique; we each have to grapple with this place, this sentence, in his own way. Sometimes we'll overlap, sometimes not. We each have to do our own time. Right?" They both nod. The pot-bellied man standing beside me twangs, "I was just telling my sister that the other day! We all here, but we all different. Everybody ain't built the same."

The man on the bed uncrosses his arms and says, "No, we're not. Look at how many guys be arguing over the TV — but *I* don't care about the TV. Or you, Georgie, you always doing this kind of stuff, writing — Lyle too — but nobody else does. We just different. Not saying my way's better, or yours, just different."

"Exactly!" I say, "That's why the stereotypes don't fit! People watch TV shows and movies that portray people on Death Row a certain way, the news sensationalizes things, etc., creating this false, often monstrous picture. True, there are some monsters here, but most are just men. So, our book is meant to first of all tell it from the *inside* perspective. But even so, *Bone Orchard* can't capture each *individual* experience. However, secondly, we hope it will serve as a sort of book of prompts for others on Death Row, wherever they may be in America, and that they'll engage with The List and write and publish *their* experiences. This survey," here I shake my pad, "*this* is meant to demonstrate what that might look like. Through this, you all are engaging with *Bone Orchard* and will show how we each can experience the exact same place in different ways. See, I am looking for your honest *personal* opinion. You can agree or completely disagree with my statements — or be neutral. There's no right or wrong answers. And it's anonymous, so I won't attach names to answers."

The pot-bellied man says, "Well, let's do this!" And the man on the bunk nods, saying, "Yeah, 'cause I'm trying to catch this game. You holding us hostage right now." We all laugh and I get right to it.

Nobody was unwilling to participate; rather, most seemed eager. After I'd surveyed the first several folks, word spread, and almost every person was ready for me. More often, I had walk-ups, so I'd survey men in pairs. On my way to make a phone call, I noticed a heavysset man acting like he was looking out the window beside my cell, and as I slid past, he straightened and said, "Wait, you not gonna ask me? You done asked about everybody else..."

I explained, "I have a phone call in like two minutes, so I was going to catch you and the last guy afterward—" His shoulders slumped in disappointment, so I hurried on, "—but I'll go on and get your answers now, if you're ready."

He grinned and said, "I'm ready. I've been waiting thirty minutes for you to get up here."

After I finished surveying the last man an hour later, it occurred to me that rarely did anyone answer simply in one of the five ways presented (agree, disagree, etc.), but instead wanted to explain how they interpreted each statement and why they chose to disagree or agree. They wanted to share their view, but also have me *hear* and *understand* it more deeply.

It struck me how nuanced the range of their perspectives were. Where *Bone Orchard* had combined their similarities into distinct, generalized features, *this* survey worked like a prism, separating our communal light into its individual rainbow components. It revealed a spectrum of responses, some of which I'll share shortly along with the statements they were responding to and the overall results.

However, in theory this was all expected. What totally surprised me was how this "rainbow effect" would impact *my own* sentiments and experience of Death Row. Since I had identified personally with all five survey statements, I was asking the men to, essentially, agree or disagree with *me*. It felt like a de facto debate or dialectic process between my thesis and their antitheses, and I found myself updating my view in light of theirs. Thus, when I finished documenting the last man's answers, I no longer fully identified with my own statements! Not as-is, anyhow. I felt compelled to qualify them, to elaborate, to say, "It's complicated."

No doubt, regarding the poems and essays I'd written over a ten-year span, I could expect to notice a change between my earlier feelings and present ones. A person can change dramatically in ten years: since our thoughts impact our emotions, new knowledge can literally affect the way we experience the world. And though I'd learned a lot these last ten years, in terms of overall self-awareness and coping with this place, surveying the men about five very specific sentiments allowed me to absorb and synthesize the totality of twenty other perspectives, forcing an evolution in my thinking. My earlier sentiments sprouted legs, so to speak, grew more sophisticated. It does make sense, though, because with the exception of the one man who's been on Death Row less than a decade, and myself (sixteen years), everyone on my pod has between twenty and forty years of history trapped under a death sentence — a history I get to tap into and benefit from. They are my elders in adversity.

