

The Beast in Me and the Monstrosity of the Cross

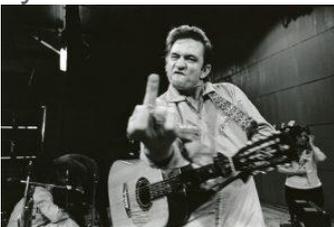


*The beast in me/ Is caged by frail and fragile bars,/ Restless by day
And by night rants and rages at the stars,/ God help the beast in me.*

If you've heard Johnny Cash's tortured version of Nick Lowe's *The Beast in Me* you'll know he was destined to growl those aching lyrics. God help the beast in me, indeed.

The beast in Johnny Cash imagined all sorts of depravity, like senseless violence (*"I shot a man in Reno/ just to watch him die"*) and petulant arrogance, like shooting a woman because she was lowdown and trifling (*"First time I shot her in the side/ Hard to watch her suffer/ But with the second shot she died"*).

Recently, a friend gave me an old LP version of Cash's *At San Quentin* live album. The record opens with the beast in Johnny Cash ranting and raving about how annoying the recording crew were by getting in his way. He swears like a sailor and boasts about his own stints in jail, and his drug use, all the while fulminating about the cruelty of the American criminal justice system.



This is Johnny Cash at his most beastly. In fact, this is the concert where Cash was snapped flipping the bird in that now-famous photograph.

Little wonder then that Cash was attracted to the lyrics of another writer who also knew the beast within. When he recorded Leonard Cohen's *Bird on a Wire*, 25 years after San Quentin, this confession rang true: *"Like a beast with his horn/ I have torn everyone who reached out for me."*

And he had.

Douglas Bryce once wrote, *"I am concerned with the beast inside, the beast that haunts the moonlit margins of the mind, never clearly seen, never wholly lost to view..."*

Often, we imagine the beast inside is some terrifying unstoppable minotaur. But I think we flatter ourselves when we do. A friend of mine says he thinks the beast in him could be more like a lazy koala than a raging grizzly bear. And when you think about it, that's not a bad metaphor. Our beastly natures often seem more pathetic and ridiculous than frightening.

As an aside, I've heard that koalas have this bizarre way of coping with stress.

They go blind! Seriously. If a koala population is under stress because of predators or a reduced food supply they contract a chlamydia organism that results in conjunctivitis and ultimately blindness. So, maybe the beast within each of us is more like a blind stressed koala than the horned monstrous creature that Leonard Cohen imagined.

The American humourist, James Thurber wrote a charming book called *The Beast in Me and Other Animals*, in which he imagined the beast within to resemble a panicky and ungainly domestic dog, the kind of creature that might be voiced nervously by Woody Allen in the film version.

The book was so popular that 'Thurber' became the Number 1 name for pet dogs in the 1950s.

Whatever the proportions of the beast in you, you can't shake yours either. Am I right?

Indeed, it was because of the beastliness of the human condition that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice. So, I guess it's fitting that when we take the time to look, to really look, upon the tortured Christ that we should sense the stirring of our most brutish inclinations.

Jesus' presence at Golgotha reminds us of the phenomenal truth that, as the Bible says, ***"He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*** (2 Cor 5:21)

He bore all our anxiety, our blindness, our fear and our fury. He who knew nothing of these things became them all that we might be set free from them and know the righteousness of God.

This is the monstrosity of the cross, more monstrous than the beast within, more terrifying than our worst fears, more comforting than our wildest dreams.

It would have to take something more beastly than the beast in us to break its hold on us and set us free.

Back to Johnny Cash's live album *At San Quentin*, if you get to listen to it you'll be surprised to discover not only Johnny the badass, but also Johnny the choirboy.

After he's done singing about murder and mayhem to an audience of prisoners, he then launches into several gospel songs, *The Old Account Was Settled Long Ago, He Turned Water into Wine*, and a song made famous by Elvis, *There Will Be Peace in the Valley*.

That last song ends with these lyrics:

***Well the bear will be gentle
And the wolves will be tame
And the lion shall lay down by the lamb, oh yes
And the beasts from the wild
Shall be lit by a child
And I'll be changed, changed from this creature that I am, oh yes***

However the beast manifests itself in us – ***greed, fear, violence, addiction, lust, hate*** – our only response to the sacrifice of the Messiah is to feebly cry, ***“Have mercy on me, a sinner,”*** or ***“I believe, help my unbelief,”*** two prayers that keep that beast – never clearly seen, never wholly lost to view – at bay.

Two prayers that express the hope that I'll finally be changed from this creature that I am.

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