

SERIAL, HEALING AND THE SILENCE OF GOD: THE HUNGER FOR ORDER AND TRUTH IN A POSTMODERN MYSTERY

Erica Milecki McMillan on Seeking Truth

The *New Yorker* called it “the podcast to end all podcasts.”¹ The *Washington Post* called it a “cultural obsession.”² The podcast *Serial* had *Game of Thrones*-level water cooler buzz during its original run in 2014. The breakthrough true crime story was reported by Sarah Koenig, a former reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, who used her perfectly-modulated voice to explore the 1999 murder of a high school student named Hae Min Lee. Thousands of people who’d never explored the podcast

¹ Sarah Larson, “What ‘Serial’ Really Taught Us,” *The New Yorker*, December 18, 2014, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/serial-really-taught-us>.

² Stephanie Merry, “‘Serial’: An investigative journalism podcast becomes a cultural obsession,” *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2014, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/11/13/serial-an-investigative-journalism-podcast-becomes-a-cultural-obsession/>.

format were tempted by Koenig's compelling storytelling, soothing voice, and the seemingly insoluble mystery of Lee's murder.

I was one of those compelled by Koenig's impossibly neutral accent and the misty web of evidence surrounding the murder. When *Serial* was released in full in early 2015, I hungered for justice as Koenig did. I was traumatized, and I was a woman living alone. I'd just seen murder done — my husband had been killed by brain cancer right before my eyes. We had been married for nine months. At that time, I couldn't imagine a new life. I couldn't imagine a future.

As shattered as I was, I don't think that I would have been able to articulate the bare facts of the Hae Min Lee murder at the time. Trauma mutes the voice, placing a stranglehold on Broca's area — the language center — in the brain.³ But now, years later, I can say that the bare facts of the case in *Serial* are these. Eighteen-year-old Hae Min Lee, a student at Woodlawn High School in Baltimore, disappeared on January 13th, 1999. She had been dating a guy named Don for ten days. She was Korean-American. Don was white. He worked at a local LensCrafters, where she also worked. She'd recently broken up with Adnan Syed, an eighteen-year-old Pakistani-American student at Woodlawn, ten days before she disappeared. On the day she disappeared, Syed

³ “. . . during the provocation of traumatic memories there is a decrease in activation of Broca's area, the part of the brain most centrally involved in the transformation of subjective experience into speech.” Bessel van der Kolk, “Trauma and memory,” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 52, no. 51 (January 2002), accessed November 1, 2022, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1046/j.1440-1819.1998.0520s5S97.x>.

reportedly asked her for a ride after school. That day, Syed had loaned his brand new cell phone and car to Jay Wilds, a student at Woodlawn and drug dealer. Reports conflict on whether Lee said that Syed couldn't take the ride, or whether he asked at all. Six weeks later, Lee's body was found buried in Baltimore's Leakin Park, her black bun protruding from a pile of leaves and refuse. She had been strangled to death.

And when I heard this story for the first time and imagined the tragic pathos of that black bun sticking out of the ground, I knew what it was to be dead and alone and full of dead-ends. To wait for God's justice to avenge the wrongs. To wonder why God was silent amidst such enormous cosmic screams. How surreal it must have been — that tuft of hair amid the ground like a misbegotten plant. And the wronged, strangled body it was attached to was waiting, waiting, for God to stretch forth his hand and right this wrong.

This podcast is an unlikely place to seek truth and justice; after all, *Serial* opens with a truly postmodern paean to doubt and the unreliability of memory: "Every day this year, I've tried to figure out the alibi of a 17-year-old boy . . . it's really hard to account for your time, in a detailed way. I mean, how'd you get to work last Wednesday, for instance? Drive? Walk? Bike? Was it raining? Are you sure? Did you go to any stores that day? If so, what did you buy? Who did you talk to? The entire day, name every person you talked to. It's hard."⁴

⁴Sarah Koenig, "Season One: Episode 01: The Alibi," *Serial* (podcast), October 3, 2014, <https://dts.podtrac.com/redirect.mp3/nyt.simplecastaudio.com/521189a6-a4f6-404d-85cf-455a989a10a4/episodes/>.