Survey Statement 1:

"...death guards this place.
death is the spirit of this place;
its character and atmosphere is death —
death is the impression it makes

on the mind:

death
death
death
death"

Results: 2 strongly disagree, 5 disagree, 3 neutral, 5 agree, 5 strongly agree

I thought about death daily. For me, it's nearly impossible *not* to. To be fair, it's partly because I carried death in with me, in that my dad had died midway through my trial. I'd also attempted suicide twice in the jail, and continued to contemplate it on a daily basis for the first ten years of incarceration. (I was arrested in 2005.) Further, only months after my arrival to Death Row, a man on the pod next door succeeded in his attempt and was found hanging from the plumbing in the janitor's closet. And, just before I started this essay, another man sat on the third-floor stairwell and slid backwards, head-first. It's only because he over-rotated that he survived,

barely, though he broke both legs, some ribs, an arm, and his back. Many guys here have razor scars and old, badly healed fractures from their own failed attempts. It's a semi-regular occurrence, but, despite these reminders of death, I was interested to hear other perspectives.

Nobody understood statement 1 as-is. They aren't poets, and it seemed to confuse them, though I did *try* with about half. I ended up simplifying it again and again until I just stuck with: "The atmosphere in here is death."

A very pale and featureless man said, "Well... it's not so simple to me. It depends. Some days, yes; some days, no. Depends on the time of year, whether I'm having problems with the other guys in here or we're getting along, having a good time. If we're laughing and getting along, it feels *alive*, but if we're fighting, yeah, it can feel like death. Or if the anniversary of my arrest comes up and I think about all I lost — it feels like death. I'd say I'm *neutral*, because it all depends. It don't always feel like death, but sometimes it does."

Another man had tossed his mattress on the floor and was sitting there obsessively plucking off tiny lint balls. He was in a trance-like state, and as soon as I read him statement 1, he exploded, "I STRONGLY DISAGREE — this place ain't death! It's LIFE! I'm a Christian, I'm all about LIFE! In church, we don't call this Death Row, we call it *LIFE ROW*. Just because the State *wants* to kill us don't mean we gonna *die* here. I believe in God, and He can deliver us. But even if they kill my body, I'm *alive*, I have *eternal* life. So I'm not gonna *let* this place be death for me. For me, it's *LIFE ROW!*"

Another man was more sedate, saying, "I disagree with your statement. Maybe at one time, when they were executing people all the time, it felt like death. But it's been like sixteen years since they executed anyone. It don't feel so much like death nowadays. It feels like purgatory, or limbo — neither life nor death, but endless suffering."

I'm not sure how I'd react if executions resume. I'm not personally afraid to die, but I've made some friends in here and can imagine it would hurt me if *they* got executed, to say the least. These men had essentially stood by, hands tied, as thirty-four of their comrades were escorted to the execution chamber between 1997 and 2006, when the de facto moratorium began, just four months before my arrival. Even so, twenty men have died of "natural causes" since 2006, two this year so far, with two more in hospice. Altogether, between executions and "natural causes" —

including the suicide — sixty-seven men have been wheeled out on a gurney, covered in a sheet. That's about half the total amount here now, and, in terms of grief, those deaths doesn't touch on people we've lost who are *not* in prison. I've lost my dad, my stepdad, my aunt, and eight free-world friends since 2006, and I know this pattern holds true for most anyone who spends twenty years in prison. Although every death and suicide attempt is a bitter reminder to me of my own mortality, and of my friends', these men challenged me to re-examine how close to death I feel now, in *general*.

I became a devout Christian about seven years in, and my suicidal fantasies gradually decreased. Death has no real hold on me, the lint picker reminded me. This environment now serves as a backdrop, contrasting and highlighting how *alive* I am. Plus, I have seen thirty-six men leave here via sentence reductions, about ten of whom ultimately went *home*, including three outright exonerations. However, there are times I feel more alive, and other times I visit death, my old companion, and still, there are other times I feel stuck in purgatory, neither dead nor alive. It depends...

Survey Statement 2:

"On the row, most everything is painted a congealed red, like blood. I take this as a threat."