No doubt Koenig meditated on the unreliability of memory when she found herself interviewing high school students fifteen years after the fact. Her witnesses struggled with their barely formed prefrontal cortexes at the time of the murder. Fifteen years later, their testimony was hazy, crisscrossed with contradictions. Did a girl named Asia see the accused killer at the library at the exact time of the killing? She wrote a letter claiming so. Would she be willing to testify? Fifteen years later, Asia would kick Koenig to the curb and refuse to talk. Did a girl named Nisha take an alibi-establishing call with very questionable timing? The call logs say that the accused killer made a call to Nisha right when he was allegedly burying Hae. Was he trying to cover his activities? Was it a butt dial? Did Nisha answer, or did the phone simply ring into nothingness? Nisha remembers taking a call and talking to both Adnan and Jay, but when was that? She thought Jay was working at a job he didn't have until February. If it was an unanswered butt dial, what was AT&T's policy about unanswered cell calls in 1999? And at the end of each inquiry, Koenig's refrain, "Are you sure?" If Koenig had set out to create a postmodern murder mystery, she could not have done better. Each lead was a handful of threads that trailed into oblivion.

Primarily on the strength of Jay Wilds's testimony, Adnan Syed was convicted of Hae Min Lee's murder. Although Syed protested his innocence and physical evidence was scant, a jury convicted Syed of her murder. He was sentenced to life in prison plus thirty-years. And thus both of their futures were broken, Adnan Syed's and Hae Min Lee's.

In 2015, after looking skyward and wondering about the silence of God, I too was left holding a handful of broken threads in my hand, the storylines of my life. The future as I knew it was dead. My future was as dead as Lee's future. As dead as Syed's. Holding bits and pieces of evidence, my accusations, I waited for God in the whirlwind.

Through a friend, I learned about the work of a German pastor named Helmut Thielicke who also knew the feeling of waiting for God in the whirlwind. From 1942 to 1951, he preached a remarkable series of sermons in Nazi Germany and postwar Germany, a desolate and devastating place and time. It must have felt to Thielicke as if God had deserted Germany even as Germany had deserted God. As Nazis were hanged in Nuremberg, Germany starved until the Marshall Plan began pouring money and food into the defeated country. With his homeland thus ravaged, Thielicke described the ultimate fear of the Christian:

The author sees himself set above a burial ground. A corpse on the bier in the church raises its hands and folds them in prayer, but the arms become elongated and drop off, the folded hands with them. On the roof of the church stands the clock-face of eternity, but there are no numbers and it is its own indicator. A black finger points to it, and the dead want to see the time on it.

A lofty and noble figure comes down with infinite sorrow from above to the altar, and all the dead cry: "Christ, is there no God?"

He answers: "There is none."

Christ continues: “I have been through the worlds, ascended to the suns and flown along the milky ways through and through, but there is no God . . .”⁵

Thielicke continues this terrifying image, illustrating the souls in the graveyard calling out in despair at this revelation. And thus he illustrated the true fear behind our every cry: that God as we know Him is not real. That He is not loving, that He is not just.

But God Himself suffered in this way, this “constricting [riddle] of life,” as Thielicke puts it. “His final word on the cross is the anxious cry: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ . . . He brings the anxiety to His father . . . If I am anxious, and I know Christ, I may rest assured that I am not alone with my anxiety; He has suffered it for me.”⁶ If we are suffering injustice, who is the One who suffered the most injustice?

Between the first time I listened to *Serial* in 2015, my life grew and blossomed. Beauty from ashes. If I was a black bun planted in the ground, God reached forth his hand and said, you shall have a home. You shall have new life. You shall have new love. And on September 20, 2022, deservedly or not, Adnan Syed received new life. He was released from prison, his conviction vacated due to a form of prosecutorial misconduct called a Brady violation: there were two violable suspects whose names had been withheld from the defense. And with this bombshell news, I found myself sucked back into this

⁵ Helmut Thielicke, *The Silence of God*, trans. G.W. Bromley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 5-6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

case that seems tantalizingly solvable even as it hovers in the zone of reasonable doubt.

It was during my second listen of *Serial* that I spotted holes in the case of cosmic injustice I brought before God. If the Reddit detectives examined my life with the intense scrutiny that they applied to the *Serial* case, what would they find? What were my failures? Why didn't I run a tighter ship? If I were suspected of murder, what would the detectives think? Would they sort through my forgotten paperwork and find answers — *she was behind on this, she had this hobby and that hobby that she bought stuff for and then dropped, she was a mess. She was a terrible bookkeeper.* If I were Adnan Syed's lawyer, would I be competent enough to avoid charges of inadequate counsel (a charge some have leveled at Cristina Guterriez, his lawyer)? In short, would my life live up to the scrutiny that I had subjected others to? Remove the plank from your own eye, you hypocrite!⁷

Much has been made of the true crime podcast phenomenon. Some listeners are undoubtedly motivated by the macabre, seeking an unholy thrill in the uncanny feeling of the unhappy dead. But I propose there is a nobler instinct in the true crime phenomenon, *Serial* included. Since we are made after God's image, we seek truth. Even non-believers can recognize justice and recognize the law, because it is written on their hearts.⁸ And even materialists are unwilling to discard the notion of truth. However much society might claim to believe in Nietzschean subjectivism — (“no, precisely facts do not exist, only interpretations. We cannot determine any fact

⁷ Matt 7:5 (KJV).

⁸ Rom. 2:15 (KJV).

‘in itself’: perhaps it is nonsense to want such a thing. ‘Everything Is Subjective,’ you say: but that itself is an interpretation . . .”) — a contingent of people want the actual truth.⁹

And that, to me, is the abiding good of true crime podcasts — that they sharpen a natural hunger for objective truth. However much we believe we have grievances, however much we have been wronged, there are more crimes to solve, more cold cases lying dormant, more souls that cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

But He has not forsaken the strangled, the raped, the murdered. Thielicke writes, “The stars cried out, and God was silent. But now hear the great mystery of this silence. The very hour when God answered not a word or syllable was the hour of the great turning point when the temple was rent and God’s heart was laid bare with all its wounds. Even when He was silent, God suffered with us.”¹⁰ Every crime is an affront to God. His heart breaks in a manner beyond our comprehension even as our own hearts break. And when we try to solve a cold case, or a case like Serial’s case, we reach out for God’s justice. We hold our hand towards Heaven.

Even now that Adnan Syed’s conviction has been vacated, there are Reddit detectives at r/serialpodcast fiercely debating one another. If the truth about Hae Min Lee’s murder lay between 21 minutes on January 13th, 1999 . . . if it is in dozens of cell phone calls triangulated

⁹ Helmut Heit, “‘There are no facts . . .’ Nietzsche as Predecessor of Post-Truth?,” *Studia Philosophica Estonica*, September 2018, 46, https://www.academia.edu/37907110/there_are_no_facts_Nietzsche_as_Predecessor_of_Post_Truth.

¹⁰ Thielicke, *The Silence of God*, 14.

off cell towers . . . if it comes from one palm print on a map of Leakin Park in Lee's car . . . these people believe that perhaps it can be found. Because we hunger for truth. Truth is real. And God himself was once murdered. We, his murderers, accuse Him, but He rises to embrace us. As impossible as it is to believe, all the brokenness and ugliness will be made right. I cannot see it easily, but through a glass and darkly.¹¹

Hundreds of millions of downloads, one Peabody Award, and one vacated conviction later, *Serial's* popularity will probably fade now that Adnan Syed is free. But true crime as a genre is an endless untapped possibility. True crime makes us seek truth, to put facts between us and the dark. The unsolved crimes and broken bodies will be made right, in our time or in eternity. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *Till We Have Faces*, "I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away."¹²

We must turn our eyes not only to Christ crucified, but to Him resurrected. The danger inherent in true crime podcasts is that we lay our eyes only on evil unrectified. As Lewis wrote, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same

¹¹ 1 Cor. 13:12 (KJV).

¹²C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: Mariner, 2012), 308.

delight.”¹³ We are to meet Jesus on the shore where he has prepared a small meal.¹⁴ Perhaps Hae Min Lee is waiting there now.

¹³C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 3.

¹⁴John 21:9 (KJV).

Bibliography

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