Results: 1 strongly disagree, 5 disagree, 2 neutral, 5 agree, 7 strongly agree

One man responded, "I mean, I've heard they consulted psychologists to help design this place, so I agree that they are probably *trying* to screw with our heads. They *mean* for all the red to make us think of blood or death, but I don't feel threatened by it. I'm gonna have to say I'm neutral on this one."

Another man took it elsewhere: "I disagree. I think the red is supposed to be like a warning sign, maybe like a red flashing light or stop sign, or both, to tell everyone else who sees us: 'Beware! These guys are *dangerous*.' Like *we* are the threat."

A third man laughed derisively and said, "I strongly disagree. I think when they built this place, they simply wanted a different color than the rest of the prison's creams and blues, and red was the cheapest color they could find." When I shared with him others' views about psychologists

and warnings, he said, "I disagree. I don't think the State is that smart. Y'all give them too much credit. Now, I do think our red jumpsuits are intentional, supposed to be like the scarlet letter — that book? — to brand us, like we're 'covered in blood' [air quotes] or we have 'blood on our hands.'" After he finished, I asked whether there was a possible connection between the red jumpsuits and the red-painted doors, railings, bunks, shelves, windowsills, etc. "Absolutely not. That's coincidental. They are just not that smart."

Personally, I do think "they" *are* that smart. I never really took it as a threat toward me, but more like a threat to outsiders. I now agree the red is a sort of stigma, marking us, screaming that we are "covered in blood" or have "blood on our hands." I also now believe the red is meant to be a reminder to us, to signal that one day our blood will be demanded — which is to say, it feels more like a threat *from* them, although, as a Christian, it feels toothless, because I am in God's hands.

Survey Statement 3:

"Our jumpsuits are red but fade to pink over the years. We fade too, like our jumpsuits. Our fading jumpsuits are a reminder of our eroding humanity here."

Results: 2 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 7 agree, 6 strongly agree

These men have been trapped in here, mostly together, so they should know all about fading, especially considering that N.C.'s Death Row population has been all but static, compared to Regular Population. In R-Pop, which houses roughly 40,000 prisoners statewide in about 50 prisons, people are entering and getting out on a daily basis, relocating from prison to prison or unit to unit inside their prisons, the specific people on a pod in a constant flux. Contrast that against Death Row's population, which has hovered around 150 people, give or take a dozen, since the late 1990s. The turnover rate is two to three people a year (i.e. new people coming in, people dying, or getting sentence reductions). So population change here is relatively imperceptible as our appeals take decades to crawl through the courts. It took Henry McCollum thirty years to convince the courts to allow DNA testing in his case, and he was exonerated when it proved his innocence. Further, Death Row is confined to only one prison, and only one unit inside the prison; we cannot be housed anywhere else besides the hospital or the hole, i.e. solitary confinement.

The result is that we can easily spend 10,000 days in a row looking at the same guys, going to recreation, church, and chow together. We learn each other's routines, recognize gaits, can distinguish voices in a crowd, notice the white spreading hair by hair, watch teeth rot and fall out one by one. Since the late '90s, they've seen powerlifters wither and wrinkle, bare skin bleed black tattoos that turn gray and blur over time, and sound minds decay into madness. They've also witnessed thirty men die slow deaths by "natural causes," carried beefs and bonds as old as their time here together, blackened each other's eyes, forgiven — enemies becoming friends becoming enemies and everything in between.

In response to the survey statement, one man said, "I strongly disagree. I don't think we fade; we fall apart."

Another answered, "I disagree. I don't think we fade. I think we get stuck at the moment we got arrested while the world moves on without us."

Still another replied, "I'm neutral because I feel like it's up to the individual. Some of us exercise, stay in shape, study, go to church. We get *stronger*, we don't fade. Other guys..." He shrugged slowly. "Well, they don't even try, so yeah, *they* fade. So I'm neutral because I don't think it's automatic."

One man added another point: "I agree, but there are so many ways to apply that. Our families 'fade' away, either dying off or abandoning us. We age, our bodies 'fade.' Some guys' minds 'fade.' It all depends on how you interpret it, but yeah, to some degree, I think we all fade. Right?"

Altogether, I now feel like "fading" seems inadequate without elaboration, though I suppose it leaves the door open for people to interpret it in many ways — and for it to be valid and applicable — so I still agree there is an element of natural fading that by default will erode a man. But I also agree that because of the hard surfaces, the food, and the unnaturalness of this place, it feels more like we are being *erased*. Nevertheless, I also concede that we have some power and autonomy to counter — or, at least, mitigate — the diminishing and eroding effects through exercise, study, etc.

Survey Statement 4:

"We'd been told many times point-blank, 'you are not here to be rehabilitated.' We are here to be executed."

Results: 0 strongly disagree, 1 disagree, 0 neutral, 8 agree, 11 strongly agree

On the surface, the statement seems straightforward. Everyone agreed that staff have either said this to them personally, or they'd heard staff say it to someone else. A few shared that they'd also heard variations of "I wish they'd start executions back up. Y'all too comfortable here" and "I can't wait 'til they start killing y'all again — I'd flip the switch myself." However, the men also acknowledge that most of the staff don't seem to care one way or the other, and some staff have been known to *quit* rather than participate in executions after they got to know us.

That being said, most felt the statement is more than just the fact of our sentence: we *are*, technically, here to be executed, not rehabilitated (which implies a view toward release back into society). Rather, the men were trying to explain that some staff members hold it as a personal *philosophy*, as if, since we are sentenced to die, they can treat us any way they wish, some going so far as to treat it like their personal mission to make our lives as hard and as miserable as possible by refusing to take us outside for recreation, "losing" our mail, "forgetting" to file our work order requests for broken toilets, spreading lies to pit us against each other, breaking things when doing cell searches, and a thousand other little torments.

As to the second part, "We are here to be executed," many felt it seems to suggest being resigned to our fate, and all of them said they had *not* given up: their cases are in the courts, and they will fight 'til the end. And I agree with them — having intended the whole statement to suggest a philosophy, not just a fact — and I have not *resigned* myself to death.

Survey Statement 5:

"Sometimes I forget I am here to die. But not for long."

Results: 1 strongly disagree, 4 disagree, 0 neutral, 6 agree, 14 strongly agree

Most said some form of "Yeah, I try *not* to think about this place. It's why I read..." Or watch TV, or get high, or sleep — anything to escape. The very last man I spoke with got angry and seemed insulted. "I NEVER forget where I am. Period. Some of these other guys—" He stopped, took a deep breath, and said, "I think about it every day. I write about it, talk about it. My life's work involves thinking, writing, and talking about this place, studying its history...I can't forget. No, I WON'T forget." Then, he went back to his writing, as clear a dismissal as I could receive. I understood, but still, sometimes when I'm on the phone with a friend, or reading a great book, or immersed in prayer — sometimes, for a moment, I *do* forget where I am because I feel *free*. However, I am not running from the reality of being here.

In fact, for the last ten years, since I became a writer, I have been thinking about this reality, too, because it is the focus of most of my writings, and it's how I process this experience. It's a survival tool, first of all. I have written, on average, three hours per day every day for ten years, so like him, I too study this place, its history, its present, and its soul impact around and inside me. Then, I translate my observations and discoveries into essays, articles, and poetry to share with the world beyond the walls in hopes of changing our future, because I have learned the elemental power of stories and truth-telling.

Without access to our first-hand accounts, the public is left with a gruesome misperception that is mostly the product of Hollywood's exaggerated depictions of people on Death Row, sensational media coverage, prosecutors' one-sided stories that focus on the gory details of crimes, and imaginations shaped by fear. It's no wonder we are seen as monsters and animals dressed as men that need to be put down; I held those same misshapen views until I interacted with the other men here. I don't know whether my writings will impact enough people to make a difference or stop the State from trying to erase me, but I do know that bearing witness to Death Row's difficult reality gives me a sense of purpose and dignity, preserves my memories of the men around me, and prevents my mind and humanity from eroding in this place — despite my graying hair, aching back, and fading red jumpsuit.